FAMINE AS A HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATION: 
THE CASE OF ETHIOPIA AND THE GREAT FAMINE 
OF THE 1980s

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In this paper, I will ultimately prove that the quest for power led the Dergue military regime to intentionally create and sustain the Great Famine of the 1980s, that their actions were intended to bring about the inevitable suffering of the Ethiopian community, and that their calculated military strategies deprived human beings of their fundamental natural rights. This paper will be broken down into four sections that I believe are necessary to classify famine in Ethiopia as an abuse to humanity that warrants attention and recognition. The first section of this paper will draw heavily from factual information and political science. I will start with a historical background of Ethiopia, emphasizing the social distinctions, ideological conflicts, and cultural divisions that spurred a political revolution. The second section will assess the chronological timeline of events leading up to the famine, and I will provide the necessary evidence to confirm my hypothesis that the Ethiopian government bears a substantial amount of responsibility for the major famine of the 1980s. The third section of this paper will draw heavily upon philosophical inquiry and ethical perspectives. I will discuss why I think the Ethiopian famine constitutes a human rights violation by looking specifically at the nature and value of objective human rights, free will, and responsibility. The fourth and final section of this paper will be a mixture of philosophy, politics, and personal opinion. I will propose a number of possible ways for individuals in the international community to become involved in Ethiopia, remedy the aftermath of war, and address the underlying causes of famine to resolve the effects.

I. PUTTING THE FAMINE OF THE 1980s IN A HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The first section of this paper is meant to serve as an informational foundation upon which my argument will depend for stability. I will start by examining the various Ethiopian ethnic groups and the failure of the government to separate the church from the state. Next I will show how the tensions between culture and nationalism led to armed conflict and a civil revolution. I will begin my historical analysis in the year 1941 with the reinstatement of Emperor Haile Selassie. From there I will examine how Selassie came into power and how he was eventually stripped of his imperial status by the Dergue military regime. I will analyze Ethiopia’s adoption of Marxism-Leninism and address the relations between Ethiopia, the United States, and the Soviet Union during the Cold War years. Throughout this section, I will refer to the various insurgent groups that waged a guerilla style war against the Dergue. I will examine the famine years and the late 1980s, and conclude with the year 1991 that signified a victory for the Ethiopian people.

The societal rift that spawned an intense rivalry in Ethiopia can be found along cultural, religious, and ethnic boundaries. The source of the revolution comes from the various contending views concerning Ethiopian nationalism and the arbitrary imposition of Orthodox Christianity by the dominant Amharan culture of the northern highlands. In

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1 Africa Watch: A Division of Human Rights Watch, Evil Days: 30 Years of War and Famine in Ethiopia 19 (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1991) (hereinafter Evil Days). For more informa-
the article “Clash of Civilizations?” Samuel P. Huntington predicts, “the fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future.”

Paul B. Henze places Ethiopia in Huntington’s forecast, “political and cultural processes in Ethiopia have been broadly cyclical: the center gains power, is challenged from the periphery, weakens, and regions become focal points of authority.” Because Amhara customs and traditions impinged on every dimension of society, the minority religions were discriminatorily labeled barbaric, intellectually inferior, and different from everyone else. Ethiopia was being pulled in two different directions on the eve of revolution, for the Amhara were “fiercely committed to the Old Christian demarcation of the nation,” yet they continued to “[proclaim] the equality of [all] ethnic groups.” This dilemma forced Ethiopians to find a way to “solve the tensions between ethnicity and nationality, some way to preserve the nation while transforming ethnic hierarchies.”

Ethiopian revolution was on the horizon once armed conflict broke out in 1961 in the northern province of Eritrea. Eritrea had been a colony of Italy from the late 19th century up until the Second World War. World War II proved to be almost bittersweet for the Eritrean people, for it alleviated Italian rule but bred conditions for cultural hostilities and civil war. After the British successfully defeated Mussolini in the Horn of Africa in 1941, the British Military Administration temporarily governed Eritrea and was intent on making Eritrea part of neighboring Sudan. As international dispute arose over the future of Eritrea, domestic disagreements turned into physical violence between Christians and Moslems. The highland portion of Ethiopia that was significantly Orthodox Christian in orientation preferred union with Ethiopia, whereas the lowland Moslems wanted complete independence. With tensions rising and resolution far from being realized, the fate of Eritrea was turned over to the United Nations in 1948. Eritrea was deemed an autonomous territory federated to Ethiopia by the United Nations in 1952; however this decision was unfortunately short-lived. In 1962, emperor of Ethiopia Haile Selassie decided to annex Eritrea and make it an official province of Ethiopia, thus marking thirty years of armed conflict.

After the Italian defeat, Selassie was determined to modernize Ethiopia. He regained his imperial status with the help of the United States, who saw Selassie’s return to power as a strategic benefit for the American military in Africa. As Selassie became accustomed to his renewed status, he became “less concerned about the rapidity of reform than about consolidating his own power and creating a government structure amenable to control and
Selassie purposely formulated domestic policy to benefit Ethiopians from Amhara and Tigray. Without adequate educations, the minority groups were excluded from state politics, could only work in agricultural jobs, and were prevented from climbing the social hierarchy to improve their wealth status. Keller notes the paradox of Selassie’s social policies:

Perhaps the most significant aspect of Selassie’s social policy was that it almost completely ignored. In spite of the fact that a large part of the Empire consisted of culturally subordinate ethnic groups...there was no conscious policy of national political integration save for the Amharization of certain select groups. Although there was an endless stream of rhetoric devoted to the idea of a, actual policies to encourage this were lacking. For the most part, the state provided the non-Amharized with only meager social services and even fewer opportunities to improve their life chances. Instead, emphasis was placed on the control and exploitation of subordinate populations.

