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# The Use and Perception of Weapons before and after Conflict: Evidence from Rwanda

*By Cécelle Meijer and Philip Verwimp*

A Working Paper of the Small Arms Survey

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# Acronyms and abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| DRC | Democratic Republic of the Congo |
| FAR | Forces armées rwandaises, Rwandan military |
| HRW | Human Rights Watch |
| IDP | internally displaced person |
| LDF | Local Defence Forces |
| MRND | Mouvement révolutionnaire national pour le développement |
| RPA | Rwandan Patriotic Army, RPF successor |
| RPF | Rwandan Patriotic Front, rebel army |

# Map 1: **Rwanda**

*Local wars and military conflicts draw not only on regional tensions, but also on the global trade in arms and weapons.*
**—Amartya Sen, Nobel Laureate, 2001**



# Introduction

The majority of Rwanda's population considers itself Hutu (more than 80 per cent), whereas a smaller group is referred to as Tutsi (about 15 per cent). The Twa are the smallest minority. In 1994, after four years of civil war, Rwanda descended into genocide. The Tutsi minority was the main target, but Hutu and Twa who were not willing to participate in the killings were also murdered. In fewer than three months, more than 500,000 people were brutally slaughtered.

Images of people wielding machetes at each other remain vivid to this day. Indeed, the machete has become the symbol of the Rwandan tragedy. In addition to this traditional tool, however, a variety of weapons and tools were used to execute the killings.

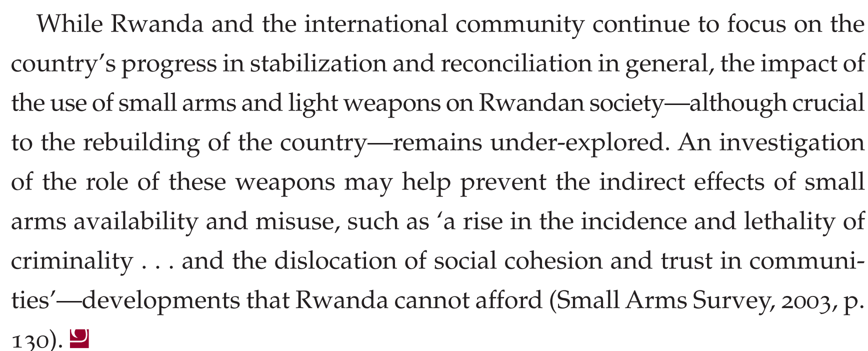
Recent quantitative research using a large-scale database of victims of genocide in Kibuye province shows that more young male adults with non-farm occupations were killed with firearms than any other group (Verwimp, 2003).[1] This data also reveals that firearms, often in combination with grenades, were more frequently used in certain locations and events than in others; in particular, they were used in large-scale massacres in which many Tutsi were killed simultaneously in the same location, such as the Gatwaro football stadium in the city of Kibuye, where thousands of people were killed.[2]

That young Tutsi who were working in the modern sector of the economy had a higher probability of being killed with firearms is linked to factors constraining the behaviour of the perpetrators: they had to save ammunition and thus used firearms only against people who could mount resistance (Melvern, 2004).[3] Consequently, the victims of firearms were young to middle-aged men with a respected status in the community. Moreover, the use of firearms and grenades—particularly wherever many Tutsi had gathered—was a cost-efficient approach to mass killings.

# Research questions

In building upon earlier research, this study asks and addresses questions that cannot be dealt with through a purely quantitative approach. By examining the availability, distribution, and use of small arms and light weapons in several rural localities, it aims to shed light on the daily use of firearms during the Rwandan genocide. This study also identifies the traditional and modern weapons used in the conflict, as well as their respective roles. Further, it investigates whether the perception of traditional Rwandan agricultural and household tools has changed since the genocide and whether there is an ethnic divide in the perception of these tools.[4]

Official government policy since 1994 requires modern weapons to be handed in to local authorities and any gun owners to have a permit, yet not much is known about the provenance or distribution of the weapons used in 1994. Nor do we know how many and what kinds of weapons are still in civilian hands. Information on the availability and demand for weapons among the population also remains scarce. Do people feel the need to arm themselves for self-protection? Are modern weapons still available in Rwanda? Does their presence influence inter-ethnic relations today?



While Rwanda and the international community continue to focus on the country's progress in stabilization and reconciliation in general, the impact of the use of small arms and light weapons on Rwandan society—although crucial to the rebuilding of the country—remains under-explored. An investigation of the role of these weapons may help prevent the indirect effects of small arms availability and misuse, such as 'a rise in the incidence and lethality of criminality . . . and the dislocation of social cohesion and trust in communities'—developments that Rwanda cannot afford (Small Arms Survey, 2003, p. 130).



# A short history of civil war and genocide

Between April and July 1994, the Rwandan military (Forces armées rwandaises, FAR), local police, national guard, and militia—called Interahamwe—killed at least 500,000[5] Tutsi, or about 75 per cent of the Tutsi population, along with many Hutu who were known to be opponents of President Juvénal Habyarimana. A few years earlier, in October 1990, a rebel group called the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) had attacked Rwanda from Uganda. This group was mainly composed of Tutsi refugees, who had left Rwanda during the 1959–62 revolution, and their children. The attack sparked a civil war between the FAR and the rebel army RPF in which the civilian population in northern Rwanda suffered the most casualties. While the RPF claimed to fight against the dictatorship of President Habyarimana; the latter professed to represent the country's majority. The battles between both armies were paralleled by peace negotiations and third-party interventions. A brief overview of recent history can help shed light on the events that followed.

