

Season of Blood – Fergal Keane

Fergal Keane's *Season of Blood: A Rwandan Journey* is both a well written travel narrative of Keane's time in Rwanda in 1994 and an easy to access analysis of the Rwandan genocide. Keane was sent to Rwanda as part of a BBC television crew to shoot a documentary film. Although the book is fairly short and much less in depth than a more scholarly work on the subject, it is a gripping and engaging account of what Keane saw and heard along the way. It is made that much more credible by the fact that Keane traveled around the country while it was deep in crisis, traveled with participants in the war from both sides, spoke with both the killers and the few massacre victims to survive, and saw first hand the devastation that was wrought.

The Rwandan genocide was triggered when the plane carrying Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana and Cyprian Ntaryamira, president of Burundi, was shot down and crashed into the grounds of the presidential palace, killing them both. President Habyarimana, a Hutu, seized power in a coup in 1973 after one of many violent persecutions of the Tutsi minority. He had been working toward implementation of the Arusha Peace Accords, which would have led to more power sharing with Tutsis and moderate Hutus. It is believed that Hutu extremists carried out the assassination to prevent the Arusha Accords from coming to fruition. But at the time the Hutu government successfully blamed the assassination on the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and by extension on all Tutsis.

Hutu extremists had been agitating against the Tutsi minority for some time before the killing began in 1994. Hutus had been encouraged to send Tutsis "back to Ethiopia," alluding to a commonly held belief that an ethnically distinct Tutsi group had migrated to Rwanda from Ethiopia in the past and had taken control of the country away from the Hutus who were already

there. Radio Mille Collines, a radio station run by Hutu extremists, began broadcasting this and other commands to attack and kill Tutsis. The country was thoroughly primed for explosion by the time of Habyarimana's assassination. The killing began that very night, as Hutu extremists moved quickly against Tutsis and moderate Hutus. As many as one million Rwandans were killed in the months that followed.

One of Keane's objectives, aside from simply telling the story of his journey through Rwanda, was to give an alternate explanation of the origins of the genocide. In his view, the Western media covered the Rwandan crisis, as it had other Central African conflicts, with a very narrow focus on the killing, because they only visited when there was major violence in progress. But, he says, the genocide was not "the result of some innate inter-ethnic loathing that has erupted into irrational violence," as the Western media portrayed it (page 6).

Much of the coverage of Rwanda in the early days neglected that part that power and money had played in the calculations of those who launched the genocide. ...African news is generally only big news when it involves lots of dead bodies. The higher the mound, the greater the possibility the world will, however briefly, send its camera teams and correspondents. Once the story has gone 'stale', i.e. there are no new bodies...the circus moves on. The powerful images leave us momentarily horrified but largely ignorant, what somebody memorably described as having 'compassion without understanding'. (page 7)

Keane spends some time in the beginning of the book reviewing Rwandan history in order to put the genocide in some sort of context and refute the assertion that it was the result of historical ethnic hatreds.

In previous generations, there was much intermixing of Hutus and Tutsis and it was very possible to switch one's identity from Tutsi to Hutu or from Hutu to Tutsi. The historical record suggests that farmers and cattle herders, the predecessors of both the Hutu and Tutsi, arrived as part of the Bantu migration, probably from the North and East, and settled in Rwanda. The area had previously been populated only with groups of hunter-gatherers known as the Twa. This

contradicts the Hutu myth that the Tutsi arrived later from Ethiopia and came to dominate the Hutu in their country.

The separation between Hutu and Tutsi was defined more by an accumulation of wealth than by any ethnic differentiation. The Tutsi were traditionally cattle herders, and cattle were associated with wealth. Cattle herders naturally had more mobility than the farmer Hutu, and their wealth in cattle allowed them to raise armies and bring the Hutu farmers under their influence. Eventually the Tutsi established themselves as an aristocracy over pre-colonial Rwandan society. Many Hutus came to be more or less vassals of the Tutsi, and eventually the Hutu were pushed to the role of second-class citizens. But there was mobility between the classes in pre-colonial Rwanda. A Hutu who had gathered enough wealth in cattle could gain acceptance into the ruling aristocracy and become a Tutsi.

This situation changed when Europeans arrived in Rwanda. German colonizers found it far easier to rule Rwanda indirectly through the Tutsi aristocracy than to rule the entire population directly. And the Tutsi, for their part, were only too happy to comply, as it further entrenched their position as the ruling class. The Germans, and later the Belgians, encouraged the Tutsi to extend their control and increase their exploitation of the Hutu. Relations between the two groups deteriorated.

In 1933 the Belgians, having taken control of Rwanda from the Germans following WWI, began issuing identity cards to all Rwandans. Previously, ethnic identity was based on the number of cattle owned, and there was frequent movement between identities as Hutu acquired enough cattle to become Tutsi, and Tutsi who fell on hard times became Hutu. But the identity card system removed all social mobility. Anyone with more than a certain number of cattle in

1933 was classified Tutsi. Those classified as Hutu were Hutu for life, with no chance of expecting more than a life toil for the benefit of a Tutsi overlord. As the Tutsi, encouraged by the Europeans, asserted more rigid control over the Hutu, the Hutu began to rise in revolt. The Tutsi put down revolts mercilessly, and that suppression was the seed of the extreme hatred that Hutus began to feel towards Tutsis.

