

Rwanda:
The Evolution of Genocide

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INTRODUCTION

Prior to 1994, the small country of Rwanda held little place in global minds. Located in the southeastern portion of Africa, it was outside the scope of much of western civilization. Rwanda was so far removed from the world's eye, reports Longman (2004), that at the mention of the country's name, a few individuals were known to remark, "Rwanda? Isn't that a woman's name?" (p. 43). Today, such naivety does not exist among the general populace. After the atrocious events of the Rwandan genocide of 1994, the global community cannot regain its ignorance, and it would be a greater atrocity if it could. The lessons learned from the genocide, while brutally taught, have led to a global initiative to prevent the use of genocidal acts. In order to understand these outcomes, it is necessary to first analyze the historical contexts, both colonial and post-colonial, that contributed to the genocide. Only after gaining an understanding of the historical implications can one can investigate the events of 1994 more accurately.

AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF RWANDA

Rwandan history is a complex one, oftentimes an amalgamation of myth, propaganda, and fact. For the sake of understanding the genocide, it is necessary to reach into the past and study the colonial and post-colonial states of the region. Throughout the country's history, ethnic distinction between the Hutu, Tutsi, and (to a lesser extent) the Twa groups has played a large role in creating division, setting up power structures, and rallying support for issues. Scholars debate over the precise time when these racial

tensions formed, but many agree that the caste-like system of the region, prior to European colonialism, was an ancient catalyst of the 1994 genocide (Langford, 2005).

The Pre-Colonial Rwandan Region

Since the 1960s, scholars have been trying to unearth the truth behind the Kingdom of Rwanda with some success. Longman (2004) asserts that Rwanda's history has been effectively rewritten several times by the ethnic group in power. In this way, tensions have risen, administrations have been one-sided, and historical fact has been muddied. For example, archeological, ethnographic, linguistic, and ecological evidence has shown the existence of cattle in the Rwandan area for 2,000 years, refuting the common belief that the Tutsi brought cattle with them in a massive immigration. Research also finds that a caste system based on cattle ownership and access to land in pre-colonial Rwanda may have provided a precursor to the tensions that caused the outbreak of genocide in 1994 (Longman, 2004).

This era of Rwanda's history saw the Tutsi having a social and economic advantage over the Hutu. In general, the Tutsi were the main cattle owners and were usually tall and thin while the Hutu were agrarian, with a shorter and stouter stature (Press, 1999, p. 240). Tutsi-Hutu relations were fluid, allowing intermarriage and the possibility of change of ethnic status based on physique and wealth. Because the Tutsi controlled the dynastic government—having seized it from the native Hutu kings in the late 17th and 18th centuries—Hutu resentment grew (Press, 1999, pp. 240-242). This existing tension was exacerbated by the European establishment of the area as a colony.

The Colonial Rwandan Region

Although Germany was the first to hold Rwanda as a colony, the biggest colonizing influence on the country was Belgium. Belgian colonial forces had taken control of the area in 1916, and after World War I, the League of Nations declared Rwanda a Belgian governance (Langford, 2005). The colonizers, willing to utilize the existing government to their full advantage, immediately classified the inhabitants of Rwanda into three official ethnic groups: Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa. Identification cards were issued, beginning in 1931, which confined each individual into one of the three groups (Langford, 2005).

Since the colonial government's ability to profit off of Rwanda was closely tied to its ability to maintain control over its inhabitants, the administration simply decided to make certain that the Tutsi class remained a ruling power. Press (1999) argues that this bias was based on European myth; Europeans had concluded, after seeing the administration and desirable features of the Tutsi, that they had descended from "a superior civilization" (p. 241). As one can imagine, the Hutu disliked the Belgian favoritism of the Tutsi class. This was made worse through the Hutu perception of three factors:

1. The Hutu constituted a majority of the Rwandan inhabitants, while the Tutsi comprised a minority (Press, 1999, p. 241).
2. Belgians discriminated against Hutu by giving special academic and training advantages to Tutsi (Press, 1999, p. 241).
3. Belgian authorities filled the positions of power exclusively with Tutsi, implying that the Hutu were far inferior to their Tutsi counterparts.

