

World History: The Machine that Produces Our Future

By Sharon Besong

2024 World Historian Student Essay Award Winner

The sound of gunshots. That is what my grandmother describes hearing exactly forty years ago when narrating the chaos of April 6th, 1984 in Cameroon, my home country. At the time, she, and everyone else, had no clue what was going on. My grandmother recalls racing home to her family and with the help of my relatives she barricaded their house by placing mattresses in front of the windows and hiding inside with the children. One of these children was my mother, who was around twelve years old at the time, just a bit younger than I am now. In the coming days, they found out there was an attempted coup d'état, where the tribesmen of the former president, Ahmadou Ahidjo, endeavored to overthrow the recently sworn-in president, Paul Biya. This event, as studying World History has helped me to understand, did not take place in a vacuum. The seeds for it to occur were sown years ago when former president Ahidjo filled the military with his tribesmen, loyal to him but woefully uneducated, and when he was tricked into abdicating by Biya. The coup d'état, just like a myriad of incidents throughout history, was manufactured by what had transpired years earlier and still affects Cameroon to this day. That is exactly what World History is for me. It is not just the study of a multitude of random, past happenings, it is the examination of a machine that is built from historical events with astonishing correlations and what it produces is the future of every single individual.

Before studying World History, I didn't know why a lot of things were the way they were. "Why do I have to learn French?" I'd ask my father every day on the drive to school as he

taught my sister and me the language. It was only years later that I would discover the array of historical events that rather miraculously worked together in producing this phenomenon: the assassination of the Archduke of Austria, Franz Ferdinand, in 1914 aided in plunging Europe into war for four years and led to the death of twenty million people while also greatly damaging the socio-economic status of Europe. This conflict came to be known as WWI.

One of the less well-known consequences of WWI was that the German Empire, an ally of Austria-Hungary, had a vast majority of its colonies taken by the foreign empires and countries it was fighting. One of the German colonies that was seized was Cameroon, called German Kamerun at the time. The French and the British captured and divided the colony between the two of them and quickly began to implement their own cultures, laws, and languages onto their share. This is why, over a century later, my family and I are English-speaking, and why I had to learn French, the language spoken by the other half of my country. Without procuring knowledge of World History, I would have been wholly unaware of just how deeply connected the assassination of an Austrian man and my writing this essay in English truly are.

Moreover, machines are sometimes built using flawed components, and this can be seen in World History too. When Cameroon was partitioned, each part gained a culture that was vastly different from the other, so when the time came for British Southern Cameroon and French Cameroon to unite, there were a lot of disagreements and contention between the two sides which was never properly addressed. As a consequence of these unsettled grievances, a civil war broke out in Cameroon in 2017 where rebels from one of the English-speaking regions attempted to gain independence and become a separate state. Had the right elements been used during the unification in 1972, elements where the two sides worked to resolve any issues and

come up with amicable solutions, there would have been no civil war - which continues to this day. A better, brighter future without the horrors of conflict like that which my family had witnessed would have been produced instead.

World History is not merely a subject to be hastily read the night before an exam, only to be forgotten a moment after. Rather, it is a topic that requires deep comprehension as the historical events and developments that comprise it serve as tools for building an altruistic, peaceful planet. Had the nations of the world not recognized the unjust and ineffectual nature of the League of Nations, they may not have dedicated immense effort towards establishing the United Nations - an organization that is far more equitable and effective than its predecessor, capable of helping states reconcile their differences without violence and conflict - and the world likely would not have experienced the relative peace it does today. By understanding the lessons taught in World History, we can aim to replicate the series of choices that led to crucial, positive changes in the world and guide ourselves toward a more cooperative and harmonious future. If the components that turned European countries from the worst of enemies to the closest of allies after the two world wars can be studied and comprehended, they could be applied to Cameroon and create a state of peace and stability within the nation.

“Instead of making history, we are made by history.” This is a well-known quote by activist and political philosopher Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The statement by Martin Luther, who understood the importance of history in building the movement for civil rights, reflects that World History is not simply an academic exercise on what humanity has done in the hundreds of years before now. Instead, it is about deciphering a colossal yet intricate machine with thousands of minute components and details representing the culmination of past events and the lessons

learned from them. All these modules may then be synthesized and employed in explaining the cultural and political occurrences witnessed today. Only by closely examining World History and how every single element that is added to it, both atrocity and triumph, contributes to the future that all of mankind will someday live in, can we decide what World History manufactures for our future.