
Burundi-Rwanda

Starting in the eighteenth century, the borderland between Burundi and Rwanda formed two distinct territories and kingdoms. But colonial administration treated them as two halves of the single territory of Ruanda-Urundi. Since 1946, the Hutu and Tusti people have been at war and only recently re-established their borders.

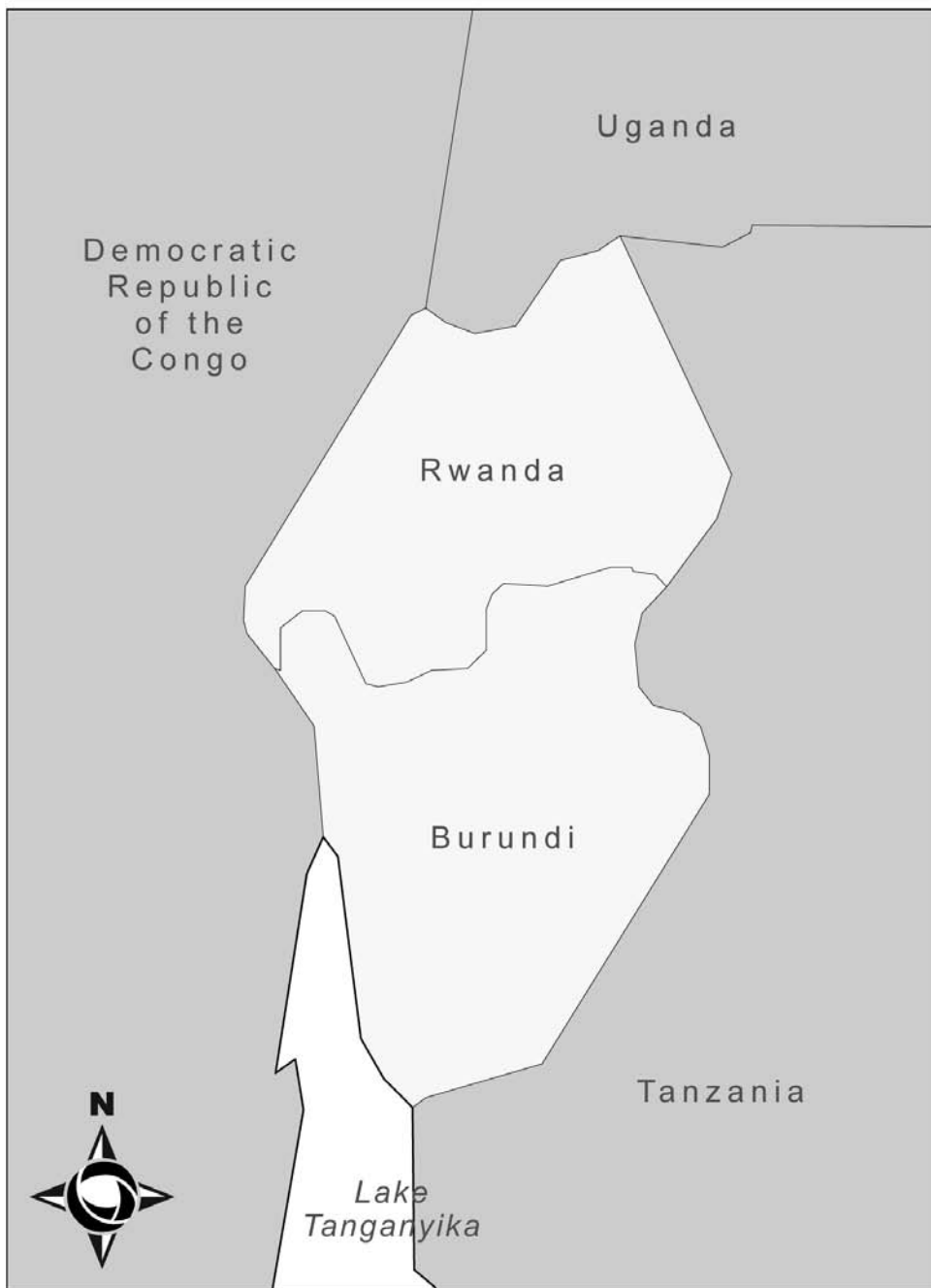
Introduction

The border between Rwanda and Burundi was originally defined by European colonial rule but was also based on substantial precolonial history as the frontier between two strong kingdoms. The countries were administered as a single territory, first by Germany and then by Belgium, during which time the border functioned simply as an administrative divide. At independence in 1962, the border was reinstated through mutual agreement as a legal international division. Within two years, the new states were in conflict, primarily over the presence and actions of Rwandan exiles in Burundi who launched attacks on their old homeland. It was a functional dispute in which the position of the border was uncontested, but the lack of state control over the movement of nonstate militants caused confrontations between governments. Rwanda accused Burundi of failing to disarm refugees or prevent them from making attacks, even of actively supporting the invasions. The Rwandan state repeatedly made incursions into the territory of Burundi to pursue its exiled opponents, reportedly killing citizens of Burundi in the process. With a real but comparatively small degree of threat from its own exiled opponents in Rwanda, Burundi also desired greater border controls between the two countries. A military coup and change of regime in Burundi encouraged the diffusion of tensions between governments. However, nonstate actors on both sides continued to use the border as a resource for conflict until the 1990s. The governments of each country were long suspected of supporting each other's rebels, but there was no further outright confrontation on the border between them. In recent years, relations have been good, with mutual agreements on the function of the border opening up controls in line with the relaxation of border regimes within the East African Community.

Physical and Topographical Features of the Disputed Area

The border mostly follows the course of rivers and lakes. While it is a short border, approximately 290 kilometers long, it features great geographical variety across its

