

A Constructivist Perspective of Rape as Military Strategy: A Comparative Analysis of the Rwandan Genocide and the Bosnian War

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Abstract

This paper explores how the social construction of a peoples' ethnic or national identity can influence the use of rape as a military strategy. In exploring this concept, the Rwandan genocide and Bosnian War will be used as case studies. It is argued that rape as a military strategy derives coercive power from social constructions of ethnicity, nationality and gender in patriarchal societies. In presenting this argument, the constructivist school of thought is used to analyze the processes that led to social constructions of ethnicity, nationality and gender. This paper considers the subsequent social environment that allowed rape to be used as an effective military strategy in both Rwanda and Bosnia.

Keywords: conflict; ethnicity; gender; nationality; sexuality; self-reflexivity; international relations; patriarchy; dynamism; sexual assault

The prevalence of systematic rape during intra- and inter-state conflict is not a new phenomenon.¹ Numerous authors have dedicated time to the study of rape as a military strategy. In "Rape as a Weapon of War," Claudia Card defines the practice as a tool "wielded by male soldiers of one country (or national, political, or cultural group) against typically unarmed female civilians of

another[.]"² Regardless if one refers to systematic rape as 'a weapon of war' or a military strategy, the following is clear; rape creates and maintains "*dominance*, which is both enjoyed for its own sake and used for such ulterior ends as exploitation, expulsion, dispersion, [and] murder."³ Based on historical examples, it is evident that mass rape has been

1. Claudia Card, "Rape as a Weapon of War," *Hypatia* 11, no. 4 (1996): 5, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810388>.

2. *Ibid.*, 6.

3. Card, "Rape as a Weapon of War,".

employed as a military strategy⁴ but the manner in which it commands coercive power differs across conflicts. For this reason, this paper explores how the social construction of a peoples' ethnic or national identity can influence the use of rape as a military strategy.

The Rwandan genocide and Bosnian War are used as case studies to argue that rape as a military strategy derives coercive power from social constructions of ethnicity, nationality and gender within patriarchal societies. The constructivist school of thought is used to analyze historical processes that led to social constructions of ethnicity, nationality and gender in each society, and considers how these processes allowed rape to be used as an effective military strategy.

Organizationally, this paper contains four sections. Section I provides an overview of the theoretical framework. Section II introduces the case studies. Section III examines these case studies in relation to constructivism and Section IV considers the ethical prescriptions constructivism offers regarding how we as social beings ought to act in response to such events in international relations.

Section I: Constructivism

Within the realm of international relations, constructivism seeks to explain why states act or behave in a certain way. This is achieved by examining processes, changes and interactions between states and their environment.⁵ Constructivism differs from other theories of international relations such as realism, which is concerned with materialism; constructivism does not ignore the importance of materialism (i.e. power and incentives), but is concerned with explaining the social and relational construction of states and the things they desire.⁶ Therefore, constructivism focuses on the social meaning attached to various objects, practices, concepts, norms and actors.⁷

Unlike other theories, constructivism does not assume a priori existence of concepts such as sovereignty or anarchy.⁸ Instead, constructivism emphasizes posteriori existence; how the meanings of these concepts are constructed through social processes and interactions

between actors and their environment. Constructivist theory is built upon three core tenets: dynamism, mutual constitution and intersubjective knowledge.⁹

Dynamism is an important tenet of constructivism because it supports the notion that change is possible.¹⁰ This foundation situates constructivism as a theory of dynamic processes, which accepts that change and continuity are a result of mutual constitution.¹¹ This process of mutual constitution occurs through various forms of communication, leading to changes and/or the emergence of ideas and concepts.¹² Mutual constitution is concerned with how ideas emerge and change as a result of an actor's particular experience and how these changes influence the actor's own thoughts and actions.¹³ Finally, intersubjective knowledge occurs when socially constructed ideas, norms and concepts are accepted by a group of people as shared knowledge.¹⁴ These tenets work together in a cyclical fashion as each factor serves to influence one another.