In the lead up to independence in 1962, the Tutsi tried to position themselves to remain in power. In 1959, the Tutsi King, Mwaami Rudahigwa, died and the Hutu rose in rebellion. This time, though, the Belgians did nothing to assist the Tutsi in suppressing the rebellion, and tens of thousands of Tutsi were killed. Many more fled into Uganda and Burundi and became refugees. In 1962, a Hutu nationalist government came to power in the newly independent Rwanda, and another purge of Tutsis began. Thousands more Tutsi refugees left for Uganda and Burundi. In 1963, Tutsi refugees living in Burundi launched an attack on the Rwandan government, resulting in yet another mass killing of Tutsis. There was another purge of Tutsis in 1967 and one more in 1973, when Habyarimana took power and promised to restore order.

Rwandan Tutsi refugees in Uganda were persecuted by both Idi Amin and Milton Obote, and many joined with Yoweri Museveni. When Museveni took power in 1986, many of the Rwandan who supported him began rising to prominent positions in the Ugandan government. Many of these Rwandans were actually born in Uganda, the children of those who fled Rwanda in 1959 and later. As the “children of ‘59” came of age in the Ugandan military, they formed the RPF and vowed to return to Rwanda some day.

Habyarimana outwardly tried to bring some unity to Rwanda after 1973. But behind the scenes he and his cronies were enriching themselves at the expense of the Rwandan people and

all the while blaming the problems of the poor on the Tutsi. This further increased Hutu hatred for Tutsi, especially among the poorest Hutu, who were told that the Tutsi wanted to steal their land. Habyarimana grew increasingly dependent on scapegoating the Tutsi in order to cling to power, even as the Tutsi were more and more thoroughly shut out of Rwandan society. As moderate Hutus began calling for more power sharing with the Tutsi, Habyarimana resorted to even more incitement against the Tutsi, again appealing to the poorest Hutu, fomenting their fears. The situation was growing more and more extreme.

The RPF launched an attack on Habyarimana's government in 1990. Their success militarily, combined with international pressure to bring some democracy to Rwanda, forced Habyarimana to the bargaining table in 1993. The result was the Arusha Peace Accords. While Habyarimana gave lip service to increased power sharing in late 1993 and early 1994, he and his political allies were privately making plans to again incite hatred and violence against the Tutsi as a way to silence the Hutu moderates. At the same time, Hutu extremists saw an opportunity to take out the weakened Habyarimana government, take power themselves and deal once and for all with the Tutsi.

The historical picture that Keane paints is much different from the simple "ethnic hatred" explanation of the 1994 genocide. Clearly there is something to his claims that it was well planned before hand. He points to a report by the human rights group African Rights as proof. History should also place blame on the Germans, Belgians and French, not just the Hutu and Tutsi, for the hatreds and divisions that developed.

Keane then goes on to describe his time in Rwanda in great detail. He and his party started out in Uganda and crossed into RPF controlled territory in northern Rwanda. The RPF

was laying siege on Kigali at the time, and Keane presumed that the Ugandan trucks he saw passing him on the road were returning from supplying the RPF with arms. When they cross into Rwanda they are met by their RPF guide, Frank Ndore. Lieutenant Ndore was born in Uganda to Rwandan Tutsi parents who fled in 1959, and was a veteran of Museveni's National Resistance Army and the RPF offensive in 1990, and Keane's description of puts a face on the RPF. Frank's young bodyguard Valence was a Tutsi from southern Rwanda who joined the RPF after almost his entire family was killed by the Hutu Interahamwe (Those who Stand Together). He is the face of another type of Rwandan Tutsi.

Keane meets some of the countless thousands of orphaned children and describes their condition and circumstances. Children were not spared from the killing. The Hutu militias used the catch phrase "don't repeat the mistake of 1959," meaning don't leave any Tutsi children alive to grow up and cause problems later on. The militias made a point of hunting down and killing children. Keane tells one particularly harrowing story of crossing into government-controlled territory to visit the Red Cross hospital in Kigali. Government soldiers were demanding entry to the hospital to look for Tutsi survivors, many of whom were children. One does not see how it could be possible for the Red Cross workers to hold out in the conditions he describes.

The climax of the book is the team's visit to the scene of the massacre at the parish church in Nyarubuye, in eastern Rwanda, which had taken place a few weeks earlier. About 3000 Tutsis took refuge at the church and were brutally slaughtered by Hutu militias with machetes and clubs. The scenes recorded on their visit feature prominently in the BBC documentary that was produced. When asked if he could imagine what the victims had gone

through, he says “...No, I cannot imagine it because my powers of visualizations cannot possibly encompass the magnitude of the terror.” (page 80).

Season of Blood is a gripping first hand account of the situation in Rwanda in the midst of a genocide. In conjunction with some more traditional, scholarly, researched material on the subject, it should be required reading for anyone studying Rwanda. Aside from the opening chapters that give a brief history leading up to 1994, most of the book describes only a small slice of time in 1994, and so the reader must look elsewhere for information on what came immediately before and after, and for events that took place away from Keane’s path. But you could only get such an up close and personal view of the people involved from a book like this.