

Case Study: The Rwandan Civil War

Introduction

Rwanda is a small landlocked country in the Great Lakes region of east-central Africa with a population of over ten million people in 2015 and is a former colony of Belgium. The civil war in Rwanda is remembered for the events that took place in 1994, towards the end of the war. This was Rwandan Genocide, an event so swift and vicious in nature that the number of those killed remains unknown. Had the genocide not taken place the civil war would have only been remembered as one of many armed conflicts on the African continent. The genocide catapulted the nation of Rwanda into the international limelight and has been described as a 'case from hell', which along with the Yugoslav Wars brought into question the optimistic 'New World Order' envisioned after the end of the Cold War. The conflict, between Tutsi rebels and a Hutu dominated government, has had major implications for the region, notably the Great Lakes refugee crisis, and the First and Second Congo Wars.

Origins

Rwanda is a former Belgian colony and it was under colonial rule that identity cards were introduced to distinguish between Hutu's and Tutsi's, the predominant identity groups in Rwanda. The source of the differences between the two are disputed, with one argument being that the differences are racial and another that they are the result of class divisions. What can be determined is that there is a clear division in terms of identity and the colonialists favoured the Tutsi as an elite, over the Hutu's. By the time of independence in 1962 the positions had been reversed and the Hutu's were in power, conducting anti-Tutsi purges, and neighbouring countries had become hosts to Tutsi refugees. Armed groups opposed to the Hutu government launched attacks into Rwanda in the early 1960's but these were defeated and in 1962-1963 approximately 10,000 Tutsi's were massacred in Rwanda, bringing an end to the attacks. In 1973 a military coup deposed the government and Juvenal Habyarimana became the President of Rwanda. Under his rule violence against Tutsi's reduced but was still present and there was still pro-Hutu discrimination, although by 1990 Habyarimana was considering allowing multi-party rule but without actually taking any action to bring it about.

The origins of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), which would be the rebel forces opposing the Rwandan Armed Forces (FAR) during the civil war, emerged from the Tutsi diaspora in Uganda. Rwandan Tutsi refugees, including the future RPF leaders Fred Rwigyema and Paul Kagame, were involved in the 1979 overthrow of Idi Amin and the 1986 defeat of Milton Obote, and both Rwigyema and Kagame became senior officers under the new Ugandan leader, President Museveni. Under Obote's rule there was persecution and discrimination against Tutsi refugees, leading to the formation of the Rwandan Alliance for National Unity (RANU), which was reformed in 1987 into the RPF, which was committed to the return of Tutsi refugees to Rwanda. By 1990, amid anti-Tutsi tensions in Uganda, the RPF had an experienced leadership and a committed following from Tutsi's within the Ugandan army.

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Escalation

In October 1990 Tutsi soldiers deserted their posts the RPF launched an offensive into Rwanda led by Rwigyema, advancing towards the Rwandan capital Kigali. France, a supporter of the Habyarimana deployed troops to protect Kigali and its airport, blocking the RPF advance and elite troops from Zaire joined the fighting on the frontline in support of the FAR. The RPF was pushed back to the Ugandan border and Rwigyema was killed in a leadership dispute. The invasion had failed within a month, with the RPF in disarray, and Habyarimana confidently declared victory.

Kagame had been in the United States during the invasion. He returned to Rwanda, and set about reorganising the RPF. He withdrew the majority of his forces into Uganda, leaving small forces operating in Rwanda to disguise the withdrawal, recruited from neighbouring countries, instilled discipline, sought funding and rearmed. In January 1991 the RPF launched an attack and took the northern city of Ruhengeri, then withdrew and switched to guerrilla warfare until the Arusha Accords of 1992 led to a ceasefire, which held for seven months until reports of massacres of Tutsi's led to a major RPF offensive in February 1993, again capturing Ruhengeri and threatening Kigali. A new deployment of French paratroopers meant that if the RPF was to take Kigali it would have to fight the French and a unilateral ceasefire was declared and the RPF withdrew their forces northwards. A peace process developed and the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR) was established to oversee the implementation of a transitional government under the Arusha Accords and a RPF mission was established in Kigali. The ceasefire would again only last months: the Tutsi diaspora had seriously miscalculated the impact of their invasion on Hutu-Tutsi relations within Rwanda.