By design, constructivist ethics examines social processes. The primary functions of the theory are explaining how ideas change and determining the impact of these changes on the manner in which an actor determines right from wrong. Thus, constructivism offers humility and self-reflexivity as the moral foundations that guide ethical prescriptions.¹⁵ For example, humility suggests that we ought to avoid naturalizing or objectifying our own truths.¹⁶ This stems from the fact that anything one considers natural, obvious or true is socially constructed and therefore subject to change.¹⁷

Similarly, constructivism recognizes that actors participate in an intersubjective world in which one's thoughts and actions have a direct impact on the construction of collective knowledge.¹⁸ For this reason, constructivism suggests that we ought to be self-reflective and consider how we contribute to the creation of shared knowledge.¹⁹

Upon establishing the foundations and ethical implications of constructivism, the following section introduces the case studies of the Rwandan genocide and the Bosnian War.

4. Gottschall, Jonathan, "Explaining Wartime Rape," *The Journal of Sex Research* 41, no. 2 (2004): 130, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3813647>

5. Ian Hurd, "Constructivism," in *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations*, ed. Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 299.

6. Alexander Wendt, "Constructing International Politics," *International Security*, 20 no. 1 (1995):71-72.

7. Hurd, "Constructivism," 299.

8. Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organizations*, 46 no. 2 (1992): 405.

9. Matthew J. Hoffman, "Is Constructivist Ethics an Oxymoron?" *International Studies Review* 11 no. 2 (2009): 242-243.

10. *Ibid.*, 242.

11. *Ibid.*, 242.

12. *Ibid.*, 242.

13. *Ibid.*, 242-43.

14. *Ibid.*, 243.

15. *Ibid.*, 243.

16. *Ibid.*, 244.

17. *Ibid.*, 244.

18. *Ibid.*, 244

19. *Ibid.*, 244.

Section II: Case Studies – Rwandan Genocide and the Bosnian War

Background

Between April and July 1994, Hutu extremists killed an estimated one million Rwandan Tutsis. During this period, there were high incidences of sexual assault and rape committed against Tutsi girls and women by Hutu extremists. While it is difficult to accurately determine the number of women who were raped during the conflict, a report by the United Nations estimates that as many as 250,000 women were affected during the genocide.²⁰

In the case of Bosnia, Serbian nationalists killed an estimated 80,000 Bosnian Muslims during 1992 to 1995.²¹ Similar to the Rwandan genocide, high incidences of sexual assault and rape occurred throughout the conflict. Again, it is difficult to quantify accurately the number of women who were raped during the conflict but estimates range in the tens of thousands.²² In both Rwanda and Bosnia mass rape was not simply the by-product of a state of disorder induced by conflict.²³ Rather, evidence suggests that rape was mobilized and employed systematically as an effective military strategy to further the goals of Hutu extremists and Serbian Nationalists.²⁴

Implementation of Rape as a Military Strategy

In Rwanda, rape was used as a military strategy to support Hutu extremists' goal of exterminating the minority Tutsi population. For example, some scholars have argued that the widespread use of rape functioned as a suspended death sentence as a result of the subsequent spread of

HIV.²⁵ According to Patricia Weitsman, AIDS patients were actively sought out from hospitals and put into special battalions whose sole purpose was to rape Tutsi women.²⁶ This supports the notion that the forcible transmission of HIV was a calculated outcome of employing rape as a tool of genocide, particularly when one considers that an estimated 70 percent of women who were raped contracted HIV.²⁷ In other cases, rape was often used as a prelude to death. According to reports and testimonies from survivors, some women were raped and then immediately killed while others were raped in front of family and members of their community.²⁸ Under these circumstances, rape was not necessarily the cause of death but rather, a means to inflict terror on the women and those close to her.

In Bosnia, Serbian nationalists used mass rape as one tactic to expel Bosnian Muslims from towns, cities and villages in order to lay claim to the region. While there were ethnic Serbs dispersed throughout the former Yugoslavia, Bosnia had a particularly large Serbian population in the pre-war period. Because of this, Milosevic largely justified intervention in Bosnia as a means to protect those Serbs.²⁹ The actions carried out by Serbian forces against Bosnian Muslims are referred to as ethnic cleansing, as their ultimate goal was the forcible removal of Bosnian Muslims from the specific geographic region Serbians had claimed as their own.³⁰ This removal was carried out using a variety

