

As originally published in *The Atlantic Monthly*

June 1964

The Atlantic Report: Rwanda

The central African Republic of Rwanda lies isolated and landlocked between the Nile and Congo River basins some 1000 miles from the Indian Ocean and 1600 miles from the Atlantic. It is roughly the size of Vermont and has the highest population density in Africa South of the Sahara (245 persons per square mile) and the lowest per capita income (\$50 per year).

Rwanda has always known population pressure on scant resources; yet, in the midst of this scarcity one sector of its population evolved a highly intricate society, which has today fallen apart. The consequences of the destruction of that society and the attempt to replace it with another lie at the root of Rwanda's present tragic situation.

The population of Rwanda is divided into three distinct tribal groups sharing a common language. The pygmoid Twa constitute less than one percent of the population and are rarely seen, being hunters and forest dwellers. The short, stocky, Bantu, Negroid Hutu represent 85 percent of the population. They were the first to fell Rwanda's forest, to clear the brush, and to cultivate. They never evolved a centralized political system, and their reliance on small units formed around clan chiefs made them highly vulnerable to invasion.

Some four centuries ago a tall, slender, haughty, exquisitely aristocratic people known as the Tutsi conquered Rwanda through a combination of force and persuasion. Although they never constituted more than 15 percent of the population, their hierarchical organization, built around a king known as the Mwami, their development of specialized warrior castes, and above all their possession of cattle enabled them to dominate the Hutu. Reputed to have originated in Ethiopia or the Nile Valley, the Tutsis were the outer fringe of a great southbound pastoral migration.

The Tutsi sacred cows

The Tutsi promised protection and cattle to individual Hutu, who in turn accepted the Tutsi as their lords to whom they owed personal services and a portion of their crops, and who eventually secured possession of all cattle and land. Each Tutsi was the client of another Tutsi patron, the Mwami being at the pinnacle.

This feudal system was justified by an elaborate ideology which had as its essential premise the fundamental inequality of human beings. According to legend, the first king of Rwanda had three sons, Gatwa, Gahutu, and Gatutsi. In order to choose his successor he entrusted each one with a pot of milk to guard overnight. The gluttonous Gatwa immediately guzzled down the milk; Gahutu dozed off and let the pot spill, returning it half empty the next day; but the faithful Gatutsi stayed awake to guard it throughout the night. Therefore the King chose Gatutsi as his successor, to be forever free from manual labor, with Gahutu who lacked self-control as his eternal serf, while the avaricious Gatwa was banished.

This legend reflects the reality of four centuries of Tutsi domination whereby a small and highly self-conscious minority indulged in the pleasures of a distinct leisure class through the exploitation of the Hutu majority. The basis of this exploitation was the cow. The highly exotic, sleek long-horned *Ndanga* cattle were the only recognized form of wealth, and Hutus could obtain them only by serving their Tutsi masters, who could at any time break the relationship and regain all the cattle they had lent to their clients.

It was not until 1894 that the first European entered Rwanda. Four years later Rwanda and the neighboring Tutsi kingdom of Burundi came under German rule. Both countries had first been allotted to Germany at the Berlin Conference in 1885, during the colonial scramble for Africa.

At the end of the First World War Belgium acquired a League of Nations mandate for Rwanda as partial compensation for war reparations which Germany would be unlikely to be able to pay. The Belgians continued the German system of indirect rule, relying upon the Mwami and the Tutsi officialdom and confining administrative posts and education to the Tutsi elite.

While never directly attacking the basis of Tutsi rule, the colonial period set in motion forces which led to its eventual destruction. Foremost among these forces was Christianity, which preached the equality of all men in the eyes of Christ. The Catholics took an early lead and soon converted the Mwami and his court; through the Church the Hutus could aspire to status, education, and authority, which were denied them elsewhere. The introduction of cash cropping and cultivation of Arabica coffee provided Hutu peasants with an income and lessened their reliance on their Tutsi masters. Finally, because of population pressures, thousands of Hutus migrated to neighboring territories, where some were exposed to and returned with ideas of democracy and majority rule.

The sudden attainment of political independence by the former Belgian Congo, and United Nations pressure on the Belgians, who exercised a trusteeship for Rwanda, caused political activity in Rwanda to spurt. It was obvious that unless the Hutus seized power before the Belgians left, an independent Rwanda in Tutsi hands would forever enslave the Hutu. Yet the Hutus were handicapped by their lack of education and experience and their inborn submissiveness.