Rwandan Independence

After World War II the newly-formed United Nations (UN) redefined Belgium's colonial control over the area of Rwanda as a temporary condition—forcing progress toward an independent Rwanda (Langford, 2005). This provided an interesting dilemma for Belgian administrators. If they withdrew their force immediately, the Hutu would carry an anti-Belgian sentiment that would cause political instability within Rwanda and decrease profitable relations between the two countries. The colonial power threw its support behind an increasingly vocal group of Hutu in order to ease resentment against the power that had suppressed the Hutu population.

The Belgian plan worked. The elite Hutu published *Le Manifeste des Bahutu* in 1957, attributing the mistreatment of Hutu solely to the Tutsi— who (according to the Hutu authors) had invaded the Hutu's native land, taken it by violent force, and systematically inhibited the Hutu's social and economic standing ever since (Langford, 2005). This focus on the pre-colonial era of Rwanda made Germany and Belgium into neutral, third parties. Even though Belgium had intensified ethnic classification and interracial tensions, the Hutu took vengeance out on the Tutsi in the form of violence. In 1959, the Tutsi king was overthrown, and by 1964 Rwanda had become an independent nation with Tutsi refugees in neighboring countries numbering 150,000 (Press, 1999, p. 242). These refugees would form the Tutsi militaristic group known as the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and would eventually help to spark the genocide of 1994.

A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE RWANDAN GENOCIDE

On April 6, 1994, Rwandan president Juvenal Habyarimana was returning home after negotiating peace with the RPF in Arusha, Tanzania. The RPF had been inciting a sort of civil war in Rwanda by rushing into the country from Uganda, attacking, and returning to neighboring countries to take shelter. Although Habyarimana was a Hutu, he had agreed to negotiations with the RPF. Upon his return to Rwanda, his plane was shot down over Kigali. Press (1999) makes it clear that this event set into motion, but was not a direct cause of, the genocide that immediately followed (p. 246). To this day, who shot down the plane is unclear, but the aftermath that the assassination sparked is forever imprinted on history. Philip Gourevitch (1998) describes the magnitude of the events in a graphic and poetic context:

[I]n the spring and early summer of 1994 a program of massacres decimated the Republic of Rwanda. Although the killing was low-tech—performed largely by machete—it was carried out at dazzling speed: of an original population of about seven and a half million, at least eight hundred thousand people were killed in just a hundred days....The dead of Rwanda accumulated at nearly three times the rate of Jewish dead during the Holocaust. It was the most efficient mass killing since the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. (p. 3)

Fueled by propaganda being broadcast over the airwaves on such channels as the Radio Television Libre de Mille Collines (RTLMC), civilian Hutu picked up their machetes and slaughtered as part of the *Interahamwe* militia forces (Press, 1999, p. 231,247). Tutsi of all ages were systematically exterminated based solely on their ethnic classification. Moderate Hutu, those who were not in favor of the tensions turning to

genocide, were also hunted down and killed. A sustained, violent event of this magnitude cannot be ignored. Yet the global community largely acted as onlookers—receiving news coverage of the massacre but taking no action to halt the atrocities. Some loss of life estimates range beyond the 800,000 mentioned by Gourevitch; Dulian (2004) places the death toll over one million (p. 40). While the exact number will most likely be a mystery forever—due to the common use of mass, unmarked graves before the RPF forces gained control of Kigali and put an end to the genocide—the issues that brought about that number should not.

AN ANALYSIS OF KEY ISSUES

An in-depth analysis of the Rwandan genocide brings up a series of concerns that cannot be ignored if the victims of Rwanda are not to have died in vain. Although there are many questions to address, the scope of this analysis will give insight into the following:

1. How did civil war escalate into genocide?
2. Why did the world largely ignore the plight of the Tutsi?

These questions will guide the discussion from this point onward. In this manner, some form of lesson may be drawn out of this tragedy.