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20. United Nations, "The Justice and Reconciliation Process in Rwanda," (2014)
<http://www.un.org/en/preventgenocide/rwanda/pdf/Backgrounder%20Justice%202014.pdf>: 1. Accessed December 1, 2015.
21. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Fifteen Years Later: Forward or Backward in the Balkans?"
<http://www.ushmm.org/confront-genocide/speakers-and-events/all-speakers-and-events/fifteen-years-later-forward-or-backward-in-the-balkans>
22. Patricia A. Weitsman, "The Politics of Identity and Sexual Violence: A Review of Bosnia and Rwanda," *Human Rights Quarterly* 30 no. 3 (2008): 569.
23. Lindsey Crider, "Rape as War Crime and Crime against Humanity: The Effect of Rape in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Rwanda on International Law," paper presented at the Alabama Political Science Association Conference (2010): 2.
24. Although the analysis of this paper focuses specifically on how Serbian nationalists used rape as a military strategy, it is important to note that all major groups (Serbs, Croats and Bosnian Muslims) committed acts of gender-based violence, including rape against women of other ethno-nationalist groups (Naimark 2001, 167).

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25. Paula Donovan, "Rape and HIV/AIDS in Rwanda," *The Lancet*. 360 (2002): 17.
[http://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736\(02\)11804-6.pdf](http://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736(02)11804-6.pdf)
26. Weitsman, "The Politics of Identity and Sexual Violence," 577.
27. *Ibid.*, 577.
28. Donatilla Mukamana and Petra Brysiewicz, "The Lived Experiences of Genocide Rape Survivors in Rwanda," *Journal of Nursing Scholarship* 4th quarter (2008): 381.
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.cyber.usask.ca/doi/10.1111/j.1547-5069.2008.00253.x/epdf>
29. Norman M. Naimark, "The Wars of Yugoslav Succession," *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe*, (United States of America: Harvard University Press, 2001): 159.
30. In cases such as the Bosnian War, it is important to realize that campaigns of ethnic cleansing can turn into genocidal massacres. In the former Yugoslavia, Srebrenica was a region in the eastern portion of Bosnia, located near the Serbian border. In 1995 Serbian forces under the leadership of Ratko Mladic led a brutal attack on Srebrenica in order to depopulate and take control of the region. During the fighting, a number of Bosnian Muslims fled to the city of Tuzla for safety but many did not. Those who stayed behind in Srebrenica became the victims of a genocidal massacre. During a seven to ten day period, an estimated six to eight thousand Bosnian Muslim men between the ages of 16 to 65 were killed by Serbian forces. The men were housed in a nearby soccer stadium and taken to various locations throughout the region where they were killed and buried in mass graves (see Naimark 2001, 164-165). The mass killing of Bosnian Muslim men in Srebrenica qualifies as a

of tactics, including systematic beatings and robberies, mass killings, rape and other forms of violence and repression intended to terrorize and inflict fear upon Bosnian Muslims.³¹ With such tactics, two million Bosnians—the majority of them Muslims—fled their homes by the end of 1992.³²

The previous analysis explains why rape was used as a tool to commit genocide and ethnic cleansing but it does not explore how mass rape gained its coercive power. In order to answer this question, the following analysis focuses on how socially constructed notions of ethnicity, nationality and gender influenced the use of rape as a military strategy.

Section III: A Constructivist Perspective of Rwanda and Bosnia

The extent to which rape can be used as an effective military strategy is largely dependent on societal context. Patriarchal societies provide the necessary context due to the fact that a woman's worth, value and identity is largely tied to that of her male relatives.³³ Therefore, under these circumstances, rape is not merely an attack on a single female but rather a violation of her family and community.³⁴ In both Rwanda and Bosnia, this social climate, in conjunction with socially constructed notions of ethnicity, nationality and gender, played a central role in the use of rape as a military strategy. In the case of Rwanda, social revolutions, traditional values, and political propaganda were factors that influenced the construction and reconstruction of such norms.

Social Revolution

Leading up to the genocide, there were a number of significant political and social changes that occurred in Rwanda. The Hutu Revolution of 1959 was a movement in which Hutu counter-elites sought to disrupt the rigid social hierarchy that had previously privileged the minority Tutsi population.³⁵ In the years following the revolution, Hutu

extremists carried out a number of killings and massacres in an attempt to displace Rwandan Tutsis.³⁶ During these events, which carried on through the 1970s, thousands of Tutsis were killed, while hundreds of thousands fled to neighbouring countries for safety.³⁷ Following this period of violence, the Hutu counter-elites successfully put an end to the historic Tutsi monarchy.³⁸

Despite the success of the revolution, Hutu extremists failed "to purify the country entirely of its hated internal other."³⁹ The events of the revolution and the years of violence that followed created a volatile environment, allowing Hutu extremists to carry out a successful propaganda campaign against Tutsis.⁴⁰ Anti-Tutsi propaganda was well developed and easily accessible to the masses through posters, magazine articles and radio broadcasts.⁴¹ Despite their use of various means of communication, all forms of propaganda had the same message; Tutsis were enemies who needed to be subdued.