The ethnic composition of the population has been a major factor in Rwandan politics since the time of colonization. At the Berlin conference of 1885 Rwanda was assigned to Germany. The Germans however never really made there mark in Rwanda because already in 1916 Belgium invaded Rwanda and occupied the territory until the end of World War I. Belgium was subsequently officially entrusted with the administration under a League of Nations mandate. The Belgian colonizers had initially favoured the Tutsi ruling class, considering them racially superior to the Hutu, who were seen as a farming people. In the 1950s, with the spread of anti-colonial and independence movements, the ruling Tutsi began to demand independence for Rwanda. At that time a Hutu counter-elite was given the opportunity to study at Catholic seminaries. With Belgian military and political aid, this new group of Hutu leaders succeeded in toppling the ruling Tutsi regime and replacing it with the Parmehutu, the party for Hutu emancipation. Grégoire Kayibanda, a seminarian, became Rwanda's first president when Rwanda gained independence in 1961. Meanwhile, the ethnic

divide did not just remain intact, it intensified. The new rulers, at the national as well as at the local level, established their power by removing all Tutsi from positions of power. Ordinary Tutsi who were not associated with political power were also targets of reprisal and murder.[6]

In 1965 Kayibanda appointed Juvenal Habyarimana as Minister of Defense. In 1973 a group of army officers around Habyarimana took power through a coup d'état. Frustrated by the oligarchical character of Kayibanda's regime, whose power base was the central province of Gitarama, Habyarimana and his followers, who hailed from northern Rwanda, perceived the people of Gitarama as politically privileged. With the coup d'état, Habyarimana became the new president and established the Mouvement Révolutionnaire national pour le développement (MRND), the country's single party to whom every Rwandan automatically belonged.

In the 1970s, thanks to high prices for coffee—the country's main export crop—and generous donor support, Habyarimana's popularity was high among parts of the population.[7] He upheld the continued use of ethnic identity cards and forbade officers and soldiers to marry Tutsi women. In order to control population movements, he set up a detailed system of registration and reporting of demographic changes at the local level. He also required every adult to participate in *umuganda* (weekly communal labour) and to attend weekly institutionalized sessions in his honour.

A key characteristic of the Habyarimana regime was its doctrine on the relation between population and land (Verwimp, 2003). The president had never been an advocate of a family planning policy. On several occasions he declared that children were the wealth of every Rwandan family. Groups set up by the Ministry of the Interior attacked pharmacies that sold condoms. The president was fully supported by the Catholic Church, which was omnipresent in Rwanda. The fertility rate of Rwandan women was among the highest in the world and the average size of cultivated land per family was shrinking rapidly from 1.2 hectares in 1984 to 0.9 hectares in 1990 (National Agricultural Surveys, 1984 and 1989–91). Many families had too little land to earn a living and feed their children. In 1986, when discussing the fate of the 1959–62 refugees, the Central Committee of the MRND declared their return impossible because the country was overpopulated.



During the civil war (1990–94), which preceded the genocide, a total of 2,000 Tutsi were killed in a number of local massacres. These massacres were not spontaneous outburst of violence from a poor peasant population; they were organized by the Akazu (Habyarimana's entourage).[8] With the shooting down of Habyarimana's plane on 6 April 1994, Rwanda entered its darkest period.

After the genocide, a substantial part of the FAR and several hundreds of thousands of civilian refugees flooded into neighbouring Burundi, Tanzania, and Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo, DRC). For two years, warrior-refugees (ex-FAR) and civilian refugees resided in camps along the border between the DRC on the one hand and Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda on the other. In November 1996, the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA, successor to the RPF) attacked the Congolese camps, killing thousands of armed ex-FAR members as well as unarmed civilians. The majority of the surviving refugees returned to Rwanda. A sizable part of the ex-FAR, Interahamwe, and civilian refugees fled deeper into Congolese territory. During the following years, from 1997 to 2000, most of the remaining refugees either died or were repatriated.

## Research methods

The research for this contribution is part of a larger research project on social capital and the mechanisms of genocide in Rwanda. The project studies the structure of horizontal and vertical lines of affiliation and relation—such as kinship and family ties, occupational networks, rural associations, church groups, and political parties—in several rural communities. Eight graduate students from Belgium's Catholic University of Leuven undertook three months of fieldwork in seven locations in the central Rwandan province of Gitarama in July–August 2004. An experienced Rwandan research assistant accompanied each student. Prior to entry in the field, students became familiar with relevant literature, attended seminars on Rwanda, wrote papers, and improved their interview skills.

Although the fieldwork did not have a special focus on firearms, students often gathered information about their use and impact. Without being asked questions about weapons, local respondents provided useful related insight. Towards the end of the fieldwork for the main project, the Rwandan research assistants fielded a relatively short questionnaire in each of the seven localities. This questionnaire, with pre-coded quantitative questions as well as open-ended questions was especially designed for this study on small arms and light weapons. In the course of one week, the researchers interviewed 114 households (16 per locality, with 18 in one of the localities). The households were randomly selected and constituted a sub-sample of a large agricultural survey project that predated the genocide.[9] The study is thus able to combine data collected before the conflict with data collected after the conflict. The questionnaire entailed three sections: one focusing on the situation prior to the genocide, a second on the genocide, and a third on the period following it. It asked one member of the household, usually the head of the household, open-ended and multiple-answer questions regarding the incidence and impact of firearms in relation to the genocide. The recall period was ten years. Answers to the open-ended question were coded after all interviews had been carried out.

In addition, one of the students remained in the field for three additional weeks to conduct specific in-depth interviews on the use and impact of modern and traditional weapons during and after the genocide. Another participant in the larger project, a criminology student, undertook interviews with some 70 prisoners in the central prison of Gitarama. She interviewed prisoners from the same areas as those interviewed by the other students, allowing for the triangulation of findings. By focusing on the mechanisms of participation in the genocide, the prison work yielded useful background information for the study of the impact of small arms and light weapons.

