Rwanda genocide of 1994

planned campaign of mass murder in Rwanda that occurred over the course of some 100 days in April–July 1994. The genocide was conceived by extremist elements of Rwanda’s majority Hutu population who planned to kill the minority Tutsi population and anyone who opposed those genocidal intentions. It is estimated that some 200,000 Hutu, spurred on by propaganda from various media outlets, participated in the genocide. More than 800,000 civilians—primarily Tutsi, but also moderate Hutu—were killed during the campaign. As many as 2,000,000 Rwandans fled the country during or immediately after the genocide.

Background

The major ethnic groups in Rwanda are the Hutu and the Tutsi, respectively accounting for more than four-fifths and about one-seventh of the total population. A third group, the Twa, constitutes less than 1 percent of the population. All three groups speak Rwanda (more properly, Kinyarwanda), suggesting that these groups have lived together for centuries.

The area that is now Rwanda is believed to have been initially settled by the Twa, who were closely followed by the Hutu, probably sometime between the 5th and 11th centuries, and then by the Tutsi, likely beginning in the 14th century. A long process of Tutsi migrations from the north culminated in the 16th century with the emergence of a small nuclear kingdom in the central region, ruled by the Tutsi minority, that persisted until the arrival of Europeans in the 19th century.

Social differences between the Hutu and the Tutsi traditionally were profound, as shown by the system of patron-client ties (buhake, or “cattle contract”) through which the Tutsi, with a strong pastoralist tradition, gained social, economic, and political ascendancy over the Hutu, who were primarily agriculturalists. Still, identification as either Tutsi or Hutu was fluid. While physical appearance could correspond somewhat to ethnic identification (the Tutsi were generally presumed to be light-skinned and tall, the Hutu dark-skinned and short), the difference between the two groups was not always immediately apparent, because of intermarriage and the use of a common language by both groups.

During the colonial era, Germany and later Belgium assumed that ethnicity could be clearly distinguished by physical characteristics and then used the ethnic differences found in their own countries as models to create a system whereby the categories of Hutu and Tutsi were no longer fluid. The German colonial government, begun in 1898 and continuing until 1916, pursued a policy of indirect rule that strengthened the hegemony of the Tutsi ruling class and the absolutism of its monarchy. That approach continued under Belgium, which took control of the colony after World War I and administered it indirectly, under the tutelage of the League of Nations.

Some Hutu began to demand equality and found sympathy from Roman Catholic clergy and some Belgian administrative personnel, which led to the Hutu revolution. The revolution began with an uprising on Nov. 1, 1959, when a rumour of the death of a Hutu leader at the hands of Tutsi perpetrators led groups of Hutu to launch attacks on the Tutsi. Months of violence followed, and many Tutsi were killed or fled the country. A Hutu coup on Jan. 28, 1961, which was carried out with the tacit approval of the Belgian colonial authorities, officially deposed the Tutsi king (he was already out of the country, having fled the violence in 1960) and abolished the Tutsi monarchy. Rwanda became a republic, and an all-Hutu provisional national government came into being. Independence was proclaimed the next year.

The transition from Tutsi to Hutu rule was not peaceful. From 1959 to 1961 some 20,000 Tutsi were killed, and many more fled the country. By early 1964 at least 150,000 Tutsi were in neighbouring countries. Additional rounds of ethnic tension and violence flared periodically and led to mass killings of Tutsi in Rwanda, such as in 1963, 1967, and 1973.

Tension between Hutu and Tutsi flared again in 1990, when Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front (Front Patriotique Rwandais; FPR) rebels invaded from Uganda. A cease-fire was negotiated in early 1991, and negotiations between the FPR and the government of longtime president Juvénal Habyarimana, a Hutu, began in 1992. An agreement between the FPR and the government, signed in August 1993 at Arusha, Tanz., called for the creation of a broad-based
transition government that would include the FPR. Hutu extremists were strongly opposed to that plan. Dissemination of their anti-Tutsi agenda, which had already been widely propagated via newspapers and radio stations for a few years, increased and would later serve to fuel ethnic violence.

