



Rwanda

## CHAPTER 15

### The 1994 Rwanda Genocide

RENÉ LEMARCHAND

Since April 1994 Rwanda has become a synonym for one of the worst genocides of the 20th century. An estimated half a million people, mostly Tutsi, were killed in the course of a carnage that claimed twice as many victims in one month as the Bosnian civil war in two years. To this must be added almost as many deaths caused by military engagements, cholera, dysentery, famine, and sheer human exhaustion.

As much as the appalling scale of the bloodletting, it is the element of planned annihilation that gives the Rwanda killings their genocidal quality. The parallel with the 1972 genocide in Burundi immediately comes to mind (see Chapter 10, “The Burundi Genocide”). Although the threats to the ruling ethnocracies—the Hutu in Rwanda, the Tutsi in Burundi—came from identifiable groups of armed opponents, in the end entire civilian communities became the targets of ethnic cleansing (i.e., large-scale ethnic massacres)—the Hutu in Burundi, the Tutsi in Rwanda. In both states, the enemy was demonized, made the incarnation of evil, and dealt with accordingly; in both instances, the killings were planned and orchestrated from above, and owed little or nothing to a supposedly spontaneous outburst of anger from below.

Where Rwanda differs from Burundi is not just that the “rebels” happen to be Tutsi, but Tutsi refugees, or sons of refugees, who were driven out of the country in the wake of the 1959–1962 Hutu-led revolution. Few would have imagined that 30 years later the sons of the refugee diaspora in Uganda would form the nucleus of a Tutsi-dominated

politico-military organization—the *Front Patriotique Rwandais* (FPR)—that would successfully fight its way back into the country and defeat an army three times its size. Fewer still would have anticipated the price of their victory. Between the FPR invasion on October 1, 1990, and the fall of the capital (Kigali) on July 4, 1994, the killings wiped out one tenth of Rwanda's population of 7 million.

Seen in the broader context of 20th century genocides, the Rwanda tragedy underscores the universality—one might say the “normality”—of African phenomena. The logic that set in motion the infernal machine of the Rwanda killings is indeed no less “rational” than that which presided over the extermination of millions of human beings in Hitler's Germany or Pol Pot's Cambodia. The implication, lucidly stated by Helen Fein (1994), is worth bearing in mind: “Genocide is preventable because it is usually a rational act; that is, the perpetrators calculate the likelihood of success, given their values and objectives” (p. 5).

### Mythologies

It is imperative to explode the myths surrounding the Rwanda genocide. Contrary to the image conveyed by the media, there is nothing in the historical record to suggest a kind of tribal meltdown rooted in “deep-seated antagonisms,” or “long-standing atavistic hatreds.” Nor is there any evidence in support of the “spontaneous action from below” thesis. From this perspective, the killings are largely reducible to a collective outburst of blind fury set off by the shooting down of President Juvenal Habyarimana's plane on April 6, 1994. However widespread, both views are travesties of reality. What they mask is the political manipulation that lies behind the systematic massacre of innocent civilians.

It is not my intention to dispose of one myth by promulgating another—the fantasy of a precolonial society where Hutu and Tutsi lived in an eternally blissful harmony. Precolonial Rwanda was unquestionably one of the most centralized and rigidly stratified societies in the Great Lakes Region. Representing approximately 85 percent of a total population estimated at 2 million at the turn of the century, the Hutu peasants were clearly at the bottom of the heap, socially, economically and politically; but if power, status, and wealth were generally in Tutsi hands, not every Tutsi was powerful and wealthy.

Inequality was inscribed in the differential treatment accorded to each group, and within each group. Nonetheless, Hutu and Tutsi shared the same language and culture; the same clan names, the same customs, and the symbols of kingship served as a powerful unifying bond between them. Nor was conflict necessarily more intense or frequent between

Hutu and Tutsi than between Tutsi and Tutsi. Much of the historical evidence suggests precisely the opposite (Vidal, 1991).