Traditional Values

In addition to major social changes, the role and influence of traditional values was also important. In the early 1980s, the Rwandan government instigated a plan to improve public morality. In an attempt to encourage moral behaviour, the government implemented a campaign that specifically targeted single urban women and women with European boyfriends.⁴² Countless women were apprehended and charged with vagabondage or prostitution and were sent to government-planned "morals straightening-out centers".⁴³ While these practices did not target Tutsi women exclusively, they were nevertheless disproportionately affected.⁴⁴ Though the practice of defending public morality did not last long, the campaign left a lasting impression on society.⁴⁵ This socially constructed idea that Tutsi women were promiscuous and

genocidal massacre because the goal of the Serbian forces during the six to ten day period of July 1995 was the complete extermination of a particularly defined group of people. For further information on the act of genocide and how the case of Srebrenica qualifies as an act of genocide, see the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, Articles I and II.

31. Naimark, "The Wars of Yugoslav Succession," 159.

32. *Ibid.*, 159-60.

33. Weitsman, "The Politics of Identity and Sexual Violence," 576.

34. Joshua Kepkay, "Gendercide and the Bosnian War," *On Politics*, 5 no. 1 (2011): 72.

35. Phillip A. Cantrell, "We Were a Chosen People": The East African

Revival and Its Return to Post-Genocide Rwanda," *Church History* 82 no. 2 (2014): 422.

36. Kyrsten Sinema, *Who must die: the state of exception in Rwanda's genocide*, Doctoral dissertation, Arizona State University: Arizona, (2012): 1-2.

37. *Ibid.*, 2.

38. Christopher C. Taylor, "A Gendered Genocide: Tutsi Women and Hutu Extremists in the 1994 Rwandan Genocide," *PoLAR* 22 no. 1 (1999): 42.

39. *Ibid.*, 2.

40. *Ibid.*, 44-46.

41. Sinema, *Who Must Die*, 34, 36.

42. Taylor, "A Gendered Genocide," 44.

43. *Ibid.*, 44.

44. *Ibid.*, 44.

45. *Ibid.*, 44.

of questionable moral standing helped to foster the necessary social context for a wide range of gender-based anti-Tutsi propaganda to emerge in the years leading up to the genocide.⁴⁶

Propaganda

In the early 1990s, Hutu extremists produced cartoons depicting Tutsi women engaging in socially inappropriate acts.⁴⁷ One illustration depicted two Tutsi women engaging in various sexual acts with three Belgian paratroopers. This extremely provocative and offensive image was a powerful tool for Hutu extremists because it allowed them to distinguish “their own sexual practices, procreative and moral, from European and Tutsi practices, non-procreative and therefore immoral.”⁴⁸ The offensive nature of the cartoon coupled with the fact that the image depicted individuals engaging in a group sexual act was foreign to traditional Rwandan sexual practices and because of this, the image—regardless of accuracy—helped to alter social perceptions of Tutsi women.⁴⁹

A second cartoon cultivated a similar message through its portrayal of two scantily clad Tutsi women caressing and kissing Romeo Dallaire, the former Major General of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda.⁵⁰ This picture included a caption that read, “*General Dallaire and his army have fallen into the trap of fatal women.*”⁵¹ This particular piece of propaganda was significant because it accomplished two things. First, it linked Tutsis to Europeans, proving divisive due to Rwanda’s colonial history.⁵² Second, it portrayed women as persuasive and conniving. These images played a small but profound role in a greater campaign to shape public perceptions of female Tutsis.

Hutu extremists also produced a vast amount of written propaganda, one of which was a publication titled “The Hutu Ten Commandments”.⁵³ Though the Hutu Ten Commandments negatively impacted the Tutsi population as a whole, the first three commandments were overtly gendered.⁵⁴ The first three commandments conveyed the notion that female Hutus were better mothers and wives than female Tutsis. Additionally, they asserted that female Tutsis were untrustworthy and any Hutu man who

employed or took a Tutsi wife or mistress was a traitor.⁵⁵ Like other forms of Hutu propaganda, these colourful depictions invoked strong anti-Tutsi sentiments, which cultivated negative perceptions of female Tutsis.

