

Issues of Debate Raised by the Rwandan Genocide

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This report seeks to organize the arguments raised concerning the Rwandan genocide. Sparked by the assassination of President Habyarimana in a plane crash on April 6th 1994, 500,000 to 800,000 people were massacred in a period of less than three months. This number represented approximately one tenth of the total national population of the time, and it is said that as many as three quarters of the ethnic group, Tutsi, who were particularly victimized, were killed. The Rwandan population can be divided into three ethnic groups: the Hutu, comprising over eighty percent of the population, the Tutsi, comprising approximately one tenth of the population, and the Twa, who make up around one percent of the population. However, all three groups share a common language and reside in the same areas, and the former distinctions which existed in terms of vocations have all but disappeared today. Inter-marriage between ethnic groups is also commonly observed.

This genocide drew worldwide attention, and along with concerns about the prevailing political powers in Rwanda, has fuelled a number of arguments until this day. An investigation of these various arguments leads to the identification of five distinct issues of debate, which in turn contain many problems requiring elucidation.

First, there is the debate concerning the historical causes of this genocide, or the ethnic antagonism. Here, the issue of the changing face of ethnicity under colonial rule looms large. Under colonial rule the relationship between the Tutsi and the Hutu underwent a dramatic metamorphosis, with individuals' ethnic identification becoming apparent and the distinction between groups more rigid. This fermented animosity and hostility between groups defined as ethnic units, so that by the end of the colonial era the advent of political power struggles between one party dominated by the Tutsi and another dominated by the Hutu led to violent conflict between the two ethnic groups. At this time, due to the backing of the colonial authorities, the Hutu-dominated party seized control of the newly independent state, and a large number of Tutsis fled the country as refugees. The invasion of the country from Uganda by the second generation of these refugees brought about the civil war in 1990, which in turn led to genocide four years later.

The second point of debate concerns the methods and the organization used in the massacres. It is generally understood that in the case of genocide in Rwanda, the general public participated, with peasants committing acts of slaughter armed with hatchets. However, a reexamination of the situation based upon published materials and interviews indicates that while there were instances in which the general populace was involved in the killings, for

the most part the massacre was conducted by the military and the police force using modern weaponry. Further, the main militia groups which played such a significant role in the carrying out of the massacres were formed by the parties originated from the single-party era. The methods of mobilization used in the massacres are therefore intimately related to the structure of the post-colonial state.

The third issue concerns the involvement of the international community. The genocide in Rwanda occurred as one outcome of the civil war, but the international community was involved throughout, influencing the political situation in a variety of ways, from the signing of a peace accord, to the deployment of Peace Keeping Organizations (and their withdrawal when genocide occurred), to the establishment of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. The elucidation and evaluation of the role of the international community is an extremely important area of debate.

Fourth, there is the issue of the repercussions the genocide in Rwanda had upon the surrounding countries and on the international community. The mass exodus of refugees which took place following the genocide in turn brought about a civil war in the neighboring Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire), bringing down the Mobutu rule which had continued for more than thirty years. Furthermore, the fact that effective intervention to stop the massacres was not achieved led to a prevailing sense of a need for atonement within the international community, which engendered an environment sympathetic to the RPF (Rwandan Patriotic Front) regime, established after the genocide. It may be said that this in turn led to the international community turning a blind eye to the war crimes later committed by the RPF.

The fifth and final issue is how to rebuild a nation and a society after such an unprecedented humanitarian tragedy as genocide. In the case of the genocide in Rwanda, reconciliation has been striven for through legal proceedings at a number of different levels, from the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, to the Belgian Criminal Courts, the Rwandan Criminal Courts, and the “Gacaca”, hearings which take place in rural areas. However, even now the war crimes committed by the RPF soldiers have yet to be tried in any of these courts, and whether such legal proceedings can make reconciliation possible remains unclear.

As shown above, an identification of the key debates concerning the Rwandan massacres demonstrates that they straddle several academic disciplines, from history to international relations, politics to law. It may be claimed that the issues related to genocide are multi-disciplinary in nature, and that this is a valuable research area that may serve as a bridge between different academic fields.