

# Know your national heroes

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A monument that depicts a hero of unknown soldier during the Liberation struggle. Photo by Craish Bahizi

Every year on February 1, Rwanda celebrates National Heroes Day. It is a day dedicated to people who exemplified and defended the highest values of patriotism and sacrifice for the wellbeing of the country and its citizens.

In honour of these heroes, it is expected that national leaders will convene at the National Heroes' Mausoleum in Remera to pay respect to the different heroes of different times who paid the ultimate price in service of the nation.

In Rwanda, national heroes are recognized based on three categories – Imanzi, Imena,

and Ingenzi.

Imanzi are supreme heroes who demonstrated outstanding achievements occasioned by supreme sacrifice, outstanding importance and example. This category, which only has two people; the late Maj Gen Fred Rwigema and the Unknown Soldier, can only be awarded posthumously.

Heroes in the Imena category are reputed for their extraordinary acts for the country marked by sacrifice, high importance and example.

The Ingenzi category comprises heroes who are still alive. Unlike the other categories, a list of the Ingenzi heroes has not yet been published.

About the heroes

## **The Unknown Soldier - Imanzi**

The Unknown Soldier represents all the fallen soldiers of the liberation struggle that ended in 1994 with the stopping of the Genocide against the Tutsi. The tomb of the Unknown Soldier is at the National Heroes' Mausoleum

in Remera, next to Amahoro National Stadium.

The tomb is a way of commemorating the thousands of soldiers whose remains could not be identified after the Liberation Struggle.

## Maj Gen. Fred Gisa Rwigema - Imanzi

Born on April 10, 1957 in Mukiranze village, Kamonyi District (former Gitarama) in the Southern Province, Maj Gen. Fred Gisa Rwigema died on October 2, 1990, on the second day of the Rwanda Patriotic Army liberation war.

Rwigema was the first commander of the liberation front and was killed by enemy fire. He is credited for mobilising Rwandans in exile towards supporting the struggle that was launched after all other options for peaceful repatriation failed to yield any results.



Maj gen. Fred Gisa Rwigema was the first commander of the liberation front before he died on October 2 1990

His parents were Anastasie Kimonyo and Gatarina Mukandilima. The young Rwigema and his family fled to Uganda and settled in Nshungerezi Refugee Camp in the 1960's following the 1959 pogroms.

In 1974, he went to Tanzania and joined the Front for National Salvation (FRONASA), a rebel group led by Yoweri Museveni.

Later in 1976, he travelled to Mozambique and joined the FRELIMO rebels who were fighting for the Mozambican liberation against the Portuguese colonial power. In 1981, 27 soldiers including Rwigema and his childhood friend and current President Paul Kagame, and Museveni, started a liberation struggle against the then regime of Uganda president Milton Obote.

Rwigema helped the National Resistance Army (NRA) capture state power in 1986 and was appointed the Ugandan Deputy Minister of Defence.

He was regularly at the front line in northern Uganda during the government's offensive against remnants of the ousted regime.

But despite holding all the above posts, he always held Rwanda at heart. Rwigema is remembered for being among those who greatly inspired the Rwandan refugees to liberate their country, and on October 1, 1990, he spearheaded Rwanda's liberation struggle. He was shot on the frontline on a hill known as Nyabweshongozi in Umutara region.

He is survived by a wife – Janet Urujeni Rwigema whom he married on June 20, 1987 – with two children: Junior Gisa and Teta Gisa.

## **Umwami Mutara III Michel Rwagasana - Imena Rudahigwa Charles Léon Pierre - Imena**

He was the son of King Yuhi IV Musinga and Nyiramavugo Kankazi Redegonde. He was coroneted on November 16, 1931 after the abdication of his father on November 13, 1931. During his rule, Rudahigwa advocated for the welfare of Rwandans, independence, democracy and fought against injustice through the King's Court.

He married Nyiramakomali on October 15, 1933 but separated in 1940. He then married Rosalie Gicanda on January 18, 1942. He worked hard to educate Rwandans through the establishment of the Mutara Fund and requested the Catholic Church, through their Jesuits' order to establish a college in Gitarama but, instead, the college was built in Bujumbura, Burundi.

Rudahigwa later set up the Islamic college in Nyamirambo, a Kigali, suburb and another school in Kanyanza and offered scholarships to many Rwandans to study in Europe. Under his reign, he eliminated all forms of slavery and subjugation and advocated for unity and reconciliation among Rwandans.

King Mutara III Rudahigwa died under mysterious circumstances on July 25, 1959 in what many consider to have been an assassination.

Michel Rwagasana was born in 1927, in Gitisi, Nyamagana of Ruhango District in the Southern Province. He attended Groupe Scolaire Astrida, attaining a Diploma in Administration. He married Suzana Nzayire in 1957 and the two were blessed with four children, but he never got a chance to see his last born because he died when his wife was three months pregnant.

Rwagasana attained several distinctive positions due to his integrity; he later became the Personal Secretary of King Mutara III Rudahigwa from 1954. His unvarying advocacy for unity, independence and denouncing ethnic differences.

He was killed during the regime of Gregoire Kayibanda for declining to embrace ethnic segregation.

## **Agathe Uwilingiyimana - Imena**

Agatha Uwilingiyimana was born on June 23, 1953, in Gitore, Gisagara District of the Southern Province. She was the daughter of Yuvenali Ntibashirakandi and Saverina Nyirantibangwa. She got married to Ignace Barahira in 1976 and was blessed with five children.

Uwilingiyimana became the first woman to hold the position of Prime Minister in Rwanda's history and served from July 17, 1993 to the time of her death in April 1994.

Prior to that, she served as Minister of Education where she advocated for equal rights



Agathe Uwilingiyimana Imena

among students. During her time in office, she advocated for the rights of women and spearheaded the fight against divisionism. She was assassinated on April 7, 1994 by members of the notorious Presidential Guard.

## Félicité Niyitegeka - Imena

Born in 1934, Félicité Niyitegeka was the daughter of Simon Sekabwa and Angelina Nyirampabuka. She was killed on April 21, 1994 during the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi. Niyitegeka is remembered for refusing to part ways with the people who found refuge at Centre Saint Pierre in Gisenyi (currently Rubavu District).

She was just a casual worker at the centre when her brother – an army officer – asked her to abandon the Tutsis since the military was aware of her activities, but she declined. When the Interahamwe militias came to her house, she already had over 30 Tutsi refugees in her house.

The Interahamwe informed her that she

would be spared but her charges would have to be killed, but opted to die alongside them.

## Nyange Secondary School students - Imena

The Senior Five and Senior Six students of Nyange Secondary School in were on March 18 1997, attacked by remnants of the genocidal machinery (during the insurgency days) who forced them to separate themselves along ethnic lines. They refused and the attackers killed six of them, including four girls.

Those that were killed are Sylvestre Bizimana, Chantal Mujawamahoro, Beatrice Mukambaraga, Seraphine Mukarutwaza, Helene Benimana, and Valens Ndemeye. The Nyange heroes are among millions of victims of the decades of bad leadership that attempted to erase our characteristic values that were historically built around our common identity since the days of our forefathers.



Heroes of Nyange

Understandably, events that commemorate these fallen students and all other celebrated national heroes evoke bitter memories.

February 1 is also a reminder that there are exemplary men, women and children, who laid down their lives for Rwanda and whose love for the country should inspire all the people to work hard to advance the same values they strived for.

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