



## Overview: Rwanda

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Rwanda is a small country in central east Africa. Over the course of the short period from April through July of 1994, beneath the cover of an ongoing civil war, extremist members of Rwanda's Hutu ethnic majority targeted the nation's Tutsi minority for rape, torture, and murder. Political moderates and some members of the Twa minority were also victimized. To grasp the historical context of the Rwandan Genocide, one must take care to note the role of European colonization in exacerbating tensions between Rwanda's ethnic groups. Acknowledgment of the importance of colonialism in helping to lay the path to genocide, however, must not be taken to mean that the genocide was inevitable, or that the earlier colonial powers were responsible for choices that were later made by the actual perpetrators in the 1990s.

For most of its history, Rwanda was organized into clans. By the 18th century, several kingdoms had emerged, and the most powerful one was ruled by the Tutsis. Expansion of this kingdom in the 1800s emboldened the ruling Tutsis to force many of the Hutus to serve them. Colonization by the Germans in the late 1800s, and then by the Belgians in the early 1900s, only heightened the problem. Both European powers favored the Tutsis over the region's other groups. In the period between the world wars, people throughout the Western world paid greater heed to matters of nationalism and race. Keeping with the trend, Belgian laws during the 1930s sought to designate Rwandans as Hutu, Tutsi, or Twa. Mandatory identification cards explicitly marked a person's identity along these lines and served as a tool for discrimination. Frequently, it was the Hutus who most felt the brunt under this system.

After the Second World War, Rwanda, like neighboring Burundi, remained part of Belgium's sphere of influence as a United Nations Trust Territory. However, in an era that saw the dismantling of European colonial empires around the globe, as well as rapid population growth in Rwanda, many Rwandans demanded immediate recognition of their full political independence from European influence. Even as this push for independence gained momentum, not all Rwandans united behind the cause: several Hutus judged it more prudent that they work immediately to topple the longstanding hierarchical socioeconomic system, which still privileged the Tutsis. This tension exploded during the 1959 Rwandan Revolution, wherein Hutu forces attacked and massacred Tutsis, many of whom fled to safety outside Rwanda. Changes now came quickly. In 1961, Belgium agreed to the revolution's demand for the abolition of the Rwandan monarchy, and the following year, Rwanda achieved independence under a Hutu-led government. Violence continued to plague the young country, with the Hutu-dominated regime regularly under attack from refugee Tutsi military forces. A military coup in 1973 brought another new government, led by Juvénal Habyarimana, a Hutu. His administration to some extent managed to reduce the frequency of violent outbursts between the Hutus and Tutsis, but still achieved no lasting reconciliation.

Rwanda plunged into civil war in 1990, when refugee Tutsis and their allies under the banner of the Rwandan Patriotic Front launched a more aggressive military campaign. The government tried to use this campaign to demonize all Tutsis and massacred Tutsi civilians on several occasions over the next few years. Although the United Nations stepped in to try to negotiate a ceasefire and a peace agreement, the plan collapsed in 1994, when a plane carrying



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the Hutu presidents of Rwanda and Burundi was shot down. This prompted several angry Hutus in both countries to call for their countrymen to murder the nation's Tutsis. Indeed, Hutu extremists in Rwanda had been preparing for such an opportunity through the propagation of hate speech on the radio, the formation of *interhamwe* (militia groups), and the dispersal of machetes.

Starting in April 1994, within a three-month period, more than 800,000 Rwandans were murdered because of their ethnic identity. Women were systematically raped, in many cases right in front of their children. Many moderate Hutus, who attempted to aid their fellow Rwandans, were brutally killed. Terrified Tutsis sought refuge in churches, expecting asylum would be granted in the predominantly Christian country; instead, several churches became sites of mass murder. Twa Rwandans, though not specifically targeted, were still often victimized in the mass frenzy. The widespread use of machetes in the genocide meant that blood watered the cities and countryside, and survivors virtually everywhere bore the marks of scars and missing limbs. The atrocities also spilled from Rwanda into Burundi, which was also already the scene of violence against Tutsi civilians, especially the young.

Although UN armed forces under General Romeo Dallaire had been in Rwanda at the start of the genocide, the international body had actually prevented them from taking necessary action to stop the violence. Within American diplomatic circles, many prominent figures wholly refused to label the events collectively as genocide, for fear that the UN Genocide Convention would then require a more direct intervention. At the same time, many Western nations took care to recall their own citizens from Rwanda via an emergency airlift. By decade's end, the American president, William Clinton, visited Rwanda to apologize for not acting to halt the genocide. By then, the damage had been done.

The Rwandan Genocide murdered over two-thirds of the nation's Tutsis, and as much as 20% of its population. There can be little doubt that the perpetrators felt free to act with impunity in the context of the world's inaction. The mass killings ended when the Rwandan Patriotic Front seized control, but efforts towards justice would take far longer to progress. A criminal tribunal was established by the UN, and for the first time, rape was officially recognized as a tool of genocide. The work of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda continues to this day. Also, the Rwandan government has implemented a more traditional justice apparatus, the *gacaca* courts, in an effort to ease the backlog of cases and bring harmony to the war-torn nation. In these courts, local communities elect a judge to help determine the guilt of alleged perpetrators of genocide. Sentences are lower for perpetrators who can demonstrate a record of repentance and a desire for forgiveness. The goal is that the many perpetrators can eventually be reintegrated into their communities, which is controversial in that it presents a different model from the Nuremberg Trials that followed the Holocaust.

The atrocities in Rwanda highlight several disquieting truths about genocide: that even lifelong neighbors will too often choose to turn against neighbors; that neither gas chambers, nor other sophisticated, modern-day weaponry that places the murderer at physical distance from the



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victim, are necessarily going to be today's tools of choice for mass killing; and that, even in an era of greater attention from the mass media to genocidal crimes, most of the world remains slow and reluctant to halt them through any commitment to direct intervention. Even today, terrible acts of violence continue to target Tutsis in nearby Burundi.