Although the potential for conflict existed long before the advent of European rule, it was the Belgian colonial state that provided the crucible within which ethnic identities were reshaped and mythologized. The result was to drastically alter the norms and texture of traditional Rwanda society. It was the colonial state that destroyed the counter-vailing mechanisms built around the different categories of chiefs and subchiefs, thus adding significantly to the oppressiveness of Tutsi rule. It was the colonial state that insisted on individuals carrying an identity card specifying their ethnic background, a practice perpetuated until 1994, when “tribal cards” often spelled the difference between life and death. It was with the blessings of the colonial state that Christian missionaries began to speculate about the “Hamitic” origins of the kingdom, drawing attention to the distinctively Ethiopian features, and hence the foreign origins, of the Tutsi “caste” (Linden, 1977). Indirect rule, synonymous with Tutsi rule, found added legitimacy in the Hamitic lucubrations of Christian clerics; and, they eventually provided the ideological ballast of the Hutu revolution, before reappearing in 1994 in the form of a violently anti-Tutsi propaganda.

### The Legacy of Revolution

After decades of unrelenting support of Tutsi rule, Belgian policies underwent a radical shift in the mid-1950s (Lemarchand, 1970). Partly in response to pressure from the UN Trusteeship Council, and partly as a result of the arrival in Rwanda of a new generation of Catholic missionaries, imbued with the ideals of Christian Democracy, a sustained effort was made to extend educational opportunities to an increasing number of Hutu elements. This radical policy shift provoked immediate resistance from the custodians of Tutsi supremacy—i.e., chiefs, subchiefs, and Tutsi intellectuals generally—while prompting educated Hutu elements to press their claims for social reform upon the trusteeship authorities.

Ethnic violence suddenly erupted in November 1959, in the form of a Hutu *jacquerie* directed against Tutsi chiefs. Hundreds of people were killed on both sides of the ethnic fault line. Though quickly brought under control by the intervention of Belgian troops, the rural uprising marked the first phase of a revolutionary process culminating in January 1961 with a Hutu-led, Belgian-assisted coup that formally abolished the monarchy and led to the proclamation of a de facto republican regime under Hutu rule. By the time Rwanda acceded to independence on July 1, 1962, some 200,000 Tutsi had been forced into exile, the majority seeking asylum in Uganda, Burundi, and Zaire. Not until 32 years and a million

deaths later would the destiny of Rwanda be once again entrusted to Tutsi hands.

The Hutu revolution constitutes a critical element in the background of the genocide: by forcibly displacing tens of thousands of Tutsi from their homeland—now in a homeless limbo and determined to go back to their country, by force if necessary—the revolution planted the seeds of the refugee-warrior militancy that led to the creation of the FPR in 1990 (Reyntjens, 1993). By the same token, to the extent that the Hutu revolution came to be identified with a “democratic,” “anti-feudal” mass movement, its enemies could only be described in opposite terms, as feudal counter-revolutionaries bent upon restoring minority rule. It is not by accident that, during the killings, the Tutsi were collectively identified by Hutu ideologues with the “Feudo-Hamitic” enemy.

### The Ideology of Genocide

The root cause of the Rwanda genocide lies in the extent to which collective identities have been mythologized and manipulated for political advantage. Today Hutu and Tutsi are not just ethnic labels; rather, they are social categories that carry an enormous emotional charge. Tutsi are seen by many Hutu as culturally alien to Rwanda, their presence traceable to “Hamitic invaders from the north” who used ruse and cunning—gifts of cattle and beautiful women—to enslave the unsuspecting Hutu agriculturalists. Only the Hutu—that is, the Bantu people, as distinct from the Hamites—qualify as authentic Rwandans. That such portrayals are at odds with every shred of evidence available is immaterial. The point is that they are critical elements in the cognitive map of Hutu ideologues. The Hamitic frame of reference is central to an understanding of the ideology of genocide. This is where the legacy of missionary historiography—evolving from speculation about cultural affinities between Hamites and Coptic Christianity to politicized dogma about the Ethiopian origins of the Tutsi—contributed a distinctly racist edge to the discourse of Hutu politicians.

