



Can Rwanda forgive and forget?
Interviewee: Philip Gourevitch
Duration: 8 minutes, 5 seconds

About this transcript

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Introduction

It was 1994, and the twentieth century wasn't quite through with mass murder. This time it was Rwanda, an African country with two historically contentious groups – the Hutus and the Tutsis.

In this episode of Bookpod, Philip Gourevitch talks about the Rwandan genocide and the questions he had about it that led him to write *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will be Killed With Our Families*.

Presentation

In Rwanda between April and July of 1994, there was a systematic program of massacres sponsored by the government in which members of the Hutu majority, spurred on by this government, rose up and slaughtered close to a million people from the Tutsi minority, as well as a lot of Hutus who opposed the massacres.



And this was the first really unambiguous and full-scale genocide since the Holocaust. And this genocide occurred right at the moment when the best news from Africa of the decade also came, which was the first elections in South Africa, where Nelson Mandela was elected president after having been released from prison in the end of the apartheid regime. So the world's attention to the extent that it ever was on Africa was very far away as the genocide began.

Rwanda is a small country about the size of West Virginia, absolutely in the center of Africa, which was not part of the world's larger geopolitical or strategic or economic interests at all. Very few Americans had any awareness of Rwanda except as the place where Diane Fossey and the movie "Gorillas in the Mist" came from.

There was a UN peacekeeping force in Rwanda because there had been a peace deal that had supposed to have ended a three- or four-year civil war. But it was actually in response to this peace deal that the genocide was launched. It was launched as a way of scuttling a power-sharing arrangement between the government, which was this Hutu



dictatorship, and the rebels, who were a predominantly Tutsi group coming back from exile. They were refugees from past political persecutions over the previous half century.

And what you then had was this extraordinary program of massacres. And the world, which had sworn all these "never again" kind of oaths withdrew. Instead of ramping up our presence there, there was a withdrawal led in part by the United States and others.

The only country that showed any eagerness to intervene was France, the only western country. And so the French actually came in on the side of the genocidal regime, which has led to a very entangled and bitter history ever since, as you can imagine.

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To compress terribly the events, what happened is that the rebel movement, led by General Paul Kagame, brought an end to the genocide. Probably about one-and-a-half to two million Hutu Rwandans fled the country as his troops moved in and seized control. And Hutu Rwandans were the killers and the organizers of the killers, the political and



military movement as well as a great many of their followers, whom they sort of dragged along with them saying, "Well, you'll be killed if you stay behind."

And so they basically bolted. Instead of staying and resisting, they created a rump state in UN refugee camps. And the world that had done nothing to stop the genocide now rushed in to sustain these killers as well as their followers or their communities in the camps for the next couple of years.

So one million out of eight million people in the country had died. Two million had fled into exile. You had a country emptied out, and they had fled and they're being kept in these camps.

All of this seemed to me two things: A story that I really couldn't get my mind around from a distance, and also a story that couldn't possibly be over – a story whose scale and significance and drama we had failed to grasp and it was surely required that there be further chapters.

How do you deal with making a country out of the remains of a country that's been so torn apart? What does it mean for



these people to have only one place to go? Would there be another war with all of these people in the camps? With those things bothering my mind, that's what brought me to Rwanda in May of 1995, a year after the killings.

That was really the beginning of this whole post-genocide era, and it was a time when the wounds, not just physical, to bodies, but I'm talking about the emptiness of the country, the devastation of the country, the baffling prospect of how you would build something that could possibly make sense here. How would you bring justice?

Probably when I first got there, there were 20- or 30,000 people in jail. By a year later there were 150,000 people packed into jail so tightly that at times their legs had to be amputated from gangrene after they were kept in there for a little while. Appalling conditions. An international community plagued by a sense of guilt but also a sense of irritation and a frustration and an unwillingness to really try to help all that much more in the aftermath:

All of these people in these camps that ultimately did lead to the next war, which is the war that began in 1996 in Congo, when the Rwandan army of Paul Kagame went into Congo



to break up the camps that the UN had built and was feeding the killers in, but wasn't doing anything to sort out or close.

That war ended up being the war that not only brought the vast majority of those people home, but others fled into the Congo, where they have been fighting ever since. And it also is the war that brought an end to Mobutu Sese Seko's dictatorship in Zaire.

These are huge historical sweeps that were taking place all around this place that is so small, Rwanda, that on the map of Africa you usually see the name written outside the borders and attached to it.

It was a kind of, um, extraordinary series of dramas in which, as far as I could tell, the biggest issues of our times: You know, huge issues of identity. Of how a post-colonial country even achieves independence. Of what it means to have a genocide to which the world refuses to respond. Of what it means when we in the West tell ourselves that we mean to intervene to do good but in fact don't have any plan to do so. Of what it means for people



who are endangered to find themselves undefended and to realize that it's only their defense that will work.

I became fascinated by the way that the humanitarian organizations were actors in the drama and helped to sustain the killers once they were in the camps and were completely unable to address the political causes and effects of their own action.

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What's happening now in Rwanda is that the rhetoric of the regime is, look, there's only so much we can do for reconciliation. But what we can say is that the root of a lot of these problems is extreme poverty and just desperate inequality and desperate want. And what we need to do is we need to basically wage a war on poverty. We need to create a kind of more and more substantial educated and middle class – "middle income," they call it, because middle class sounds very Western. Middle income means, like, 2700 bucks a year instead of, you know, a dollar a day.



I'm not saying that a bourgeoisie is a safeguard against war. I'm saying that it's impossible to develop a society without developing it economically.

You see when you go to this part of Africa extreme poverty. And that is at least a part of what has to be dealt with.

What you see now is a concerted effort to address at least some of those problems in a situation that seems to most people from the outside impossible.

Valedictory

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