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western, central, and eastern stretches. Low and marshy in places, the western region south of Lake Kivu in Rwanda is cut off from the central areas of both countries by the Congo-Nile Ridge, a mountainous region rising over 2600 meters and covered by the Nyungwe/Kibira rainforest. During the border crisis of the 1960s, Rwandan militants gathered in this triangular border area, crossing from Congo to Burundi before attacking the Rwandan border. To the east of the forest, for a short stretch, the border is unmarked except for some trees planted in a valley during the colonial period, before it reaches the central course of the Akanyaru/Kanyaru River. This river, often invoked as a cultural symbol for the border as a whole, is moderately broad and fast-flowing in places but easy to wade across for those who know it well. The landscape on either side is defined by the rolling hills that characterize much of the region, extremely densely populated and heavily cultivated. As the Kanyaru bends northward, the landscape gradually descends, and the eastern reach of the border runs through wide plains that are relatively sparsely inhabited. At this point, the frontier is marked by lakes Cyohoha-Sud and Rugwero, with a short span of unmarked flat land in between, and is notably close to Kigali, only about 70 kilometers to the north. This closeness of a sparse population and refugee settlements, each located just to the south, made it the ideal situation for the major *inyenzi* attack of December 1963.

History

The border between Rwanda and Burundi is remarkable among African frontiers for its long history. The central stretch of the border, which largely follows the Akanyaru/Kanyaru River, had become established as the default boundary between kingdoms on either side by the late eighteenth century. It was confirmed through repeated wars and invasions, in which neither kingdom was able to hold territory on the opposite side of the river for long. The eastern and western stretches of the border were similarly resolved in roughly their current location in the nineteenth century and were broadly in effect when Europeans arrived at the end of the twentieth century. Germany took control of both kingdoms through negotiation and conquest, and adopted a policy of indirect rule through the respective central kings. However, while the two kingdoms maintained their distinctions, colonial administration treated them as two halves of the single territory of Ruanda-Urundi.

This arrangement was followed by Belgium when it was granted a League of Nations Mandate over the territory following World War I, and the area was confirmed as a United Nations Trust Territory in 1946. The border between Rwanda and Burundi therefore existed in legal terms only as an internal administrative boundary during the colonial period. Its position was defined by Belgian

arbitration between the claims of local chiefs in the early 1930s, when “natural-boundaries,” especially rivers, were used as the dividing line wherever possible.

