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Origins of the Rwandan Hutu-Tutsi conflict

The 1994 genocide culminated a long history of conflict between the Hutu and Tutsi people -- a conflict that Rwandans say began with Belgian colonialism.

Though distinct groups had originally settled in Rwanda, bringing their own economies and social systems, intermarriage made them virtually indistinguishable by the time Belgium gained responsibility for Rwanda in the aftermath of World War I. At the time, the divide between Hutu and Tutsi was largely socio-economic, with Tutsis representing the upper cattle-owning classes.

The Belgians added and codified a racial component to the definition. An exhibit at the Kigali Memorial Centre shows footage of Belgian scientists measuring Rwandan's facial characteristics to define racial differences. Tutsi were declared superior to Hutu. Beginning in 1932, ID cards bearing racial identification were required of all Rwandans.

The Belgians switched alliances when the Tutsi king was overthrown in 1959. Hutus, who made up 85 percent of the population, took power upon independence in 1962. Waves of Tutsis fled in 1959 and again in 1962, following mass killings. By the 1994 genocide, as many as one million Rwandan Tutsi refugees lived in neighboring countries.

"The 'genocidaires' used the identity cards as a primary means of identifying their targets for extermination. It was a campaign that writer Philip Gourevitch has called "the most efficient mass killing since the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki."

For more information, see Philip Gourevitch's "We Wish To Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families."

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