Suppressed peasants in Tigray and Eritrea eventually began to realize the corruption and inadequacy of the government. After Selassie reassumed the imperial throne, it was not long before Ethiopians started to realize the “backwardness” of the Ethiopian autocratic government.

Neglected Ethiopians who correctly predicted the political intentions of Haile Selassie decided to take immediate action. Entire communities banded together to defy the autocratic government, regardless of individual race or ethnicity. During his second reign, Haile Selassie was able to contain numerous rebellions, a violent coup d’état, constant insurgency, and serious tax revolts as well as cover up a devastating famine. By the 1970s, it was obvious the emperor was running out of luck and strength. Many of the young university students who participated in the unsuccessful coup d’état advocated the defiance of imperial rule for the sake of “liberty, equality, and fraternity.” Insurgent groups, formed to lead ideological campaigns against Ethiopian tyranny and promote the modernization of Ethiopia to ease economic suffering, did not stop fighting with the fall of Haile Selassie; rather they continued to work for Ethiopian independence to ensure a prosperous future for all Ethiopians regardless of ethnicity or religion.

In the years leading up to the revolution, the Cold War was underway between the United States and the Soviet Union and communism was spreading like wildfire throughout Africa. By 1974, the Provisional Military Administrative Committee, also known as the Dergue, staged a military coup d’état that successfully overthrew the authoritarian reign of Haile Selassie. Ethiopians feared the Dergue but were also curious to see how a broken government could be fixed by new policies, so they accepted the military regime early on. As the Ethiopian Dergue increased in size, a tyrannical leader named Colonel

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14 *Id* at 238.
15 Keller, *supra* note 1, at 534.
16 *Id* at 534.
17 *Marxist Modern* at 123.
18 *Layers of Time* at 251.
19 *Id* at 248-265.
20 *Marxist Modern* at 125.
21 *Id*.
22 *Id* at 136.
23 *Evil Days* at 48-49.
24 *Layers of Time* at 284.
Mengistu Haile Mariam became the most prominent figure among the military ranks.\textsuperscript{25} The defeat by the Dergue meant that insurgents of military orientation would run the Ethiopian government under the command of Mengistu. Ethiopians saw Haile Selassie as a dictator who imposed an “anachronistic and growingly ineffective regime” built on “liberalism, the United States, and capitalism.”\textsuperscript{26} Ethiopians grew increasingly cold toward the West and their practices; after all, it was the United States and Britain that reinstated Selassie as emperor.\textsuperscript{27} As the Dergue rallied against the spread of capitalism, it was easy for them to impose their Marxist political agenda on the public at large. According to Keller, “viewing itself as the legitimate vanguard of the revolution, rather than stepping aside or sharing power with civilian elements,” the Dergue “shifted [their] ideological direction in mid-1976 and declared [a] commitment to ‘scientific socialism’.”\textsuperscript{28} Ethiopians saw Marxism-Leninism as a means to hold a fragmented society together; however the revolution would prove that the Dergue manipulated an idea of nationalism to secure political power.\textsuperscript{29}

The overthrow of Selassie meant that a new government had to be implemented quickly. When socialism became adopted, corporations, businesses, and rural land became nationalized.\textsuperscript{30} The Dergue mandated peasants associations, required farmers to employ modern agricultural practices that were socialist in nature, and expanded the role of the Ethiopian Agricultural Marketing Corporation.\textsuperscript{31} The Dergue assumed that the successful socialist practices of the Soviet Union would be applicable to the political, social, and environmental conditions in Ethiopia. Unfortunately, Ethiopia was not ready for such a drastic change in such a short amount of time. The Russians had some sense of identity, whereas Ethiopian nationalism was still an open question among an ethnically divided population.\textsuperscript{32}

Civil war engulfed the state of Ethiopia, mainly because the Dergue adopted Marxist ideology but were clueless as to how to apply socialism to the Ethiopian state.\textsuperscript{33} All Ethiopians were set on Marxism-Leninism; however they were divided on how to integrate socialist principles into their everyday operations.\textsuperscript{34} The southern Oromo All Ethiopian Socialist Movement (MEISON), for example, saw the Dergue as effectively working toward implementing Ethiopian socialism, whereas the northern Amhara and Tigrean Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Party (EPRP) claimed that no military government would ever be able to reform Ethiopia into a Marxist state.\textsuperscript{35} Ideological tensions grew between many insurgent groups and were usually based on ethnic divisions further fragmenting an already broken society.\textsuperscript{36}

The location of Ethiopia in the Horn of Africa definitely benefited the Dergue during the Cold War.\textsuperscript{37} Given its strategic position in close proximity to the Middle East, the United States and the Soviet Union provided Ethiopia with aid to secure good relations.\textsuperscript{38}
In the mid 1970s, Ethiopia was allied with the United States whereas Somalia was linked to the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{39} Throughout the 1970s, the United States offered military training and supplies in excess of $100 million to the Dergue.\textsuperscript{40} By 1977, these relationships were reversed when Ethiopia started to identify with Orthodox and Marxist Russians while Somalia became an interest to the United States.\textsuperscript{41} With the support of Fidel Castro’s Cuba and the Soviet Union, the Dergue fought against all insurgent groups that did not support the Marxism they advocated.\textsuperscript{42} From 1976 to 1978, the “Red Terror” killed any potential supporters of the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) or MEISON as well as any civilian who happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time.\textsuperscript{43} As the Somalis fought for the southeastern Ogaden territory of Ethiopia in 1977 and the Dergue waged a massive war against rebel sympathizers, Orthodox Christianity was being advocated by the government and imposed on the Ethiopian populace once again.\textsuperscript{44} Africa Watch has stated, “one of the main reasons for the last thirty years of warfare has been the unwillingness of marginalized people in Ethiopia to accept the northern-highland definition of national identity.”\textsuperscript{45} Those who did not conform to Amhara Orthodox Christianity were punished by the Dergue on charges of going against Ethiopian nationalism.\textsuperscript{46} It is in this sense, according to Donham, that:

