**Violence in Rwanda**

* How would you explain the onset of the conflict and its escalation to genocide?
* What role did ethnicity play?
* Does the rationalist explanation apply? (ethnic conflict = strategic dilemma)

**Background**

Prior to the colonial era, Tutsis generally occupied the higher strata in the social system and the Hutus the lower. However, social mobility was possible, a Hutu who acquired a large number of cattle or other wealth could be assimilated into the Tutsi group and impoverished Tutsi would be regarded as Hutu. A clan system also functioned, with the Tutsi clan known as the Nyinginya being the most powerful. Throughout the 1800s, the Nyingiya expanded their influence by conquest and by offering protection in return for tribute.

The former colonial power, Germany, lost possession of Rwanda during the First World War and the territory was then placed under Belgian administration. Both colonial powers ruled Rwanda through the kings and perpetuating a pro-Tutsi policy. Although the two ethnic groups are actually very similar[[1]](#footnote-1) - they speak the same language, inhabit the same areas and follow the same traditions, the Belgians considered the Tutsis to be superior to the Hutus. Consequently, when the Belgian colonists arrived in 1916, they produced identity cards classifying people according to their ethnicity.

Generally, ethnic tension in Rwanda are nothing new. There have always been disagreements between the majority Hutus and minority Tutsis, but the animosity between them has grown substantially since the colonial period. In the late 1950’s during the great wave of decolonization, tensions increased in Rwanda. The Hutu political movement, which stood to gain from majority rule, was gaining momentum while segments of the Tutsi establishment resisted democratization and the loss of their acquired privileges.

In November 1959, a violent incident sparked a Hutu uprising in which hundreds of Tutsi were killed and thousands displaced and forced to flee to neighboring countries. This marked the start of the so- called ‘Hutu Peasant Revolution’ or ‘social revolution’ lasting from 1959 to 1961, which resulted in the overthrow of the Tutsi monarchy and implementation of majority rule. In 1962, Rwanda reached de jure independence.[[2]](#footnote-2) By then 120,000 people, primarily Tutsis, had taken refuge in neighboring states to escape the violence which had accompanied the gradual coming into power of the Hutu community.

A new cycle of conflict and violence continued after independence. Tutsi refugees in Tanzania and Zaire seeking to regain their former positions in Rwanda began organizing and staging attacks on Hutu targets and the Hutu government. Ten such attacks occurred between 1962 and 1967, each leading to retaliatory killings of large numbers of Tutsi civilians in Rwanda and creating new waves of refugees. By the end of the 1980s some 480,000 Rwandans had become refugees, primarily in Burundi, Uganda, Zaire and Tanzania.

They continued to call for the fulfillment of their international legal right to return to Rwanda, however, Juvenal Habyarimana, then president of Rwanda, took the position that population pressures were already too great, and economic opportunities too few to accommodate large numbers of Tutsi refugees. In fact, the economic situation was dire and the Habyarimana began losing popularity.

**The Civil War**

In 1988, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) was founded in Kampala, Uganda as a political and military movement with the stated aims of securing repatriation of Rwandans in exile and reforming of the Rwandan government, including political power sharing. The RPF was composed mainly of Tutsi exiles in Uganda, many of whom had served in President Yoweri Museveni’s National Resistance Army, which had overthrown the previous Ugandan government in 1986. While the ranks of the RPF did include some Hutus, the majority, particularly those in leadership positions, were Tutsi refugees.

On 1 October 1990, the RPF launched a major attack on Rwanda from Uganda with a force of 7,000 fighters. Because of the RPF attacks which displaced thousands and a policy of deliberately targeted propaganda by the government, all Tutsis inside the country were labeled accomplices of the RPF and Hutu members of the opposition parties were labeled as traitors. Media, particularly radio, continued to spread unfounded rumours about the Tutsis in order to incite fear about possible revenge attacks, which exacerbated ethnic problems.

The Hutu regimes from 1959-1994 received support from a number of states. Zaire (later the Democratic Republic of Congo) supported the government of Rwanda with troops in the initial stages of the armed conflict with the RPF, and France also lent military support to the regime around the same years. The French support did not include the contribution of warring troops, but saw the stationing in Rwanda of French troops that advised and assisted the Rwandan government as well as providing them with arms and equipment. Belgium also sent military support to Habyarimana’s regime in the form of arms and munitions but cut off all such support when reports of massive human rights abuses reached Brussels. Also, Egypt and South Africa have been implicated in supplying arms to the government of Rwanda between 1990 and 1994.