Despite being combined in one colonial territory, the political development of each nation under Belgian rule was quite different. The population of both countries is largely comprised of three categories of people: Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa. In Belgian policy, the Tutsi, at around 14 percent of the population, were treated as the natural rulers; the majority Hutu as a peasant class; and the Twa, around 1 percent of the population, as social outcasts. Through selective recruitment and education, Tutsi power was enhanced under indirect rule, and the number of Hutu chiefs decreased dramatically.

By the 1950s, a Hutu *counter-elite* or opposition had emerged in Rwanda. They were a group of educated politicians who recognized their own ethnic distinction and objected to their political subjection by Tutsi hegemony. Around the same time, Belgian attitudes changed to support the ideological “liberation” of the Hutu masses rather than the pragmatic strengthening of a Tutsi aristocracy. In Burundi, however, the ruling class was considered neither Hutu nor Tutsi, but a separate category called Ganwa. While Belgian policy treated Ganwa and Tutsi as the same, this internal distinction contributed to a less acute political divide between Hutu and Tutsi in the country, and ethnicity was not a major factor in Burundi’s politics.

In 1959, a civil war broke out in Rwanda between political parties strongly associated with ethnic power blocs. Many thousands of refugees fled the country, taking up residence in neighboring countries. In 1961, a group of Hutu politicians declared the abolition of the Tutsi monarchy and the creation of the Republic of Rwanda. In Burundi, the political contest had been between parties that mostly did not divide along ethnic lines and was dominated by extremely high popular support for the monarchy.

Despite pressure from the United Nations and the international community for Ruanda-Urundi to remain a single country, through strong mutual agreement, Rwanda and Burundi separated at independence in 1962, and the boundary between them was restored as an international frontier. A number of shared institutions, including a monetary and customs union, remained, but the border itself was recognized as the divide between sovereign nations. Rwanda was immediately under threat from armed groups among its refugees in neighboring territories, as exiled Tutsi militants began to launch raids from Uganda and Congo. They were widely known on both sides as the *inyenzi*, literally “cockroaches,” because they mostly attacked at night; in later decades, this term became a matter of extreme hate speech against Tutsi in general. In 1963, Uganda took steps to remove the refugees from the borderland and disarm them, and then attention shifted to Burundi.

Here, the ruling party was undergoing internal splits after the assassination of the prime minister–elect, Prince Louis Rwagasore, shortly before independence. These splits began to take on ethnic characteristics, as some Tutsi feared that Burundi would follow Rwanda’s path and tried to consolidate their own position, while some Hutu considered that they were cut out from power because of their ethnicity. In this environment, certain Rwandan Tutsi exiles and Tutsi politicians in Burundi began to work together closely. Border relations became extremely tense.

In November 1963, Rwanda unilaterally ended the remaining agreements on the monetary and customs union, and in December, the largest ever inyenzi raid crossed the border from eastern Burundi, almost reaching Kigali before it was destroyed. The raid was extremely violent, and brutal reprisals against Tutsi within Rwanda followed. A diplomatic row emerged as both countries appealed to the United Nations, Burundi accusing Rwanda of genocide against its Tutsi population and Rwanda denouncing Burundi for failing to enforce border controls to stop the exiled raiders, or even supporting them. Rwandan troops were reported to have crossed the border to pursue their enemies and killed some citizens of Burundi in the process. Further, smaller inyenzi raids reoccurred over the next two years, and while Burundi did occasionally manage to arrest and deport the perpetrators to Congo, its insufficient border control efforts did not satisfy Rwanda.

