

Using The Holocaust as a Frame of Reference for Understanding the Rwandan Genocide: A Historical Comparison

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ABSTRACT

When a conflict can catch the world's attention, it is essential to understand it correctly. Understanding an event correctly is critical when discussing events like Rwandan Genocide. Even though this only lasted 100 days, it fundamentally changed how several countries participated in the international community. Due to the ephemeral nature in which the genocide happened, a historical analogy like the Holocaust becomes extremely useful to help others understand some very complex background that led up to both conflicts. Even though a surface-level analysis may find few deep connections between the events of The Holocaust in Germany and the Rwandan Genocide, upon more profound research, one thing is apparent- if one is trying to understand Rwanda, then Germany is an apt place to begin. The nature of deep-seated hatred and planning towards total extermination, while not the first of its kind, was shown to have holistic and systematic approaches to the everyday lives of both Rwandans and Germans that allowed for this hatred to grow in a manner in which those in power thought it was natural to hate those who were being targeted for complete genocide indeed. The Rwandan Genocide was an event that captured the attention of the world, so using an analogy that speaks to more than just the direct days of the conflict allows for the possibility for the world to learn from such tragedies and try to identify signs to stop such tragedies from happening again in the future.

If a conflict can gain international attention, those outside of the group of active stakeholders will seek to understand those events. This is where historical analogies become so critical. Using a correct analogy from history can help inform those who may have limited knowledge of a conflict's background. These analogies can help understand motivating factors behind otherwise hard-to-understand or quickly unfolding events. Due to the sheer speed at which the Rwandan Genocide unfolded, the most apt analogy to guide our understanding of tensions before, during, and after this genocide is The Holocaust. Correctly identifying the similarities in how events like the Holocaust and the Rwandan Genocide took place would aid stakeholders in understanding how quickly these events can unfold and prevent further casualties. The Rwandan Genocide was the result of tensions and ethnic division that had been building for decades, and much like in Germany, too many lives were lost because the international community was not able to see or acknowledge the commonalities between these two events until it was too late. In order to find the correct analogy to shape historical understanding, there needs to be a comparable set of circumstances in the background of the event as well as similarities in the precipitating event that drove people towards conflict. If these background variables mimic each other in the same way, possible outcomes of the conflict can also be derived from the analogy.

After World War II, the international community made a vow of "Never Again." It would never again use nuclear weapons, never again allow such massive war casualties, and never again allow a population to be subjected to the grotesque brutality of Hitler's concentration camps. The international community cemented this promise with The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (The Genocide Convention). The Genocide Convention was created post-World War II and ratified by 152 countries, including all G7 nations, such as the United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom. This United Nations (UN) legislation is a global commitment to

human rights that promised retaliation if any nation, national system, or head of government were to take or promote action to purposefully and systematically commit murder against “a national, ethnical, racial or religious group¹.” A driving purpose of the Genocide Convention was to circumvent this desire to destroy human life and integrity. But even with such safeguards in place, the Genocide Convention was not strong enough not keep the war-weary promises of the 1950s. A strikingly similar situation would arise in April of 1994 in the small East African nation of Rwanda, which sparked international attention. With the Genocide Convention already in place, the international community had the tools with which to respond. However, these grandiose international treaties could do little to stop Tutsis from being slaughtered in their own villages.

