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# THE MILITARY BRILLIANCE AND HORROR OF PAUL KAGAME

**THE CENTRE FOR SECURITY STUDIES**

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The Rwandan Genocide was among the most horrific events of the 20th century which led to the barbaric slaughter of around 8,00,000 people in a matter of 100 days. Rwanda, a country of about 6 million (1993) inhabitants, was no stranger to ethnic conflict. Since colonial times, ethnic tensions ran high among the populace. After the country's independence there had been episodes of killings followed by a mass exodus of mostly Tutsi refugees into the neighboring countries of Burundi, Uganda, and Tanzania.

The genocide occurred in the backdrop of the Rwandan Civil War, which was fought between the RPF (Rwandan Patriotic Front) and the Hutu-led government based in Kigali. The initiation of the genocide in 1994 by the Hutu regime led to the resumption of hostilities between the opposing forces which had come to halt following the Arusha accords in 1993. Eventually, the RPF was able to almost completely defeat the state military which had been trained by the French and had been equipped with modern weapons by several countries over the years<sup>1</sup>. *How did a mere rebel group manage to do that?*

The RPF was evolved from the Rwandan Alliance of National Unity (RANU), which was a shadow organization of Rwandan refugees in exile in the countries of Burundi, Uganda, and Tanzania and aimed at replacing the monarchy with a socialist regime and returning the refugees to their country. The RPF had fought alongside the National Resistance Movement (NRM) in Uganda led by Yoweri Museveni, who became the President of Uganda in 1986. This faithful alliance of the RPF with the ruling regime in Uganda proved to be incremental in providing the rebel group with territorial, tactical, and monetary support, albeit discretely.

In 1990, the RPF saw the window of opportunity and attacked. During its initial three-week offensive, the RPF moved more than 100 km into Rwanda and captured Gabiro, one of the regime's largest military depots, as well as a second city, Nyagatare<sup>2</sup>. However, the government Forces were able to repel the invasion after extensive reinforcements from Belgium, France, and Zaire. Furthermore, the offensive led to the death of RPF's top three commanders. Paul Kagame, a Tutsi refugee who had previously fought alongside Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni and had later served as his chief of intelligence stepped in to command the rebel forces.

The RPF under Kagame regrouped in the Vumba mountains along the Ugandan border and embraced guerrilla tactics. Kagame adapted a "deliberately protracted" military strategy, avoiding direct confrontation with the enemy forces who had superior equipment. The rebels would continuously bombard enemy positions from a distance and infiltrate them at night. In the classic Sun Tzu Style, the rebels gave the enemy troops an avenue of escape, not making the enemy choose between fighting and certain death. The government troops who were low on food and morale due to days of continuous shelling, chose to retreat, more often than not. As the government troops

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<sup>1</sup>Bonner, Raymond. "How Minority Tutsi Won the War". *The New York Times*, 1994.

<sup>2</sup>Reed, Wm. Cyrus Exile. 1996. "Reform, and the Rise of the Rwandan Patriotic Front". *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 34 (September 1996): 488. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/161382>.

retreated, the rebels would attack from the rear and flanks, inflicting heavy casualties and encouraging the troops to flee quickly. The quick retreats meant that the government troops were unable to carry their heavy equipment, which was later captured by the rebels. This is how the rebels got most of their weapons.

From the beginning, the government troops were constantly on the defensive, withdrawing from one position to another, launching the odd counterattack but having to withdraw and consolidate new positions<sup>3</sup>. This style of fighting rendered the government advantages like armor, helicopters and an airborne battalion useless<sup>4</sup>.

Paul Kagame was a strict disciplinarian at the core. He didn't drink or smoke and commanded the rebels with an iron fist. He adopted a code of conduct, a rarity for regular African armies at the time. Much less for revolutionary armies. Specific penalties for failing to carry out an assignment, drinking on duty, stealing, and abuses of civilians were laid out. A serious violation like rape, murder, treason, or desertion could earn one a place in front of the firing squad<sup>5</sup>. Remarkably, the code was not only enforced against low-ranking officials but against officers as well.

The government forces far outnumbered the rebels; however, it is important to note that many had little to no training in contrast to the battle-hardened soldiers of the RPF which contributed to their dissipation.

As fighting broke out in the wake of the genocide, an outnumbered rebel battalion stationed in Kigali post the Arusha accords managed to break out and link up with rebel reinforcements. At this point, most observers of the war assumed the rebel forces were preparing an assault to capture the capital, but Kagame had other ideas. Kagame refrained from attacking the enemy head-on to avoid a prolonged battle for the capital which would prevent him from capturing other territories and saving people from the genocide. In what was later described as a masterstroke, Kagame put just enough forces into Kigali to harass government troops and prevent them from reinforcing other areas of the country. The RPF campaign's strategy and tactical execution drew the attention of qualified military observers around the world.