The revolution never created a new notion of the nation—one that genuinely escaped the presuppositions of the old overlay of traditional ethnic hierarchies and the metanarrative of modernity...the revolution itself had encouraged lower-status ethnic groups to see themselves as equal to all others. Yet, the revolution—now deterritorialized by the Cold War—did not produce the necessary new cultural definition of the nation in which different ethnic groups could truly take their place.\textsuperscript{47}

The fall of Haile Selassie did not address Ethiopian nationalism; rather it further injured an ethnically diverse state that only wanted to find a common ground for all to stand upon. Ethiopians started to assemble along ideological, political, and cultural lines and hoped that their coalesced efforts could remove the Dergue from power. Since Ethiopia lacked a sense of national identity, getting these groups to work together for one common purpose was nearly impossible during the early days of the revolution. Throughout the 1960s, the Muslim Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF-RC) increased in membership and momentum. By 1972, ideological divisions began to surface and differences erupted into physical aggression. The 1970s were tainted with war and violence as insurgent groups fought amongst themselves and against the Dergue. Obviously Marxism was not making a unified Ethiopia, part of the reason being that insurgent groups and the Dergue did not share the same notions of socialism, the other being that the success of Marxism in the Soviet Union could not be copied by the Ethiopian people in the Horn of Africa. According to Henze, the problem was that there was no government for these various groups to rally for their causes and peacefully influence popular opinion, so the only alternative was to use sheer force and coercion.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{39} Id at 138.
\textsuperscript{40} Layers of Time at 300-303; Marxist Modern at 138.
\textsuperscript{41} Id.
\textsuperscript{42} Layers of Time at 304-305.
\textsuperscript{43} Evil Days at 101-112; Layers of Time at 305.
\textsuperscript{44} Marxist Modern at 138-142.
\textsuperscript{45} Evil Days at 19.
\textsuperscript{46} Marxist Modern at 143-145.
\textsuperscript{47} Id at 149.
\textsuperscript{48} See generally Layers of Time.
With farmers, traders, the economy, and the environment incapacitated by the negative effects of war and the failed adoption of Marxism-Leninism, the 1980s were almost guaranteed a famine of enormous magnitude. The military was using a large portion of the national budget to finance the war and Western donations from international organizations were declining rapidly.\(^4\) The Great Famine proved to be a difficult time for Ethiopia, as counter-insurgent strategies were being developed to correspond with the food shortage and further control the growing rebel fronts.

As communism ideology started becoming less attractive to Ethiopians, the anti-Dergue rebel fronts seized the opportunity to make significant strides toward victory.\(^5\) Mengistu knew that peasants and civilians were starting to turn on socialism and the Dergue, so he persuaded the Ethiopian people that he would start implementing democratic governmental institutions. According to Henze, “no sooner had [Mengistu] proclaimed them than it became apparent that Mengistu’s commitment to the reforms he had announced was lukewarm.”\(^6\) Over the course of the revolution Mengistu made false promises and empty lies, and it is obvious that the Dergue became “driven more by political imperatives than by perceived economic objectives.”\(^7\) By 1991, the EPRDF insurgent group had been successful in terminating the Dergue, freeing Eritrea, and implementing a new democratic government.\(^8\)

II. THE REALITY OF THE ETHIOPIAN FAMINE IN THE 1980s

The first section was intended to place the famine into the historical context of the Ethiopian revolution, so now I will address the Great Famine of 1983-1985 in detail. The second section of this paper is meant to prove that the government had foreseen the famine, had implemented tactics of war specially designed to exacerbate the famine, and then used humanitarian aid as a tool to promote a corrupt agenda. First, I will examine the counter-insurgency strategies employed by emperor Haile Selassie and how his crooked government led to the famine of 1972-1973. I will explain how he was successful in hiding the famine from the international community, but not so lucky in persuading the Ethiopian people that he was not to blame for widespread hunger. Next I will turn to the methods of warfare carried out by Mengistu and his troops, and apply these techniques to what occurred in Eritrea and Tigray prior to the 1980s famine. From there I will explain the consequences of the Dergue’s actions, the attempt Mengistu made to hide the famine from the international community, and the manipulation of foreign aid by the government to finance the revolution. This section is intended to answer part of my projected hypothesis, that the Ethiopian government generated the famine of 1983-1985, implemented policies to make the famine inevitable, and then sustained a momentum to encourage a state of mass hunger.

