The Bosnian Genocide

In 1984, Sarajevo, Yugoslavia was home to the Winter Olympics. Known as a multicultural and cosmopolitan city, Sarajevo seemed to be an ideal host for the world games. Fewer than ten years after the Olympics, the city barely stood. Nearly every inch of it was riddled with bullet holes, and Yugoslavia had disintegrated into war. Sarajevo was no longer seen as a symbol of successful multiculturalism, but rather as a city of hatred and ethnically-motivated killing. The Bosnian Genocide was underway.

What were the origins of Yugoslavia’s unrest?

Yugoslavia came into existence in 1918. From its birth, the country struggled with the competing political beliefs and interests of the Eastern Orthodox Serbs and the Roman Catholic Croats. Nazi occupation during World War II brought severe bloodshed to the country. More than one million Yugoslavs died, many in massacres. Serbs, Muslims, and Croats all perpetrated these atrocities and all suffered severe losses. Tens of thousands of Serbs, in particular, fell victim to wartime massacres as the Croats collaborated with the Nazis.

The defeat of the Nazis and a cruel civil war helped bring Communist leader Marshal Tito to power in 1945. Tito’s iron-fisted rule and popularity as a wartime hero held Yugoslavia together during the Cold War. Under Tito, an intricate federal system distributed political power among Yugoslavia’s ethnic groups. Despite his efforts, Tito could not completely erase the hatred and anger that had taken root during World War II. After his death in 1980, the country’s power-sharing arrangement fell apart. A political and economic crisis followed. Leaders on all fronts used ethnic tensions to try to gain more political power. In the Republic of Serbia (part of Yugoslavia), for example, Slobodan Milosevic rose to power in the late 1980s by rekindling ethnic Serbian nationalism. Milosevic’s attempts to assert Serbia’s dominance in turn fueled nationalism in Yugoslavia’s other republics.
"Yugoslavia's tragedy was not foreordained. It was the product of bad, even criminal, political leaders who encouraged ethnic confrontation for personal, political and financial gain."
—Richard Holbrooke, chief Bosnia negotiator for the United States

In 1991 and 1992, Yugoslavia's federal system completely disintegrated, with the republics of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, and Macedonia declaring independence. Fighting erupted in Slovenia and Croatia in 1991 and spilled over into Bosnia in early 1992. (Only two republics—Serbia and Montenegro—remained part of Yugoslavia.) Bosnia became the site of yet another twentieth-century genocide.

Who was targeted during the Bosnian Genocide?

Muslim and Croat civilians—mostly men—were targeted during the genocide. While they supported the creation of an independent state, local Serbs saw themselves and their land as part of Milosevic's "Greater Serbia." The Serbs attempted to expel Muslims and Croats from Serb areas. Specifically targeting civilians, the Serbs used torture, gang rape, concentration camps, and massacres to carry out their "ethnic cleansing" against Bosnian Muslims and Croats. During the war, Muslims and Croats were guilty of atrocities as well, but Serb forces were responsible for most of the brutality against civilians.

How did the world respond?

The international community played a complicated role in the Bosnian Genocide. Asserting that the stability of the continent was at stake in Bosnia, while denying that the events amounted to genocide, the European Union unsuccessfully attempted mediation. The UN then sent a peacekeeping force to the country in 1992 and established six "safe areas" using lightly armed troops from European countries. Serbian aircraft were prohibited from flying over the country and economic sanctions were imposed on the Yugoslav government.

Nevertheless, by 1993, Bosnian Serb forces controlled 70 percent of Bosnia's territory and their plan for "ethnic cleansing" continued. The European leaders were eager to assert their leadership and peacekeeping abilities and the United States was willing to step back. (The U.S. government was also reluctant to call events in Bosnia a genocide.)