In 1924, before he became chancellor of Germany, Adolf Hitler published his only book, *Mein Kampf*, which chronicled his hatred of the Jewish population through an endless diatribe. Almost a decade later, once in official control of Germany, Hitler operationalized extreme discrimination against the Jews, beginning as incremental changes in everyday German life: Jews were required to wear a yellow Star of David and had to register themselves and their families with the government as Jewish. They also were forced to undergo name changes according to their gender: women were required to take the middle name of Sarah, while men had the middle name of Israel. (Guetner, n.d.)². Antisemitic legislation began seeping into the fabric of German society slowly and quietly, so many did not notice the immense hatred towards this entire ethnic population until it was too late. The hatred for the Jews became so profound that the generation of people who went to school in Germany during this time is still referenced as one of the most antisemitic generations in existence: “Nazi schooling and extracurricular activities sought to inculcate racial hatred to an extraordinary extent. The entire curriculum—not only biology classes—was used to convince the young of the importance of race and the inferiority of Jews, blacks, etc.⁶” So, this fundamental change in the way the Jews were treated coupled with an active and very successful propaganda machine; very little was done to protect or save this population from the horrors that awaited them⁷. On November 28th, 1938, the German Reich Ministry of the Interior gave an official order which limited the movements of Jewish people in and out of Germany. By this point, there was nothing that the Jewish population could do to retaliate. While the first six years of Hitler's reign (1933-1939) saw otherwise unimaginable changes to the lives of Jewish people, the opening of the first Jewish Ghetto in November 1939 marked an even deadlier turning point.

Work camps date back to months after Hitler's election as Germany's Chancellor, where criminals served a set sentence for their crimes committed. However, as Hitler's power in Germany strengthened and antisemitic hatred became commonplace, the purpose of the work camps changed. Groups of people that did not fit Hitler's “ideal” of what a German citizen should look like (Jews, Roma, homosexuals, and people with disabilities, etc) began to be sent to work camps along with criminals. As his power grew, additional camps needed to be built to accommodate additional victims. As World War II began to unfold, the Third Reich sought to dispose of those who were now in the work camps— this is when concentration camps as we know them today began to take shape³.

While these camps did not initially begin as death camps, one should not overlook the violence and brutality that existed there previously. During the earlier days, families would be separated and never see each other again. New mothers would be separated from their newborns, and the babies would then be taken to the “kids' room,” where they succumbed to utter starvation or were eaten by the rats⁴. There was an intentional disregard for even a modicum of human dignity for the people working in the camps. There was no food, and if a person dared to take a carrot meant for a sheep, they were beaten within an inch of their life. As the men, women and children of the camps had their human rights stripped away, the international community was silent.

The first group at the camps to be targeted were those designated as “old and mentally defective.” However, notes found from this time show this was not wholly accurate: the notes said that doctors “examined around 300 to 350 prisoners in the [Sachsenhausen] hospital wing. Allegedly all of them were mentally defective. Nevertheless, among them, there were also cripples, war wounded, and those suffering from depression⁵.” It was but a feeble justification to murder those who had systematically been “othered” in Germany.

The Final Solution was designed and implemented to be the “answer to the Great Jewish Question.” The long-standing goal of the Nazi party and Germany by proxy was to have a nation free of the influence of Jewish people. Leaving them in ghettos and limiting all rights and interactions was not enough. Those in power were after a way to permanently erase every one of Jewish Heritage from existence. Nazi leadership decided on the use of gas chambers in January of 1942 at the closed-door Wannsee Conference⁸. The initial plan was to have two separate phases in this mass extermination plan, the first to coincide with Operation Barbarossa, Hitler’s attempt to conquer the Soviet Union. Still, the incursion into Russian land also provided an excuse for killing squads comprised of 3,000 of Hitler’s most ruthless men⁹ to systematically attack all Jews in Nazi-occupied territory. The singular goal was to kill “every Jew in their grasp... in Nazi-occupied territory... no matter their sex or age¹⁰.” Methodically plowing through territory after territory, entire villages were gunned down simply for being Jewish. While reading diaries from notorious Nazi Officer Heinrich Himmler, two points converge. There is a deep seeded disdain for all Jews and an innate desire to destroy the mental fortitude of these communities. In Himmler’s own words: “I have decided on a solution to this problem. I did not consider myself justified to exterminate the men only – in other words, to kill them or have them killed while allowing the avengers, in the form of their children, to grow up in the midst of our sons and grandson.” When this proved to be too costly and slow-moving, the Wannsee Conference’s second and deadliest phase was implemented, the gas chambers. Even though Nazi leadership did not fully decide on the method of killing death camp prisoners until 1942, which was just three years before Hitler’s death, the death toll from each individual death camp quickly reached approximately a million per camp. Single days with these gas chambers at camps would see death counts that reached 18,000. Overall, “the Holocaust took the lives of 90% of the Polish-Jewish population, two-thirds of the Jewish European population. That is around six million Jews in total¹¹.”