The Canadian commander of UN forces in Rwanda in 1994, Maj. Gen. Romeo Dallaire said that the case study of RPF tactics could be useful in educating military officers in staff colleges on low-intensity warfare.

*"Kagame is an intellectual figure. I would rate him as a first-rate operational fighter,"* said Col. Jim McDonough, commander of American forces in Rwanda and a former director of the U.S. Army School for Advanced Military Studies. *"He understands discipline. He understands speed. He understands mobility."*<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Vogel, Steve. "Student of War Graduates on Battlefields of Rwanda." *The Washington Post*, 1994

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Stearns, Jason. *Dancing in the Glory of Monsters*. (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), 94

<sup>6</sup>Vogel, Steve. "Student of War Graduates on Battlefields of Rwanda." *The Washington Post*, 1994

All this suggests that Paul Kagame is a Machiavellian at heart. As everyone familiar with political theory knows, Machiavelli wrote that it is better for a ruler to be feared than loved and that the ruler should be shrewd and pragmatic while making decisions. So was Kagame.

The Human Rights Watch report on Rwandan Patriotic Front says that the genocide took place in the context of the war and the RPF wanted to win the war, not just to save the Tutsi. Post the siege of Kigali, the RPF choose to not strike at the heart of the enemy but rather advanced through weaker regions in the east and the south. The strategy may have offered a better chance at military victory but did not present the best possible plan for rescuing the Tutsi.

When the killings could no longer be ignored by the international community, the UN Security Council discussed sending a larger peacekeeping force to Rwanda with a broader mandate to protect civilians on April 30, 1994. At this point, the RPF forces were very much in control and a decisive military victory was in sight. Instead of welcoming the move and urging speedy implementation, the RPF spokesman in Brussels strongly opposed the deployment of the force, arguing that the genocide had been complete and there were no more Tutsi to save. This was far from the truth and the RPF leadership was aware of the fact, claims the Human Rights Watch report. They refused to support a larger peacekeeping force mandated to stop the genocide for the fear that the French might use the force to protect the fleeing Hutu government and inhibit military victory.

The RPF, during its campaign in the war, was also responsible for serious human rights violations. As they went to the areas where the genocide had taken place, the RPF soldiers took it upon themselves to avenge the slain. In many cases, civilians were accused of genocide by the mere fact that they were Hutu and summarily executed. At Rutongo, north of Kigali, RPF soldiers reportedly went from house to house killing unarmed inhabitants<sup>7</sup>. The RPF refrained from taking prisoners and enemy soldiers laying down their arms were shot down. The only massacre by the RPF forces that was documented in detail occurred in September 1994 in Mukingi, Gitarama prefecture where civilians, including women and children, were gathered on the pretext of transportation and were open fired upon<sup>8</sup>.

The Human Rights Watch report concludes that considering the hierarchical structures of the RPF with a well-established chain of command, it is highly unlikely that the leadership was unaware of the horrific events taking place under their watch. The international community and the United States were especially reluctant to press charges on the RPF for the abuses that had occurred. It is important to note that the world saw the RPF as a heroic force that had saved hundreds of thousands of Tutsis from certain death in a genocide that had claimed 8,00,000 lives. All the abuses by the RPF were considered in the context of this number: 8,00,000. As a result, almost none of the people involved in carrying out the abuses were tried for their crimes.

In a few years after the war, Paul Kagame cemented his rule in Rwanda. He officially became the country's President in 2000, he had been the de-facto leader since the civil war. Under the

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<sup>7</sup> Human Rights Watch, *The Rwandan Patriotic Front*, accessed October 14, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/rwanda/Geno15-8-03.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

leadership of Kagame, Rwanda has prospered economically and has been at peace. Rwanda's healthcare system is one of the best on the continent and the country boasts of an average life expectancy of 69 years, 5 years higher than the continent.

However, the President has stuck to his Machiavellian code of conduct and has commanded the nation as he commanded the rebel forces, with an iron fist. The Economist's Intelligence Unit Democracy Index for 2021 has classified the country as authoritarian. The ruling party continues to target those perceived as a threat to the government. Arbitrary detention, ill-treatment, and torture in official and unofficial detention facilities are commonplace, and fair trial standards are routinely flouted in many sensitive political cases, in which security-related charges are often used to prosecute prominent government critics.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> "Rwanda: Country Brief", Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/africa/rwanda>.