Genocide

On the evening of April 6, 1994, a plane carrying Habyarimana and Burundian Pres. Cyprien Ntaryamira was shot down over Kigali; the ensuing crash killed everyone on board. Although the identity of the person or group who fired upon the plane has never been conclusively determined, Hutu extremists were originally thought to be responsible. Later there were allegations that FPR leaders were responsible. (A report issued by the Rwandan FPR-led government in 2010 indicated that Hutu extremists were responsible.) The organized killing of Tutsi and moderate Hutu began that night, led by Hutu extremists. Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingiyimana, a moderate Hutu, was assassinated the next day, as were 10 Belgian soldiers (part of a United Nations peacekeeping force already in the country) who were guarding her. Her murder was part of a campaign to eliminate moderate Hutu or Tutsi politicians, with the goal of creating a political vacuum and thus allowing for the formation of an interim government of Hutu extremists assembled by Col. Théoneste Bagosora, who later would be identified as having played a significant role in organizing the genocide. The speaker of the National Development Council (Rwanda’s legislative body at the time), Theodore Sindikubwabo, became interim president on April 8, and the interim government was inaugurated on April 9.

The next few months saw a wave of anarchy and mass killings, in which the army and Hutu militia groups known as the Interahamwe (“Those Who Attack Together”) and Impuzamugambi (“Those Who Have the Same Goal”) played a central role. Radio broadcasts further fueled the genocide by encouraging Hutu civilians to kill their Tutsi neighbours, who were referred to as “cockroaches” who needed to be exterminated. It is estimated that some 200,000 Hutu participated in the genocide, although some were unwilling and consequently were forced to do so by the army and Hutu militia groups. The methods for killing were typically quite brutal, with crude instruments often employed to pummel or hack away at victims. Machetes were commonly used. Rape was also used as a weapon and included the deliberate use of perpetrators infected with HIV/AIDS to carry out sexual assaults; as a result, many Tutsi women were intentionally infected with HIV/AIDS.

The United Nations (UN), which already had peacekeeping troops in the country for a monitoring mission (United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda; UNAMIR), made unsuccessful attempts to mediate a cease-fire. On April 21, as the crisis deepened, the UN voted to reduce UNAMIR’s presence in the country from 2,500 troops to 270. That seemingly incomprehensible troop reduction at a time when assistance was sorely needed was rooted in such factors as the mission’s mandate, which required an effective cease-fire to be in place, and the inability of the UN to find more troops to bolster the mission, which it felt had already been stretched too thin to have a significant impact on the situation. On May 17, however, the UN reversed its decision and voted to establish a force of 5,500, composed of soldiers mainly from African countries, but those additional troops could not be immediately deployed. On June 22 the UN backed the deployment of a French-led military force, known as Operation Turquoise, into Rwanda to establish a safe zone; the operation was opposed by the FPR, which claimed that France had always supported the government and policies of President Habyarimana.

The FPR had rejected the legitimacy of the Hutu extremist interim government inaugurated in April and resumed fighting then; by April 12, FPR troops had invaded the outskirts of Kigali. The FPR were successful in securing most of the country by early July, taking Kigali on July 4. Extremist Hutu leaders, including those of the interim government, fled the country. A transitional government of national unity was established on July 19, with Pasteur Bizimungu, a Hutu, as president and FPR leader Paul Kagame, a Tutsi, as vice president. The genocide had come to an end.

The duration of the 1994 genocide is usually described as 100 days, beginning on April 6 and ending in mid-July. (July 18 is one date often cited as the end of the genocide. July 19 is another. Both dates were slightly more than 100 days from the start of the genocide.) During the genocide more than 800,000 civilians, primarily Tutsi, were killed. Some estimates, including that of the Rwandan government, are higher. As many as 2,000,000 Rwandans, both Hutu and Tutsi, fled, most of them into eastern Zaire (after 1997 called the Democratic Republic of the Congo); the great majority returned to Rwanda in late 1996 and early 1997.
Aftermath

Once the genocide was over, the country faced years of reconciliation and recovery. Trying those who were thought responsible for genocidal acts was a primary focus, as was promoting national unity and rebuilding the country’s economy.

Prosecuting the perpetrators

Those accused of participating in the genocide were primarily tried in one of three types of court systems: the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), Rwandan national courts, or local gacaca courts. Some suspects who had fled Rwanda were tried in the countries in which they were found.

ICTR

In November 1994 the UN responded to charges of genocide in Rwanda by creating the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR; formally known as the International Criminal Tribunal for the Prosecution of Persons Responsible for Genocide and Other Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law Committed in the Territory of Rwanda and Rwandan Citizens Responsible for Genocide and Other Such Violations Committed in the Territory of Neighbouring States between 1 January and 31 December 1994).

