

From Colonial Division to Nationalist Violence: The Roots and Legacies of the Rwandan Genocide

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AUTHOR BIO

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ABSTRACT

Up to 2 million people fled Rwanda during the 1994 genocide, with 75,000 survivors being children who lost one or both parents (World Vision, 2023). This essay discusses the causes and consequences of the Rwandan Genocide and the key role that colonialism and nationalism played in driving the events that occurred between April 7 and July 15 in 1994 (Straus, 2020). Ethnic ID cards introduced by Belgian colonialists in 1926 racialized Hutu and Tutsi, fostering discrimination. Hutu nationalism, fueled by historical oppression and economic decline from the 1989 coffee crisis, led to violence triggered by the assassination of President Juvénal Habyarimana. Consequences include economic collapse, widespread PTSD, and stigmatization of children born from rape. Rwanda's ban on ethnic identification aims to curb divisionism but limits monitoring of inequality, impacting recovery efforts.

Keywords: *Rwandan Genocide, Hutu, Tutsi, colonialism, nationalism, ethnic ID cards, coffee crisis, UNAMIR, divisionism, genocidal rape, PTSD, economic decline*

OVERVIEW OF THE GENOCIDE

Up to 2 million people fled Rwanda; and 75,000 of the survivors were children who had lost one or both parents (World Vision, 2023). ‘Moderate’ politically neutral citizens who were of Hutu ethnicity were also targeted and slaughtered.

Introduction of Ethnic ID Cards

In 1926, the Belgian colonial government introduced Rwandan ID cards which, in 1931, became mandatory. They specified ethnicity: Hutu, Tutsi, Twa, or ‘Naturalisé’ meaning French naturalised citizens. This was the first bureaucratic racialisation of the two ethnic groups, Hutu and Tutsi, and marked the beginning of state-sanctioned discrimination.

Path to Rwandan Independence (1962)

On September 25th, 1961, a referendum was held on remaining a kingdom or becoming a republic. 80% of voters out of a 95% turnout voted against remaining a kingdom. Despite claims of a rigged vote from King Kigeli V, Rwanda was declared a republic following parliamentary elections on the day of the referendum. With this, the Belgian colonial government withdrew from Rwanda and relinquished political control. The new ‘Kayibanda’ government retained mandatory ethnic ID cards and officially discouraged mixed-ethnicity marriages. With increasing ethnic tensions, the Belgian authorities granted recognition to the republican Rwandan State as a means of avoiding more social unrest. In 1962, the UN General Assembly urged Rwanda and Burundi to unite as one state, but both countries decided that a political union between Burundi and Rwanda was impossible due to historical antagonism. On June 27, 1962, the UN General

Assembly terminated the Belgian Trusteeship Agreement. This allowed Rwanda to gain independence.

Belgian and UN Intervention

The Belgium government then sent 550 troops to Rwanda to try to keep conflict to a minimum, but the minister of defence, Léo Delacroix, crucially underestimated the severity of the situation. The soldiers were underprepared, underfunded, outmanned and, scattered across 14 locations, vulnerable to attack. When, at the end of 1993 serious conflicts erupted and showed no sign of amelioration, the Belgium government asked for United Nations intervention. The United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR) was established on October 5th, 1993 to help stop the civil war (United Nations, n.d.). However, due to the UN’s limitations of engagement that barred soldiers from best protecting themselves and Rwandans under threat, this mission is seen as one of the United Nations’ most disastrous failures.

CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OVERVIEW

In 1895, King Kigeli IV Rwabugiri of Rwanda-Urundi died and left the nation in turmoil over his succession (Vansina, 2004). Rwanda and Burundi had been made part of the German empire by the 1884 Berlin conference, and by 1897 the area, then known as Rwanda-Urundi, was controlled by Germany with the goal, principally, of extracting natural resources and cash crops (Lemarchand, 2008). Rwanda-Urundi comprised two main ethnic groups - the majority Hutu (85%), and minority Tutsi (14%) (Newbury, 1988). The German government declared Tutsi, with their taller stature and lighter skin, to be racially superior, leading to this group having more power, more

wealth, and higher socio-economic standing than Hutu.