Reasons for the Escalation from Civil War to Genocide

According to the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, “genocide” has been committed when three conditions exist: specific acts (such as “killing,” “causing serious bodily or mental harm,” “deliberately inflicting conditions of life calculated to bring about physical destruction,” “imposing measures to prevent births,” or “forcibly transferring children to another group”) are committed, such

acts are committed against members of a specific group (national, ethnic, racial, or religious), and they are carried out with the intent to destroy the group, in part or in full (“Department of State,” 2002, pp. 259-260). This definition differs from war in the fact that genocide seeks to eliminate an entire group of people with the sole reason being the existence of such a group. Rwanda’s conflict became genocide because of two main factors:

1. The ongoing conflict between the Tutsi and the Hutu was exploited by Hutu extremists prior to the outbreak of genocide (Langford, 2005, pp. 19-21).
2. The plan for genocide was premeditated by the Hutu-held Rwandan state (Press, 1999, p. 247).

Together, these reasons gave birth to a genocidal machine that remained in full force for 100 days.

a Hutu perspective of history

Langford (2005) believes that the independence of Rwanda was seen by Hutu as the reclamation of the Rwandan region from the Tutsi, who had conquered to become the ruling class in pre-colonial Rwanda (p. 21). He asserts that this belief set up Rwanda as a “racial state,” the authority of which was thought to have existed before the constructs of government—such as constitutions, bills of rights, and popular sovereignty—therefore making it a “neo-patrimonial” and “one-party” state (p. 21). From this perspective, the structure of the Hutu’s ethnically-run, unchallenged state was threatened by the retaliation of the Tutsi in the early 1990s. The focus became the perception of Tutsi *ethnicity* as the foremost threat—not the group’s military, political, or economic characteristics. This exploitation of the existing, and historically marred, conflict between

the Tutsi and Hutu led to this exploitation being spread to civilian level, resulting in the training and arming of civilian militias.

the evidence for premeditation

Press cites four indications that the genocide in Rwanda did not spontaneously occur during a period of nationwide insanity. First, the aforementioned exploitation of the Hutu-Tutsi conflict was channeled through government-owned (or government-persuaded) media to incite ethnic hatred and a sense of pure community among the Hutu population. In a country where televisions are scarce, radio is the means by which many Rwandans gain their information (1999, p. 247-248). Thus, it is of no surprise that much weight was carried by RTLMC broadcasts such as, “the grave is still only half full: who will help us fill it [with dead Tutsi]?” (Press, 1999, p. 248).

Secondly, Press (1999) notes the training and arming of civilian militia that occurred after the RPF invasion of 1990. This further links the genocide to a state that would not tolerate the multi-party transitional government called for under the Arusha peace accords. Thirdly, the speed with which the killings began after the president’s plane crashed alludes to forethought in the Hutu government. The mobilization of militia and the establishment of a provisional government within the hour of the assassination provide further proof that these operations were planned well in advance (regardless of who fired the shot at the president’s plane). Finally, before the assassination took place, lists existed that pinpointed important persons to be executed immediately at the breakout of genocide (p. 247). With evidence of this caliber, the proof is overwhelming that the Rwandan government’s premeditation of genocide was a contributing factor in making the step from ethnic, militaristic conflict into genocide.

An Explanation of the World's Lack of Intervention

Throughout the Rwandan crisis, the international community failed to act in opposition to the genocide. The reasons for this vary dramatically from country to country and even in international efforts. Still, an occurrence of this gravity should have put more pressure on policymakers. Adelman and Suhrke (2000) point out this irony by noting that, even though the efficiency of the genocide was far beyond that of the Nazi Holocaust of the Jews, developed nations were rather apathetic: “This [Tutsi slaughter] occurred while people in North America and Europe were watching *Schindler's List* on their movie screens and leaving the theatre profoundly moved, vowing that such genocides should never again occur” (p. xviii).