As the war progressed, the Axis powers saw their earlier gains quickly unravel with the invasion of the Soviet Union, a significant tactical error that would lead to the end of the war. As Soviet and Allied forces reclaimed more and more territory, those running the concentration camps panicked, fleeing the camp, leaving prisoners to wait to be liberated, or trying to move the prisoners further inland. Soviet forces officially liberated the last death camp at Stutthof on May 9th, 1945¹². While it was the last camp that was closed, which had claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, it was also the first camp opened by the Nazi Party outside of Germany.

Attempting to carry out the genocide of an entire population was supposed to be an accident, a series of unimaginable and inimitable events. Thus, the trials that commenced against those who committed war crimes began with the close of WWII, meant to warn future generations from repeating these atrocities. The trials were carried out in three phases: the first was for Commandant Rudolf Höss¹³, one of the longest-serving Nazi Officers, who directly oversaw the Auschwitz concentration and extermination camp, which left 1.1 million Jews dead. The second most notable tribunal was The Cracow trial of the SS garrison. During these trials, 40 people were indicted and sentenced for their crimes against the Jewish population. Trials for these crimes against humanity would continue well into the 1960s. However, most sentences were handed out in the “trials [that] were held between 1946 and 1953 before regional, voivodeship, and special courts in Katowice, Cracow, Cieszyn, Gliwice, Racibórz, Sosnowiec, and Wadowice. The most common sentences for lower-ranking members of the Auschwitz garrison were three years in prison (203 times, for 31.9% of all the sentences) and four years (111 times, 17.5%). Death and life sentences were relatively rare (41 times, 6.1%)¹⁴.” The trials were carried out amid global scrutiny, trying to ensure that these crimes would never again be committed. In tandem, the international community began drafting the Geneva Convention, which gave prisoners of war protection and outlined an “ethical” standard of combat and imprisonment.

Almost 50 years later, despite the international repercussions from the atrocities of WWII, the small East-African country of Rwanda would relive these experiences. In a manner that closely mimics the early years of Nazi Germany, Rwanda had its own legal division between the ethnic groups in the region. Starting in the early 1930s, when Rwanda was still a German colony, all citizens had identification cards with demarcations representing Hutu, Tutsi, or Twa lineage, with the two majority ethnic groups being the Hutus and Tutsis. This ethnic division would only grow more exacerbated as the population in the region increased. In 1959, the Hutus and Tutsis reached a breaking point: even though Tutsis made up just 14% of the population, they received more benefits from their new Belgian

administration, letting them receive “western-style education” while the 85% of the Rwandan population that the Hutus represented remained still in hard labor jobs. These events precipitated the first civil war as the repressed majority (Hutu) sought to overthrow the power structure that favored the Tutsis.

By the end of 1959, this goal was accomplished. With the Tutsi Monarchy overthrown, the Tutsis fled en masse to neighboring countries like Uganda and Tanzania. During these years in exile, the Tutsis created the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), which then invaded Rwanda and fought for a right to return from 1990 to 1993. The outcome was the Arusha Accords, which were meant to create a power-sharing agreement between the RPF, a group dominated by the Tutsis, and the Hutu-majority Rwandan government. Even though these negotiations were years in the making, the result left a lot to be desired. A significant component of these accords was the integration of the two separate militia forces: the RPF and Rwandan Defense Force (RDF). Both sides felt as though they were being asked to give up many soldiers in the accord's effort to form a new and united Rwandan Armed Force (RAF). The Accords also did little to address setting up fair elections for a new government; instead, it outlined setting up a transitional government that would make way for joint leadership, but since the Hutu or the Tutsi were never able to trust each other, the transition government was never actually installed. The Accords may have been well planned but poorly executed, and did little to address the fundamental issues of distrust between the two communities that were now trying to integrate.

