

## Introduction and Summary

The purpose of this study is to present a historical background to developments in Rwanda that culminated in the genocide\* that began in April 1994. The subject is dealt with in chronological order. The two chapters "Rwanda in the region" and "Arming Rwanda", although not less important, fall outside the chronology and are therefore presented as separate annexes.

There is an abundance of books, research reports and studies on different aspects of the history and recent developments in Rwanda (see the annotated bibliography in Appendix 3). This study relies on available written materials supplemented by interviews with established scholars (Rwandese as well as foreign). We wish to thank them all for letting us draw upon their knowledge, in particular Professors Filip Reyntjens, David Newbury and Gerard Prunier, who have commented on our drafts.

Our review of documentation on the historical evolution of Rwandese society has not led us to any easy answers or to pinpoint one or two ultimate reasons for the tragic events. On the contrary, it has rather led us to conclude that recent events result from a cumulation of events of the past, with one factor forming a building block for the next, and all actors and factors interrelating and interacting.

However, we wish to use this summary to highlight a few specific developments in Rwanda's history that we think have been of decisive importance, and need to be understood in order better to comprehend what led to the tragedy in 1994 and what is going on in Rwanda today. We think that they are all important and hesitate to stress one more than the other. The scholarly debate on Rwanda has often been "reductionist", trying to establish whether one or the other factor has been more important – a debate that has helped to clarify the different standpoints, but has led to little conclusive result.

The aspects we wish to stress are:

- 1) The buildup of indigenous social and political structures towards the end of the pre-colonial period, in particular under the reign of the Tutsi king Rwabugiri during the second half of the 19th century. Rwabugiri's administration (1860 – 1895) imposed a harsh regime on the formerly semiautonomous Tutsi and Hutu lineages, confiscating their lands and breaking their political power. Rwabugiri amplified feudal labour systems, in particular the *uburetwa*, i.e. labour in return for access to land, a system that was restricted to Hutu peasant farmers while exempting Tutsi. He also manipulated social categories, and introduced an "ethnic" differentiation between Tutsi and Hutu based on historical social positions. Polarization and politicization of ethnicity thus began before the advent of European colonialism.

*\*The term "genocide" is legally defined in the International Genocide Convention of 1948 as acts committed with the intention to destroy, wholly or in part, a national ethnic, racial or religious group, as such. This definition is precise and operational and is rather qualitative than quantitative. Politically, the tendency has been to avoid the use of the term as much as possible as it obligates states to intervene to protect those threatened by massacre. This is discussed in detail in Study II.*

(End p 9)

2) The German and Belgian colonial (trusteeship) policy of indirect rule, favouring the strengthening of Tutsi hegemony and resulting in a political and administrative monopoly in the hands of the aristocratic Tutsi overlords of the *Nyiginya* clan from the 1920s. Under the influence of the so-called hamitic thesis, this policy culminated in 1933 with the introduction of compulsory identity cards, reinforcing and accelerating the late pre-colonial process towards a separation of Tutsi and Hutu (and Twa). From then on, all Rwandese had to relate to "their" respective ethnic group, which in turn determined avenues and fortunes in society. Under European colonialism, a policy of "ethnogenesis" was actively pursued, i.e. a politically-motivated creation of ethnic identities based on socially-constituted categories of the pre-colonial past. The minority Tutsi became the haves and the majority Hutu the have-nots.

3) The abrupt change by Belgium only some 25 years later, when – under the influence of the general decolonization process in Africa, the build-up towards political independence in the Congo (Zaire) and in a belated attempt to redress past injustices – the colonial administration (and the Catholic church) shifted support from the minority Tutsi to the majority Hutu. This eased the way for the so-called peasant, or Hutu, revolution of 1959 – 61, through which Rwanda underwent a profound transition from a Tutsi-dominated monarchy to a Hutu-led independent republic in less than three years. The replacement of one political elite by another introduced a new dimension of political and social instability and a potential for future ethnic violence. The events of 1959 – 61 also forced tens of thousands of Tutsi into exile in neighbouring countries, from where groups of refugees began to carry out armed incursions into Rwanda, sowing the seeds of the country's ethnically-defined refugee problem.

4) Largely due to extreme population pressure, in addition to complex agricultural production systems and competition for land between crop-farmers and cattle-owners, the Rwandese society developed over the centuries into a remarkably organized state, with a high degree of authoritarian social control from the centre. This was not only the case with the core Tutsi-dominated pre-colonial feudal kingdom (i.e. excluding the northern and southwestern areas of present Rwanda) – in which a vertical chain of command through layers of chiefs regulated the economy and the life of peasants through various social contracts – but also during the German and Belgian administrations, through which a policy of indirect rule continued, and strengthened, the control from above.

What is important in the context of this study is, first, that the highly organized and centralized Rwandese state formation over the years constrained the scope for the emergence of non-governmental organizations and independent interest groups. Political parties did appear on the scene towards the end of the 1950s, but on the whole the development of an independent NGO based civil society has been largely dwarfed by the state. Thus, along with the oppression and exploitation of Rwandese women farmers – carrying most of the agricultural work and being physically drained through constant pregnancies – there are, for example, in male-dominated Rwanda only a few rural women's associations to voice their interests.

Secondly – and most importantly – the political culture of centralized social control has facilitated policies aiming at mobilization or manipulation of the Rwandese rural people, for peaceful as well as violent purposes. Subjugated receivers of instructions from above and with out means to disobey, the peasant population has largely joined campaigns launched by the government, whether the essentially constructive *umuganda* labour regime from the mid-70s or the later fatally destructive *interahamwe* militias.

