Rwandan Genocide

Rwandan Genocide refers to the mass killings of at least 500,000 Rwandans from April to July 1994. Most of the genocide victims were Tutsi, an ethnic group of central Africa and a minority in Rwanda. The term genocide refers to the systematic destruction of an ethnic, racial, religious, or national group. Government forces carried out the genocide in the name of protecting the Hutu ethnic majority.

The Hutu and Tutsi have a number of similarities. They generally speak the same language, live in the same areas, and follow similar traditions. However, ethnicity has long caused social and political tensions in Rwanda. A critical period occurred under Belgian colonial rule in the early to middle 1900’s. The Belgians initially favored the Tutsi, granting them increased power in government administration, as well as greater employment and educational opportunities than Hutu. The Belgians also formalized the ethnic divisions by requiring all people to carry passes identifying themselves as Hutu or Tutsi.

As Rwandans struggled for independence in the late 1950’s and early 1960’s, a violent reversal of the ethnic power structure took place. The period is called the “Hutu social revolution.” In 1959, a Hutu uprising led to violence against the Tutsi. With Belgian help, Hutu elites took over the government. After Rwanda gained independence in 1962, Hutu secured the presidency. Violence during the uprising and the early years of independence resulted in the deaths of thousands of Tutsi. After independence, the Tutsi were subjected to discrimination and political repression. The violence and discrimination prompted hundreds of thousands of Tutsi to flee to neighboring countries.

Beginning in 1990, a Uganda-based Tutsi-led rebel group, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), launched several attacks against the Hutu-led government. In August 1993, the government signed a peace treaty with the RPF. But on April 6, 1994, Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana, a Hutu, was killed when his plane was shot down above Kigali, Rwanda’s capital. Hutu extremists filled the power vacuum left by the president’s assassination. The extremists immediately began a campaign of violence against people they viewed as political opponents.

Over the following three months, government forces with militia and civilian assistance massacred at least 500,000 people in one of the worst human rights violations of the 1900’s. Most victims were Tutsi, but Hutu who opposed the violence also were killed.

Meanwhile, the RPF advanced against government forces, eventually defeating them and taking control of Rwanda’s government. The RPF also committed human rights violations as they secured the country. More than 2 million refugees, mostly Hutu, left Rwanda to escape the RPF. Most refugees fled to Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or DRC), where violence between Hutu and Tutsi continued for years.
In late 1994, the United Nations created a special court of justice to prosecute the organizers of the genocide in Rwanda. The court convicted dozens of individuals. The RPF-led Rwandan government also tried hundreds of thousands of perpetrators in domestic courts and through a community justice program. The RPF-led government has remained authoritarian, but it has presided over a period of significant economic growth and social development.

See also Genocide; RwandaHistory.

**How to cite this article:**
To cite this article, World Book recommends the following format:

**MLA:**
Straus, Scott. "Rwandan Genocide."

**APA:**

**Harvard:**