Extremely high tensions continued along the border for the following two years, as Rwanda penetrated the territory of Burundi to “hunt inyenzi.” Political exiles from Burundi also attacked the border from Rwanda in September 1964, burning homes on the Congo-Nile Ridge. The government of Burundi, in turn, claimed these attacks had been conducted with official support from Rwanda to spark a Hutu revolution south of the border. Following bloody ethnic crises in 1965, a military coup in 1966 abolished the monarchy in Burundi. The new republican government attempted to calm relations with Rwanda, which welcomed the end of the monarchy but distrusted the Tutsi army officers who had taken power. Rwanda continued to enter Burundi to attack its exiled opponents, and local residents of the borderland in Burundi petitioned the government for protection and stronger controls on the border. In 1967, tripartite talks between President Kayibanda of Rwanda, President Micombero of Burundi, and President Mobutu of Congo achieved consensus on peaceful control of their mutual borders, and each agreed to attempt to disarm their respective exiled opponents. By 1969, inyenzi attacks from Burundi had largely ended.

Over the following decades, the border remained a point of political tension but little outright conflict. A small group of Tutsi from the south of Burundi consolidated power, committing a “selective” genocide against educated Hutu and other opponents in 1972 and sending many thousands of refugees across the

border. The “Hutu” republic in Rwanda was therefore matched by the “Tutsi” republic in Burundi, each hosting the ethnic and political opponents of the other. It was widely believed that the government of Burundi supported Rwanda’s opposition and vice versa. However, when Rwandan exiles once again invaded their homeland in 1990, they came primarily from Uganda, with limited support from the territory of Burundi, while Burundi’s Hutu opposition substantially grew out of refugee camps in Tanzania. Despite the regional crises of the 1990s, the states did not come into conflict over their border and have in recent years cooperated in easing border controls, as members of the East African Community.

Politics and Culture

Life in Rwanda and Burundi has remained substantially agricultural. Historically, Tutsi were associated with pastoralism, their ethnic identity partly defined under the Belgians by the ownership of cattle. Hutu were associated with cultivation and Twa with hunting. All three groups in both countries shared a single language (Kirundi in Burundi, Kinyarwanda in Rwanda, each mutually intelligible), belief system, and social structure. Colonial perceptions of a feudal society, along with arguments for separate genetic origins based on stereotypes of physical appearance in which Tutsi were considered tall, Hutu short, and Twa even shorter, concealed complex and sometimes fluid social relations. While Tutsi dominated power in pre-colonial and colonial Rwanda, not all Tutsi were powerful, and in certain regions, Hutu enjoyed local dominance, even independence from the central Tutsi monarchy. In Burundi, the role of the Ganwa as a distinct aristocracy further blurred the association of ethnicity and power, and contributed to the relative absence of ethnic politics until the postcolonial period. On the other hand, both societies were heavily stratified, bound by various forms of patron-client relations based on ownership of land and cattle. Finally, while Hutu and Tutsi are found in all areas of both countries, they are not evenly distributed. In southern Rwanda, the area around Butare historically featured a higher than average Tutsi population, while in the neighboring region of Kayanza, in Burundi, there were comparatively few Tutsi.

Settlement in the central stretch of the border is extremely dense, at over 400 persons per square kilometer today. Villages, on the other hand, are rare, existing only where active state policy has resettled the population in clusters. Instead, standard communities are based on the unit of the hill, with homesteads separated by cultivated plantations growing bananas, potatoes, beans, and other staple foods alongside the cash crops of tea and coffee.

Interactions between people on either side of the border have long been extensive, even during the height of border tensions in the 1960s. Visits to neighboring markets and cross-border marriages were common and were only briefly and

ineffectually restricted by the state, in limited locations during moments of extreme crisis. However, local recognition of the position of the border has largely been very high, encouraged in part by its long history and the use of major topographical features as markers. Cultural distinction between people considered to be Burundi and Banyarwanda on either side of the border is strong, even while mutually comprehensible languages and close similarities of their respective societies minimize the differences between them.

Local variations in culture sometimes reflect a greater degree of historical interaction across the border and continue to affect the perception of national identity. For example, in the heights of the Congo-Nile Ridge, residents on the Burundi side of the border are often considered by their lowland neighbors to have more in common with Rwanda than with the rest of Burundi.

Furthermore, while Catholicism emerged as the dominant faith across both countries during the colonial period, Protestant missions notably established themselves on either side of the border in this area. While they counted only a small minority of the local population among their converts, these missions came under heavy suspicion from the state in Burundi in the 1960s due to their cross-border networks and perceived favoritism toward Hutu refugees. Finally, the mountainous and wooded terrain made the region a favorite path of escape for political exiles in the 1960s, and the difficulty of access from administrative centers in Burundi still encourages the recognition of a distinct culture and mentality in the highlands.