Already the ideological stock-in-trade of Hutu revolutionaries in the 1950s, official references to the Hamitic peril gained renewed salience in the wake of the FPR invasion. The attack on Kagitumba on October 1, 1990, suddenly gave ominous credibility to the image of the Tutsi as an alien invader: Did they not invade the country from the north, like their forefathers, this time with arms and ammunition provided by Uganda? Is it not the case that many of the soldiers enlisted in the ranks of the FPR were born in Uganda, and that its leaders had close ties with President Museveni of Uganda, whose Hima origins are sufficient proof of his Hamitic sympathies? And, with characteristic cunning, did they

not try to dupe President Habyarimana into accepting the Arusha Accords, which, if implemented, would have posed a mortal threat to the democratic heritage of the Hutu revolution?

What emerges from the incitements to violence distilled by Radio Mille Collines and other vectors of Hutu propaganda is an image of the Tutsi as both alien and clever—not unlike the image of the Jew in Nazi propaganda. His alienness disqualifies him as a member of the national community; his cleverness turns him into a permanent threat to the unsuspecting Hutu. Accordingly, nothing short of physical liquidation can deal with such danger.

### The Road to Apocalypse

With the birth of several opposition parties in 1991, a whole new set of actors entered the political arena, adding an entirely new dimension to the security threats posed by the FPR invasion. For the first time since the Hutu revolution of 1959, the circumstances were ripe for a strategic alliance between the enemies from within and those from without.

Predictably, this convergence of external and internal threats generated intense fears within the ruling party, the *Mouvement Révolutionnaire National pour le Développement* (MRND). At stake was not just the monopoly of power exercised by the party leadership, or even the structure of Hutu domination, but the political survival of a regime entirely controlled by northern Hutu elements. It is worth remembering in this connection that during much of the First Republic (1962–1973), power lay in the hands of Hutu politicians from the south-central regions; not until the coup of July 1973, instigated by Major-General Juvenal Habyarimana, and the proclamation of the Second Republic (1973–1994), did the northerners emerge as the dominant force in the government, the administration, the Party, and the army.

Given the nature of their ethno-regional underpinnings, and shared resentment of northern Hutu rule, it is hardly surprising that the three major opposition parties—the ethnically mixed *Parti Liberal* (PL), the *Parti Social Démocrate* (PSD), and the *Mouvement Démocratique Républicain* (MDR)—should have been perceived by MRND hard-liners as potential allies of the FPR, and therefore as presumptive traitors: the PL because of its mixed Hutu—Tutsi membership, the PSD and MDR because they drew much of their support from the Hutu masses of the south-central regions.

In this three-cornered politico-military struggle, the Tutsi civilian populations became political pawns. Courted by the PL, solicited for cash and food (and sometimes threatened) by the FPR, thoroughly distrusted by the MRND, a good many Tutsi ended up joining hands with the FPR

because they felt they had no other option. Official suspicions that every Tutsi, by ethnic definition, harbored pro-FPR sympathies created the conditions of a self-fulfilling prophecy. The wholesale slaughter of hundreds of Bagogwe (a Tutsi subgroup) in northern Rwanda in January 1991, followed by the cold-blooded murder of thousands of Tutsi civilians in the Bugesera region in March 1992, set off a pattern of localized ethnic cleansing that went on almost uninterrupted in the months preceding the genocide.

Anti-Tutsi violence increased in proportion to the magnitude of the threats posed by the FPR, but also as a result of the organizational steps taken to counter such threats. Reference must be made here to the massive recruitment and training of Hutu militias. Known in Kinyarwanda as *interahamwe* ("those who stand together"), they were ostensibly organized to protect civilians against FPR attacks; their real function, however, was to serve as a paramilitary force trained to provide auxiliary slaughterhouse support to the police, the *gendarmérie*, and the regular army. While the *interahamwe* came to be identified with the MRND, another group, the *impunza mugambi* ("the single-minded ones"), linked up with an even more fanatically anti-Tutsi party, the *Coalition pour la Défense de la République* (CDR). On the eve of the genocide the militias claimed a total membership of 50,000.