The Ethiopian government under Haile Selassie from 1961-1974 was based on “a feudal system of government and [an] administration characterized by cultural chauvinism, as well as ethnic and regional inequalities, and was in the throes of a severe economic crisis that [had] been allowed to escalate out of control.”\(^9\) Throughout the war of Eritrea, innocent Ethiopians became victims of war as offensives and massacres by armed forces swept through the north. The imperial government developed counter-insurgency tactics that were specifically orchestrated to instill fear in the civilian population and prevent the harboring of rebel fronts by depopulating the Eritrea region using a “scorched earth” pol-

\(^4\) Id at 307.
\(^5\) Id at 313.
\(^6\) Id at 317.
\(^7\) Keller, supra note 26, at 618.
\(^8\) Layers of Time at 334-336.
\(^9\) Keller, supra note 26, at 618.
icy. Africa Watch has stated, “from the very start of the war, the Ethiopian army used hunger as a weapon.” The deliberate killing of animals, destroying of crops, stealing of food, restrictions on trade, and damage to markets, in conjunction with drought and poor living standards, made widespread famine inevitable. Forced relocation of the pastoral population, intentional massacres resulting in a death toll of astronomical proportions, and poisoning of water wells all worked to strengthen an emperor and dwindle a population that was already suffering from inadequate food supplies. The government gave northern Ethiopians an ultimatum, either agree to an unequal coexistence and dependence upon imperial rule or die from the ravages of war.

I think that the famine of the 1980s was not a chance occurrence, but rather a foreseen effect of war used to brutally cripple a nation. Prior to the Great Famine, Selassie experienced a period in which Ethiopia was low on resources. When civilian complaints surfaced regarding the urgency of food relief, the corrupt regime ignored their requests. If the famine was acknowledged, the emperor believed his reputation would be tarnished; therefore he deliberately dismissed famine allegations to preserve his self-image. When the international community began to question the Ethiopian food supply, Selassie hid behind exaggerations and excuses. Alex de Waal mentions in his book “Famine Crimes” that Selassie “suppressed reports about famine and refused to countenance relief.” According to Africa Watch, the famine “was popularly blamed on drought, a backward and impoverished social system, and the cover-up attempted by the imperial government.”

While these factors did add to the food crisis, these obstacles on their own would not have led to the widespread destruction that did in fact occur. For one thing, farmers and pastoralists were familiar with the fluctuating weather patterns in eastern Africa. They developed survival mechanisms that could have been deployed to reduce and contain the effects of famine in 1972; however the “forcible alienation of resources and violence” made these backup techniques impossible to implement. Drought partly caused the famine, but it was the “drought acting on a society that had been deprived of the means of responding to that threat” - thus the government, not merely the weather, can be held accountable.

It is important to take note of the famine in the 1970s because it serves as an evidential precursor to the later famine of the 1980s. The famine of 1972 further persuaded Ethiopians to adopt Marxism and dispose of imperial rule altogether. There is no doubt in my mind that given the famine of the 1970s, the Dergue knew that their actions would inevitably lead to famine. Mengistu and his troops were determined to create an atmosphere susceptible to famine, deny that they played any role in the deprivation of food, and then use international aid as a weapon of war. Given the turbulent past of Ethiopia and the high prevalence of famine, there seems to be a strong link between war and hunger that is almost impossible to deny. De Wall supports my view, “the zone of severe famine coincided with the war zone, and the phases of the developing famine corresponded with the major military actions.” This coincidence was not accidental; the government implemented strategies that were intended to destroy a nation through hunger.

55 Evil Days at 116.
56 Id at 42-43.
57 Id at 42-47.
58 Id at 48.
60 Evil Days at 58.
61 Id at 55-64.
62 Id at 59.
63 Id.
64 African Issues at 108.
65 Id at 115.
The Dergue used their warfare techniques to achieve environmental degradation, Ethiopian dependency on the government, and starvation of the rebel fronts. Starting with Eritrea, the measures taken by the army and the air force shattered the ecosystem as trees were cut and forests were burned for defense purposes. Pastures that were not annihilated by phosphorous and flammable chemicals were rigged with mines, trampled on by tanks, or cratered with bombs. As land became scarce, herdsmen could no longer graze their livestock freely and many farmers were left with poor crop yields. Whatever food peasants were able to produce and whatever livestock were able to survive were usually destroyed or confiscated by government soldiers.66

Further south in Tigray, the TPLF fought a classic guerilla insurgency, and the Dergue retaliated with tactics that were similar to the methods employed in Eritrea. Africa Watch asserts that counter-insurgent warfare turned into all out counter-population warfare, for the government anticipated total destruction of Tigray. Grain stores were burned, entire villages were incinerated, and markets were relentlessly bombarded. As farmers lost their means of employment and feared for their lives, harvesting of crops ceased altogether and the food market was in an undeniable state of emergency.67 With no money, no food, and no livelihood, many Ethiopians were forced to idly wait for death.

The battles in Eritrea and Tigray were directly linked to the counter-insurgency strategies that led to an “economic war in Ethiopia.”68 Keller explains, “the wished to destroy the TPLF, as well as its base of popular support, to disrupt agricultural production, and to regain control of the fertile western region of Tigré.”69 As a result of their counter-insurgent tactics, unemployment was on the rise, food prices began to skyrocket, and grain mills became inoperable. According to Alemneh Dejene in his book “Environment, Famine, and Politics in Ethiopia,” “apart from agriculture, there is no source of employment to supplement income in the Ethiopian highlands.”70 Many Ethiopians came to depend upon the government, not because of the policies they advocated, but because it was the only chance they had for survival. After the government announced that the state ideology would be Marxism-Leninism, the economy became completely nationalized and under Dergue management. Trade was restricted with the imposition of blockades, high taxes were issued to reduce trading, and commerce routes were monitored day and night. As part of the socialist campaign and military plot against guerilla insurgents, the Dergue sought to isolate movement by forcing Ethiopians to relocate on state farm territory or resettle in villages under government control. The communication pathways that were not destroyed by traditional warfare were disconnected, as were migration trails into Sudan and Somalia.71

