

History and Human Rights

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Adolph Hitler knew history. As a young boy, he eagerly devoured stories about the American West. He was dazzled by the white man's conquest of Indian lands. For Hitler, the history of the United States demonstrated that the removal of "inferior races," even to the extent of mass murder, was necessary to the march of progress. Later in life, he learned about the massacres of Armenians during the founding of Modern Turkey. This modern genocide confirmed Hitler's view that a great nation must not allow moral scruples to interrupt its date with destiny. "Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?" Hitler wrote on the eve of launching World War II.

Why is history vital to the study of human rights? First, because the perpetrators of human rights abuses so often take their cues from the past. Atrocities usually occur in the name of some national, ethnic, or religious cause. The professed aim is to rectify historic wrongs or to realize historic aspirations. "The traditions of the dead generations," a philosopher wrote, "weigh like a nightmare upon the living." History sets the parameters for what leaders and their followers believe is necessary and allowable. It creates, in short, the moral sensibility of a time. If you want to understand Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot, then you have to examine their relationship to history.

What is true for the violators of human right is even more true for the advocates. The very idea that all men naturally possess "certain inalienable rights" emerged from the crucible of historical conflict. Enlightenment thinkers in the 17th and 18th century were

inspired by admiration for the humanistic spirit in ancient Greece and Rome and hatred of the religious superstitions and feudal institutions they saw around them. History, in their view, demonstrated that Europe did not have to live under the yoke of traditional authorities: all men were capable and deserving of freedom. The American colonists picked up on these ideas in their struggle with the British Empire. After failing in their petitions to the British King, they appealed to what Thomas Jefferson called “self-evident truths” of human freedom and equality. The American Declaration of Independence caught the world’s attention by claiming a right of rebellion based on these universal principles. The French Revolutionaries of 1789 carried this logic further still. In defense of the “rights of man,” they swept away French social, religious, and governmental traditions and exported their revolution across Europe. Today it is impossible to speak about human rights without referring, however indirectly, to the legacy of the Declaration of Independence and the Declaration of the Rights of Man. The study of history places such documents in the contexts of their time and reveals the wellsprings of emotion, ideas, and aspirations that underlie them.

The study of history is also crucial for understanding the strengths and the limits of human rights instruments today. The modern human rights movement has its roots in popular campaigns of the nineteenth century, like the efforts to fight slavery, end imperialism, reform the prisons, and stop female sex trafficking. These campaigns propagated the idea of creating common legal standards and mechanisms of enforcement for the entire world. After World War II, with countries still reeling from revelations of genocide and persecution, the newly formed United Nations took the first steps toward realizing such a dream. In 1948, the UN General Assembly adopted a non-binding

resolution known as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The International Criminal Court was created far more recently, in 2002, in order to prosecute persons accused of genocide and crimes against humanity.

The development of international standards and tools of enforcement has forced dictatorial regimes to consider the possibility that they may someday face consequences for their actions. Human rights institutions have instilled hope in activists around the world and created a common vocabulary and set of tactics for challenging the abuse of power. The momentum behind the human rights movement has produced a growing awareness of issues like racial equality, gender equity, and the rights of children. At the same time, history demonstrates that the emergence of human rights instruments has barely dented the principle of national sovereignty. The nation state—whether democratic, dictatorial, or something in between—is still the primary determinant of what is law and how it is to be enforced. The result is that, for better or for worse, it is usually impossible for the international community to do anything about human rights abuses without gaining the active cooperation of local states.

The philosopher George Santayana famously declared that “those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” The history of human rights, however, demonstrates that “remembering” the past is never enough. At the university, the study of history is less about learning facts than about developing tools of exploration and interpretation. History is the art of mining historical data and crafting it into plausible narratives and arguments. It is a creative process, like making movies or writing novels, except that the historian is bound by certain rules of evidence and presentation. Students of history spend a lot of time just learning these rules: to sort fact from fiction, assess

competing arguments, and use sources responsibly. It is no wonder that so many great lawyers and journalists were once history majors. The historian's skills are essential to any profession which is about the creative gathering and presentation of facts.

History is especially important to the theory and practice of human rights. To understand human rights principles and institutions, we need the ability to place them in a historical context. To understand human rights abuses, we must be able to see actors as historical beings who were shaped by the past and who strove to leave their own mark on history. To make a difference ourselves in the struggle for international human rights, we need to possess tools for the honest exploration of facts and the creation of responsible and effective narratives. For all of these reasons, the study of human rights should be entwined with the study of history.