In August 1993, through the peacemaking efforts of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and the governments in the region, the signing of the Arusha peace agreements appeared to have brought an end to the conflict between the then Hutu dominated government and the opposition Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). The Arusha Accords envisioned the establishment of a Broad-Based Transitional Government (BBTG), which would include the insurgent RPF and the five political parties that had composed a temporary government since April 1992 in anticipation of general elections. The Accords included other points considered necessary for lasting peace: the rule of law, repatriation of refugees, and the merging of government and rebel armies. In October 1993, the Security Council established the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR) with a mandate encompassing peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance and general support for the peace process.

From the outset, however, the will to achieve and sustain peace was subverted by some of the Rwandan political parties participating in the Agreement. With the ensuing delays in its implementation, violations of human rights became more widespread and the security situation deteriorated. Later, evidence demonstrated irrefutably that extremist elements of the Hutu majority while talking peace were in fact planning a campaign to exterminate Tutsis and moderate Hutus.

**The Genocide**

On April 6, 1994, President Habyarimana was killed when his plane was shot down. It is not known if the attack was carried out by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), stationed outside the country at the time, or by Hutu extremists trying to instigate a mass killing. In any event, Hutu extremists in the military, led by Colonel Theoneste Bagosora, immediately went into action, murdering Tutsis and moderate Hutus within hours of the crash.

On 7 April, Radio Television Libres Des Mille Collines (RTLM) aired a broadcast attributing the plane crash to the RPF and a contingent of UN soldiers. Radio stations were also broadcasting appeals to the Hutu majority to kill all Tutsis in the country. The army and the national police directed the slaughter, sometimes threatening Hutu civilians when persuasion didn’t work.

Later that day the Prime Minister, Agathe Uwilingiyimana and 10 Belgian peacekeepers assigned to protect her were brutally murdered by Rwandan government soldiers in an attack on her home. Other moderate Hutu leaders were similarly assassinated. After these incidents, Belgium withdrew the rest of its force. On 21 April, after other countries asked to withdraw troops, the UNAMIR force reduced from an initial 2,165 to 270.

The absence of a resolute commitment to reconciliation by some of the Rwandan parties was one problem, but the tragedy was compounded by the faltering response of the international community. The capacity of the United Nations to reduce human suffering in Rwanda was severely constrained by the unwillingness of Member States to respond to the changed circumstances in Rwanda by strengthening UNAMIR’s mandate and contributing additional troops.

Over the course of about 100 days, between 500,000 and 1,000,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu were killed in the Rwandan genocide[[3]](#footnote-3). Killings continued until 4 July 1994 when the RPF took military control of the entire territory of Rwanda. The war ended later that month when the RPF captured the last territory held by the interim government, forcing the government and genocidaires into Zaire.

The victorious RPF assumed control of the country, with Paul Kagame (the RPF commander) as de facto leader. This new government perpetrated one-sided violence when it took power in 1994, though not on the same scale as its predecessor. Kagame went on to become the president of Rwanda when the transitional government was disbanded after elections in 2003.

The remnants of the former regime and many Hutu refugees chose to oppose the new government militarily in the years that followed. In this episode of the conflict over government power in Rwanda the government perpetrated one-sided violence against civilians, primarily of Hutu ethnicity. The RPF’s transitional government came to be supported primarily by Burundi, but also received material support from the USA and Kenya. Kagame won elections in 2010 and 2017. As of 2019, Kagame and the RPF remain the dominant political force in Rwanda.

1. Supposedly, Tutsis are often taller and thinner than Hutus, with some saying their origins lie in Ethiopia. Yet, according to some historians and anthropologists, the only difference between the two groups were economic, rather than ethnic. Which would explain the difference in height, due to nutritional differences, for instance. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Following independence in 1962, Ruanda-Urundi split into two countries: Rwanda and Burundi. In Burundi, the minority Tutsis maintained their control of the military and government through different forms of violence. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The genocide in 1994 was perhaps the most clear-cut case of genocide since the Holocaust: as certain actors made clear the intent to destroy the Tutsi population, hundreds of thousands were killed.  Hundreds of thousands more were raped, maimed, or otherwise traumatized.  As much as 90% of Rwanda’s pre-1994 Tutsi population (which was estimated to comprise about 14% of the country’s total population) was murdered.  The extermination effort took place within the context of a renewed civil war, but much of the carnage involved civilians far away from the front lines.  Indeed, the government of Rwanda appeared to have diverted substantial military resources from the front lines to the effort to slaughter civilians. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)