Last but not least, this contribution draws on prior genocide-related fieldwork undertaken in the same locations (Verwimp, 2003). Consequently, this research is able to present findings from a variety of sources—qualitative, quantitative, specifically related to small arms and light weapons, and sources related to the mechanisms of genocide—to shed light on the incidence and impact of modern and traditional weapons during the Rwandan genocide.

It should be noted, however, that the study is limited geographically as well as by the number of households interviewed. Given the small sample size and the concentration of the fieldwork in one province, this study is not representative of the whole of Rwanda.

The province of Gitarama, in the heart of Rwanda, has often played an important political role in the country's history. The court of the Mwami, the Rwandan king, was located in the southern part of the province. At the end of the period of colonization, in the second half of the 1950s, the province was home to Kayibanda. Economically, it is neither the poorest nor the richest province. In April 1994, Gitarama was relatively calm, until the interim government marched into to the provincial capital and exhorted the burgomasters (heads of communal authorities) to extend the genocide into their communes. Thanks to the presence of sanctuaries, local resistance, and the relatively early arrival of the RPF in some communes, the genocide in Gitarama was not as devastating as elsewhere in the country. This background makes Gitarama an interesting case study.

# The machete: a tool or a weapon?

Thirty per cent of the 114 respondents say they witnessed a fight between Rwandans involving traditional tools before the genocide. Half of the fights revolved around land issues or were linked to drunkenness. Most respondents identified machetes, clubs (with or without nails), spears, or hoes as the tools used in these fights. Three quarters of the respondents, however, said that they did not regard machetes as weapons prior to the genocide; instead, they saw it as a tool people used in and around the house. Yet almost half of the respondents who had witnessed a fight involving one or more traditional tools said they had perceived machetes as weapons before the genocide. There was no statistically significant difference between Hutu and Tutsi respondents with reference to the perception of the machete. Results are presented in Table 1. Responses did not reflect a difference according to occupation or education either.

Table 1
**Perception of the machete before and after the genocide**

| | **Regarded machete as a weapon before the genocide (%), N=114** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Witnessed fight with trad. arms* | No | Yes | | chi-square test for significance |
| No | 86.7 | 13.3 | | 0.001* |
| Yes | 56.3 | 43.8 | | |
| *Ethnic affiliation* | | | | |
| Hutu | 78.2 | 21.8 | | 0.863 |
| Tutsi | 76.7 | 23.3 | | |
| | **Regards machete as a weapon ten years after the genocide (%), N=114** | | | |
| *Household members died in past 10 years* | No | I almost forgot | Yes | chi-square test for significance |
| No | 85.3 | 5.9 | 8.8 | 0.406 |
| Yes | 73.7 | 10.5 | 15.8 | |
| *Ethnic affiliation* | | | | |
| Hutu | 84.6 | 9.0 | 6.4 | 0.001*** |
| Tutsi | 56.7 | 10.0 | 33.3 | |

**Note:**
*** significant at the 1 per cent level

An even greater percentage of Hutu respondents said they did not regard the machete as a weapon ten years after the genocide than prior to the genocide; instead, they said they saw it as an agricultural or household tool. This response may be influenced by a type of 'political correctness', since it may be seen as unacceptable to consider a machete a weapon, especially for Hutu. In contrast, more than one-third of the Tutsi respondents consider the machete a weapon—and not a tool—ten years after the genocide. The difference between the two ethnic groups was not statistically significant before the genocide, but it is now. Indeed, only half of the interviewed Tutsi respondents now consider the machete an ordinary tool, compared to 76.7 per cent before the genocide.

Ten per cent of the respondents said they had 'almost forgotten' that so many people were killed with machetes.[10] This reply was also chosen by respondents with a history of mortality in the family (although family members were not necessarily killed with a machete). Most people said they see the machete as a household tool, even if they lost members of their own family. People do not want to forget that their family members were killed, but they may want to forget the cruelty involved in the killings. The test statistic in the yes/no question on family mortality, however, is not statistically significant. A regression analysis may provide deeper insight into the effect of the death of household members on the perception of the machete as a weapon rather than a tool. See Table 2.

The multinomial logit regression in Table 2 demonstrates that the perception of the machete by respondents is not independent of household characteristics.[11] It shows that both the number of household members lost in the past ten years and the respondent's ethnic affiliation determine the perception of the machete

as a weapon or a tool. For example, a respondent whose household is headed by a Tutsi and who has lost many household members has a high probability of regarding the machete as a weapon rather than a tool. The variable measuring the number of lost household members also has a statistically significant effect on the probability of producing the reply that 'I almost forgot that the machete was used to kill so many people', when compared to the first category of respondents, who perceive the machete as a tool. As noted above, this reply may indicate that Rwandans want to forget the cruelty of the killings of their family members. From the location variables (commune dummies), only Rimba commune, which is located very close to Kigali and was the scene of fierce battles between the Rwandan army and the rebel army, shows a statistically significant and positive effect on the probability of regarding the machete as a weapon or having forgotten about it. This effect is relative to the commune that was left out of the regression, Birama.

During one interview, a Hutu respondent told the researcher that all households in his community still owned one or more machetes and other agricultural tools. He subsequently stood up and took his own machete from under his bed, held it up in the air and said: 'You see, here is my machete, it is the same one as I used in 1994 when we hunted down the Tutsi.'[12] This man, while not representative of the community where he is living, showed a certain pride in his action taken in 1994.

In two locations, the sectors of Vutovu and Bembe, respondents reported an increase in traditional tools used as weapons prior to the genocide. In the former commune of Tongata, respondents told us that the burgomaster distributed machetes.

