Rwandan Genocide

Date April 6–July 1994

Following the death of President Juvénal Habyarimana on April 6, 1994, Rwanda erupted into genocide, with somewhere between 800,000 and 1 million Rwandans, mostly Tutsi, being murdered by their racially motivated Hutu neighbors. The killing lasted until July, and the ensuing refugee crisis was not resolved until 1998.

Locale Rwanda

Key Figures

- Juvénal Habyarimana (1937–1994), Rwanda’s defense minister who overthrew his cousin to become the country’s president from 1973 to 1994
- Paul Kagame (b. 1957), leader of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) who fought against Habyarimana’s government and became president of Rwanda in 2000
- Fred Rwigema (1957–1990), one of the initial leaders of the RPF whose death prompted Kagame to return from military training in the United States and lead the RPF
- Agathe Uwilingiyimana (1953–1994), Rwanda’s final prime minister under Habyarimana and one of the first high-profile Interahamwe targets to die in the genocide

Summary of Event

The racist policies of the Hutu-led Rwandan government from 1962 to 1973 created a Tutsi diaspora, which spurred a revolutionary movement to oust the Rwandan government. The revolutionaries, who were made up of both Tutsis and Hutus, went by the name the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and were initially led by Fred Rwigema. It was from Uganda and Tanzania that the RPF launched attacks on Rwanda starting in the 1990s. Rwigema was killed in the first week of fighting. After that, the RPF was led by Paul Kagame.
By the time the RPF began its attacks in the 1990s, hard-line anti-Tutsi forces in the government had already started the country down a murderous path. After the attacks began, the government used the RPF as a scapegoat to encourage ordinary citizens to kill each other. As the RPF strengthened its political position, finally forcing President Juvenal Habyarimana to sign a peace agreement in 1993, in Arusha, Tanzania, the government increased its anti-Tutsi rhetoric. One of the loudest voices in this hue and cry was that of the radio station Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM), which urged Hutu citizens to take part in the killing of Tutsis. Indeed, the government had for months been training groups of youths into a militia called the Interahamwe, extolling the virtues of Hutu Power and instructing them to murder Tutsis.

Thus, by April 6, 1994, when the airplane carrying President Habyarimana and Burundi’s Hutu president Cyprien Ntaryamira was shot down, killing all on board, the country was already primed for violence. The Interahamwe immediately set up roadblocks, making travel difficult within the country. RTLM began announcing the names and locations of Tutsis, so that they could be hunted down and murdered. By the next morning, local militia cells had organized to begin hunting down the country’s Tutsis and systematically killing them, using mostly machetes. Hutu moderates were considered as dangerous as the Tutsis, and they were murdered as well. The country’s prime minister, Agathe Uwilingiyimana, was pulled from her house and killed on April 7. Foreign arms from a variety of sources, including developed Western nations, continued to be smuggled to Rwanda’s Hutu forces throughout the genocide, exacerbating the killing.

The Rwandan genocide remains horrifically remarkable both because so many people were killed in such a short time and because the international community allowed it to happen. The leader of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR), Roméo Dallaire, pleaded for assistance to prevent the genocide before it began, but his request was turned down. The international community and peacekeeping forces stood aside. After ten Belgian members of the UNAMIR peacekeeping mission were tortured and mutilated before being killed by the Interahamwe, the United Nations cut its presence from 2,500 to 250. Dallaire remained with the small group, and, while he is credited with saving twenty thousand lives, his forces had almost nothing to do with ending the genocide. Western nations avoided acknowledging the genocide, and the United States refused to even use the word “genocide,” for fear of being required to send aid to the tiny African nation. Having recently suffered a public relations disaster in Somalia, where eighteen US soldiers were killed, US president Bill Clinton’s administration attempted to downplay the genocide as a local conflict that did not require American intervention. In fact, the Rwandan genocide received little mainstream press coverage worldwide, with only a few reporters courageous enough to enter the country, let alone broadcast the horrific events taking place.

Throughout the country, Tutsis fled to places thought safe—hospitals, churches, and schools—but such congregation only made it easier for the Hutus to find and kill them en masse. In fact, ordinary Hutu citizens represented the strongest Hutu killing force in the country. Pressured by the Interahamwe and RTLM, and supported by the country’s history of unpunished violence against Tutsis, individuals took up machetes and slaughtered friends and even family members. Tutsis hid in the country’s swamps and banana trees, but they were hunted down. Some Hutus were sincerely horrified by the crimes surrounding them and refused to participate in the violence, and some became murder victims themselves. Very few succeeded in staying out of the violence, but some were successful in their rescue efforts. One Hutu man, Paul Rusesabagina, managed to protect more than a thousand people inside the Hôtel des Mille Collines, bartering daily with the Interahamwe and other Hutu Power extremists to save the lives of the hotel’s guests for the entirety of the genocide.
Finally, in July, roughly one hundred days after the genocide began, RPF forces captured the country’s capital, Kigali, and violence began to taper off. In that time, between 800,000 and 1 million Rwandans, mostly Tutsi, had been murdered.

**Significance**

The ouster of the Hutu government led to a massive flight from Rwanda by the country’s Hutus. Just as the Interahamwe had urged average citizens to murder during the genocide, it encouraged them to panic in their flight, informing them that they would be massacred by the RPF in vengeance for the genocide.

Refugee camps sprang up in Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi, and Zaire. Although the new refugees received an outpouring of humanitarian aid, the camps were, in fact, little more than outposts for the Hutu Power agitators. These extremists used the cover of the French Operation Turquoise, which was supposed to be part of the international response to the genocide, to escape with their arms into neighboring countries. Those who wished to leave the camps and return home to Rwanda were killed, and the Interahamwe exacted a tax from everyone in the camps, in the form of either money or supplies. Raids into Rwanda regularly brought further Tutsi deaths, even as the RPF tried to establish a government of true equality.

By 1996, the camps remained a problem. The dictator of Zaire, Mobutu Sese Seko, became involved with the Hutu Power movement, and Zaire began using its government as well as Rwanda’s Interahamwe against its own Tutsi population, first trying to expel them to Rwanda, then to kill them outright. The Tutsis formed a defense militia that gained support and troops from both Rwanda and Uganda. The First Congo War erupted, ending only when Mobutu was ousted just before his death from cancer, and Zaire became the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1996.

Rwanda’s problems, however, were far from solved. As Hutus from the camps were slowly repatriated, the government began trying to prosecute offenders. Some of the worst faced the United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR); this was a source of frustration to the Rwandan government, which wished to prosecute internally. Others remained free, with decreasing likelihood of imprisonment. In order to deal with the huge backlog in overcrowded prisons, many lower-level offenders were mandated to special courts set up beginning in 2001 after the style of old tribal-village councils, called Gacaca. In past times, the Gacaca had settled disputes by seeking atonement rather than retribution, but the Gacaca courts drew widespread criticism for repeated controversies; more than one-quarter of the publicly elected judges of the Gacaca courts were accused of participating in the genocides themselves and the courts also faced problems with witness intimidation and lack of a defense counsel for the accused. The Gacaca courts were closed in June 2012 in response to these criticisms. The ICTR delivered its last trial judgment in December 2012 and the remaining cases were handled by the Appeals Chamber. Three men accused of genocide and crimes against humanity—Félicien Kabuga, Protais Mpiranya, and Augustin Bizimana—remain fugitives from justice. When apprehended, these three men will face trial at the United Nations Mechanism for International Criminal Tribunals. The ICTR indicted ninety-three and sentenced sixty-one individuals involved in the Rwanadan genocide.

**Bibliography**