Most of the militias were recruited from among the vast pool of Hutu internally displaced persons (IDPs) driven from their homes by the advance of the FPR in the north. On the eve of the genocide about 1 million of the IDPs were registered in the whole of Rwanda, living in 40 IDP camps, for the most part in extremely harsh conditions. The IDPs, according to James Gasana (2000), who once served as minister of defense in the Habyarimana government, "were explicitly targeted by the FPR rebellion, expelled from their homes and continuously shot at in the camps to force them to move farther into the government-controlled zone. Families were separated and scattered—health centers were overwhelmed, mortality increased; suspension of schooling and lack of occupation for the young led to increased delinquency and crime" (p. 12). It is hardly a matter of coincidence that among the scores of young thugs manning the checkpoints in the capital, the vast majority were recruited among the IDPs of the Nyacinga camp, near Kigali. Seething hatred of every Tutsi in sight is what lay behind the scenes of mayhem in Kigali, Butare, and Gikongoro.

By 1992 the institutional apparatus of genocide was already in place. It involved four distinctive levels of activity or sets of actors:

1. The so-called *akazu* ("little house" in Kinyarwanda), consisting of Habyarimana's wife (Agathe), his three brothers-in-law (Protais

Zigiranyirazo, Seraphim Rwakumba, and Elie Sagatwa), and a sprinkling of trusted advisers. This core group was directly responsible for planning and orchestrating the genocide.

2. The rural organizers: recruited among communal and prefectural personnel—i.e., *prefets*, *sous-prefets*, *bourgmestres*, *conseillers communaux*, etc.—and numbering anywhere from 300 to 500. They supplied the middle-level cadres in charge of engineering and supervising the killings in the communes.
3. The militias (*interahamwe*), often operating in tandem with the police and the *gendarmérie*, formed the ground-level operatives in charge of doing the actual killing. Many also played a key role in "persuading" (at gunpoint) Hutu civilians to kill their Tutsi neighbors. Although the term came to designate a variety of self-appointed killers, the core group has been described as "forming up to 1 or 2 percent of the population; they killed out of conviction; they were trained to kill, they often smoked hashish and are thought to have killed between 200–300 people each" (Physicians for Human Rights, 1994, p. 11).
4. The presidential guard, numbering approximately 6,000 and recruited exclusively among northerners, were trained specifically to assist civilian death squads. The systematic killing of opposition figures, Hutu and Tutsi, in the days immediately following the crash of the presidential plane, on April 6, 1994, was essentially the work of the presidential guard.

The sociological profile of the killers reflects the diversity of their social and institutional ties. Especially noteworthy, however, is the number of intellectuals and professional people who participated in the slaughter. Despite many exceptions to the rule, one cannot fail to notice the number of journalists, medical doctors, agronomists, teachers, university lecturers, and even priests who were identified by survivors as accomplices in the massacre of innocent civilians. At the other end of the social spectrum were the hundreds and thousands of landless Hutu peasants and unemployed city youth whose prime motivation for killing was to steal their victims' property, their land, their furniture, their radio, or what little cash they happened to carry.

What set in motion the wheels of this infernal machine was complex, a sequence of events that began with the Arusha Accords conference in Tanzania (June 1992–August 1993) and ended with the shooting down of President Habyarimana's plane in April 1994.

Although compromise was the very essence of the power-sharing formula hammered out at Arusha—whereby the FPR would have as many seats in the transitional government and legislature as the MRND,

and would contribute 40 percent of the troops and 50 percent of the officer corps to the new Rwandan army—for the hard-liners within the party and the *akazu*, this was tantamount to betrayal. By instigating ethnic violence on a substantial scale in several localities, MRND/CDR extremists had every intention to derail the peace process. The wanton killing of innocent civilians thus became the quickest way of eliminating all basis for compromise with the FPR.

The decisive event that played directly into the hands of the extremists and sounded the death knell of the Arusha Accords, however, was the assassination of Burundi President Melchior Ndadaye on October 21, 1993. As the first popularly elected Hutu president in the history of Burundi, his election brought to a close 28 years of Tutsi hegemony, and this after a transition widely described by outside observers as “exemplary” (Lemarchand, 1994). His death at the hands of an all-Tutsi army had an immediate and powerful effect on the Hutu of Rwanda. The message came through loud and clear: “You simply cannot trust the Tutsi!” With Ndadaye’s death vanished what few glimmers of hope remained that Arusha might pave the way for a lasting compromise with the FPR.