"We do not interfere in American affairs. We hope that they do not interfere in ours."
—Jacques Delor, Chairman of the European Commission

The peacekeeping effort proved to be largely ineffective in stopping the genocide. The so-called UN safe areas all fell to the Serbs and were "ethnically cleansed," most infamously perhaps in Srebrenica where UN troops, who had promised to protect Bosnian Muslims, withdrew. Some eight thousand Bosnians were massacred.
Ethnic Cleansing

The term “ethnic cleansing” is often used either in addition to or instead of “genocide” when describing the Bosnian case. Some scholars contend that the deaths that occurred in Bosnia were part of an ethnic cleansing campaign that was full of genocidal acts but was not an actual genocide. Those who characterize the Bosnian case solely as ethnic cleansing believe that the Serbs’ intention was not the complete extermination (i.e. genocide) of all Bosnian Muslims, but rather the forced and complete exportation of them (i.e. ethnic cleansing). This position holds that genocidal acts were used to attempt to instill the fear and devastation necessary to get the Muslims to leave their land and take refuge elsewhere, but that complete extermination was never a goal. On the other hand, many scholars claim that the number of genocidal massacres used to carry out the ethnic cleansing campaign leaves little question that the events should be considered a genocide. In April 2004, the United Nations War Crimes Tribunal announced that the persecution and killing of Bosnian Muslims by Serbs was indeed a genocide.

"The tragedy of Srebrenica will forever haunt the history of the United Nations. This day commemorates a massacre on a scale unprecedented in Europe since the Second World War—a massacre of people who had been led to believe that the UN would ensure their safety. We cannot undo this tragedy, but it is vitally important that the right lessons be learned and applied in the future. We must not forget that the architects of the killings in Srebrenica and elsewhere in Bosnia, although indicted by the international criminal tribunal, are still at large. This fact alone suggests that the most important lesson of Srebrenica—that we must recognize evil for what it is and confront it not with expediency and compromise but with implacable resistance—has yet to be fully learned and applied. As we mark the anniversary of the death of thousands of disarmed and defenseless men and boys, I wish to express once again to their families and friends my deepest regret and remorse. Their grief cannot be assuaged and must not be forgotten.”

—Kofi Annan, UN Secretary-General, July 11, 2000

How did the tide turn in Bosnia?

In 1995, an alliance between Croatia and Bosnia’s Muslims tilted the balance of power on the battlefield against the Serbs. In addition, as Serbian massacres of Bosnian Muslim villagers and artillery attacks against Sarajevo continued, journalists and individual citizens galvanized public opinion in the United States and
worldwide, calling for an intervention to stop the bloodshed.

Ultimately, it was the United States that took the lead in bringing peace to Bosnia. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) launched a bombing campaign against the Bosnian Serb army. NATO’s air war, led by U.S. pilots, allowed Bosnian Croat and Muslim fighters to take the initiative on the ground.

By the fall of 1995, a new map of Bosnia had taken shape. The Serb-held portion of the country shrank to 49 percent, while the Muslims extended their control to 29 percent of the territory and the Croats to 22 percent. Ironically, the ethnic cleansing that the international community had tried to prevent was mostly complete; Bosnia consisted of three largely ethnically pure regions, each with its own army. In all, more than two hundred thousand people had died in the struggle and 2.3 million had lost their homes.

In October 1995, a cease-fire was reached. A formal peace agreement was signed in Dayton, Ohio in December, 1995. The agreement was meant not only to end the war, but also to build a democratic, multi-ethnic state. To a large degree, it is the United States that has stood behind the international commitment to maintain Bosnia’s borders and to compel the young state’s three main ethnic groups to share the responsibilities of government. When U.S. peacekeepers first entered Bosnia, President Bill Clinton pledged that they would stay no longer than a year. By 1999, he conceded that accomplishing his goals in Bosnia would require many years, even decades, of international involvement. Many countries opened their borders to individuals and families fleeing the Bosnian War. In 2000, the United States was home to close to one hundred thousand Bosnian immigrants, many of whom left their homes during the conflict.