The restrictions on trade spelled disaster for the entire Ethiopian economy. If grain prices increased in one part of the country, traders would go wherever grain was cheapest, purchase as much grain as they could, and transport it back to remove scarcity. The imposition of unaffordable taxes and military observation of trade routes prevented all unauthorized trading that Ethiopians had previously relied upon. Rebel-held areas were prevented from receiving any food and deficit areas could not be alleviated by the surplus grown in other regions.72

The government became addicted to the Soviet model of communism, and the Dergue intentionally used socialism as a tool to format the national economy to serve their inter-

66 Evil Days at 113-132.
67 Id at 133-156.
68 Id at 157.
69 Keller, supra note 26, at 614.
71 See generally Evil Days.
72 Id at 133-176.
ests in the Ethiopian revolution. According to Dejene, “the peasant agricultural sector comprises 90% of the Ethiopian population and contributes 50% of the gross domestic product and 90% of the nation’s export earnings.” Prior to the 1980s famine, the government expanded its role in the agriculture industry, the backbone of the Ethiopian economy. The Agricultural Marketing Corporation (AMC) was a monopolistic outgrowth of the government that fixed the price of grain and allowed the government to control regions that yielded crop surpluses. Farmers who resided on state farms had to fill a government imposed crop quota and were forced to sell their produce below market price. Peasants Associations supervised the relocated farmers and made sure they gave their monthly contributions. But because the war had damaged the land, peasants had no choice but to sell their material assets for money that they would then use to buy grain, only to give whatever food they bought to the government to avoid punishment for not filling their specified quotas set by the AMC. The AMC was supposed to redistribute the grain it acquired, however most of the grain was used for feeding the military and the farmers were left with nothing. De Waal is convinced that “neither soldiers nor urban dwellers went hungry during the famines of the 1980s.” The government nationalized all commercial farms, underpaid the laborers they forced to work, and used destitute Ethiopians to build new villages, settlements, and state farms.

The adoption of socialism was meant to benefit the entire national economy. However, the Dergue’s Marxist counter-insurgent strategies were designed to force starving Ethiopians into indentured servitude to the state. Dejene found in his study of Ethiopia that soil erosion is the number one cause of land degradation and is “[due] primarily to human activities, particularly overgrazing, overcultivation, and deforestation.” As the Dergue destroyed and commandeered land, they shattered any chance for Ethiopians to grow their own food and live off their own land. When they resettled in villages or on state farms, government policy regarding planting and ownership rights of land were left ambiguous. Ethiopians feared the Peasants Associations and the threat of being resettled, so they did everything they could not to cause a disturbance that would lead to removal from their homes and families. In his 1980s study, Dejene found that “in spite of the rhetoric of the present ‘Marxist’ government, peasant influence on government policy is insignificant,” and “peasant institutions...have retrogressed each year to become more and more the organ of government policy—a policy whose priority is not exactly combating famine.” The Peasants Associations became one more “socialist” program that the government used to control food production and its producers.

Mengistu, like Selassie, tried to convince the international community of his innocence in the famine crisis; however Africa Watch has found contrary evidence. Africa Watch has asserted in its report that “one consequence of the government’s military policies...was the creation of famine” that was “ascribed to drought.” It is worth noting that “while climatic adversity and related factors certainly played a part in the tragedy, a closer investigation shows that widespread drought occurred only some months after the famine was really under way, and that information on food production and food prices gave an account which contradicts important elements of the drought hypothesis.” If the famine came first and drought came second, how is it possible, given the causal history of events,
to assert that a side effect caused the cause? This fact alone proves the Dergue were desperate to remove responsibility and hold an uncontrollable natural phenomenon accountable for the famine. Furthermore, government commissions were guilty of underreporting and exaggerating statistics to serve their own interest. These numerical manipulations, while not dispositive, tend to suggest government complicity.

After the famine made newspaper headlines around the world, the government could no longer deny the existence of a mass food shortage. So, they admitted to a famine caused by drought and then implemented policies to appear as though they were remediying the situation. For example, in the mid-1980s the Ethiopian government began pushing for a plan of action to bring about food self-sufficiency. The Ministry of Agriculture and the World Bank proposed a Peasant Agricultural Development Extension Program (PADEP) that would help to redistribute food evenly across Ethiopia. While this plan sounded promising, Dejene found one problem, “the Ethiopian government cleverly selected part of the package that it saw as having no conflict with its interest, and proceeded in implementing its own PADEP, partly to dispel the international image of a government whose agricultural policy was a major contributor to famine.” The government basically reworked the PADEP to satisfy their war initiatives and assure the international community that they were at least aware of the famine. Mengistu also offered a plan for resettlement that was intended to remove individuals from famine stricken zones and place them in areas that were better suitable for farming. Again the government received praise for focusing on the devastating effects of famine, and again their plan for resettlement was an illusion, a means to capture and contain rebels and civilians for their own objectives. Even when the Dergue openly confessed that Ethiopia was experiencing a massive food shortage, they still managed to manipulate the situation to their own advantage.

The Great Famine was predicted and then nurtured by the Dergue, and this is evident given the role of humanitarian aid in the Ethiopian fray. Mengistu used flawed figures and projections of the Ethiopian food supply to appeal to the international community for foreign aid. The international community did recognize the suffering of the Ethiopian population; however they failed to see that the government was using the relief as a means to further its own ends. From 1984 to 1985, 975,000 metric tons of food went to the government held areas, whereas 80,000 metric tons went to the dominant insurgent held regions. This was made possible by the establishment of the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, which I will turn to next.

The Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) was established to distribute aid and conduct unbiased reports of conditions in Ethiopia. When the Dergue assumed power, the RRC was structurally altered to become an instrument of war. As the international community responded with generous aid donations, the government only allowed relief to go through the RRC. Africa Watch has stated that 90% of money and food went to the government and was channeled through the RRC. As the money was being dispersed, the RRC was assuring donors that their money was reaching every affected famine victim in Ethiopia, when in reality Mengistu’s soldiers were the only ones being nourished. The RRC was used as a shield for the government to hide behind and a mechanism they could easily use to obtain monetary funds to finance their growing military ranks. Clearly the RRC was involved in government operations and evidently their intent was to moni-
tor the flow of supplies so that the government prospered at the cost of civilian and insurgent lives.

The RRC's alliance with the government made it extremely difficult for donor countries to distribute their humanitarian aid to rebel held areas. When humanitarian agencies and other organizations requested a "food truce" that would allow for relief to be channeled through non-governmental organizations, the government refused claiming a peaceful agreement "amounted to a proposal 'to make an arrangement with criminals'."\(^9\) Mengistu was determined to keep all humanitarian aid in his arsenal of weapons to deploy on the rebel fronts and an unsuspecting civilian population. According to Africa Watch, "USAID was the only donor to contemplate giving substantial support to the cross-border operation...[but] because of the politics of the relief program, USAID did not in the end give support that it promised."\(^9\) Many organizations, the United Nations included, distributed relief to further their own international foreign policies, and the Dergue pitched a compelling presentation that made it difficult to refuse channeling aid through the RRC. In Ethiopia, the reality was that if countries wanted to allay the effects of famine, they either had to give to the government or not give at all. Their choice was further constrained by their domestic agendas; they did not want to look insincere through the eyes of the media and they wanted praise from the international community.\(^9\) As innocent civilians were dying from starvation, the government was using aid to satisfy their ethnocentric goals.

Evidently the military was receiving more aid than they could consume, so the remaining supplies were used as a tool in war. Hungry Ethiopians joined government militias knowing that they would be paid in food rations.\(^9\) Keller explicates, "in the north, relief supplies were being deliberately used to induce local residents to join the Ethiopian army, and to pay the soldiers."\(^9\) Moreover, food was used as bait to lure and then trap starving drifters in government resettlement areas where they would have no choice but to stay under Mengistu's indirect supervision. By restricting movement, the Dergue hoped to prevent Ethiopians from freely migrating to Sudan or to rebel territories. The government wanted to pacify Eritrea and Tigray and make it impossible for Ethiopians to survive without Dergue assistance. Government sponsored relief centers were more like prisons; curfews were set and punishment for escaping was unavoidable.\(^9\) All the Dergue cared about was getting the international community off their backs; they could care less whether or not their policies actually helped the victims of famine. After all, the people affected by famine were dying from starvation for a reason, to further promote the Dergue and their socialist cause, so the government thought.

Some people may be convinced that while the government did play a significant role in the Great Famine, the various rebel fronts should share part of the blame as well. I do not doubt that the guerrillas did use food as an instrument in war. I disagree that the rebel fronts brought about the famine and then became intent on promoting widespread hunger. Only after the government started using food as a tool did the various rebel fronts further use the effects of famine to their own advantage. Africa Watch gives some evidence that the rebel fronts warned civilians of their military actions beforehand, whereas the government initiated surprise attacks, hoping to kill as many Ethiopians as they could who could become potential enemies.\(^9\)

The counter-insurgency strategies of the Ethiopian government under Selassie and Mengistu were both aimed at "robbing the poor to feed the rich" and "draining the sea to

\(^{90}\) Id at 179.
\(^{91}\) Id.
\(^{92}\) Evil Days at 178-180; African Issues at 121-123.
\(^{93}\) Evil Days at 125.
\(^{94}\) Keller, supra note 26, at 621.
\(^{95}\) Evil Days at 186-188.
\(^{96}\) Id at 270.
catch the fish." Through the direct use of traditional warfare, the government tried to eliminate the rebel fronts that threatened their perceived supremacy. From 1978 to the early 1990s, ground offensives and aerial bombardments had become the normal standards of everyday life. The government motto seemed to be burn, slaughter, or bomb “[anything] that moved.” Since the Dergue basically targeted any area that could potentially harbor their adversaries, in exterminating the rebellious fronts they also destroyed a huge portion of the civilian population. Given the intentional manipulation of international aid, the carrot and stick approach to food distribution, and the premeditated warfare techniques, the government had foreseen the famine, had implemented counter-insurgency strategies designed to exacerbate the famine, and then used humanitarian aid as a tool to promote a corrupt agenda. Based on the examples I have given concerning the Ethiopian socialist system, reason must prevail; the government used famine as an instrument to promote its domestic agenda and I do not see how this can be denied.

III. HUMAN RIGHTS AND FAMINE: PROOF OF A VIOLATION

I have only answered a fraction of my hypothesis, that the Ethiopian government generated the Great Famine of the 1980s, implemented policies to make the famine inevitable, and then sustained a momentum to encourage a state of mass hunger. The third section of this paper is meant to serve as a philosophical foundation upon which my argument will be further strengthened. I will first define famine then apply the definition to the circumstances in Ethiopia from 1983-1985. From there I will move on to examine what human rights are and whether or not they exist. I will appeal to the philosophical work of John Locke and his conception of the state of nature, social contract, and the right to revolt against the sovereign power. Before moving on to address famine in an ethical context, I will reject cultural relativism and uphold the objectivity of human rights. Next I will contend that free will does exist because it is required when assigning moral responsibility. From there I will offer the promising deontological moral theory of Immanuel Kant, and systematically show how the Dergue can be held morally at fault for their actions. To accomplish this task, I will appeal to Kant’s “Perpetual Peace” and apply two versions of his categorical imperative to the Ethiopian famine. I will readdress the objectivity of human rights to prove that these rights do have value that is independent of human agency. From there I will finally conclude with why I believe the Ethiopian famine was a human rights violation. This section is intended to answer another part of my projected hypothesis, that famine is a violation of human rights and does apply to the case of Ethiopia when used as a weapon of war.

