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Looking Evil in the Face: The Lessons of Idi Amin

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Eichmann was executed in Jerusalem, condemned for the murder of 6-million Jews. Contrast that with the recent death of Idi Amin Dada, who died in exile of natural causes. The former Ugandan dictator (whose age was either 78 or 80, depending on the report), was finally sent to Hell's landing by "major organ failure." In the last weeks of his life, his family sought a kidney donor. Those who miss the irony in that request should reflect a little longer.

Amin ruled Uganda from 1971 to 1979, establishing a bizarre rule of terror that stands virtually unparalleled in modern history. He took power in a military coup and proceeded to make mass murder, cannibalism, torture, and terrorism the centerpieces of his policy.

Today's college students were born after the collapse of Amin's regime, but the blood-soaked legacy of Idi Amin demands our conscience and attention.

Estimates of Amin's death toll now reach upwards of 500,000 victims, many of them university students, foreigners, and intellectuals. Many were anonymous. Amin's notorious "Public Safety Unit" and "State Research Bureau" conducted mass killings and routinized torture. Prisoners were forced to execute each other with sledgehammers. He had one of his wives murdered, dismembered, and then sown back together so that her children would recognize her.

In one infamous killing spree, he had a number of political opponents killed, their bodies thrown to the crocodiles, and their severed heads placed in the deep-freeze of his Kampala palace. Guests for dinner would find the frozen heads on the table, with Amin conducting an improvised "conversation." Counted among these victims was the Anglican Archbishop of Uganda, Janani Luwum. Mr. Luwum's son labeled Amin a "madman," who "has killed so many people and . . . has never repented for what he has done."

Cannibalism was a frequent accusation, and Amin never denied that he ate human flesh. Of the accusation, he would only say, "I don't like human flesh. It's too salty for me." Uganda's "Big Daddy" never explained how he learned this culinary lesson.

His theatrics caught worldwide media attention. He named himself Lord of all Beasts of the Earth and Fishes of the Sea and Conquerer of the British Empire in Africa in General and Uganda in Particular. How's that for a business card?

He granted himself invented medals and decorations, and wore them emblazoned on his military uniform. He landed unannounced at national capitals, demanding to be treated like a king. He sent Britain's Queen Elizabeth II a telegram that read, "Dear Liz, if you want to know a real man, come to Kampala." The Queen apparently resisted the invitation.

His buffoonery masked his murderous ambitions. He had several opponents decapitated on television, ordering the victims to wear white clothes so that the blood would be clearly visible. He celebrated Adolf Hitler and claimed that the murder of 6-million Jews was fully justified.

His hatred of the Jews was made perfectly clear when seven terrorists hijacked a flight from Tel Aviv. Amin allowed the hijackers to land at Uganda's Entebbe airport, leading to one of the most daring rescue missions in Israeli history.

Along with many others, Christopher Munion of The Daily Telegraph denied that Amin was insane: "Capricious, impulsive, violent and aggressive he certainly is, but to dismiss him as just plain crazy is to underestimate his shrewdness, his ruthless cunning, and his capacity to consolidate power with calculated terror." His former attorney general once explained that Amin "kills rationally and coolly."

Announcing his death, The New York Times described Amin as "beefy, sadistic, and telegenic." [See New York Times article] The Washington Post tagged him as "unquestionably evil and perversely fascinating." [see Washington Post article]

Amin went out of power as he went in—by means of a military coup. Ugandan and Tanzanian forces deposed Amin, who fled to Libya, then Iraq, and eventually to Saudi Arabia, where he lived out his days in comfort as a "guest" of the Saudi royal family. His exile was an affront to justice, and Amin dreamed of regaining power to the end.

Reporter Riccardo Orizio located and interviewed Amin in exile, only to hear him claim, "I'm still on top of things, I'm still a man of influence." Better check the fridge.

Orizio described the exiled dictator as "walking the thin rope that separates madness from political satire, the tragic from the comic." Asked if he had any regrets, Amin told Orizio, "No, only nostalgia." [see Orizio article]

At his trial, Adolf Eichmann was asked if he desired to make a statement of repentance for his genocidal crimes. "Repentance is for little children," the former Obersturmbannführer retorted. Both men went to their deaths without visible remorse. The difference, of course, is that Eichmann met his death at the end of a rope, and Amin died of old age.

Where is the justice? Idi Amin's death by natural causes is a powerful and necessary reminder that true justice will never be fully achieved on earth. Crimes demand punishment, and the moral axis of the universe can never be set straight when mass murders die in comfortable exile. The blood of Amin's victims cries out for justice, but no earthly court can now reach Idi Amin.

This is why the Christian understanding of God's perfect and ultimate justice is central to our worldview. God will execute perfect justice upon all sin and every sinner. Idi Amin will answer for his crimes in eternity. Nothing less will satisfy God's own moral righteousness and justice.

Amin may have cheated the hangman, but he will not cheat his Creator. "Now see that I, even I, am He, and there is no God besides Me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; nor is there any who can deliver from my hand." [Deuteronomy 32:39] Idi Amin Dada will surely answer for his sins.