In recent years, the international community has made efforts to bring justice to Bosnia. The former leader of Yugoslavia, Slobodan Milosevic, was charged with “crimes against humanity,” “violations of the laws or customs of war,” and genocide by the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia (ICTY) at the Hague. He died in March 2006 before being convicted, having been held since 2001.

In 2007, the UN’s International Court of Justice ruled that the Serbian government was not directly responsible for the genocide in Bosnia but also ruled that the government could have prevented the slaughter in Srebrenica. This was the first time the UN tried a state for genocide. In March 2010, the Serbian government apologized for not doing enough to prevent the massacre, but did not identify the killings as genocide.

In June, 2010, the ICTY convicted Vujadin Popovic and Ljubisa Beara of genocide and sentenced them to life imprisonment. The two men were top-ranking officers in the army that committed the Srebrenica massacre. Other top Serbian officials remain at large and continue to evade justice.
Hundreds of millions of dollars in economic aid have been spent to restore the economy. The United States and its allies remain hopeful that their efforts will bring reconciliation and stability. More than one million refugees have returned to their homes. Despite reconstruction efforts, ethnic differences continue to divide the country. Politically, voters from all three ethnic groups have consistently supported candidates along ethnic lines. The multi-ethnic central government envisioned by the Dayton Treaty exists largely on paper.

The Rwandan Genocide

In the spring of 1994, the world watched as violence engulfed the tiny central African country of Rwanda. Over the course of one hundred days, nearly one million people were killed at the hands of army militias, friends, family members, and neighbors. In a country that had a total population of fewer than eight million, these numbers are mind-boggling. Although the world had pledged “never again,” the reality seemed instead to be “again and again.”

What are the origins of the Tutsi-Hutu conflict?

The hostility between Hutus and Tutsis, however intense, reaches back only a few decades. Although a minority, making up approximately 15 percent of the population, the Tutsis have long held most of the land in Rwanda (and neighboring Burundi). For centuries, they were primarily cattle herders while the Hutus, making up 84 percent of the population, were farmers. (The Twa people comprise the remaining 1 percent of the population.) Under German and then Belgian colonial rule, the economic differences between the two groups deepened. As part of their “divide and rule” strategy for colonial domination, the Belgians openly favored the Tutsis. Educational privileges and government jobs were reserved solely for the Tutsis. Identity cards were issued to document ethnicity. (These types of cards were later used to identify the Tutsis during the 1994 genocide.) This colonial favoritism contributed to tensions between the Hutus and Tutsis.

Despite the growing tensions, widespread violence did not break out between the two groups until the country gained independence in 1962 as Rwanda-Urundi. (The country later split into the countries of Rwanda and Bu-
In the late 1950s, the Belgians hastily organized elections in Rwanda and Burundi as their colonial empire in central Africa began to crumble. Hutu parties gained control of the Rwandan government in 1959, reversing the power structure and triggering armed opposition by the Tutsis. In three years of civil war, fifty thousand Rwandans were killed and another one hundred thousand (almost all Tutsi) fled the country. In neighboring Burundi, the Tutsis took advantage of their control of the army to override election results and seize political power. During the next three decades, Burundi's Tutsi-led government crushed repeated Hutu uprisings. In 1972 as many as one hundred thousand Hutus were killed in Burundi.

Ethnic conflicts notwithstanding, the vast majority of Hutus and Tutsis struggled side by side for survival as small farmers. By 1994, Rwanda, with a population of 8.4 million people and a land area the size of Maryland, was among the world's most densely populated and poorest countries. Poverty and the scarcity of land played into the hands of politicians seeking to further their power by igniting ethnic tensions.

What events led to the Rwandan Genocide?

In 1990, the region's problems were further complicated when the rebel army, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), invaded Rwanda. Most of the soldiers in the RPF were Tutsi refugees who had been living in neighboring Uganda since the early 1960s. In August 1993, the Arusha Accords peace agreement between the rebels and the government was signed in Tanzania and a small UN force was put in place to oversee the accord.