The relationship between these Accords and the escalation of violence is something that can be traced back to the United States Secretary's office in August 1992. Looking back at the road that precipitated the mass genocide predates the conflict by just two years, Hutu President Habyarimana signed a power-sharing agreement (Arusha Accords) with the Tutsis to put an end to the Civil War¹⁵ that had spread to neighboring Tanzania and Uganda. Given the conflict risk, the UN was stationed nearby to supervise immediately after the agreement was signed and both the Hutus and Tutsis returned to Rwanda. Even though the leadership of both parties agreed to the Arusha Accords, public opinion of the Hutu majority seemed to steer away from any work toward reconciliation with members of the Rwandan Defense Force, saying, “we thought we had won because we got everything we asked for! It was a dream, but looking back now, we know it was useless.” Due to the unsatisfactory nature in which the Hutus and the Tutsis met the Arusha Accords, the divide between the two ethnic groups worsened. The relationship between the Hutus and the Tutsis in the region would only grow more adversarial in nature, reaching an apex in April 1994 when the plane taking President Habyarimana to Rwanda with Burundian President Ntaryamira was shot down by a missile over Kigali Airport, killing both men.

After the plane was shot down, the conflict between the Hutus and Tutsis exploded, with the Tutsis being blamed for the tragedy. Common narrative deduced that although the origins of the missile that brought the plane down were unknown, the fact that both President Habyarimana and President Ntaryamira were Hutus and a general notion that the Arusha Accords that were seen as favoring the Tutsis made it an easy task to pin the attack on the Tutsis.. Immediately following the death of Habyarimana, the Rwandan Armed Forces and the Interahamwe began shutting down roads to go door to door, systematically killing all of the Tutsis they were able to get their hands on. To this day, Tutsi forces claim that Hutus were behind the attack on President Habyarimana due to how fast they were able to organize the roadblocks and systematic killings in villages.

A key force in accomplishing the Hutu Mission was the Interahamwe. This group of unaccompanied fighters was funded by prominent Hutu business leader Félicien Kabuga but led by Military general Robert Kajuga. The Interahamwe were known for following the official military to clear any other persons out and were also responsible for setting up the initial roadblocks after the plane crash, preventing Tutsis from leaving Rwanda. The outrage at the death of Hutu President Habyarimana, coupled with the deep ethnic divide in Rwanda, quickly led to the deaths of the Rwandan Prime Minister and the Belgian Peacekeepers. An extremist sect of Hutus began the systematic slaughter of everyone who disagreed with having only conservative Hutu in power in the government; this meant that all people, even moderate Hutus, were subject to death.

This situation rapidly devolved into a true massacre where the environment seemed to condone this mass murder of all ethnically Tutsi and politically moderate Hutus where “Phrases like ‘go to work’ and “the graves are

not yet full' were read by radio DJs during the spring of 1994. A newspaper called on citizens to exterminate the 'cockroach Tutsis'¹⁷." Journalists broadcasted the names and addresses of Tutsis in the area on live radio stations. Finding out who Tutsi was something that was easy to accomplish as all Rwandan IDs had their ethnic group listed on them. Tens of thousands of people were killed every day, and little could be done to stop it. The main weapon of those taking part in the killing were machetes. Neighbors turned on neighbors, and Hutu husbands were murdering their own Tutsi wives out of fear of them being killed in retaliation. Amid the violence, the international community was silent. There was a clinical nature to how the Rwandan Armed Forces and the Interahamwe were organizing these killings. It has been reported that "weapons and hit lists" were provided to local groups of Hutu to aid in the genocide. Due to Rwanda being a single-party state which was dominated by the Hutu population, there was no legal recourse that Tutsis could find to assist in protecting themselves; even those who tried to seek refuge in churches were killed. The Belgian Peacekeepers assigned to the region could not provide much aid as their lives were quickly claimed in the initial onslaught of violence¹⁶. The publication of these killings is what initially sparked an international dialogue about the violence occurring in Rwanda.