Despite the closely related cultures, the long history of the border has meant that there have not been any substantial claims for unity since the end of the colonial period; neither was there much local interest during European rule. However, the political shifts of the 1950s and 1960s toward increasing investment in ethnicity encouraged the recognition of ethnic continuity from various quarters. While it was not always reciprocated, the cultural and social claim of ethnic brotherhood across both countries contributed to the border conflict and encouraged an interventionist stance from successive governments toward their neighbors' ethnic policies and practices.

The border was not subject to any direct legal codification at independence. Its position was not mentioned in any legal decision, and the previous administrative divide of the colonial territory was simply put into practice as an international frontier, reiterated by the laws of the Republic of Burundi in 1970. A conference in Addis Ababa in April 1962 established a limited number of institutions that the two states would share after independence: a monetary, banking, and customs union; a coffee marketing board; and agricultural research institutes. These were all dissolved by the end of 1963, immediately prior to the outbreak of border violence.

In April 1966, round table discussions in Gisenyi, Rwanda, failed to produce any agreement on border controls or the restriction of refugee activity. A

subsequent meeting in Kinshasa on August 25, 1966, involving the Congolese government, culminated in an insubstantial “cooperation agreement” on matters of security between the three former Belgian states. It was signed on August 29.

These tripartite meetings increased in frequency after the military coup in Burundi in 1966. The Goma Summit, held in Congo on March 18–19, 1967, was the first meeting between the heads of state since independence, and it produced the first formal agreement on functional cooperation in shared borderlands. This was in response to Decision AHG/DEC of the Organization of African Unity, which called for an end to the border conflict between Rwanda and Burundi, as well as the tripartite declaration that attached all responsibility for the conflict on the presence of Rwandan refugees in Burundi. The states agreed “to take energetic measures in order to prevent, on our respective territories, all traffic and all possession of military arms by political refugees.”

Subsequent meetings were held and a resolution of cooperation signed in Bujumbura on June 29, 1969. These discussions aimed to create a regional body of economic integration. A formal coordination commission was created at a tripartite meeting in Bukavu, Congo, in December 1970. Further resolutions were signed in June 1974 and May 1975, culminating in the establishment of the Economic Community of the Great Lakes Region (CEPGL) on September 20, 1976. While officially targeted at increasing economic cooperation, the founding treaty declared that the primary aim of the community was “to ensure, first and foremost, the security of the States and their people in such a way that nothing disturbs peace and order along their respective frontiers.” One of its few achievements was the establishment of freedom of movement for the citizens of the three states.

The CEPGL was abandoned during the regional crises in the 1990s but refounded in 2007.

Following the accession of Rwanda and Burundi to the East African Community in July 2007, the two countries agreed on the most recent and substantial alteration to the functional control of their shared border in 2010, with the re-establishment of 24-hour border crossings, which had been suspended since 1963.

The border conflict, at its height in the mid-1960s, was the intersection of two conjoined political conflicts. The human qualities of culture, ethnicity, and shared colonial history had bound Rwanda and Burundi together but brought them to contrasting positions of political inequality by the early 1960s. The actions of the Rwandan militant exiles threw the two states into conflict, as their attempts to fight their way home and destabilize the Republic of Rwanda externalized the internal problems of both nations.

In 1962, Rwanda’s new Hutu government viewed the Kingdom of Burundi as a feudal stronghold clinging on to the old monarchic system that had been abolished north of the border. As an ideological enemy, Rwanda considered Burundi

to be a natural ally of the monarchist Tutsi refugees and believed that the *inyenzi* attacks were not only permitted but were aided by the government of Burundi. Maintaining focus on the exiled opposition and their supposed alliance with a foreign power, the government of Rwanda was able to use the border conflict as an excuse to purge internal opponents by accusing them of working with the external forces. The dispute over Burundi's failure to impose functional control on the border may therefore be seen as an expression of larger fears and rivalries that grew out of internal instability in both countries.