Table 2

**Perception of the machete and household characteristics: a multinomial analysis**

| Variables in the regression | It is a weapon | Coeff. Sign. | I have forgotten it | Coeff. Sign. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Number of hh. Members lost | 0.901*** | 0.005 | 1.11** | 0.028 |
| Ethnic affiliation | 1.401* | 0.068 | -4.7 | 0.671 |
| Rimba comm. | 2.915** | 0.036 | 22.668*** | 0 |
| Constant | -4.544*** | 0.001 | -23.909*** | 0 |

**Notes:**

N=108, Log likelihood=55.89, Pseudo $R^2$=0.461. The dependent variable has the values zero, one and two respectively for 'tool', 'I have forgotten it', and 'weapon'. 'Tool' serves as the baseline in the regression.
*significant at the 10 per cent level; ** significant at the 5 per cent level; *** significant at the 1 per cent level.
Non-significant commune dummy variables are not shown in the table. Regressions with a binary dependent variable, which either add the 'I have forgotten it' response to the 'it is a weapon' or leave out these observations and only consider 'it is a tool' and 'it is a weapon' produce similar statistically significant results.

# Assault rifles, grenades, and ex-soldiers

Respondents were given a roster with depictions of weapons and asked to identify which weapons they had personally seen in their community.[13] These weapons had to be ones they had not seen before in their community. They were also asked who carried these weapons. The results are presented in Tables 3 and 4.

Tables 3 and 4 reveal that more than one-third of the respondents saw one or more firearms in their local communities before the genocide. The great majority of these weapons were identified as guns or assault rifles. Respondents most often identified the local police as carriers of these firearms, followed by former soldiers and then soldiers. Respondents recalled more sightings of assault rifles in the local community during the genocide than before the genocide. Grenades—which take an important second place among weapons seen during the genocide—were most frequently carried by ex-soldiers, soldiers, and Interahamwe (youth militia), respectively. The police, who figured in first place among gun carriers prior to the genocide, are relegated to fourth place during the genocide. Since the survey isolated weapons the respondents had not seen before in their communities, the results show that several groups of people who did not carry firearms prior to the genocide began to do so as of 1994.

Table 3
**Firearms that were observed before 1994 in seven rural communities in Gitarama Province (as % of all observations*)**

| | Prior to the genocide N=52 | During the genocide N=137 |
|---|---|---|
| *Respondents* | | |
| Did not observe arms | 60.5 | 25.4 |
| Did observe arms | 35.1 | 70.2 |
| No reply | 4.4 | 4.4 |
| *Types of firearm observed* | | |
| Guns | 10 | 12.4 |
| Assault rifles** | 85 | 44.5 |
| Grenades | – | 20.4 |
| Automatic weapons | 2 | 6.5 |
| Launchers | 2 | 6.5 |

**Notes:**
* The number of observations is higher than the number of respondents because eight respondents observed two types of weapons and two respondents observed three types.
** A small percentage of the assault rifles were recognized as bolt-action rifles and equipped with scopes.

Table 4
**Persons who carried firearms in rural communities (%*)**

| | Prior to the genocide N=49 | During the genocide N=119 |
|---|---|---|
| *Type of person* | | |
| Soldiers | 13.4 | 34.5 |
| Ex-soldiers | 19.2 | 42.7 |
| Police or gendarme | 63.4 | 5.0 |
| Militia/Interahamwe | 2 | 22.6 |
| Burundians | – | 1.0 |
| Rebels | – | – |
| Peasants | 2 | – |
| Political authorities | – | 5.0 |

*Some respondents identified multiple carriers of arms.

These findings indicate that the number of firearms present at the community level increased substantially during the genocide. More significantly, there were marked shifts in the kinds of weapon and the types of person who carried these weapons. Prior to 1994, notably in times of peace, most firearms were seen in the hands of the state's law enforcement personnel, namely the police and soldiers, respectively. As Rwanda sank into conflict, however, armed soldiers

gained in prominence. Survey respondents said they saw ex-soldiers—those who were demobilized or officially retired from active duty—carrying arms in their local communities prior to the genocide, but in particular during the genocide. These observations, together with those of firearms carried by the Interahamwe, show that the local police no longer had the monopoly of violence during the genocide. Instead, ex-soldiers, active soldiers, and militia members were identified as carrying most of the firearms observed for the first time in these selected rural communities.

Several factors gave rise to these developments. In January 1994—three months before the genocide—Human Rights Watch (HRW) presented evidence that the then government was buying weapons. Payments were made partly in cash and partly with the promise of the future harvest of the tea plantation of Mulindi (HRW, 1994, pp. 14–18). HRW finds that the regime was distributing weapons among the population, using Rwanda's administration as part of a 'civilian self-defence programme'. Some time earlier, in August 1991, Colonel Sylvain Nsabimana, the chief of staff of the Rwandan army, had proposed to provide a gun for every administrative unit of ten households: 'At least one person should be armed per *nyumba kumi* (unit of ten households)' (HRW, 1994, p. 27 and app. C). HRW has also documents that burgomasters ordered quantities of arms and ammunition in 1992–93 that far exceeded the needs of their local police forces (Des Forges, 1999, pp. 97–99). They ordered guns, Kalashnikovs, machine guns, grenades, and large quantities of bullets. The HRW report also documents the purchase of arms by the rebels, the RPF.[14]

This project's fieldwork confirms the HRW findings. Indeed, the research shows that in one commune the burgomaster gave an assault rifle to one young male in each cell (lowest administrative unit). This gun distribution was the result of a national policy, as is clarified in the diary of Colonel Théoneste Bagosora, which elaborates on the 'civilian self-defence programme' and the distribution of weapons. Bagosora also identifies how many recruits should be trained, what kinds of weapon they should receive, and how recruits should be trained to use them (Des Forges, 1999, p. 107).