The rise of the Hutus

On July 24, 1959, the forty-six-year-old Mwami Rudahigwa died suddenly under mysterious circumstances without having designated his successor. This proved the occasion for the decisive clash between the Tutsi and the embryonic Parmehutu, the political organization of the Hutu, led by Gregoire Kayibanda, former seminary student, guide at the Brussels World's Fair, and editor of the Catholic newspaper. While the Tutsis quickly installed the Mwami's nephew as the new king and prepared a terrorist campaign against leading Hutu politicians, the Hutu masses staged an uprising under Parmehutu direction. The Mwami was deposed and fled the country along with thousands of other Tutsi refugees, and a provisional Hutu government was installed.

Two extremely bitter years followed, during which a United Nations-supervised referendum resulted in an 80 percent victory for the Parmehutu Party and the decisive rejection of the monarchy. Periodic fighting between Hutus and Tutsis continued, and additional thousands of refugees fled the country.

Meanwhile, in neighboring Burundi, to which Rwanda was linked by a customs and monetary union, the sixty-four-year-old Mwami Mwambutsa used the political skills garnered through fifty years on the throne to hold his country and Tutsi rule together. While Rwanda achieved independence on July 1, 1962, as a republic, Burundi remained a monarchy, and ideological strains caused relations between the two countries to deteriorate rapidly.

Among the 100,000 Tutsis who fled Rwanda prior to its independence and the 250,000 who remained behind, there are many who refuse to face a life of permanent exile or to accept Hutu rule. Four centuries of domination have led them to believe that they are superior to the humble, submissive, and physically inferior Hutu. Among the hard-core exiles a secret terrorist organization known as the Inyenzi was formed. This became the focus of counterrevolutionary activity directed at overthrowing the Rwanda government and restoring the monarchy.

Rwanda enjoyed relative peace for eighteen months following independence while the Inyenzi confined their activities to agitation among the Tutsi refugees. The dedicated government of thirty-seven-year-old President Kayibanda instituted an austerity program unique in Africa. The government was less successful in persuading the population to continue the highly unpopular antierosion works and the supervised growing of quality coffee which the Belgians had maintained through compulsion. The government's greatest achievement was in abrogating the feudal contracts over cattle and land, which had been the nexus of Tutsi domination.

Invasion by refugees

This period of calm has been rudely and decisively shattered by three invasion attempts mounted by the Inyenzi. The first of these occurred on November 25, 1963, when 3000 Tutsi refugees in Burundi began a march toward the Rwanda border to "return to their homeland." The marchers included old men, women, and children, as well as three truckloads of arms. The marchers were spotted by missionaries and UN refugee officials, and the Burundi government intervened to turn them back.

The second invasion attempt occurred on December 20, 1963, one day after the conclusion of a conference between the Rwanda and Burundi governments in which they agreed to dissolve their customs and monetary union. The invaders struck this time at Nemba on the Rwanda-Burundi border. They were armed only with homemade rifles, spears, and bows and arrows, and first attacked a Rwanda military base under construction, where they seized light arms and two jeeps. The invaders then proceeded north toward Kigali, the smallest and probably worst-defended capital in the world, with a population of 4500 and one paved street. They advanced to within twelve miles of Kigali before they were intercepted by the Rwanda Garde Nationale. The invaders fled, suffering heavy losses, after a battle waged with modern weapons but highly reminiscent of an intertribal skirmish.

The Rwanda government was panic-stricken by the news of the second invasion attempt. Rwanda's mountainous terrain, lack of village life, and open borders make it ideal for terrorist operations. The one-thousand-man Garde Nationale had its hands full defending the capital and the border posts, and the defense of the country would have had to rely on the civilian Hutu population taking up arms.

The government took two measures to guard the country against further invasion and internal subversion (the second group of invaders had made contact with local Tutsis). Prominent Tutsis throughout Rwanda were arrested and herded to government prisons, where after severe beatings the majority were released. However, all those whose names had been found on a list of people whom the invaders planned to install as government officials were shot. This list had been taken off the body of a Congolese mercenary killed while fighting with the invaders.

The second measure was to send a minister to each of Rwanda's ten prefectures to organize the "self-defense" of the civilian population with the aid of the local prefect and the elected burgomasters. The individual situation in each prefecture and the attitude of local officials, rather than government policy, caused the subsequent massive reprisals and massacres of the local Tutsi population which have been so widely reported.