5) Increasing intra-Hutu tensions – mainly between groups from the northern Gisenyi and Ruhengeri regions and those from the rest of the country – developed during the First and Second Republics (1962 – 1990) and came to form an important factor underlying the cleavage between Hutu in the 1990s. In addition to competition over political spoils, at the core of this division is the historical fact that the northern Hutu were independent until the first decade of the 20th Century, when they were militarily defeated by combined German and Tutsi-led southern Rwandese troops. To this day, the northerners form a distinctive Hutu subculture in which  
(End p 10)

awareness of a pre-Tutsi past is more pronounced than in other parts of Rwanda. President Habyarimana's informal council – or *akazu*; constituted around his wife and brothers-in-law – represented this independent Hutu tradition, deeply suspicious of any reconciliatory gestures towards the exiled Tutsi community and, therefore, also essentially hostile to the Hutu political groups favouring a dialogue with the Tutsi-led Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF). The slow and often flawed democratization process in 1990 – 94 was to a great extent due to this intra-Hutu division. The *akazu* was also behind the genocide from April 1994, preparing the tragic events through instructions to presidentially-appointed *bourgemestres* (mayors), building up the *inter-ahamwe* militias and mobilizing the Burundian Hutu refugees pouring into southern Rwanda after the assassination of the Burundian Hutu president Ndadaye in October 1993.

6) The economic slump starting in the late 1980s and the effects of the actions subsequently taken by the government in consultation with the international donor community, i.e. the structural adjustment programme of 1990 – 1992. The economic deterioration, largely due to a sharp decline of world market prices for coffee – Rwanda's prime export earner – as well as to unfavourable weather and economic policies such as increased protectionism, price controls and other regulations, affected the whole society. In US dollar terms, GDP per capita fell by some 40 percent over the four years 1989 – 1993. The slump hit the Rwandese peasantry particularly hard. Combined with the effects of the civil war from October 1990, continued demographic pressure on available resources and decreasing agricultural yields, the economic crisis introduced yet another element of stress and instability into the Rwandese political and social fabric. The international community, including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, overlooked these potentially explosive political consequences when designing and imposing their economic conditions for support to Rwanda's economic recovery.

7) The refugee crisis, starting in 1959 and developing into a constant political and social problem throughout the history of independent Rwanda. Tens of thousands of Tutsi, in several waves from the Hutu revolution onwards, were forced into exile in

neighbouring countries. Largely due to the intransigence of the Rwandese Hutu-led governments towards their demands to return, and to the unwelcoming policies of some of the host countries, the exiled Tutsi communities became over the years increasingly militant. In turn, this led to the creation of the Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF), the military attack on Rwandese in October 1990 and the ensuing civil war.

8) Of crucial importance in this context is the two-generations-old unsolved issue of impunity for genocidal crimes in Rwanda. The International Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, confirmed by the International Court of Justice in 1951 and ratified by Rwanda in 1975, stipulates that persons committing genocide shall be punished, "whether they are constitutionally responsible rulers, public officials or private individuals". In addition to the crime of genocide as such, punishable acts according to the convention are conspiracy to commit genocide, direct and public incitement to commit genocide, attempt to commit genocide and complicity in genocide. In Rwanda, those who over the years have been responsible for ethnic mass killings have not, however, been brought to justice. For the psychological health of the people, and the political health of the country, the crimes must be addressed. If a culture of impunity is allowed to continue, the spiral of violence seems almost bound to be repeated in the future.

9) Linked to the problem of impunity is the legacy of fear that exists in the Rwandese social fabric as a result of repeated mass killings since 1959, and which has its origins in the process of ethnogenesis and division between privileged Tutsi and under-privileged Hutu during the colonial period. With creation of the ethnicity issue followed a social construct of Tutsi superiority and Hutu inferiority, contempt and mistrust, which ultimately permeated the entire society and developed into a culture of fear. It largely contributed to the outburst of violence at the time of Rwanda's independence, when the tables were turned and the fear among the majority Hutu (End p 11)

gave way to a fear among the minority Tutsi. Since then, it has been repeatedly exploited for purposes of political manipulation.

10) Developments in Rwanda are, finally, closely related to developments in the Great Lakes region, comprising Rwanda, eastern Zaire, Uganda, northwestern Tanzania and Burundi. This is the historical region of the *banyarwanda*, i.e. the people who speak the language of Rwanda, *kinyarwanda*, and who throughout modern history share a common heritage. It was violated by European powers, who at the turn of the century divided the region and the people into Belgian, British and German colonial dominions, with far-reaching consequences for later, including the most recent, events. Thus, regional political, economic, social and cultural dynamics – taking the form of, among other things, cross-border flows of refugees, weapons, ideas and fears – must be borne in mind when considering solutions to Rwanda's problems, as well as the problems of – above all – Burundi and Zaire. If not, the ghastly events in Rwanda in 1994 could easily draw the entire region into similar, or still greater, human tragedies.

All these factors, sometimes fuelled and sometimes constrained by interventions from

the international community, led to the manipulation of ethnicity in the 1990s, which in turn led to the genocide from 6 April 1994. We hope that this study of the history of Rwanda will help the reader to be aware that the causes of polarized ethnicity are not easily defined. On the one hand, we do not wish to draw the conclusion that such ethnicity only stems from differences based on ancestry, culture or social position. As shown below, the complexity of the pre-colonial society was such that differences could just as well be explained by lineage, clan, occupation, class etc. On the other hand, neither can we draw the conclusion that the contemporary antagonistic cleavages along ethnic lines can be attributed solely to specific events during the colonial period, nor in the period thereafter. There are no simple answers. The truth is that the present can be explained only as a product of a long and conflict-ridden process, where many factors contribute to the total picture.

(End p 12)