The ICTR was international in composition and was located in Arusha, Tanz. The tribunal was not empowered to impose capital punishment; it could impose only terms of imprisonment. The governing statute of the ICTR defined war crimes broadly. Murder, torture, deportation, and enslavement were subject to prosecution, but the ICTR also stated that genocide included “subjecting a group of people to a subsistence diet, systematic expulsion from homes and the reduction of essential medical services below minimum requirement.” In addition, it ruled that “rape and sexual violence constitute genocide…as long as they were committed with the specific intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a particular group, targeted as such”—as was the case in the Rwandan conflict, where the Hutu-dominated interim government organized the mass rape of Tutsi women by HIV-infected men. The tribunal thus was among the first international bodies to formally recognize sexual violence as a war crime. (See also rape: Rape as a weapon of war.)

The statute of the ICTR limited the jurisdiction of the tribunal to Rwandan leaders, while lower-level defendants were to be tried in domestic courts. The ICTR statute did not consider the official position of an individual, including his position as head of state, to be a sufficient basis for avoiding or evading criminal culpability. Military and civilian leaders who had known or should have known that their subordinates were committing war crimes were subject to prosecution under the doctrine of command or superior responsibility. Individuals who had committed war crimes pursuant to government or military orders were not thereby relieved of criminal liability, though the existence of the orders could be used as a mitigating factor.

After extensive administrative and logistic delays, the ICTR completed its first cases in 1998. In May former Rwandan prime minister Jean Kambanda pleaded guilty to six charges of genocide and was sentenced to life imprisonment on September 4. In October 2000 Kambanda tried to revoke his guilty plea, but his motion was rejected by the ICTR.

Another roadblock occurred in 1999, when Rwanda severed its relationship with the ICTR after the tribunal ordered the release, on procedural grounds, of Jean-Bosco Barayagwiza, a prominent genocide suspect. He had been charged with orchestrating a media campaign that urged the Hutu to kill their Tutsi neighbours. The order to release him was suspended, though, and in February 2000 the Rwandan government announced that it would resume cooperation with the UN court. Barayagwiza stood trial later that year and was found guilty in 2003.

In April 2002 four senior military officers—including former colonel Bagosora, who was considered the main architect of the genocide—were brought to trial at the ICTR. The ICTR alleged that Bagosora had begun planning the genocide as early as 1992, and it charged that all four had trained the militias that killed Tutsi and moderate Hutu. The four were also considered responsible for the murders of 10 UN peacekeepers from Belgium and the murder of Prime Minister Rwagwiza. He had been charged with orchestrating a media campaign that urged the Hutu to kill their Tutsi neighbours. The order to release him was suspended, though, and in February 2000 the Rwandan government announced that it would resume cooperation with the UN court. Barayagwiza stood trial later that year and was found guilty in 2003.

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sentenced to life imprisonment for having masterminded the killings, and Nsengiyumva and Ntabukuze also received life sentences. Those were the first convictions for the organization of the genocide that were issued by the ICTR. Kabili was cleared of all charges.

Several key perpetrators were sentenced to life imprisonment in 2009, including former justice minister Agnes Ntamabyariro, former Kigali prefect Tharcisse Renzaho, and former speaker of the parliament Alfred Mukezamfura (in exile in Belgium and sentenced in absentia).

**National courts**

National courts were charged with trying lower-level genocide suspects. Unlike the ICTR, Rwandan courts were initially able to sentence those found guilty to capital punishment. The first death sentences were carried out on April 24, 1998, when 22 people convicted of genocide were publicly executed by police firing squads, despite serious procedural inadequacies in the hearings: war crimes trials often suffered from procedural deficiencies indicative of ethnic biases.

In 2007 Rwanda’s parliament abolished the death penalty (effective from the end of July), an important step in the country’s efforts to extradite genocide suspects from European countries that had hitherto refused such requests because they objected to capital punishment.