What is famine? In the article “Famine Crimes in International Law,” David Marcus defines “famine” as “a particularly virulent form of [starvation] causing widespread death.” Put another way, “famine occurs when a society no longer becomes socially and economically viable.” Without an agricultural sector of the market, the Ethiopian economy was doomed and unable to recover without outside intervention. Marcus makes a distinction between “second-degree faminogenic behavior” and “first-degree faminogenic behavior.” The former occurs when “governments implement policies that themselves engender famine, then recklessly continue to pursue these policies despite learning that they are causing mass starvation,” which is what the Dergue did prior to 1983. The latter “is intentional; governments deliberately use hunger as a tool of extermination to an-
nihilate troublesome populations." Ethiopian civilians and insurgents became pawns in a chess game after 1983. The government was able to play God and decide who lived and who died.

Locke and Paine’s ideas about the social contract and the limits to sovereignty demonstrate that there is a link between the Ethiopian famine and human rights. Societal inequality arises when the social contract is breached. Certain individuals become ignorant to reason and thus become obsessed with passions and driven by desires. After the fall of Selassie, the backdrop of revolution was a war for freedom from the arbitrary rule of the Dergue, who, like Selassie, assumed sovereign power without societal concurrence. Thousands of innocent Ethiopians died because of hunger or its effects, their right to property was confiscated along with the material fruits of their labor, and their right to liberty was monitored, restricted and threatened by force. According to Paine, “the two modes of government which prevail in the world are...government by election and representation [and] government by hereditary succession,” and “the two distinct and opposite forms erect themselves on the two distinct and opposite bases of reason and ignorance.”

The Ethiopian government planned a strategic military campaign that created conditions that would inevitably lead to the Great Famine of the 1980s. The next question becomes who gets responsibility and how much. Do the Dergue? Does Mengistu? Should the rebel fronts and the government forces be equally liable? Do the peasants and drought deserve a share in the blame? As I have shown in part two of this paper, I believe that the individuals who called themselves “Dergue” are the only ones who can be held morally accountable for the famine that ravaged Ethiopia. Of course drought and violence played a role in the development of famine, as well, but this does not free the Dergue of their moral responsibility.

Naturally, some individuals were more responsible than others, given the internal military hierarchy among the Dergue ranks. Mengistu was responsible, but so were the military officials who carried out his orders. In his study, Milgram learned that “for a person to feel responsible for his actions, he must sense that the behavior has flowed from ‘the self’.” Milgram further notes “the most far-reaching consequences is that the person feels responsible the authority directing him but feels no responsibility the content of the actions that the authority prescribes.” Similar to the internal rationale Mengistu followed, I think that the Dergue military officials reasoned that they were only following orders. If Mengistu claimed he was not responsible and the Dergue claimed they were not responsible, then who is? Someone has to be, for it certainly was not merely the weather or the starving Ethiopians. Moreover, Milgram states that “the subjects do not derive satisfaction from inflicting pain, but they often like the feeling they get from pleasing the experimenter.” All human beings by their nature want praise and recognition for a job well done. Some people become so brainwashed and intimidated that they will completely discard their own opinions for the sake of acceptance by others. But, regardless of the military’s internal feelings toward Mengistu, the fact that they voluntarily and rationally chose to act in such a way as to make a famine inevitable means they must bear the burden of responsibility.

Human rights exist independent of human agency and it is important to understand their objective value. In his essay, “The Nature and Value of Rights,” Joel Feinberg appeals to the moral theory of Kant, that “moral worth” must be “[derived] from the thought

103 Id.
104 Thomas Paine, RIGHTS OF MAN: BEING AN ANSWER TO MR. BURKE’S ATTACK ON THE FRENCH REVOLUTION 114 (1790).
106 Id.
107 Id at 637.
that it is . To Feinberg, rights are defined “as ordinary duties” and “the performance of [these duties] is presumed to be so beneficial to the person whose duty it is that he can the necessary means from the state and noninterference from others as due.” Similarly, Paine states that “a declaration of rights is, by reciprocity, a declaration of duties also,” and “whatever is my right as a man, is also the right of another; and it becomes my duty to guarantee, as well as to possess.” The link that Feinberg, Paine, and Kant draw between rights and duties implies that human beings should recognize the value of their life and the life of others. To Kant, “practical reason alone [prescribes] laws to free beings without constraining them,” and even when they fail to follow such laws, the objective nature and value of human rights still exist. I think that respecting humanity requires a comprehension of the duties human beings have toward one another and the state of nature all human beings originated from. The Ethiopian government committed a human rights violation because they selectively neglected to recognize the rights of man qua man.

The Dergue’s strategic famine also violated human rights law. By adopting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations recognized that humans have rights, that these rights need to be protected from the threat of ignorance, and that rights are not subject to discrimination for they apply universally to all rational beings that “are born free and equal.” Article 25 proves that withholding food violates human rights: “everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food...and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment...or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.” Furthermore, Article 30 states “nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group, or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein.” The Dergue violated Article 25 because they did not mitigate the effects of famine they created. They violated Article 30 because they intended to depopulate a portion of Ethiopian society by violating Article 25 and manipulating the food supply.