# The impact of firearms during the genocide

## Results from the quantitative survey

As noted in the research methods section above, the surveys included questions on the impact of firearms during the genocide. More specifically, two questions and one statement were designed to determine to what extent the presence of firearms is perceived as having facilitated the execution of the genocide. Respondents were allowed to provide more than one response (see Table 5).

Asked to describe the impact of firearms during the genocide in their own words, respondents most frequently stated that firearms increased the speed of the genocide and that they induced fear in the population. While a large majority of the respondents said that firearms played a key role in the genocide, they refrained from saying that firearms were the main reason for the genocide. Two-thirds of the respondents attributed the genocide to people and authorities rather than to arms; they argued that people were also killed with traditional weapons. Nevertheless, one-third of the respondents pointed at firearms as the main cause for the genocide, contending that arms empowered the executors, that resistance to these weapons was impossible, and that the use of weapons between the FAR and the RPF caused the genocide.

Of 114 households surveyed in the seven communities, five own a firearm. In three cases the weapon is an assault rifle, and in the two other cases it is a grenade. Three of the five households counted a soldier among their household members and mentioned him as the owner of the firearm. The fourth household received its weapon from a member of the Interahamwe and the fifth obtained it from the RPF.

## Socio-economic status, ethnicity, and firearms

This study links the answers on the impact of weapons to data collected prior to the genocide via an agricultural household survey (Verwimp, 2003). In the

Table 5

**The impact of firearms during the genocide**

| 1 (open-ended): What was the effect of firearms during the genocide? (%) N=166 | |
|---|---|
| Increased rate of killing | 39.1 |
| Induced fear | 18.7 |
| Caused death | 10.2 |
| Used to support traditional arms | 9.6 |
| Breaking of resistance | 7.2 |
| Pressure to participate | 6.0 |
| Empowered executors of genocide | 3.6 |
| Armed conflict between RPF and FAR caused genocide | 2.4 |
| Do not know/other | 1.8 |

| 2: Did firearms play a key role in the genocide? (%)* N=114 | |
|---|---|
| No | 8.8 |
| Yes | 86.8 |
| No reply | 4.4 |

**Note:**

* Reasons provided for the 'yes' or 'no' answers were pre-coded but are not comparable to answers to the first open-ended question, which were coded after the interviews. Due to these discrepancies, the pre-coded answers were disregarded and analysis was based on the open-ended answers.

| 3 (open-ended): Firearms are the main reason the genocide took place. (%) N=114 | |
|---|---|
| Do not agree | 62.3 |
| Agree | 29.8 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 2.7 |
| *Why not agree?* | N=71 |
| Genocide executed by people and authorities, not by arms | 46.4 |
| People were also killed with traditional weapons | 53.5 |
| *Why agree?* | N=34 |
| Arms empowered executors | 51.2 |
| Resisting firearms was not possible | 29.4 |
| Armed conflict between RPF and FAR caused genocide | 23.5 |
| Do not know | 5.8 |

light of this data, it appears that the use of small arms and light weapons during the genocide was not independent of the socio-economic characteristics of the victims. Table 6 shows the average land size of households whose members were either threatened or killed with a firearm. The table also shows the percentage of heads of households who had at least a primary school degree.

For Tutsi, owning land does not seem to have had a significant effect on the probability of being killed or threatened by a firearm. Still, educated Tutsi were more likely to be killed or threatened by a firearm than non-educated Tutsi. For Hutu both land size and education mattered. It should be noted that in this study's sample, Hutu were almost exclusively threatened or killed with small arms and light weapons by other Hutu, indicating that not only ethnicity mattered in the genocide. Especially with respect to the use of a modern versus a traditional weapon, a potential victim's socio-economic status played a determining role.

Table 6

**Socio-economic characteristics, ethnicity, and firearms**[15]

| | Hutu N=76 | Tutsi N=11 | All N=87 |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Land owned in 1990 (averages, in hectares)* | 0.87 | 0.70 | 0.84 |
| Not killed or threatened by firearm | 0.77 | 0.78 | 0.77 |
| Killed or threatened by firearm | 1.28 | 0.32 | 1.14 |
| Pearson correlation coefficient between land ownership and confrontation with a firearm | 0.26 | -0.29 | 0.20 |
| Level of significance | 0.02** | 0.37 | 0.06* |
| *% of heads of the hh. with prim. school degr.* | 18.5 | 36.4 | 20.2 |
| Not killed or threatened by firearm | 12.7 | 0 | 12.5 |
| Killed or threatened by firearm | 33.3 | 50 | 36.8 |
| Chi-Square test for primary school degree and confrontation with a firearm | 3.7 | 4.2 | 6.1 |
| Level of significance | 0.05** | 0.03** | 0.01** |

**Notes:**

* significant at the 10 per cent level

** significant at the 5 per cent level

Table 7
**Killed or threatened by a firearm? A bivariate logistic regression**

| Variables in the regression | Killed or threatened | |
|---|---|---|
| | Coeff. | Sign. |
| Land owned in 1990 | 0.012** | 0.046 |
| Head of the hh at least prim. school | 2.405*** | 0.003 |
| Constant | -2.890*** | 0.007 |

**Notes:**
N=85, Log likelihood=53.55, Pseudo $R^2$=0.233. Dependent variable has the values 0 or 1.
** significant at the 5 per cent level
*** significant at the 1 per cent level
Commune level dummies were included in the regression but are not shown in the table.