Following Burundi's apparent weakness on the border, the conflict was made worse by the Rwandan government's decision to impose its own functional control too vigorously, entering the territory of Burundi, and harassing and killing its neighbor's citizens. These actions prompted borderland residents in Burundi to place great political pressure on their government to increase its military presence on the border.

Internal politics in Burundi were perhaps even more complex than in Rwanda. Despite Rwanda's fears of a feudal Burundi, during the worst period of border conflict, the government was, in fact, headed by a Hutu prime minister, Pierre Ngendandumwe. He denounced the Rwandan reprisals against their own Tutsi as an act of genocide and also made some attempt to impose control on the border. When Rwandan raiders returned to Burundi, they were arrested and expelled into Congo following the judgement that "having slaughtered the peaceful population of Cyangugu [in Rwanda] without any provocation, they cannot be considered as refugees." A greater military force was placed on the border to prevent further crossings, although institutional incapacity and internal political rivalries meant that functional control of the border still failed to live up to Rwanda's requirements.

However, there were indeed Tutsi in positions of power in Burundi who worked together with the Rwandan exiles in fear of transnational Hutu unity and also associated with Congolese rebels; they were even linked to the Chinese embassy in Bujumbura. Burundi appeared as a potential base for infiltration or exploitation of Congo, a key battleground of the Cold War, and China apparently cultivated relations with the Tutsi leaders as a potential means toward local influence. In this light, internal party politics and transnational ethnic identifications combined with international Cold War interests to raise the profile of the border conflict. Despite his efforts to control the frontier and confront Rwanda, Prime Minister Ngendandumwe was forced to step down in 1964 and was replaced by those in the pro-Tutsi, pro-Chinese camp. He was briefly reinstated in 1965 but was assassinated within days by a Rwandan Tutsi expatriate who worked at the U.S. embassy in Bujumbura.

While ethnicity played an essential role in the political circumstances surrounding the initial border conflict, it is important to note its comparative

insignificance in the eventual resolution. Power in Burundi was split between Hutu and Tutsi during the 1963–1964 conflict, but following the murder of Hutu politicians in 1965 and the 1966 military coup, the government shifted toward Tutsi domination. Nevertheless, Tutsi president Micombero was very enthusiastic about normalizing border relations with Rwanda and worked hard to convince the Rwandans that the two countries could live together as sister republics despite their contrasting situations of ethnic inequality.

State security, understood in terms of political ethnicity and the human qualities shared between the two states, was the primary issue in the border conflict, but issues of economic unity were relevant both before and after the main confrontation. The short-lived monetary union and other agreements at independence fell apart when Rwanda demanded a greater proportion of the shared foreign currency reserves in November 1963 and later claimed that the *inyenzi* raid in December was Burundi's revenge for this economic withdrawal. Certainly, the breakdown in economic cooperation appears to have convinced some on both sides that the political confrontation was making a turn for the worse. After the main crisis, the formation of a regional economic community was a direct result of negotiations aimed at resolving the border conflict. However, it is important to note that while such factors of economic unity and cooperation preceded and followed the conflict, they appear to have been secondary to the political and human factors at play. No apparent economic advantage was gained for either side in the border conflict, and the CEPGL was a product of the conflict's resolution rather than its cause; it aimed to maintain the peace rather than build it.

Conclusion

Disputes over the functional control of the border between Rwanda and Burundi have largely been settled. As part of the East African Community, the two states have cooperated in the functional management of their shared border, working toward freedom of movement. In 2010, they reinstated 24-hour border posts, which had been abolished in 1963. Reflecting their new political relations, Burundi has refused to recognize claims of asylum for a number of Rwandans who crossed the border, forcing some to return. The Kanyaru River has in some places shifted slightly since the colonial period, raising territorial questions over the status of some locations, notably the central hill of Sabanerwa between Ngozi Province in Burundi and Southern Province in Rwanda. However, such incidents have not produced any significant political conflict between the states.

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