Belgian Colonial Policies

After WW1, under the League of Nations Mandate (August 19th, 1923) Rwanda was to be governed by Belgium (University of Pennsylvania, 2017). Unlike Germany, Belgium was invested in effecting social change as a means of economic growth (Melvern, 2004). From 1920-1930, Belgian ethnologists measured skull and nose size, height, and eye shape (Fornace, 2009), and, like Germany, they declared Tutsi to be more 'European'. The Eugenics movement in America and Europe influenced Belgium to favour Tutsi and consolidated an ethnic divide between Hutu and Tutsi by publishing distinctive characteristics of both ethnic groups. Consequently, Tutsi privileges were increased to include Western education and more governance (Fornace, 2009). Since a segregated society would be less likely to unite and rebel against the colonial government (Mann, 2004), Belgium encouraged the ethnic divide, rendering colonial control easier to exert (Melvern, 2004). However, the privileges enjoyed by Tutsi exacerbated anti-Tutsi feelings amongst the Hutu who were excluded from power and privilege. Searching for a way out of oppression, Hutu began to unify through shared struggles and oppression, trying forcefully to 'reclaim' their own nation through governance. This led, in 1926, to a Hutu rebellion in Northern Rwanda, suppressed by Belgium (Prunier, 1995).

Rise of Hutu Nationalism

This unification developed nationalism, another cause of the genocide. The Hutu extremist political group, Interhamwe, was created to instil fear and insecurity amongst Hutu in order to create the need for revolution. Ethnic racialisation and segregation, partially

developed in colonial Rwanda, was exacerbated to create nationalism as a motivation for genocide. Interhamwe used radio stations, public gatherings, and announcements to characterise Tutsi as power-hungry, inhumane dictators who would oppress Hutu (Gourevitch, 1998). Hutu became fearful for their rights and livelihoods, and they bound together with one collective interest - to eliminate the threat: Tutsi. This ethnic nationalism was aggravated by the shared historical oppression of Hutu promoted under Belgian and German colonialism. For Tutsi, embracing an ethnic distinction provided tangible benefits and fostered Tutsi patriotism. For Hutu, ethnic distinction was the only reason they recognised the oppression. In addition, over time, rumours that Tutsi originated in Ethiopia resulted in Hutu viewing Tutsi as foreigners (Chrétien et al, 1994) who had no right to rule their land, with the power given by Belgian colonialists on discriminatory premises. Therefore, a Hutu revolution and reclamation of power were seen as a much-needed, rightful reconstruction of the nation driven by Hutu pride and loyalty to Rwanda. Out of concern for the Rwandan (Hutu) people and country, nationalism was tempered and channelled into the massacre. Paired with Tutsi ostracisation and their rumoured foreign origins, hatred amongst Hutu evolved into a nationalism driven by motivation to save their people and country.

ECONOMIC CRISIS AND COFFEE COLLAPSE

Economic deterioration of Rwanda was brought about by the termination of the International Coffee Agreement (ICA) in 1989. Coffee was Rwanda's largest export and made up 70% of all exports. The 75-country-pact (International Coffee Organisation, 2008) was created in 1963 by America to achieve a stable coffee market to minimise risk of communist uprisings amongst coffee-producing nations in Latin America during the cold war (McQue,

2019). However, some global coffee exporters like Vietnam, not in the ICA, exported more coffee than member countries, meaning that global coffee importers purchased more from exporters outside the ICA with its higher price floors, leading to a surplus amongst exporters in the ICA, Rwanda being one of them. Since the Rwandan economy was largely built on coffee production, the Rwandan economy declined as coffee prices dropped and demand dwindled. Warrants were required to cut down coffee trees and farmers were obligated to dedicate some land to coffee production (McQue, 2019). This structural catering to the coffee industry rendered adaptation difficult and costly for Rwanda, and contributed to the inability to make profit. The economic downfall in Rwanda led to high living costs and difficulties for farmers struggling to sustain their livelihoods. The majority of Rwanda, and consequently of farmers, was Hutu. Furthermore, most Tutsi were of higher-class as a result of colonial governance, and Hutu were more severely impacted by the economic downfall. This desperation worsened Hutu disenfranchisement and living conditions, motivating a Hutu rebellion to reclaim control and reallocate resources and power to Hutu people. This was an encouragement to genocide.

