The 1994 Rwandan Genocide, which occurred amidst a civil war between the Hutu and Tutsi, resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Tutsi. International observers were slow to comprehend and react to the situation, resulting in a severe humanitarian crisis in central Africa. Rwanda's small size (at 10,169 square miles) belies the enormity of the bloodletting it suffered in the course of one of the largest genocides of the last century. Beginning in early April 1994, and continuing relentlessly over the next 1,000 days, an estimated 650,000 Tutsi civilians were killed at the hands of Hutu elements identified with the incumbent regime, headed by President Juvénal Habyarimana.

To these must be added tens of thousands of Hutu victims, mostly from the southern parts of the country, and largely identified with opposition parties. Assessing the causes and individual responsibilities for the killings is no easy task. Few other comparable dramas have generated as much discord and controversy among local actors and outside observers.

The country's environmental constraints, social structure, and basic facts of its history have had a profound impact on the destinies of its people. Landlocked, overpopulated and overwhelmingly dependent on agriculture, Rwanda stands as one of the poorest countries in Africa. With one of the highest population densities in the continent, the shortage of cultivable land has remained a major source of social tension in the countryside. No attempt to grasp the roots of genocidal violence, or assess the long-term viability the present regime, can overlook the implications of Rwanda's demographic explosion. From 2.5 million in 1960 Rwanda's population today is estimated at 10 million, of whom more than half live below the poverty level.

A former German colony later entrusted to Belgium—first as a Mandate under the League of Nations, and then as a Trust Territory under the United Nations—through much of the colonial era Rwanda stood a classic example of "indirect rule." While the king (mwami) and his chiefs served as the legitimate instruments of colonial domination, the Tutsi as a whole saw their privileges substantially enhanced. As the main recipients of a Western education, their status as an elite group seemed firmly established—until challenged by the rise of a Hutu
revolutionary movement in the mid-1950s. The postwar years saw a major shift in Belgian policies, owing in part to the rising influence of Christian Democracy among the missionary community, and UN pressures for hastening the pace of democratization.

The publication in 1956 of a mildly reformist pro-Hutu manifesto, known as *Le manifeste des Bahutu*, is considered the first significant challenge to Tutsi hegemony, culminating in 1959 with the outbreak of widespread anti-Tutsi violence. Acting hand in hand with the Catholic clergy and the Belgian tutelle, the newly created Parmehutu party—*Parti de l'émanicipation du peuple Hutu*—served as a vehicle for the defense of the Hutu masses against the elitist claims of the "feudo-hamitic" monarchists. In response, Tutsi politicians sought to mobilize support through the *Union nationale rwandaise* (Unar) a left-leaning monarchical party formally headed by a Hutu.

The peasant uprisings that broke out in November 1959 eventually morphed into a full-fledged revolution, actively supported and encouraged by the Belgian authorities. As the country crossed the threshold of independence on July 1, 1962, as a Hutu-dominated republic, some 200,000 Tutsi had been forced into exile, mostly in Uganda, Burundi, and the Congo. Not until 32 years and a million deaths later would the country's destinies be once again be entrusted to Tutsi hands.

On October 1, 1990, some 6,000 refugee warriors of predominantly Tutsi origins marched across the border from Uganda into Rwanda and proceeded to fight their way to the capital, Kigali. Most of them belonged to the Rwandan Patriotic Front (*Front Patriotique Rwandais*—FPR), a politico-military organization created in 1979 by Tutsi exiles. Thus began a 30-month civil war accompanied by untold atrocities by both sides, and culminating with the pivotal event that triggered the bloodbath: the shooting down of President Juvenal Habyarimana’s plane on April 6, 1994, on a return flight from Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

The killings began moments after the crash. The first to be targeted were Hutu officials identified with opposition parties and therefore of pro-FPR sympathies. Opposition figures, Hutu and Tutsi, were disposed of in a matter of hours. Doing away with hundreds of thousands of Tutsi civilians proved a more difficult undertaking, especially in the southern region, where mixed marriages were more frequent. Nonetheless, the scale and swiftness of the massacre leaves no doubt about the determination of the machete-wielding militias. After setting up roadblocks and checkpoints the death squads sprang into action. An estimated 20,000 people were killed in Kigali and its environs in the three weeks following the crash.

For weeks and months, from one locality after another, hundreds and thousands of Tutsi civilians (and Hutu civilians who looked like Tutsi), men, women and children, were shot, speared, clubbed or hacked to pieces in their homes, church compounds and courtyards. That a carnage of this magnitude could have been going on day after day, week after week, without interference from the international community speaks volumes for its lack of resolve in dealing with such massive human rights violations.
After weeks of vicious fighting in and around Kigali on July 4, the FPR effectively took control of the capital. The FPR victory and the new government were promptly recognized by the international community. On July 19, Pasteur Bizimungu, a Hutu member of the FPR was proclaimed president of the republic for a five-year mandate, and Faustin Twagiramungu, also a Hutu, prime minister of a national unity government. But there was little doubt about who was in charge: from now on the man who led his ragtag army of refugee warriors to victory—Major General, then Vice-President, and now President Paul Kagame—would quickly assert himself as the central figure in the new Rwanda.