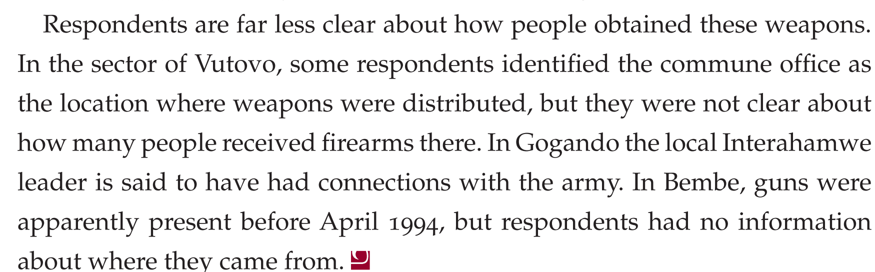
The results of the descriptive data in Table 6 are confirmed in a bivariate logistical regression (see Table 7). Indeed, large land owners and members of households headed by an educated person had a higher probability of being threatened with or killed by a firearm than Rwandans who owned little or no land or had received a limited education. There was no significant effect of any of the commune dummies in this regression.

## Observations in selected localities

Although the surveyed localities had different experiences during the genocide, similarities do exist. Firearms and grenades seem to have made an enormous impression everywhere; during the interviews, people remembered very vividly when, how, and by whom, firearms were used in the conflict. Almost all respondents in the Bamba sector, for example, recalled seeing a local Interahamwe leader carrying grenades, usually tied to a belt, though purportedly not used.

In all localities, only a few people—often local officials and civil servants—seem to have carried firearms and grenades, which helps explain why respondents were able to provide detailed descriptions of weapon owners. In the Vutovo sector, the director of the Catholic schools, an agronomist, a teacher, and the assistant burgomaster were identified as firearm carriers. In Betenyo sector, respondents say the police sergeant and an ex-soldier carried weapons. Although some farmers also received firearms, most respondents said that the possession of a firearm or grenade signalled the owner's leadership status. Yet respondents recalled that leaders did not often use their weapon during the killings, but rather to threaten or mobilize the population.

These recollections are consistent with the above-mentioned results of the quantitative research. Firearms were usually used to threaten and plunder. In the sectors of Bembe, Betenyo, and Gayenzi, respondents noted that Interahamwe leaders were firing into the air, causing fear among the population. These events seem to have made a very strong, fearful impact, as evidenced by the fact that many respondents mention them although the researchers did not focus on the use of small arms and light weapons during the interviews. A leader of the Interahamwe in Gayenzi reportedly fired into the air after he told Hutu to start killing Tutsi or be killed themselves. He also reportedly fired at a shop owned by a Hutu who maintained good relations with Tutsi.

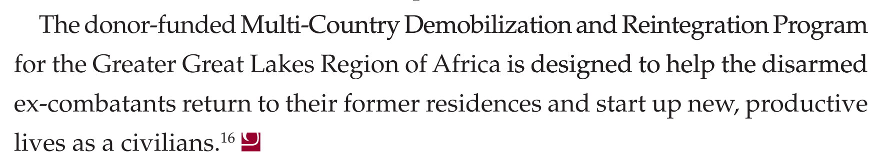


Respondents are far less clear about how people obtained these weapons. In the sector of Vutovo, some respondents identified the commune office as the location where weapons were distributed, but they were not clear about how many people received firearms there. In Gogando the local Interahamwe leader is said to have had connections with the army. In Bembe, guns were apparently present before April 1994, but respondents had no information about where they came from.

# The disappearance of arms after the genocide

The large majority of the respondents say that small arms and light weapons have disappeared from their communities. Only soldiers and the police are carrying arms at the moment, reminiscent of what respondents recall from the period before the genocide. Nevertheless, a few people warn that Local Defence Forces (LDF) also carry arms and that some weapons are hidden among the population. The LDF is allegedly an unpaid corps aiding the police with the maintenance of law and order.

After 1994, small arms and light weapons disappeared from the communities, largely because owners fled with their guns. These armed flights are among the reasons why refugee camps in eastern Congo became flooded with arms. Arms also disappeared from Rwandan society through government-sponsored collection programmes. In addition, a few respondents recalled that the population itself disarmed the owners of firearms after the genocide, such as in the sector of Bamba, in the north of the province of Gitarama.



The donor-funded Multi-Country Demobilization and Reintegration Program for the Greater Great Lakes Region of Africa is designed to help the disarmed ex-combatants return to their former residences and start up new, productive lives as a civilians.[16]

# Tambata: a case study[17]

The final part of this study entailed in-depth qualitative interviews in two small villages in central Rwanda: Rigor and Ragor, located in the Gedoba sector, in Mabaya district (former commune Tambata), in the province of Gitarama. Each of these neighbouring villages has a distinct character. Rigor is a commercial centre and is strategically placed along the road. Ragor is a more rural community, largely comprised of small farmers. Nevertheless, the history of the two villages is closely linked because of the massacre in April 1994 at the parish in the neighbouring town of Tambata. Thanks to the resistance of the burgomaster of Tambata, Ndagijimana, against the killings that had begun in parts of the country, the parish had become an important shelter for the Tutsi of Tambata and other communes. Until his murder on 21 April, the burgomaster helped the local police and population defend the internally displaced persons (IDPs) against attacks by the militia and Interahamwe from outside the commune. Ndagijimana's death marked the beginning of large-scale killings in the commune; after only three days, most people at the parish had been killed on site or in the surrounding area, while attempting to flee. In her account of the Rwandan genocide, *Leave None to Tell the Story*, Des Forges estimates that 5,000 to 7,000 people were killed there (Des Forges, 1999, p. 277). Local people speak about 20,000 to 30,000 dead, but these figures may be overestimates.