The shooting down of Habyarimana’s plane, on April 6, 1994, on a return flight from a regional summit in Dar-es-Salaam, must be seen as the critical turning point in the sequence of events leading to the blood-bath. On board were not one but two Hutu presidents, Habyarimana and Cyprien Ntaramyira of Burundi, thus bringing to three the number of Hutu presidents killed in six months. Among other passengers killed in the crash were Burundi ministers Bernard Ciza and Cyriaque Simbizi, Major General Déogratias Nsabimana, Rwanda’s Chief of Staff, Juvénal Renzaho, presidential advisor and former ambassador to Germany, Colonel Elie Sagatwa, the president’s brother-in-law and special counselor, Major Thaddée Bagaragaza, head of the presidential guard, and Dr. Emmanuel Akingeneye, Habyarimana’s personal physician.

Despite continuing speculation by some analysts of an *akazu*-sponsored plot intended to eliminate the “moderates,” there is growing evidence to suggest that Kagame was indeed the central actor behind the crash. (Editor’s note: There, in fact, continues to be speculation that various actors might have planned and carried out the downing of the plane. Among those under suspicion are: the *akazu*, the French government and the Rwandan Patriotic Force. In regard to the alleged involvement of France see Linda Malvern’s 2008 article, “The Perfect Crime?,” in prospect.) Debate and disagreements persist between those who stubbornly adhere to the view that *akazu*-linked extremists committed the deed to rid the country of a president turned too liberal (such as

Linda Malvern and Gérard Prunier, among others) and those who point to Kagame as the chief villain. Those holding the anti-Kagame brief note that he has steadfastly refused to allow an international commission to investigate the matter, and that among the victims of the crash were some of the key supporters of the *akazu*, such as Sagatwa, Renzaho and Nsabimana. None could be described as moderates. Even more revealing are the detailed testimonies offered by former FPR officers and defectors, most notably Abdul Ruzibiza’s account of how he and other members of the crack unit known as the Network Commando went about the task of preparing the ground for the shooting down of the presidential plane (Ruzibiza 2005). Ruzibiza’s disclosures fully corroborate the findings of the French investigating magistrate Jean-Louis Bruguière in his brief on behalf of the three French crew members who died in the crash.

It is important to add that there were compelling political reasons for Kagame to render null and void the road map established at the Arusha conference. Seen from the perspective of the electoral calendar drawn at Arusha, it is easy to see why Kagame might have found it imperative to chart an alternative course, even if it meant planning Habyarimana’s murder: with general elections scheduled to take place 22 months after the inauguration of the Broadly Based Transition Government (BBTG) there could be little doubt that the FPR would end up the loser; meanwhile with only 5 cabinet seats out of 21 in the BBTG the FPR was in no position to introduce an amendment to the Arusha provisions. The only way to prevent the nightmare scenario of a defeat at the polls was to either scrap the Arusha accords or seize power. Shooting down Habyarimana’s plane would have allowed Kagame to score on both counts.

### Descent into Hell

The news of Habyarimana’s death spread instantly throughout the land, ushering a climate of intense fear and uncertainty. For Hutu extremists the exigencies of security, indeed survival, called for an immediate response. The decision to apply the full force of genocidal violence against all Tutsi as well as every Hutu suspected of Tutsi sympathies stemmed from a straightforward rational choice, dictated by the logic of survival: Either we kill them first, or else we’ll be killed. Thus framed, the logic of the “security dilemma” left no alternative but to annihilate the enemies of the nation, the Tutsi.

In practice, setting in motion the wheels of the killing machine turned out to be a far more complex and difficult task than has been assumed by most commentators. Recent research into the dynamics of violence at the local level shows just how central to the whole genocidal process were

the intra-Hutu struggles for power between moderates and extremists (Straus, 2006). In a number of communes, efforts to tip the scales on the side of the hard-liners met with considerable local resistance. As Scott Straus (2006) conclusively demonstrates, the genocide was by no means the sudden, irresistible, uniformly orchestrated butchery that some might imagine; it came about as “a cascade of tipping points, and each tipping point was the outcome of local, intra-ethnic contests for dominance (among Hutu)” (p. 93). Furthermore, as Straus (2006) shrewdly observes, the protracted struggles for supremacy that went on in many communes makes it all the more probable that a more determined stance on the part of the international community would have prevented the worst from happening.

