

# The Rwandan Genocide and Global Powers

While three communities had been living side by side before the arrival of colonists to Rwanda, the societal structure underwent a change when it became the colony of Germany, then Belgium. The first genocide of the 20th century was carried out by Germans in Namibia. Between 1904-1909, around 100,000 Namibians were slaughtered by German soldiers, and the skulls of those murdered were shipped to German universities. The last genocide of the same century was again in Africa, but this time in Rwanda. Apart from occurring in Africa, another similarity between the two genocides was their close relationship with colonization.

The world witnessed highly bloody events in Rwanda in 1994. Two large ethnic groups of the country, the Hutu and the Tutsi, were at the center of these events. The murder of around 1 million people with machetes turned the streets into a blood bath. The massacre continued for 100 days, making it the biggest genocide of the post-World War II period. But rather than stepping in, the United Nations, USA and Europe abandoned Rwanda to its fate and left the country immediately. Well then, what was the real issue here? How did these two communities end up becoming such enemies?

As with almost every country in Africa, Rwanda is a country created by artificial borders drawn by colonists. While three communities (the Hutu, Tutsi and Twa) had been living together until the arrival of colonists in the country, which became a colony of Germany and then of Belgium, the societal structure underwent a change with the arrival of foreign forces. The most significant change was the strict discrimination between these closely related communities based on ethnicity. The reshaping of society based on ethnic discrimination during colonial times was undoubtedly the main factor in Rwanda's undoing. Rwanda was colonized by Germany in 1899 and handed over to Belgium in 1918 after the defeat of the Germans in World War I. The legacy left by both colonial administrations to Rwanda was nothing more than a separatist and racist style of politics.

## Colonial legacy: Social segregation and violence

The Belgian colonial administration's policy of creating a privileged ruling class from the Tutsi laid the ground for bloody fights long after the end of colonial rule. Separatist policies, such as strict ethnic discrimination between the Hutu, Tutsi and Pygmy people, and ethnic classification on identity cards caused these communities to become enemies. Among these policies, privileging the Tutsi and providing them with educational scholarships and vocational training based on the justification that they were smarter made the Tutsi the voice and leader of society and excluded other communities from social life and economic activities. This attitude of transferring the cultural and physical racist mentality of Europe to Rwanda eventually turned these kindred communities into adversaries. However, this situation which could not be accepted by the Hutu who were high in numbers started to bring the risk of conflict into question at the end of the 1950s.

The main item on the agenda of Hutu political elites who started to gain power in the 1950s was to stand up against the social and economic monopoly of the Tutsi obtained through the colonial forces. The 12-page *Hutu Manifest* published in 1957 emphasized this discrimination and invited all Hutus throughout the country to unite. This manifest written by Hutu elites is considered the precursor to the genocide.

The dethronement of the Tutsi king in 1959 ignited the events between the two ethnic communities which would turn into genocide in the following years. As from that date, around 130,000 Tutsis fled from the country and started to live in refugee camps in neighboring states. The Belgian colonial administration which had already started to lose power abandoned the country in 1962 and left behind a volatile society full of hatred. After gaining independence, the Hutu, constituting the majority of the population, grabbed power and violence soon started to be directed against the Tutsi.

The attempts of those Tutsis who had fled during the events in 1959 to return to the country resulted in the death of 21,000 people in such regions as Kyanika and Kaduha in 1963, and the hatred and hostility

between the Hutu and Tutsi communities continued to deepen every day. The use of ethnic discrimination in formal education had created a society in which young people were full of hatred against those who did not resemble them. In an interview, Kankesha Josephine who witnessed the events of 1963, recounted that they had to walk over dead bodies on their way to school and that dogs were tearing the corpses into pieces. Such incidences experienced in rural areas show that the path towards the blood soaked streets of 1994 had already started to be paved as early as 1959.

The events of 1973-1974 saw a repeat of those of 1959-1963. In all these incidents, the Tutsi were subjected to ethnic genocide and those who survived fled to Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Uganda. But the Tutsi population which was increasing in the surrounding countries became organized in these countries and established the *Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF)*. This armed organization would become the only hope for saving the Tutsi from slaughter in the following years.

## **The Genocide of 1994 and Global Silence**

The shooting down of the plane carrying Rwandan President Habyarimana on April 6, 1994, is considered as the start of the tragic events. The systematical massacre of the Tutsi began just 15 minutes after this attack leaving the country trapped in chaos for 3-4 months. Extremist Hutu gangs started to slaughter the Tutsi wherever they could find them. But it was the murder of around 10 Belgian soldiers working in the United Nations Peacekeeping Force by attackers that really had a calamitous effect. The incident saw the immediate departure of all foreign missionaries, creating a more favorable environment for the gangs carrying out the genocide.

While all these highly bloody events were going on in the country, global actors kept surprisingly silent. Even though the US public reacted to the silence of the USA, which had no strategical interest in Rwanda in terms of taking action to stop the massacre in the country, the Clinton administration avoided naming the events as a "genocide". Although it was a conscious choice not to use the expression "genocide" in White House press conferences in order to avoid taking any responsibility for Rwanda, the USA's failure experienced in Somalia a short time earlier also led to this syndrome.

The shooting down of two Black Hawk helicopters in Somalia in October 1993 and the military losses of the US army had given the USA a big shock and taught it to act cautiously in Africa. This fear relapsed in Rwanda and the USA preferred to stay silent about the events in the country. The USA's blindness reached such a level that it decided not to interrupt radio broadcasts inciting the people to massacre with the justification that it would be intervening in the freedom of speech.

While the United Nations adopted the same passive attitude, Western countries turned a blind eye to the killings in Rwanda as well. The UN, stuck to its principal of staying "neutral" between the parties, proved that it lacked the mechanisms to prevent such events. The lack of such minerals as oil, natural gas, gold and diamond and strategic importance left this small African country to suffer its own fate alone. Before the start of the events, intelligence that extremist gangs were preparing for a genocide was ignored and eventually, this grave tragedy ended up becoming a spectacle only viewed from afar. While the USA and European countries were mobilizing any means to get their own citizens out of the country during the days of the genocide, they did not make any effort to stop the genocide in Rwanda.

As the genocide raged on, it was the RPF militia who entered Rwanda from its border regions, gained ground step by step, and laid siege to Kigali. This prevented the complete extermination of the Tutsi and paved the way for the rise of Paul Kagame to the presidency in the political scene. By the time these events ended in July 1994, Rwanda's streets, churches, and schools were overflowing with corpses.

While the words of regret and empty prayers accompanied by fake tears staged in the media after the genocide were not sufficient to hide this shame on humanity, all that was left were the heroic stories of a few volunteers. The story of a few invaluable people who saved Tutsis from being slaughtered by hiding them in orphanages, churches, and mosques showed that acts of humanity were still possible even under impossible conditions.

Rwanda is one of the most important lessons of the 20th century. It is the most obvious proof of the fact that discrimination and politics based on ethnic codes can cause hugely bloody events. The chaos caused

by the ethnic politics designed by colonialism in a small African country showed us how global actors could be silent against the violations of human rights in places where they have no interest.

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