The trigger for the Rwandan Genocide was the downing of President Habyarimana's aircraft when he was returning from negotiations in Dar es Salaam. For months beforehand anti-Tutsi propaganda had prepared the Presidential Guard and interahamwe militias for action and it is still not known who shot the President's plane down. Habyarimana's willingness to commit to a peace process had alarmed hardliners within his government, although the President himself had been also been instrumental in a developing Hutu Power movement since the outbreak of the civil war in 1990. The perpetrators of the genocide targeted Tutsi's and moderate Hutu's over a three month period and UNAMIR was helpless to prevent it. The moderate Hutu opposition to the government was wiped out early in the genocide and ten Belgian soldiers were killed while guarding the moderate Prime Minister on behalf of UNAMIR. Estimates of the number killed in the genocide range from 500,000 to a million and the killings were up close, brutal and with whatever weapon came to hand. As the international community prevaricated the RPF launched a major offensive, refusing to negotiate with the interim government while the killings went on. A steady three pronged offensive led to the RPF occupying all of the country by the end of July 1994, with the exception of the south-west, where France had deployed UN mandated troops. The interim government and millions of Hutu's, including the perpetrators of the genocide, fled to the

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neighbouring countries of Burundi, Tanzania, Uganda and Zaire. Relations between the French forces and the RPF were tense due to France's previous support for the Habyarimana government but the territory was handed over to the RPF on the 21st August 1994. The civil war had effectively ended on the 18th July with the capture of the north-western town of Gisenyi and final defeat of the interim government by the RPF.

The RPF has governed Rwanda since its victory in 1994 and is credited with providing stability and implementing a multi-party system of government but has been criticised by human rights groups for suppressing opposition groups and limiting their number. The Rwandan constitution prohibits political parties from basing themselves on any division that may lead to discrimination, although this has led to accusations of making Rwanda a one-party state, which uses anti-genocide laws to suppress dissent.

Third Parties

UNAMIR was the UN's major contribution to the situation in Rwanda and was deployed in support of the Arusha accords but did not have a mandate or the resources for military intervention. The commander, Romeo Dallaire, warned of the preparations for genocide but was not provided with further resources. Whilst helpless to prevent the genocide, UNAMIR forces saved thousands of lives and tried to establish negotiations between the warring parties. Initially deployed to support the ill-fated interim government UNAMIR continued to operate until 1996 with an extended mandate to provide security for refugees. In total, forty countries contributed troops to UNAMIR operations.

The major European involvement in the civil war came from France, which was a supporter of the Habyarimana government and whose forces stalled RPF advances on three occasions- the first and second of these providing security for Kigali and allowing the FAR to recover from RPF advances. The third deployment during the genocide is credited with providing security for the south-east of Rwanda but also with allowing the perpetrators of the genocide to escape, while the FAR was engaged with the RPF. Belgium had deployed troops in 1990 but these were withdrawn as the Belgian constitution prohibited the involvement of its troops in civil wars. Belgian troops were also present later, as part of UNAMIR, but were again withdrawn after the murder of twelve unarmed Belgian soldiers.

Mediation and Negotiation

The most ambitious attempt to end the Rwandan Civil War was the Arusha Accords, negotiated in Tanzania under the auspices of the United States, France and the Organisation for African Unity (OAU). The goal of the accords was the establishment of a transitional government, to include the RPF, with the aim of future general elections. Amongst the points considered necessary for a stable peace was power sharing agreements, the merging

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of the rival armies and the repatriation of refugees. The Arusha Accords sought to solve the key problems affecting Rwanda, but despite being signed by the Rwandan President and political leader of the RPF were not actually implemented. It is questionable as to how much President Habyarimana was committed to the peace process as it effectively stripped him of some of his powers, and hardliners within the government were preparing for genocide while the talks were taking place.

Resolution

The Rwandan Civil War was ultimately decided by military force when the rebels of the RPF took control of the country in 1994, although the underlying Hutu-Tutsi conflict has not been resolved and has had wider repercussions in neighbouring countries. This is despite efforts to resolve the conflict peacefully and two ceasefires, one unilateral by the RPF, and the deployment of UNAMIR. The failure to mediate a peaceful resolution between the two parties was ultimately a consequence of the political situation in Rwanda itself, essentially a pro-Hutu administration that discriminated against Tutsi's in the long term and the refusal of hardliners to accept compromise and deliberate mobilisation of the Hutu population against Tutsi's and the elimination of moderate Hutu opposition.

Workshop Questions

1. Apply one or more of the theories presented in the CAR Theories section: What do they reveal about the conflict and which are more appropriate to understanding the case?
2. The UN and leading western states have been heavily criticised for failing to respond effectively to the genocide. Is this correct?
3. What lessons regarding the morality and practicality of external intervention in civil wars can be drawn from this case?

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