Trigger of the Genocide

The genocide was triggered by the assassination of the Rwandan president, Juvénal Habyarimana, and Burundi president, Cyprien Ntaryamira, when their plane was shot down on April 6th 1994 (Gourevitch, 1998), 32 years after Rwanda's independence. Both presidents were Hutu, and their deaths were widely accepted to be by order by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), a Tutsi political party mainly made up of children of Tutsi who fled Rwanda in the early 1950s at the start of ethnic conflicts (Des Forges, 1999). On the very night of the presidents' deaths, violence ensued. As a

result of the assassination, Tutsi huts were burned, orphans were murdered, and 500,000 Tutsi women and children were raped, mutilated, and sexually enslaved by Hutu (Green, 2002). Genocide had begun. 800,000 Rwandans were killed with guns and machetes (Britannica, 2023). The Interhamwe, along with Hutu civilians and the Rwandan military, carried out mass rape, (the first-time rape was considered a war crime on a genocidal scale) (Des Forges, 1999). Male victims were impaled from anus to mouth, females suffered breast oblation, babies were smashed against walls (Taylor, 1999) and HIV was used as a weapon (Baines, 2003). Anti-Tutsi propaganda was spread through the radio station, RTLM, from October 1993 to late 1994. It depicted Tutsi women as manipulative and untrustworthy and men as sadistic and imperious. The radio spread fear among Hutus of being the victims of Tutsi (Baines, 2003).

Post-Genocide Ethnic Identity Ban

As a consequence of the Rwandan genocide, the Rwandan government has desperately resorted to trying to characterise Rwandans as one ethnic group. Ethnic identification is officially prohibited through laws against 'divisionism', referring to ethnic discrimination and the development of nationalistic ethnic notions. For example, one law states that; "Any person who makes public any speech, writing, images, symbols or radio with the aim of discriminating or sowing divisionism among people is sentenced to between 1-5 years of imprisonment and fined from five hundred thousand [\$1,600 NZD] to two million [\$6,400 NZD] Rwandan francs." (Rwanda Law, 2021). This lack of ethnic identity restricts Rwanda's ability to monitor discrimination and inequality within Rwandan society, track demographic change over time, estimate needs, and monitor or evaluate rehabilitation programs.

ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES

The number of people who left Rwanda during the Genocide and faltering economic growth had an immediate long-term impact on the Rwandan economy. The UN estimates that 75% of the Tutsi population died - with 662,000 Tutsi deaths (André, 2020). A further 2,000,000 people (both Tutsi and Hutu) fled Rwanda during the genocide (Des Forges, 1999), leaving vacancies in the workforce to be filled by underqualified workers. This reduced economic efficiency and consequently profit and growth. Rwanda's GDP dropped by 58% in 1994 (Hodler, 2018).

PSYCHOLOGY AND SOCIAL IMPACTS

In 2005, 13.6% of 913 randomly sampled Rwandans were deemed to suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Rugema et al., 2015). Similarly, 13.5% of 269 genocide perpetrators had the same diagnosis (Schaal, 2012). After the genocide, Rwandan society was fractured and there was a loss of communal trust. These widespread psychological and social impacts restricted the functioning of local leadership and thus the effectiveness of the economy. The genocide was a display of internal instability, which destroyed Rwanda's ability to attract external investors (World Bank, 2009). This intensified the struggle for economic growth in the 21st century.

Children Born of Genocidal Rape

One long-term social impact is the generation born from rape. 350,000 women were raped, resulting in up to 20,000 babies (Bijleveld, 2009). Women forced to bear these children often committed infanticide, abandonment, or became perpetrators of domestic violence towards their children as they struggled to come to terms with their own trauma (Mukangendo, 2007). "Sexual violence

was a step in the process of destruction of the Tutsi group...destruction of the spirit, of the will to live, and of life itself," stated the verdict on the Hutu leaders who organised the genocide, as reported by Lindsey Hilsum (The Guardian, 2014). Levine Mukasakufu, a survivor of genocidal rape, stated "I didn't love my daughter. Her father was the one who killed my family. I wanted to kill her, too." (The Guardian, 2014). Children born of rape experience stigmatisation, a struggle for personal identity, and often domestic violence. Some Rwandan primary schools will not accept children born of rape as they are not considered children of 'worthy' or 'honourable' origin (Wagner, 2022). The psychological impacts and social stigma of genocidal rape affect an emerging generation of Rwandans in the 21st century.

CONCLUSION: LASTING IMPACTS

The Rwandan genocide was fuelled by ethnic nationalism after decades of oppression during colonial rule, and economic tension in the years preceding the genocide. Almost a million lives were lost during the massacre, and those who survived continued to struggle under the lack of ethnic identity, economic decline, and stigmatisation of sexual abuse. Nationalism resulted in war crimes and mass genocide, leading to a nation afflicted with ethnic erasure, economic decline, and a stigmatised and shunned generation.

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