

The Rwandan War demystified

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Abstract

This paper is drawn from my recent doctoral thesis entitled “The Rwandan War 1990 – 1994: Interrogating the dominant narrative”.¹ It addresses two propositions:

- 1) The mass killings Rwandan Tutsis was the outcome of a planned and controlled programme of annihilation.
- 2) Rwanda ought to serve as a reminder of a shameful episode of Western non-intervention.

It proceeds to discuss the meaning of genocide, the applicability of the term to mass killings in the 20th century, and the ways in which the term has been revised and abused to serve vested interests.

Introduction

There is a well-established though increasingly tenuous consensus that the outbreak of mass violence directed against Rwandan Tutsis and “moderate” Hutus that followed the aerial assassination of President Habyarimana in April 1994 was the result of a planned and controlled programme of annihilation conducted by Hutu extremists. I have termed this consensus the dominant narrative.

There is an even stronger international consensus that Rwanda serves as a reminder of a shameful episode of Western *non*-intervention that left hundreds of thousands of civilians to their tragic fate.

This paper takes issue with these two propositions.

There is no doubt that during the second quarter of 1994, Rwandan Tutsis were selectively murdered in vast numbers. However this was not the result of any organised conspiracy to annihilate Tutsis as a group. The killings were uncontrolled and conducted in conditions of complete anarchy.

While an extremely rapid and altruistically-driven intervention force could conceivably have saved civilian lives during this period of carnage, the fact that the killings were most concentrated in the first few weeks after Habyarimana’s assassination places a limitation upon the efficacy of such an imagined scenario. What the advocates of humanitarian intervention into Rwanda failed to recognise is that extensive Western intervention had preceded this period and played a significant part in creating the conditions that led to the eruption of mass violence in the first place. And it is with this intervention that I want to start. Here is a summary of the ways in which Western intervention shaped the Rwandan War and its tragic outcome.

1 Diplomatic cover for the Rwandan Patriotic Front invasion and subsequent war.

The invasion of Rwanda from Uganda on 1 October 1990 benefited from diplomatic cover and disinformation from Washington and London. Rwanda's President Habyarimana had previously asked American intelligence to check for evidence of troop movements on the Rwandan border and been told by Herman Cohen, then Secretary of State for African Affairs, that he had no evidence of such movements. Cohen had failed to add that the reason he had no information was that the C.I.A. had "turned off" its monitoring during this period. The monitoring turned back on after Habyarimana's visit revealed extensive Ugandan support for the RPF's preparations.²

The Rwandan ambassador to Uganda called his western counterparts to a meeting on 9 October and informed them of Uganda's active collusion with the RPF and that Rwanda was preparing to take the matter up with the U.N. Security Council and the Organisation of African Unity. The British Ambassador responded by organising with his American counterpart a joint statement from Western embassies two days later which stated that "[t]he [government of Uganda] as such and Museveni himself were taken by surprise by the incursion into Rwanda....[and] as a consequence the government of Uganda was now in an extremely embarrassing position". It went on to state that they "had no evidence of any policy of collusion and support for the rebels".³ The British Ambassador must have been dismayed to learn that the "deeply embarrassed" Museveni had no plans to rush back home to deal with this supposedly grave breach of Ugandan national security. At this point the Ambassador felt it incumbent upon himself to urge the British Foreign Office to suggest to Museveni that he return to Uganda quickly. "I believe it is important that he should now return from the United States without delay even if this means postponing his proposed visits to Denmark, Strasbourg and Italy".⁴ However Museveni flew by Concorde to London⁵ and took a total of nine days to return to Uganda.⁶

Years later, Herman Cohen admitted that America had "silently acquiesced in the invasion".⁷

But that was only the beginning of America's involvement in the RPF's war, and Britain's complementary role in line with its "special relationship" with the US. When the defeated forces of the RPF returned to Uganda nothing was said of the fact that none of them were arrested, as the British Ambassador had been assured would happen. Instead, the RPF reassembled on the Ugandan side of the border and were rearmed by the Ugandan Army. When Kagame left Fort Leavenworth to take up the leadership of the RPF following the deaths of Rwigyema, Baingana and Bunyenyezi, he had told his US army sponsor that he had to return to East Africa to "join in the struggle" and asked that Robert Gribbin, the Deputy Chief of Mission at the US embassy in Kampala, be informed of his decision.⁸ Kagame is quoted saying that "the US experience added something. Central to my studies in Leavenworth were organisation, tactics, strategy, building human resources, Psy-Ops [psychological operations], information, psychology and information among the troops".⁹

The United States observed the re-armament of the RPF until it had developed into a more powerful force than the Rwandan army. It also colluded with Museveni's denials that Uganda was assisting the RPF. Cohen obtained assurances from his deputy

Robert Houdek that there was no such support. Years later, Houdek admitted that his investigation into this matter consisted solely of putting the question to Ugandan Foreign Minister Eriya Kategaya and receiving from him the familiar denial.¹⁰ Gribbin praises Museveni for his “plausible deniability”.¹¹ Toward the end of January 1991, Ambassador Kanyarushoki led an observer team that included the military attachés of the United Kingdom, Tanzania and Sudan. The team travelled from Kigali to the Ugandan border region where it was determined that the RPF had no presence inside Rwanda, and therefore that its incursions were being mounted from the Ugandan side of the border.¹² Yet this initiative still did not result in any Western diplomats taking action against Museveni.