Events in Burundi soon reignited tensions. In October 1993, Tutsi army officers killed Burundi's first Hutu president, Melchior Ndadaye, in an attempt to overthrow the new government. Burundi plunged into violence. As many as one hundred thousand people, most of them Hutu, were killed.

Hutu extremists in Rwanda used the Burundi crisis as an opportunity to fan hostility against Tutsis in their country. In April 1994, Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana was killed in a suspicious plane crash, along with the second president of Burundi. Within hours of the crash, Hutu extremists executed eleven UN peacekeepers from Belgium and began carrying out a well-organized series of massacres. After the murder of the Belgians, the UN peacekeeping mission in Rwanda was brought to an abrupt halt as nearly every UN soldier was evacuated at the demand of their individual countries.
How was the genocide carried out?

The Rwandan Genocide lasted for one hundred days. Nearly one million people were killed. Machetes and clubs were the most widely used weapons. Thousands of Tutsis and moderate Hutus were hacked to death each day by Hutus, many of them friends, neighbors, and relatives. Civilian death squads called Interhamwe, or “those who fight together,” had trained prior to the start of the genocide and were responsible for the largest massacres. The majority of other Hutus were given machetes and incited over the radio to kill. Told that the Tutsis would destroy Rwanda and murder all of the Hutus, the Hutus were made to believe that they had to kill the Tutsis first. Hutus who refused to kill or who attempted to hide Tutsis perished as well. The largest massacres occurred in areas where Tutsis had gathered together for protection, such as churches, schools, and abandoned UN posts.

Radio played an integral role in the genocide. A nation crazed with fear and desperation heard repeated broadcasts labeling the Tutsi “cockroaches” and “devils.” Loudspeakers in the streets disclosed names and locations of Tutsis on the run. The United States, the only country in the world with the technical ability to jam this hate radio, refused, stating that it was too expensive and would be against people’s right to free speech.

How did the international community respond?

Prior to the start of the genocide, the United States and the United Nations both disregarded warnings they received from Rwandans as well as from General Romeo Dallaire, head of the UN peacekeeping mission in Rwanda. These warnings clearly stated that a plan to exterminate the Tutsis was underway. Dallaire made an urgent request to be granted permission to raid the Hutu weapons caches. He was denied permission on the grounds that it was too dangerous, unprecedented, and against his mandate. He was instructed to inform the Hutu leaders that a genocide was about to begin. As the organizers of the genocide, these Hutu leaders were already well aware of this.

Once actual killing broke out, world leaders condemned the violence in Rwanda, but balked at intervening to stop it. U.S. officials in the Clinton administration refused to define the killings as “genocide,” in part because they did not want to be obligated to intervene under the Genocide Convention, which requires countries to prevent and punish genocide. Even as the rivers filled with corpses and the streets were lined with severed limbs, the international community did not intervene. Many incorrectly characterized the conflict as “ancient ethnic hatred” and saw the risk of intervention as too high.

Eventually, the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) stepped up its assault against the government and the massacres came to a halt. By July 1994, the RPF had seized the
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capital and forced the Hutu army to flee in panic. Fearing reprisals, as many as two million Hutus abandoned their homes, many taking refuge in the Congo. International forces, including two thousand U.S. troops, arrived after the massacres had ended to protect international relief operations for the nearly two million Hutu refugees, including many of the killers. The last UN peacekeepers left Rwanda in early 1996.

Why did the international community fail to intervene?

In the years since the Rwandan Genocide, diplomats and scholars have debated why the international system failed Rwanda's victims. The reasons remain unclear. State sovereignty, apathy, financial restraints, bureaucracy, fear, safety concerns, and "Somalia Syndrome" (see box below) are among them. In 1998, while visiting Rwanda, President Clinton apologized for his administration's part in disregarding the events of 1994.