IV. THE CONTINUING RELEVANCE OF THE GREAT FAMINE

The quest for power led the Dergue military regime to intentionally create and sustain the famine of 1983-1985. Their actions were premeditated to bring about the inevitable suffering of the Ethiopian community, and their calculated military strategy deprived their citizens of their fundamental rights. In this fourth section, I address the continuing implications of the Great Famine. I explain why I think famine is still prevalent in present-day Ethiopia, and propose a strategy for combating famine through harnessing the value of cross-cultural dialogue and the media, and conclude with an evaluation of humanitarian aid.

There are many reasons why starvation is still prevalent in the Ethiopian region. As illustrated throughout this paper, the revolution seriously impaired the Ethiopian economy, devastated the natural environment, and weakened the government infrastructure. Given these factors, the unstable weather patterns, and the constant warfare in the Horn

110 Paine, supra note 104, at 90.
111 Immanuel Kant, PERPETUAL PEACE: A PHILOSOPHICAL SKETCH 32 (1795).
113 UDHR at Article 25.
114 UDHR at Article 30.
of Africa, Ethiopia has never been able to fully recover from the socialist system employed by the Dergue. Kant maintains, “though the treaty of peace puts an end to the present war, it does not abolish a state of war.” Both the revolution and the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia have ended, but the state of hunger still persists. Without economic self-sufficiency, the eternal war to overcome famine will remain.

Trusting in cross-cultural dialogue to advance human rights might be criticized as too optimistic and unrealistic given present day politics. However, only when people understand that Ethiopia needs our assistance and attention can the necessary support and care be provided. Cross-cultural dialogue is necessary to build consensus in favor of foreign aid in the First World. Such efforts have been effective before — international aid to Ethiopia more than doubled during the Great Famine, from $361 million in 1983 to $784 million in 1985. Members of the United Nations, European Union, and the United States coordinated their efforts to bring about the relief Ethiopians urgently needed.

While eliminating hunger completely may be difficult, eradicating famine is feasible if there is cross-cultural dialogue. Coordinated international humanitarian aid provides Ethiopia with a viable means to decrease famine and work towards self-sufficiency.

So far, I have been arguing that the situation in Ethiopia demands international attention. The next issue I want to discuss is how the global community can come to learn about Ethiopia so that they may rationally conclude that famine is a human rights violation. From there they can employ cross-cultural communication techniques, wage a cost benefit analysis to determine the kind of intervention that is required to ensure safety, carry out the necessary actions to remedy the present hunger, and implement policies to prevent future outbreaks of famine. In the technological age of present day society, television and the Internet have been able to inform communities about what is going on beyond their borders. Of course, reporting is subject to biases, incomplete information, and other flaws that make it impossible to take entirely at face value. Nonetheless, the media provides a useful service and can help people to recognize the value of human rights. To Jonathan Glover, “we can...feel sympathy for people we do not know” if we know them, and so “we may be moved to help by the television reports from refugee camps in Ethiopia.” As Arthur Koestler asserts, though, “distance in space and time degrades intensity of awareness” and “so does magnitude,” so diligent, continued efforts at dialogue are crucial.

There is evidence that the media influenced foreign investment toward the Ethiopian famine in the 1980s. Indeed, the significant jump in humanitarian aid occurred shortly after the release of a BBC film that documented the effects of famine in northern Ethiopia. The media and cross-cultural dialogue can help people realize that their help is required in Ethiopia.

In building consensus and structuring aid, advocates of aid to Ethiopia should be mindful of the argument set forth by Mary B. Anderson in her article, “You Save My Life Today, But for What Tomorrow?”. One reason why the existence of famine seems to perpetually exist in Ethiopia is because “humanitarian assistance rarely addresses the fundamental circumstances that underlie crises.” Instead, if people are giving humanitarian aid to Ethiopians, they need to incorporate an education program that teaches the people how

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115 Kant, supra note 111, at 20.
116 Eritrea and Ethiopia at 37.
117 Evil Days at 178.
120 Evil Days at 177-178.
to survive without assistance. Anderson notes, “Experience shows that such aid, by failing to recognize and connect with existing decision-making, management, distributional, or other productive and psychological capacities of the people affected by crises, undermines and weakens these capacities.” As a result, “more and more recipients of aid accept what is given from outside as their due, their right” and “that outside aid is necessary for survival.” In the 1980s, entire families in Ethiopia lived in relief centers, mainly because they had nowhere to go and no resources at their disposal. This is part of the reason why there is still famine today. Even worse, Anderson notes that sometimes “aid feeds conflict...through the direct misappropriation of aid goods by warring parties.”

Anderson goes on to explain that “aid providers should focus on assessing capacities” so that aid recipients will not become dependent on temporary humanitarian relief. Donors must focus on building a self-sufficient Ethiopia. Relief workers need to show Ethiopians how to use the resources they have to deal with drought, prevent famine, and sustain an independent livelihood. As Anderson concludes, relief in Ethiopia will be successful only if humanitarian providers “learn and employ the lessons of experience” and actively pursue the principal causes of hunger.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper, I have proven that the quest for power led the Dergue military regime to intentionally create and sustain the Great Famine of the 1980s, that their actions were intended to bring about the inevitable suffering of the Ethiopian community, and that their calculated military strategies deprived human beings of their fundamental natural rights. While it may be too late to bring many of the oppressors to justice, the continuing poverty, suffering and starvation in Ethiopia demands international action. While institutional resources may be limited, increased attention through media and cross-cultural dialogue can focus international attention and action by individuals as they did after the tsunami that devastated East Asia in late December of 2004. Only a similar level of attention to the continuing evils of famine in Ethiopia will meet all of our moral responsibilities.

122 Id at 140.
123 Id.
124 Id at 141.
125 Id at 142.
126 Id at 138.