Anti-Tutsi propaganda played an important role in altering social norms related to ethnicity and gender. One example that best demonstrates this shift is the departure from pre-colonial and early colonial perceptions of Tutsi women. In pre-colonial and early colonial eras, for a Hutu man to have a Tutsi wife was considered a status symbol or evidence of social advancement.⁵⁶ In the post-revolution era, and the subsequent end to the Tutsi monarchy, this practice no longer held the same social benefit for Hutu men because Tutsis were relegated to second-class citizens.⁵⁷

Based on the previous analysis, it is evident that norms related to ethnicity and gender evolved throughout 20th century Rwanda. However, it is important to understand how this process of evolution led to a fundamental shift in the social meanings attached to such norms and ultimately, their dynamic nature.

Dynamic Social Constructions

Revisiting the core tenets of constructivism is useful to explain how the norms of ethnicity and gender changed in Rwanda and what this meant for establishing rape as an effective military strategy. When considering the tenet of dynamism, which stipulates that change is possible, it is evident that social perceptions of Tutsi women evolved throughout pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial eras. The dynamic nature of social processes is clearly demonstrated in the case of Rwanda as social meanings attached to Tutsi women changed from a position in which they were viewed as social elites to one that positioned them as untrustworthy and promiscuous.⁵⁸

Similarly, the tenet of mutual constitution, which is the process by which ideas are created and change through various forms of communication, is evident in how the Hutu Revolution, the public morality campaign, and Hutu propaganda communicated particular ideas of ethnicity and gender. The various forms of communication were central to disseminating messages concerning ethnicity and gender, which ultimately led to the establishment of intersubjective knowledge.

Without the successfulness of these processes, the tenet of intersubjective knowledge, the process whereby socially constructed ideas, norms and concepts are accepted by a group of people as shared knowledge, would

46. Ibid., 45.

47. Ibid., 47.

48. Ibid., 48.

49. Ibid.

50. Ibid., 47.

51. Ibid., 47.

52. Ibid., 47.

53. Ibid., 49.

54. Ibid.

55. Taylor, “A Gendered Genocide,” 49.

56. Ibid., 45.

57. Ibid., 45.

58. Taylor, “A Gendered Genocide,” 44.

not have been achieved. The emergence of intersubjective knowledge is evident as countless Hutus adopted the belief that Tutsi women were inferior and, as part of a wider enemy group, were subordinate. Hutu extremists successfully constructed an “us” versus “them” dichotomy. Coupled with the fact that they operated in the normative context of a patriarchal society, they were able to mobilize rape as a military strategy as a means to further genocide.

Gender and Sexuality in the Pre-War Era

Rwanda demonstrates how socially constructed meanings of ethnicity and gender can create the necessary framework for rape to be used as a military strategy. We can see a similar phenomenon in an examination of Bosnian war. To understand the use of rape as a military strategy in the Bosnian War, it is important to understand social perceptions of gender and sexuality in the pre-war era. According to author Maria Olujic, a major component of Yugoslavian cultural ideologies was based on a patriarchal order known as *zadruga*.⁵⁹ Within this framework emerged the honour/shame dichotomy, which formed the basis of women’s morality.⁶⁰ Women’s chastity and fertility were important to all the Slavic cultures and for this reason, opposing sides exploited this cultural value and effectively used it as a weapon against their enemies. Due to the fact a woman’s honour was attached to that of her male family members, Olujic explains that women were viewed as extensions of the greater national body and therefore, similar to the case of Rwanda, a Serbian attack on a female Bosnian Muslim was an attack on her family and wider community.⁶¹

Cultural Songs

In the pre-war era, gendered and sexual imagery intersected aspects of everyday life.⁶² Notions of masculinity and male sexuality were portrayed through various forms of songs, jokes and games.⁶³ The various ethnic groups in the former Yugoslavia each had their own slightly different versions of these practices. For example, in Croatia, people often sang folk songs called *ganga*.⁶⁴ In these types of songs, men were portrayed as wanting sex while women were portrayed as withholding it.⁶⁵

In one song, a baking metaphor is used to describe the way in which a man asserts his dominance over a woman: I shaved and cut her [pubic hair] / I have and cut [my woman] On the open hearth where the polenta [cornmeal] is mixed.⁶⁶