**Gacaca courts**

The number of suspects to be tried in connection with the genocide was immense, and cases moved slowly through the ICTR and national courts. In 2001, in an attempt to clear the backlog of some 115,000 genocide cases awaiting trial, the Rwandan government announced plans to establish gacaca (grass) courts according to the traditional justice system. In precolonial days gacaca courts were used to resolve conflicts between families. The courts were held outside, and the heads of households served as judges. The government’s decision to employ that method of justice would create thousands of local courts to handle some genocide suspects accused of minor crimes, such as arson, as well as capital crimes, though suspects accused of more serious crimes would continue to be tried in higher courts. In addition to clearing the backlog of cases, it was hoped that the gacaca courts would bring to light some of the unknown details of the genocide, provide a sense of closure, and foster reconciliation between Rwandans.

The courts were convened in January 2002 and began operating in several phases over the next several years, with the first trials beginning in March 2005. The success of the courts, often a matter of opinion, varied from trial to trial. Although some courts were found to be fair and objective, others were accused of having followed a political agenda and of having delivered harsh sentences that were not commensurate with the evidence provided.

The gacaca courts were intended to operate for a limited amount of time, but closure of the courts was repeatedly postponed. By 2010 the gacaca courts had prosecuted some 1.5 million cases.

**National recovery**

As the ICTR, national courts, and gacaca courts attempted to bring the most serious genocide suspects to justice, the government, to alleviate prison congestion, periodically granted mass amnesty to prisoners accused of lesser crimes. For example, in March 2004, 30,000 accused prisoners were granted amnesty and freed after they confessed to, and asked forgiveness for, having committed acts of genocide, and in February 2007 some 8,000 prisoners accused of war crimes—many of them sick or elderly—were released. Amnesty was not wholly supported by survivors, who believed that those who confessed were not genuinely sorry for what they had done but, rather, were using the amnesty to escape justice. Many survivors were forced to live and work beside those whose violent acts they had witnessed during the genocide.

Meanwhile, Rwanda’s military forces became embroiled in neighbouring Zaire’s civil war. The troops had entered Zaire in late 1996 to expel Hutu extremists who had fled there after the genocide and were using that country as a base for launching attacks on Rwanda. After many attempts at resolution, a peace agreement was reached in 2002 that
provided for the withdrawal of Rwandan troops in exchange for the disarmament and repatriation of Hutu extremist rebels there.

Although Hutu insurgencies continued to occupy Rwanda’s government, reconciliation efforts were ongoing. The government announced plans to change several national symbols, including the flag and national anthem, that were widely associated with extremist Hutu nationalism. A new constitution, aimed at preventing further ethnic strife in the country, was promulgated in 2003. Later that year the first multiparty democratic elections in Rwanda since independence were held; Kagame, who had ascended to the presidency after Bizimungu resigned in 2000, was victorious in securing another term. In 2006 the Rwandan government implemented a significant administrative reorganization, replacing the previous 12 prefectures with 5 larger, multiethnic provinces intended to promote power sharing and reduce ethnic conflict. Also, several genocide memorials were created throughout the country.

Rwanda’s economy, adversely affected by the conflict of the early 1990s, continued to recover gradually; by the end of the first decade of the 21st century, substantial progress had been made. Recovery efforts were aided in 2006, when significant debt relief was granted by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and in 2007, when Rwanda joined the East African Community, a regional trade and development bloc.

In the early 21st century the events of 1994 still weighed heavily on Rwanda. In 2004 Kagame came under fire after a newspaper leaked the findings of a report, commissioned by French judge Jean-Louis Bruguière, that included allegations that Kagame and other FPR leaders had ordered the rocket attack that caused the 1994 plane crash that killed Habyarimana and triggered the genocide (echoing the claims of some Rwandan dissidents); Kagame vehemently denied the allegations. Rwanda severed relations with France in 2006 when Bruguière—claiming jurisdiction because the flight crew members who perished in the crash were French—signed international arrest warrants for several of Kagame’s close associates for their alleged roles in the crash and requested that Kagame stand trial at the ICTR. (Relations between the two countries were restored in November 2009.) As before, Kagame denied having had anything to do with the crash and countered by alleging that the French government had armed and advised the rebels responsible for the genocide. Later that year Rwanda established a commission to investigate France’s role in the genocide; the findings, released in 2008, implicated more than 30 French military and political officials. In October 2007 the Rwandan government launched a formal investigation into the 1994 plane crash. The results, released in January 2010, indicated that Hutu extremist soldiers were responsible for shooting down the plane carrying Habyarimana, with the intent of derailing his peace negotiations with Tutsi rebels, and for using the incident as an excuse to initiate the genocide against the Tutsi and moderate Hutu.

### Additional Reading

#### Cite

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