## Winning local support for the killings

Tambata remained calm during the first weeks of April 1994, while surrounding regions such as Severa, Ceruru, and Tongata had already succumbed to the beginnings of genocidal killing. During this period, the only reported killing in Rigor and Ragor was that of a man who had attempted to incite the population to hunt down Tutsi. Motivated by the words of the burgomaster, 'He who wants to start killing will be killed himself,' a group of local people attacked and killed the man.

The interim government—together with Interahamwe and the military—grew determined to quash this resistance. After several failed attacks in Tambata, they decided to kill the burgomaster, who, as the highest local authority, represented their greatest obstacle. Following his death, some local leaders backed by the military were able to incite the population to start the killing. By this time, the population had already been exposed to anti-Tutsi propaganda for years.

The military played a crucial role in spreading the killings throughout the country:

> *The military encouraged and, when faced with reluctance to act, compelled both ordinary citizens and local administrators to participate in attacks, even travelling the back roads and stopping at small marketplaces to deliver the message* (Des Forges, 1999, p. 8).

Tambata is a case in point. At the marketplace of Rigor, the military incited people to violence by broadcasting messages such as, 'We want you to destroy Tutsi houses and kill Tutsi' (Des Forges, 1999: 277) and 'Some of you are already eating cows [from Tutsi who fled], but where are the Tutsi corpses?'.

## The use of arms

Soldiers at Rigor's marketplace were reinforcing their message by firing their guns into the air. Some survey respondents said that besides spreading fear among the population, the presence of guns also encouraged people to participate, since they understood it to indicate government sponsorship. One respondent argued:

> *The guns proved to the population that the execution of the genocide was supported by the government and the people thought they had to help the government by searching for and killing Tutsi everywhere.*

Asked whether there was a special reason to choose a particular type of weapon or a certain way of killing, most respondents answered that it was not a matter of choice. One respondent said:

> *Everybody was killing with what was available. People didn't think about the type of weapon to use, they were just looking for something that could kill.*



Other research, however, shows that a lack of choice was not always the case; indeed, under certain circumstances, assailants deliberately used firearms (Verwimp, 2003). Firearms were used strategically. In particular, respondents said that the use of modern weapons such as assault rifles and grenades was necessary in the killings at the parish of Tambata. Earlier attempts to attack the IDPs had failed because they outnumbered the attackers and were able to defend themselves with traditional arms. As one respondent put it:

> *Modern weapons made it possible to carry out the genocide quickly. If they had not brought in modern arms, the Tutsi would have been able to defend themselves because they also had some traditional arms. Before, they had tried a couple of times without modern weapons, but they did not succeed.*

With modern arms, the attackers were able to kill a large number of IDPs on the very first day of the final attack. On the second day, most attackers killed survivors with traditional arms such as hoes, spears, machetes, clubs, bows and arrows, and ropes. After the killings, Interahamwe and the local population searched for survivors.

## The spread of arms during and before the genocide

Almost every Rwandan household possessed traditional tools before April 1994. Results of the quantitative survey confirm that most people viewed machetes as essential tools, although some respondents noted that they could also be used as weapons, especially for self-protection at night. In addition, Rwandans were required to carry a traditional arm at the obligatory night-patrols.

Interview results indicate that neither firearms nor other modern arms were widespread among the population. In Tambata, as in the other surveyed locations, only the local police carried firearms before the genocide. During the genocide, however, several modern weapons were handed out. The distribution of these modern weapons—guns and grenades—was highly organized in Tambata. A leading army major from neighbouring Ceruru supplied the arms; his assistant and some local figures, including a former burgomaster and the agricultural specialist of the commune, were charged with distributing them,

initially from the communal office. Especially ex-soldiers and Interahamwe received the arms, but they were also handed out to local people who were seen as capable of using them. Weapons were not stored at the communal office for any period of time; a sector-specific pick-up schedule ensured that the weapons were picked up quickly. Several respondents mentioned the weapons stock was hidden in a civilian's house when the RPF arrived.

## Weapon training

While modern weapons were also distributed among civilians, they could not have used them properly without some sort of training. Respondents suggest that the army had already begun training young adult males by April 1994. An elected Gacaca judge explained:

> *The army took these men away for about a month. They gave them weapon training and sent them home after that. Officially they said that those men were not good enough for the army, but they were the first to receive arms during the genocide.*

He further noted that training also took place during the genocide. Specifically, a group of six men, led by the above-mentioned assistant of the army major, taught people how to use guns. Another respondent talked about a programme called 'self-defence' that began just after 6 April:

> *In every sector there was one military officer responsible for the training of young men. At that time they said that it was a training to fight against the RPF, but we think now that it was for the genocide.*

Survivors from the parish recounted that some people were even taught how to use a gun at the very time the massacre was taking place. This study's fieldwork confirms earlier research:

> *Soldiers, national police (gendarmes), former soldiers, and communal police played a larger part in the slaughter than is generally realized. . . . Although usually few in number at sites of massive killing, their tactical knowledge and their use of weapons of war, including grenades, machine guns, and even mortars, contributed significantly to the death tolls in these massacres. It was only after the military had launched attacks with devastating effect on masses of unarmed Tutsi that civilian assailants, armed with such weapons as machetes, hammers, and clubs, finished the slaughter* (Des Forges, 1999, p. 8).

## The current situation

Most respondents indicated that the inclination to use arms is greater today than it was before 1994. 'Killing has become easier. People bring traditional arms even for solving small problems. It is like a game,' said one respondent. At the same time, respondents note that the government is actively fighting illegal arms possession and criminality; they argue that the inclination to use weapons is there, but that the government is controlling the situation.

Yet not all respondents felt that the possession of arms was being monitored strictly. One respondent complained that although he had told the authorities about two persons who still possessed guns, they did not act on his information.