According to Olujic, given the context, the words in this song provoked strong imagery for a number of reasons. First, during the Yugoslavian wars, to shave or cut someone was a colloquialism for killing someone.⁶⁷ Second, during World War II, if a female spy were captured, her head would be shaved to signal a sense of shame.⁶⁸ Third, placing a woman on the hearth of a fireplace symbolized “her sexual hotness or readiness for penetration, according to the man.”⁶⁹ Finally, the mixing of polenta (a Slavic dish made from cornmeal) with a wooden spoon, served as a phallic representation in which “a man’s stick/penis is depicted as controlling a woman’s sexual being.”⁷⁰

The underlying symbolisms in the verse of this particular song demonstrate how women were highly sexualized and objectified in the pre-war era. One must consider the impact that these songs, jokes and games such as this had on shaping perceptions of sexual violence during the Bosnian War. Given the highly sexualized perception of women coupled with the significance of the honour/shame dichotomy associated with patriarchal order, individual female bodies became a symbol of ethnic or national groups and evolved into a viable target of the warring parties.

Female Concentration Camps

There is no disputing that rape was a structurally implemented tactic of Serbian forces.⁷¹ In addition to implementing concentration camps, Serbian forces established all-female camps for the purpose of raping and impregnating women.⁷² Various survivors have reported that once a woman was confirmed to be pregnant, she was held long enough to ensure abortion was not be a viable option.⁷³ Once these children were born, they were considered to be Serbian, with the children’s nationality determined solely by the father’s identity.⁷⁴ As Weitsman explains, “a woman had a passive role in transmitting

59. Maria B. Olujic, “Embodiment of Terror: Gendered Violence in Peacetime and Wartime in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina,” *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 12 no. 1 (1998): 33-34.

60. *Ibid.*, 34.

61. Kepkay, “Gendercide and the Bosnian War,” 69.

62. Olujic, “Embodiment of Terror,” 34.

63. *Ibid.*, 34.

64. *Ibid.*, 34.

65. *Ibid.*, 34.

66. *Ibid.*, 34.

67. *Ibid.*, 35.

68. *Ibid.*, 35.

69. *Ibid.*, 34.

70. *Ibid.*, 34-35.

71. Joanne Barkan, “As Old as War Itself: Rape in Foca,” *Dissent* Winter (2002): 61.

72. Kepkay, “Gendercide and the Bosnian War,” 73.

73. Weitsman, “The Politics of Identity and Sexual Violence,” 569-71.

74. *Ibid.*, 571.

identity, even though the offspring was genetically 50 percent hers and, if raised by her, culturally 100 percent hers.⁷⁵ Such children were often referred to as Serb or Chetnik babies.⁷⁶ As a result, the rape survivors and resulting children were emblematic of the nation's defeat.⁷⁷ Interestingly, while an estimated 10,000 children were born as a result of rape in Rwanda, forced impregnation was not an intended outcome like it was Bosnia. Thus, while mass raped occurred during both conflicts, the example of Bosnia demonstrates how socially constructed concepts such as national identity can significantly impact the utility of rape as a strategy for furthering ethnic cleansing.⁷⁸

Social Constructions and Societal Context

What is most significant about pre-war perceptions of gender and sexuality in Yugoslavia is that, unlike the case of Rwanda, gender and sexuality did not take on new meanings.⁷⁹ Rather, the pre-existing notions shared by the major Slavic cultures were exploited and used by one group to harm the other.⁸⁰ Regardless of this trait, one can still identify the core tenets of constructivism at work. First looking at dynamism, socially constructed notions of gender, sexuality, and the importance of the honour/shame dichotomy influenced by patriarchal structures did not change in their meanings. Rather, these socially constructed notions were forced to operate in a new social context in which the prime goal was for one ethno-nationalist group to harm the other. Second, the tenet of mutual constitution was at work as ideas about gender, sexuality and ethnicity were communicated through songs, jokes, and games. This allowed for the dissemination of information, leading to the solidification of intersubjective knowledge. Serbian nationalists eventually adopted the idea that Bosnian Muslims were a threat and an impediment to Serbian safety and nationalism. Therefore, based on shared notions of gender and the intersection of the honour/shame dichotomy, Serbian forces were able to mobilize rape as an effective military strategy to further ethnic cleansing.