Even though what was happening in Rwanda met all of the aforementioned criteria of the Genocide Convention, the world was hesitant to act in the region. It was not until June 22nd, 1994, that the United Nations Security Council was able to implement "Operation Turquoise¹⁸," a Peacekeeping mission that consisted of mainly French and African troops. Even with 3,000 soldiers on the ground whose main goal was to try and maintain peace¹⁹, the extremist sect of Hutus that were driving this conflict could not be stopped until almost a month later²⁰. It was not until mid-July when Paul Kagame led the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) to take control of the region to cease the killing²¹. Even though it had only been roughly 100 days since the start of the Genocide, 800,000 lives had been lost, and "about 75% of the Tutsi population was killed." With the Tutsi population decimated, the international community planned to administer justice through legal recourse; Rwanda had been destroyed within a matter of months, so the plan to bring justice to those who died mimicked the Holocaust trials of the Holocaust.

By October 1994, the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) was established in neighboring Tanzania²². The main goal of this tribunal was to bring justice to those lives who were cut short. However, the tribunal quickly ran into issues, as 2 million Hutu fled the area when Kagame took control of the region and removed all mentions of ethnicity from the Rwandan constitution. The tribunal remained active until the mid-2000s when they brought international charges against three high-ranking military officials and three journalists for their active role in the genocide²³. These trials would have much less of an impact when compared to the Nuremberg trials. The length of time between the events of the Genocide and the beginning of these trials allowed far too many people to escape and evade justice. Within four years of the end of the conflict, 130,000 people had been detained for trial, but only roughly 1,300 were able to make it to trial by that point. Many high-ranking officials were sentenced for these crimes as recently as May 2022. Félicien Kabuga was 86 when he was sentenced for his crimes in the Rwandan genocide. Given he provided financial support but was not involved in operational aspects of the Interahamwehe was found guilty of funding groups that took part in the genocide. While many did face trials in an international setting, there were still many who would never be brought to proper justice. Human Rights Watch reports retribution killings that happened at the end of the Genocide happened. To try and get more offenders processed in any manner, Rwanda developed the Gacaca system for processing genocide-based crimes. The Gacaca was described as a "community-based resolution team" were those who were a part of the genocide. Though the Gacaca system was able to process countless cases, its legacy garners mixed views. While it allowed for immense growth in the reconciliation of the Hutus and Tutsis, many of those who lost family members felt it did not leave room for true justice in the way the Nuremberg trials did.

Given the close resemblance between the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide, the international community fails to allow the latter to occur. The Holocaust and the Rwandan Genocide can be outlined in the same four stages: there was rapid indoctrination of hate for an ethnic minority group, a precipitating event (the Wannsee conference in Germany and the fallout of the Arusha Accords), a rapid slowdown of the conflict (outside forces taking control of the region and beginning trials for the accused in both analogies), and finally, a series of tribunals to hold leadership

accountable for combined millions of deaths. The historical analogy is clear; it can teach us that international protocols need to include a time frame for mobilization, bolstering swift and decisive action to prevent or stop genocides from occurring. Examining the Holocaust - Rwandan genocide analogy helps uncover weaknesses in the international system and prevent massive casualties in the future. The international community needs to decide on a benchmark for intervention and universally apply it rather than a case-by-case scenario when dealing with Genocide. While both countries have made tremendous strides from the days of genocide and the Holocaust, both still serve as a reminder of what can happen if the world does not act.

Endnotes

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