"The international community, together with nations in Africa, must bear its share of responsibility for this tragedy, as well. We did not act quickly enough after the killing began. We should not have allowed the refugee camps to become safe havens for the killers. We did not immediately call these crimes by their rightful name: genocide. We cannot change the past. But we can and must do everything in our power to help you build a future without fear, and full of hope."
—President Bill Clinton in Rwanda, 1998

Despite President Clinton's apology and the apologies of others, the United States and other countries have done little to address the deeper causes of one of the world's bloodiest and most explosive conflicts. Progress has been made in preventing a new round of bloodletting between Tutsis and Hutus, but some worry that the international community is not doing all that it should. The country, with its fragile stability and complicated past, could easily explode into violence again, as could neighboring Burundi.

"If it were to happen again tomorrow, would the international community be there? Quite honestly, I don't know."
—UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan

Somalia Syndrome

In 1993, U.S. troops stationed in Mogadishu, Somalia on a humanitarian mission were involved in a clash with Somali militia. The conflict that ensued on October 3, 1993 was the bloodiest firefight involving U.S. troops since Vietnam. The conflict resulted in eighteen dead U.S. troops and nearly one thousand dead Somalis. The U.S. troops were killed and dragged through the streets of the capital city of Mogadishu. Broadcast for the world to see, the U.S. public was outraged. All U.S. peacekeeping troops in Somalia were removed as the country slipped into chaos. This battle changed the United States' responses to the world's humanitarian crises, especially those in Africa. The United States' reluctance to get involved in certain conflicts, often those involving ethnic strife, is commonly referred to as the "Somalia Syndrome."

"Three brief years separated the vigorous military intervention that overrode Iraqi sovereignty and supported humane values in defense of some 1.5 million Kurds in April 1991 from the total passivity in responding to the Rwandan bloodbath during which perhaps a million people were murdered in April 1994. In between, there was Somalia."
—Scholar Thomas G. Weiss
**How is Rwanda recovering from the genocide?**

Rwanda’s government has taken steps to heal the wounds of Tutsi-Hutu conflict within Rwanda. Almost all of the Hutu refugees have returned home. Local and national elections have been held and both Hutus and Tutsis fill top government positions. The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (in Arusha, Tanzania) has tried more than fifty of the top organizers of the genocide, including high-ranking conspirator Théoneste Bagosora who was convicted in December 2008 of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes, and sentenced to life in prison.

Since 1994, the Rwandan government has struggled with the task of trying thousands of lower ranking individuals accused of participating in acts of genocide. By 2000, over 120,000 people were awaiting trial in prison on charges related to the genocide. In 2004, the government established the *gacaca* court system (pronounced ga-cha-cha), in order to speed up that process. These traditional, community-based courts focus on truth and reconciliation and aim to bring justice and healing to the remaining victims and perpetrators. According to Rwandan officials, about 85 percent of the population has been involved in the *gacaca* in some capacity, and as of December 2008 as many as 761,446 accused had been brought before the courts. At the same time, some Rwandans say they have been threatened to prevent them from testifying in these courts.

Memories of the 1994 genocide remain fresh, though the government says its promotion of national unity is working. Countless Hutus and Tutsis live as displaced persons or refugees. Intermarriage and close friendships between Tutsis and Hutus are no longer as common as they once were. Moreover, Rwanda’s poverty, which has worsened since 1994, threatens to touch off further ethnic conflict. Regional instability and the massive refugee problem in the African Great Lakes Region are additional factors that threaten stability in Rwanda.

Rwanda, like any country with a traumatic history, faces the daunting task of coming to terms with its tragic past. The genocide will linger for generations not only in the minds of anyone who experienced it first hand, but in the collective psyche of the country as a whole. A genocide can only be processed slowly, but small strides are being made to recognize and come to terms with the events of 1994. Various museums and memorials have been constructed at genocide sites throughout the country, and organizations have been created dedicated to scholarship and dialogue on the genocide.

“Rwanda has a problem. On the surface, things are becoming normal. But some of the flowers which are flowering have bodies beneath them.”

—Esther Mujaway, Rwandan counselor