Introduction

Slavery was abolished in all Portuguese colonies in 1878, but poor labour conditions persisted long after the institution itself had been eliminated. As the international community gained awareness of these conditions, the debate as to what exactly constituted as ‘slavery’ arose, especially during the 1920s with the creation of the League of Nations. The extent to which such a debate affected practices within the countries of Portuguese Africa, however, is unclear. In studying the journals written by the American sociologist Edward Ross during his travels in Angola and Mozambique, we can get a first-hand account of the working conditions within these countries and better understand how far beyond the sphere of formal policy the human rights debate actually extended.

Methodology

Before releasing his report in 1924, Edward Ross travelled to Portugal’s African colonies of Mozambique and Angola. He kept detailed journals of his travels, describing the working and living conditions of the local populations in approximately 320 pages on hand-written notes.

Results

In nearly every case recorded by Ross during his trip, the laborers in Angola and Mozambique were severely mistreated by their employers and the colonial government itself. They were frequently taken from their villages to work for months at a time with very little to no pay, frequently without food or proper clothing. The most frequent source of payment was in the form of a tax receipt, with no proper wages for their work. Ross records several cases in which village members were taken and have not been heard from afterwards. Most of the work was performed for the government, mostly on road

Conclusion

Ross’s journals indicate that there was a strong disconnect between the practices put in place on the ground in Angola and Mozambique and the debate on human rights that was taking place on a global scale. While groups such as the League of Nations were attempting to abolish slavery in all its forms, there was no actual implementation of such practices in the colonies themselves. Ross’s observations support the claim that while the institution of slavery itself had been abolished in the colonies, the practices and customs relating to the mistreatment of laborers were still firmly in place.

Abstract

Ross’s report was used by the League of Nations, considered by some to be the forerunner of today’s United Nations, as part of their investigation into the “Question of Slavery” in the post-abolition era. While Ross wrote in his report that the native peoples of Angola and Mozambique were living essentially in a state of serfdom, frequently unpaid and abused by their employers, we know relatively little about the substance of his interactions during his on the ground investigations. The history of the Ross Report raises the question of how far beyond the sphere of formal policy the human rights debate actually extended. A close examination of Ross’s travel notebooks—consisting of 320 hand-written pages—will shed light on how far the incipient labor rights debate extended to field of colonial practice, helping to fill a gap in our knowledge of early 20th century human rights history.

References

Special thanks to the University of Ottawa, the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program, and Professor Eric Allina of the History Department.