According to Livingston and Eachus (2000), American involvement in the disastrous Somalia peacekeeping efforts had left the country headed toward highly restricted participation in future peacekeeping efforts (p. 209). Under the Clinton administration, Presidential Decision Directive 25 was issued in May of 1994, making it a prerequisite for the United States to have funds, interests, and withdrawal dates in place before supporting peacekeeping efforts (p. 224).

America's lack of motivation can also be attributed to the little attention paid to Rwanda by primetime television news sources. As Livingston and Eachus (2000) point out, considering the lives lost during the genocide, coverage of the event was rather low until after the initial 100 days of massacre, and even then the news media turned to the stories of refugees fleeing to Zaire and mainly labeled the genocide as the product of ancient racial hatreds rather than a systemized, politically-based elimination of opposition (pp. 210-218). Americans were more interested in other news of the day such as Nelson

Mandela's election win in South Africa and the ubiquitous trial of O.J. Simpson (pp. 218-220).

Beyond the United States, international involvement varied greatly albeit no real forces intervened with an effective force. France had supported the Rwandan president and had provided military training to the government's forces, but it still claimed allegiance to the Arusha Accords (Callamard, 2000, p. 168-169). French forces evacuated French civilians and certain government officials during an intervention immediately after the start of the killings, but its limited mandate (which would allow it to avoid confrontation with the RPF) would not justify intervention to stop the genocide (p. 176).

Canada supported the efforts of the UN, going so far as to provide Brigadier General Romeo Dallaire for the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR). Unlike the United States, which remained detached from the peacekeeping force, and France, which sent in its own intervention force, Canada remained true to the official channels of the UN. This proved to be problematic, however, as the limited authority given to UNAMIR by New York prohibited it from intervening (Adelman, 2000, p. 200). The limitations of UN-delegated policy are made clear when one realizes that UN peacekeeping forces controlled the Kigali airport during the entire genocide (Adelman & Suhrke, 2000, p. xviii).

CONCLUSIONS

April 6, 1994 marked the beginning of a three-month genocide carried out by the provisional government placed in power after the assassination of President Habyarimana. April 6 marked the start of the violence on a genocidal level, but it did not mark the beginning of the conflict between the Hutu and Tutsi. Ethnic tensions had been

tight since the days of the pre-colonial, dynastic system. Retaliations between the two groups resulted in bloodshed, governmental coups, and the exploitation and rewriting of historical conflict on several occasions up until 1994. The genocide that occurred was not spontaneous, nor was it a primitive struggle between ethnicities over ancient hatreds as the media first reported. It was a premeditated, efficient political tactic meant to remove the perceived threat to the Hutu neo-patrimonial, one-party state that was to be instituted by the signing of the Arusha Accords by Rwanda's president. The international community looked on with gaping mouths and remote controls. Media coverage worldwide did not focus on the genocide until it was too late to save 800,000 to 1,000,000 lives.

Positive changes have occurred in Rwanda since the reaction to the genocide. The country has passed a new constitution that prohibits affiliation of political parties with ethnic groups, provides penalties for discrimination based on racial or ethnic characterization, and sets forth specific punishments for crimes of genocide (Dulian, 2004, p. 41). Furthermore, identification cards now label all Rwandans as simply citizens of Rwanda with no mention of ethnic or racial origin, and reconciliation is one of Rwanda's highest goals (pp. 41-42).

Despite these gains in Rwanda, the Great Lakes Region of Africa—as a whole—does not have a happy ending. After the 1994 genocide, the fighting just changed locale; those who perpetuated the genocide simply turned their eyes to the Banyamulenge in Zaire, setting off civil war there (Adelman & Suhrke, 2000 p. xviii). Rebel forces there were strongly supported by the RPF government in Rwanda, and many Hutu refugees were massacred. This leaves the world to wonder how to extinguish a conflict that has

been burning for centuries through retaliation and violence. No matter what the future holds, lessons from the Rwandan genocide must influence the international community to take note of the region and act as necessary. Otherwise the only lesson learned from the massacre of 800,000 people will be that Rwanda is not just a woman's name.

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