The worst slaughter took place in Gikongoro prefecture, where the dense tropical forest provides an open border with Burundi. Here, word had been received that Kigali had fallen and the former Mwami restored. Local Tutsis had for several days prior to the invasion been boasting of their hopes of returning to power and had been congregating around the former royal residence, located in this prefecture. Whether spontaneously or upon the orders of local officials, the Hutu population arose against the Tutsis in this prefecture.

The most reliable estimates of the numbers killed are between 10,000 and 14,000. The population used any weapons nearby, mostly hoes and long knives for cutting grass, resulting in hideous atrocities. Bodies were dumped into rivers and streams, left alongside roads to be scavenged by wild animals, and buried in mass graves.

Elsewhere in Rwanda timely action averted tragedy. Thus, in Kibungo prefecture on the Tanganyikan border the Catholic White Fathers prevailed upon the local authorities not to excite the Hutu population. The result was relative calm; Hutu and Tutsi celebrated Christmas mass together, and local Tutsis turned over to the authorities an Inyenzi invader hiding among them. Yet the White Fathers were convinced that had a single Tutsi hut been burned, all the Tutsis in the prefecture would have fled.

There was never a government policy of genocide against the Tutsi.

Beginning on Christmas Eve, 6000 Tutsis, including 5300 women and children, fled into Uganda, with 13,000 head of cattle. No attempt was made by the Rwanda government to interfere with this defenseless horde or

even larger masses of refugees who fled into Burundi, the Congo, and Tanganyika. Other thousands of Tutsis took refuge in Catholic mission stations within Rwanda, where they believed they would be safe because of Catholic influence in the government. While the government tried to induce these internal refugees to return to their homes, it took no action against them.

A third invasion attempt occurred at Kizinga on the Uganda border on December 27. At this point 500 well-armed Tutsis, coming mostly from the Congo, were met by a force of the Rwanda Garde Nationale, which had been alerted for several days to expect an attack. The invaders were repulsed; more than 300 were killed, and the others were taken prisoner by Uganda officials.

A call for UN help

This invasion attempt prompted the Rwanda government to cable U Thant for UN assistance. Max Dorsinville, personal representative of U Thant in the Congo, arrived in Kigali on January 1 and spent several days in the country before going on to Burundi. His failure to protest vociferously or threaten international action enabled the reprisals to continue, and they were not brought under control until mid-January, largely as a result of pressure from Catholic and Protestant authorities and foreign embassies within Rwanda. Meanwhile, the world remained almost totally uninformed since Radio Rwanda is too weak to be heard outside the Country and Rwanda has no newspapers except a monthly bulletin in Kinyarwanda.

Today Rwanda remains in a state of constant military alert, with passes required for traveling within the Country and military roadblocks maintained on the principal roads. The effects of the invasions and of the security situation have been disastrous for the Rwanda economy. The cash sector, dependent almost entirely on exports of coffee, is dying, and the standard of living has fallen markedly. The subsistence sector continues to supply adequate foodstuffs, although malnutrition is widespread. Rwanda hopes to create its own currency, although its foreign-exchange reserves are depleted and its balance-of-payments deficit is chronic. Only Belgian and other external aid and technicians are keeping the nonsubsistence sector of the economy alive.

The 150,000 Tutsi refugees huddled along Rwanda's borders provide a constant security threat and a fertile ground for Inyenzi agitation. Their presence makes life impossible for the Tutsis remaining in Rwanda, who are regarded as suspect by the Rwanda government.

Urgent measures are required to prevent Rwanda from erupting again into violence and to restore hope to its crippled economy. Among these are military measures to control the refugees and prevent further invasion attempts by the Inyenzi. The neighboring governments of Uganda, Tanganyika, and the Congo are using the limited military means at their disposal toward these ends, and the Burundi government is under pressure to do likewise. Also required is external assistance to enable the permanent resettlement of the refugees in the neighboring countries, where fortunately there is ample unused arable land.

Finally, even if the Tutsi question is resolved, Rwanda still faces a galloping population increase threatening its meager resources. The strength of Catholicism within Rwanda and the traditional high regard for children rule out artificial methods of population control. Meanwhile, at the present rate the population will double within twenty-three years, and unless a long-term economic plan is implemented to increase agricultural productivity and bring additional lands into cultivation, the only alternative will be a return to pre-colonial Malthusian methods of population control. This can be averted if economic planning, technical assistance, and external aid to the total sum of \$8 to \$10 million a year are forthcoming. Otherwise, Rwanda is likely to remain on the world's conscience.