In the examples of both the Rwandan genocide and the Bosnian War, gender played a pivotal role in determining how warring sides would engage one another. Recognizing the gendered nature of any conflict is imperative, given that the manner "in which men and women experiences and deal with the consequences of

conflict depends on gender roles and relations prior to the conflict and how they [are] renegotiated during wartime."⁸¹ Given the previous analysis, it is necessary to determine the ethical prescriptions constructivism offers in regard to this topic.

Section IV: Ethical Implications

As explained in Section I, constructivism views ethics as explanatory factors and for this reason, constructivism is not designed to determine whether the actions of Hutu extremists or Serbian nationalist were ethical or unethical.⁸² Instead, constructivism is concerned with how each group constructed and understood notions of gender, ethnicity, and nationality and how subsequent *changes* to these norms (or the social environments in which they existed) granted rape coercive power in each conflict. However, as Hoffman stresses, "constructivist ethics differ significantly from those found in other theories of international relations, precisely because constructivism is a different type of theory."⁸³ In other words, unlike other theories, constructivism is an explanatory and not a prescriptive theory. For these reasons, constructivism offers humility and self-reflexivity as its own *unique* ethical prescriptions.

Though constructivism cannot determine whether the actions of Hutu extremists or Serbian nationalists were right or wrong, constructivism can assign self-reflexivity as an ethical prescription to help guide future interactions that deal with children who were born as a result of rape in such conflicts. As Weitsman explains, derogatory labels attached to these children are incredibly harmful, as it links them "to that of their rapist fathers, a legacy they can never escape."⁸⁴ Therefore, self-reflexivity would stress disregarding the use of labels such as Chetnik babies or 'children of bad memories', as they were referred to in Rwanda.

As social actors, we live in an intersubjective world and as a result, our thoughts and actions play an important role in shaping social process and the construction of shared knowledge; therefore, constructivism stresses that we *ought* to acknowledge our influence on social processes. It is abundantly clear from the case of Bosnia that social constructions of national identity can be manipulated for selfish gains. Self-reflexivity may encourage actors to

75. Ibid., 571.

76. Ibid., 570.

77. Kepkay, "Gendercide and the Bosnian War," 74.

78. Weitsman, "The Politics of Identity and Sexual Violence," 567 & 574.

79. Olujic, "Embodiment of Terror," 31.

80. Ibid., 31-32.

81. Martha Walsh, "Aftermath: The Impact Of Conflict on Women In Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Center for Development Information and Evaluation U.S. Agency for International Development Washington* (2000): 1-14.

82. Hoffman, "Is Constructivist Ethics and Oxymoron?" 231.

83. Hoffman, "Is Constructivist Ethics an Oxymoron?" 233.

84. Weitsman, "The Politics of Identity and Sexual Violence," 572.

consider how they contribute to change and the creation of shared knowledge.

Conclusion

The Rwandan genocide and Bosnian War demonstrate that the use of rape as a military strategy is not an isolated event. Therefore, the topic of wartime rape is an important phenomenon that deserves attention in international relations. As the analysis in this paper suggests, social constructions of ethnicity, nationality and gender in patriarchal societies grant rape coercive power during conflicts where the opposing sides are clearly defined. By conducting a constructivist analysis of the highlighted case studies, we can better understand the role of historical processes and their influence on determining the utility of rape as a military strategy.

Moreover, by relying upon constructivism's explanatory nature as a theory, this paper has suggested how constructivism might be used to predict instances where rape may be used as a military strategy. Perhaps by acknowledging the patterns and processes that occurred in Rwanda and Bosnia, various social actors can help monitor conditions in high conflict areas. In such situations, it would be necessary to identify and understand the normative contexts in which opposing groups exist. For example, if there is evidence demonstrating the emergence of gender-based propaganda in a society where opposing sides are becoming increasingly polarized, it is possible that gender-based violence could emerge.

By embracing self-reflexivity, actors consider their impact on the creation of intersubjective knowledge. If this type of awareness can be focused on examining conflicts that are already in progress, perhaps conscious-minded social actors can avoid or mitigate instances where rape and other forms of gender-based violence are mobilized as military strategies. However, the degree to which this could be achieved outside the confines of theory versus practice is difficult to predict as it would ultimately require various social actors to not only agree upon a common goal but also decide it is important to pursue, regardless of the burden it may place on them.

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