In Kigali, the killing of opposition figures, Hutu and Tutsi, began a few hours after the crash, on the basis of pre-established lists. The first to be targeted were moderate Hutu politicians affiliated with the MDR and PSD, and the Tutsi leadership and rank-and-file of the PL, including its president, Lando Ndasingwa. At this stage, little attention was paid to ethnic criteria. Anyone suspected of FPR sympathies was seen as traitor. Included in this category were Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingiyimana, the president of the Constitutional Court, the minister of labor and social affairs, and countless other lower ranking officials.

Opposition figures were disposed of in a matter of hours. Doing away with hundreds of thousands of Tutsi civilians—and thousands of Hutu in the Gitarama and Butare prefectures—proved a more difficult undertaking. Where local authorities refused to yield to the murderous injunctions coming from Kigali (as in Butare, where the *prefet* managed to keep things relatively peaceful for ten days after the slaughter began in Kigali), they were the first to be killed when the *interahamwe* showed up.

Forty-eight hours after the crash, the carnage began to spread through the countryside, causing thousands of panic-stricken Tutsi to flee their homes. Some were sheltered by Hutu neighbors, others tried to flee to FPR-controlled areas, and still others sought refuge in churches or went into hiding in neighboring swamps. The worst massacres occurred in churches and mission compounds, as in Nyamata, Musha, Karubamba. In Musha, 40 kilometers north of the capital, where some 1200 Tutsi had sought refuge, the militias went to work at 8:00 A.M. on April 8; not until the evening was the “job” (*akazi*) done.

Throughout the carnage, “the militias were exhorted by the privately owned Radio Mille Collines, which continued to broadcast messages such as ‘The enemy is out there—go get him!’ and ‘The graves are only half full!’” (Richburg, 1994, p. 4) In a number of localities, Hutu were ordered by the militias to kill their Tutsi neighbors; failure to comply meant a death warrant for themselves and their families.

The methods used by the militias are described with clinical precision in a report by Physicians for Human Rights (1994): “The *interahamwe* used the following methods of killing: machetes, *massues* (clubs studded with nails), small axes, knives, grenades, guns, fragmentation grenades, beatings to death, amputations with exsanguination, live burials, drowning, or rape. Many victims had both their Achilles tendons cut with machetes as they ran away, to immobilize them so that they could be finished off later” (p. 11).

When death has been dispensed so massively and cruelly, one wonders whether the wounds will ever heal. The legacy of horror casts a long shadow on the capacity of Rwandan society to rise from its own ashes. And it raises problematic questions about the chances of national reconciliation: Can justice and accountability erase the haunting memories of the past? Can the RPF soldiers be prevented from dispensing a more brutal form of justice in dealing with returning refugees suspected of participating in the genocide? How can Tutsi hegemony meet both the exigencies of security and the demands of the Hutu majority for a meaningful participation in the economic and political life of the country?

#### Postgenocide Rwanda: The Quest for National Reconciliation

In seeking answers to these questions it is important to recall how the new Rwanda authorities interpret the root cause of the genocide, how they estimate the rate of participation in the killings, and how best to mete out punishment. While all three are closely related to the goal of national reconciliation, in practice they raise major obstacles in the way of a viable *modus vivendi* between Hutu and Tutsi.

Despite considerable evidence to the contrary, official interpretations of the genocide are reducible to one single overriding variable: inter-ethnic hatreds. Hence the need to drastically alter Rwanda’s social map. In practice, this means that at the stroke of a pen ethnic identities have been legislated out of existence. In today’s Rwanda, there are no longer Hutu, Tutsi and Twa, but only Banyarwanda—the “people of Rwanda”—and anyone suspected of encouraging “divisionism” by making loaded references to ethnic labels is liable to legal sanctions. Article 13 of the constitution deals explicitly with “revisionism, denial and trivialization (*banalisation*)” of the genocide: all are punishable by law; Article 33 further stipulates that “the propagation of ethnic, regional and racial discrimination or any other form of division is punishable by law.” The rationale behind this legislation is straightforward: since ethnic enmities lie at the root of the carnage, the path to peace lies in the elimination of ethnicity from political discourse.