

RWANDAN GENOCIDE: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Rwanda

Rwanda is a small country in central Africa. It has no coastline and is bordered by Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Its terrain is very hilly and the land is good for farming. It is this terrain that gave rise to the country's nickname, 'Land of a Thousand Hills' (or, in French, 'Pays des Mille Collines'). The country's capital is Kigali (where the film Shooting Dogs is set).

People

Because of the fertility of the land for farming, Rwanda is densely populated. The main languages spoken are Kinyarwanda (spoken by all three black groups), English and French, a legacy from the Belgian imperial occupation. Most people in Rwanda are Catholic.

The population of Rwanda is made up of three groups, the Hutus, the Tutsis and a small minority of Twa. The Hutus (around 85% of the population) generally worked as arable farmers, whereas the Tutsis had a tradition of cattle herding. Although these groups later came to conflict, the idea of their separateness was in fact largely created by the Belgian forces, who believed that they were distinct racial groups and decided which group every person belonged to, writing it on an identity card that everyone had to carry.

It was thought that Tutsis were taller and lighter skinned, sharper nosed and originally came from north Africa, whereas Hutus were darker skinned and had flatter noses and came from the south. The Tutsis were therefore seen as being less 'African' and more like Europeans. In fact, it is now thought that they belong to the same ethnic group, and the difference was only in their occupations.

Even the Belgians realised this and ended up defining the groups by profession and wealth instead: if a person owned more than ten cows, they were Tutsi; if they owned fewer than ten, they were Hutu. The Twa are a clear ethnic minority group, being very short 'pygmies'.

Historical Background

Rwanda was a monarchy until it was taken over by Germany as part of their empire. After World War I, it was confiscated from Germany and given as a protectorate to Belgium.

The Belgium occupiers decided to rule the Rwandan people by dividing them into distinct class groups, by a quite arbitrary system. They then decided to favour Tutsis as 'superior' to the Hutus and rule with their help. This caused resentment against the Belgian-employed Tutsis, who enforced the strict taxes and other laws made by the Belgian government. Tutsi children were given more education.

After World War II, Rwanda was still administrated by Belgium. Through several reforms and individual events, the Hutus came to have more power and dominated the government. PARMEHUTU (the Party for Hutu Emancipation), discriminated harshly against Tutsis. When the nation of Burundi separated from Rwanda in 1962, some of the Tutsis there gathered together and tried to capture Rwanda's capital, Kigali. The Tutsis population were punished horribly; many were massacred.

In 1973 General Juvénal Habyarimana and his MRND party came to power in a coup and although initially he had policies of 'unity', he soon began clearly to favour Hutus. All other political parties were made illegal. Marriages between Hutus and Tutsis were also banned. However, many Hutus opposed the regime as being too 'moderate'.

TASK 1: LONG-TERM FACTORS

Identify the main long-term factors that led to the genocide of 1994 and rank them in order of significance. Which do you think is the most significant? Argue your case.

The Start of the Genocide

In 1989 the price of coffee collapsed; the Belgian government had encouraged Rwandan farmers to grow coffee and this drop in its value crippled the economy. The Rwandan government borrowed large amounts of money from abroad, but many Rwandans were still malnourished and in great poverty. The government, through its radio station, blamed the Tutsis for the crisis. Some members of the Hutu government started training small groups of soldiers called 'interahamwe' ('those who come together').

In 1990 a mainly Tutsi group called the Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF) invaded Rwanda from Uganda to the north, aiming to overthrow the government. A military government was formed, who set up a radio station called Radio Télévision Libre de Mille Collines (RTLM) which broadcast anti-Tutsi propaganda. Tutsis were called subhuman 'cockroaches' and the radio presenters said that the Tutsis were going to try to enslave the Hutus.

In the face of continuing fighting (despite an official ceasefire), in 1993 the UN sent a peacekeeping force called the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR). This force had very little power as it lacked both money and men.

During this period, there were sporadic acts of terrorism in Kigali and RTLM radio station blamed the Tutsis. In fact, the bombing was done by Hutu militia in order to provide an excuse for the attack that they planned against the Tutsis. On April 6 1994, President Habyarimana and the President of Burundi were assassinated when their plane was shot down. The Tutsis were blamed, but it is also possible that the President's own guard were responsible. In fact, both sides were able to use the assassination to further their own causes. Despite this, calls went out on the radio to rid the country of the 'Tutsi cockroaches'.

When the genocide started, there were around 30,000 men in the interahamwe, commanded by Prime Minister Jean Kambanda and generals such as General Bizimungu. The militia were armed with grenades and rifles, but many simply carried machetes. As soon as Habyarimana was killed, the militia started to massacre both Tutsis and any moderate opposition within the government.

Roadblocks were set up checking identity documents and interahamwes went to the houses of known Tutsis and killed them. The interahamwes were given almost free reign to act as they wished. Many women were raped. Hutus who refused to take part in the massacre were often killed.

Over the next 100 days, an estimated 900,000 Tutsis were murdered. An estimated 2 million refugees crossed the border into neighbouring Burundi. In the months that followed, many more died from disease that spread through the population.

TASK 2: TRIGGER FACTORS

Identify the main trigger factors that led to the genocide of 1994 and rank them in order of significance. Which do you think is the most significant? Argue your case.

After the Genocide

In 1995, the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA) forcibly gained control of the country. As a result, 500,000 to 800,000 Hutu refugees fled to Goma, Zaire in July, 1994. Those who took refuge in Zaire and other neighbouring countries were either those responsible for the Tutsi genocide, or they were innocent Hutus who simply feared retaliation by the Tutsis if they remained in Rwanda. During the first month after the influx to Goma, almost 50,000 refugees died due to cholera. To stop the disease spreading, Zaire's government sent soldiers to the Hutu camps to forcibly repatriate the Hutus to Rwanda. There were reports of Zaire soldiers using violence to scare the Hutus away. The media reported this as a 'humanitarian' crisis, causing the rest of the world to take notice. As a result, politicians visited the cholera camps in eastern Zaire.

TASK 3: POLITICS AND JOURNALISM

Why do you think it easier for the media to report the Goma crisis than it was for them to report on the Rwandan genocide?

Why were politicians happier to visit cholera camps in Zaire than the killing fields of Rwanda?

Why do you think that the media used the word 'humanitarian' when we were looking at people who had been directly or indirectly guilty of mass murder?