Some respondents point to the government programme called *nganda*, in which civilians are taught how to use weapons as part of a broader political education scheme, as a dangerous development.

With regard to traditional weapons, respondents offer an unambiguous consensus: every household still owns them. In fact, as one respondent noted, 'Every man has to have one, it is part of our culture. He should be able to protect his family.'

To what extent modern weapons are still in private hands is more difficult to determine, partly because people do not discuss this topic freely. Nevertheless, there are accounts that some weapons are still being kept secretly. One respondent estimated that more than two-thirds of the weapons used are still present in Tambata. Some respondents said they sometimes heard gunshots during the night, but that they did not know who was firing the guns.

Other respondents reported that the presence of modern weapons had a negative impact on social relations in the communities. One said: 'Because people know that others have guns, they are still very afraid. People who own those guns can behave like kings.' People in Ragor complain that Hutu and Tutsi are living in separate worlds, divided by a great deal of tension. One respondent even spoke of a form of competition concerning weapons, claiming they are more widely spread than before 1994.

# Conclusion

Small arms and light weapons are not a side issue of the Rwandan genocide; they are a central feature of it. They are a key to how people understand the way the genocide was executed. Respondents in this study remember very vividly the people in their communities who were carrying arms and the way they were used by these people. Above all, small arms and light weapons were used to intimidate people, induce fear, and demonstrate power. These weapons were often carried by ex-soldiers and Interahamwe, people who lack power and authority in peacetime, or would have remained powerless without these weapons.

This study's quantitative research—although reliant on a small sample size—yields the conclusion that small arms and light weapons were not used at random. Their use was related to the characteristics of the victims: land owners and educated people had a higher probability of being threatened or killed by a firearm. The organizers and perpetrators of the genocide may have deliberately avoided the use of ammunition to kill poor peasants, reserving bullets for people with a certain status in the community, as they could have mounted greater resistance. In contrast, machetes and other traditional arms were used by poor people to kill other poor people. Because of popular participation in the genocide, the use of traditional weapons was thus widespread.

Ten years after the genocide most people interviewed consider the machete a household or agricultural tool. Tutsi households and any households that suffered numerous casualties are more likely to perceive the machete as a weapon than a tool. More than a third of Tutsi respondents identify the machete primarily as a weapon, probably pointing to mistrust between neighbours.

The small case study in Tambata further demonstrates the existence of mistrust among Rwandans. Respondents were generally afraid to be interviewed and reveal information. Some said that Hutu and Tutsi lived apart and that some people hid their weapons not knowing when they would next need them.

These findings should serve to highlight the ongoing need for policies and programmes designed to improve relations of trust between Hutu and Tutsi

households, government authorities and citizens, and the men and women of Rwanda.

# Endnotes

1 The study defines 'firearm' as a gun, a rifle, or a grenade.

2 This article uses the term 'firearm' and 'modern weapon' interchangeably to refer to modern weapons and firearms such as guns, rifles, assault weapons, or grenades. The more generic term 'modern arm' can refer to many kinds of weapons, but in Rwanda it essentially refers to rifles. Specific arms are identified in this study whenever necessary.

3 Government documents from 1990–94 reveal that regime leaders realized that firearms and ammunition were in short supply and thus needed to be used economically.

4 The Government of Rwanda, through the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission, is promoting a unified Rwandan identity, one divorced from the ethnic affiliations of the past. This process is difficult, largely because Rwandans continue to identify themselves with their ethnic groups, which determined much of individual and family histories in the past decades. This study uses these categories in order to facilitate discussion of the genocide and civil war. This usage in no way implies that the authors subscribe to the use of these ethnic terms in the shaping of Rwanda's future.

5 See Desforges (1999). Other scholars such as Gerard Prunier put the death toll between 500,000 and 800,000.

6 Jean-Pierre Chrétien, Danielle de Lame, Catherine Newbury, Gérard Prunier, and Filip Reyntjens provide detailed assessments of the history of Rwanda. See bibliography.

7 For a discussion of Habyarimana's dictatorship, with a focus on his party's establishment and his appeal to Rwanda's farmers, see Verwimp (2003).

8 See FIDH (1993).

9 For details, see Verwimp (2003).

10 Responses to the two questions in Table 1 are not directly comparable since the latter question has three response categories. The additional reply—namely that the respondent 'almost forgot' about the use of machetes as weapons before the genocide—could not be applied to the first question. Two issues are at stake here. The first is that respondents who chose the reply 'I almost forgot that so many people were killed with a machete' may show a willingness to forget about the use of the machete as a weapon as well as a recognition of its use during the genocide. If this is the case, these replies may be added to the 'yes' category, providing further confirmation of a stronger shift of perception among Tutsi than among Hutu. Second, this answer may also reveal the presence of trauma from the side of the respondents. The authors were not able to distinguish between these two possibilities.

11 A multinomial logit regression models the choice of an agent between several alternatives. The alternatives are not hierarchical; they stand on equal footing. The model is an extension of the binary choice model where an agent only has two possibilities from which to choose.

12 All the quotes in this article are based on confidential interviews held in Rigor and Ragor (central Rwanda) in September 2004.

13 An additional grenade was added to the standard roster of guns, assault rifles, automatic firearms, grenades, and rocket launchers used by the Small Arms Survey.

14 See Stephan Goose and Frank Smyth (1994) for a detailed description and criticism of the arms sales to Rwanda.

15 The sample size is smaller than 114 because not all households interviewed for the pre-genocide survey could be revisited.

16 For more on the Rwandan demobilization programme, see Verwimp and Verpoorten (2004). Renner (1997, p. 44) discusses efforts in Nicaragua as a failed example of reintegration of ex-combatants.

17 The names of the places have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

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