The US sought ways to legitimise the RPF’s war. The RPF claimed that they were forced to seek a violent solution because of intransigence on the part of the Rwandan government on the issues of refugee return. Despite the fact that that US officials had been involved with the Rwandan government in making preparations for the return of refugees, and that the RPF invasion had actually scuppered these preparations, Herman Cohen testified at the Belgian Senate hearings on Rwanda that the RPF invasion had been a response of people “forbidden from returning to their homeland”. Gribbin described the war as a “win-win” situation: “Uganda was free of the Rwandans, Museveni was free of his obligations to them, and the Rwandans themselves now had the opportunity to forge their own destiny”.¹³

2 Using the RPF’s firepower to coerce the Rwandan government into negotiating a power-sharing arrangement with the RPF.

Despite the deteriorating security situation brought about by the war, the ruling party proceeded rapidly with its democratic reforms. The reforms culminated in a democratic constitution becoming law at the end of May 1991. Freedom of political association, multi-party democracy, and specific criminalisation of ethnic discrimination were key parts of the constitution. Had the United States been true to its stated commitment toward democratic reform in Rwanda, it could have used its considerable leverage upon Uganda to bring about the disarmament of the RPF. The RPF would have been free to enter Rwanda and participate in the democratic process with the same rights that were being extended to the nascent internal opposition parties. It is clear though that the US did not view democracy in Rwanda as an end in itself but as a means toward regime change that, at the very least, included the RPF. The prospect of ceding power to the RPF - which had no interest whatsoever in the democratic process - posed a grave threat to Rwanda’s democratic transition.

The ruling party strongly resisted external pressure to recognise the RPF as a Rwandan rather than a Ugandan entity, but was forced to do so in the N’Sele ceasefire. Much harder coercion followed to force the government to agree to a negotiated political settlement with the RPF. Shuttle diplomacy on the parts of the US, Belgium and France had pushed both sides toward negotiations. America’s position was that, with the agreed departure of French forces, the Government of Rwanda had no choice but to go beyond signing a military cease-fire, and sign a joint declaration committing to serious negotiations toward a political settlement that would bring about a Broad Based Transitional Government including the RPF, and for the integration of the FAR and RPA into a new national army. The government resisted. Talks went on non-stop on 10 and 11 July and were still deadlocked by

midnight 12 July 1992. At that point a US official told Ambassador Kanyarushoki that if he wanted the RPF to stop at Byumba, he should sign - otherwise they will reach Kigali. Kanyarushoki understood this to mean that the RPF would reach Kigali with Washington's blessing. The government signed.¹⁴

- 3 Supporting a disinformation campaign that accused Habyarimana and people close to him of committing acts of genocide from the beginning of 1993.

The RPF viewed Arusha as a vehicle for translating its military gains into political gains. Its strategy of demonising Habyarimana and the MRND was facilitated in no small measure by western agencies. In an effort to secure the greatest possible concessions on the issue of the integration of the two armies, the RPF launched its largest offensive to date in February 1993. This spectacular violation of the peace negotiations resulted in forty thousand civilian deaths¹⁵ and the population of internally displaced people rising to almost one million. Yet, not only was the RPF not sanctioned for its recourse to violence, but it managed to win Western sympathy for a show of outrage at abuses committed by the government side. The reason for this major diplomatic victory was a human rights report that emerged rather conveniently at the time of the offensive. The Report of the Independent Commission of Inquiry was strongly biased toward the RPF, including no serious investigation into RPF abuses, and came very close to accusing the government of committing genocide – a word that was used in its press launch. Kagame used the report to return to Arusha with indignant demands that the government take action to stop the “genocide in Kigali”, which elicited sympathy from the Tanzanian Facilitator and a British observer.¹⁶

An opportunity to provide a more balanced account of human rights violations in Rwanda arose the following month when Mr B.W. Ndiaye, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights, visited Rwanda. His visit was prompted by the ICI report. Yet it turned out to be more a public relations exercise than an investigation into human rights abuses. Ndiaye's mission lasted nine days, from 8 to 17 April 1993. Given the self-imposed time constraint, there was “no question of undertaking an in-depth fact-finding or verification mission”. Ndiaye used the ICI report as his “main working document because of its methodological and specific nature and the diversity and consistency of the testimony it contains”. Although by his own admission, no in-depth investigation had been performed, Ndiaye nevertheless concluded on the basis of some “cross-checking” that the allegations contained in the ICI report “could, by and large, be regarded as established”. Not only could they be established, it seemed that Ndiaye was able to go a step further and include in his report what the ICI had suggested, but desisted from committing to print – that the violations against Tutsi civilians satisfied the conditions of paragraphs (a) and (b) of Article II of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.¹⁷

Having demonstrated its superior military capacity, and having Habyarimana and the MRND fighting off a charge that it was engaging in genocide, it is not surprising that the Arusha negotiations descended into a rout, with the RPF emerging in a pre-eminent position. An American official stated that the RPF had “flummoxed” the government, and “won” the negotiations. He felt that the Accords were “too blatantly

stacked in the Tutsis' favour to be truly workable. But, having bought into the process, neither the United States nor others could repudiate the product".¹⁸

Although the Arusha Accords had elevated the RPF into a pre-eminent position, they had also committed all parties to scheduled elections which would have revealed a miniscule level of support for the RPF. The RPF now had to find a plausible excuse to tear up the Accords and return to the battlefield for a complete military victory. With such high level external support during the war, and the fact that the most influential actors in the international community had already shown sympathy for the charge that Habyarimana, or people close to him, were already guilty of acts of genocide against Tutsis, the RPF would have felt confident that they could get away with provoking massacres and burying the Arusha Accords with a final offensive by means of a major terrorist atrocity.

The dominant narrative

I assume that most of us here are familiar with the evidence for the RPF's responsibility for shooting down Habyarimana's plane. The dominant narrative disingenuously skirts around this issue by claiming that regardless of who was responsible for the aerial assassination, the act served as a signal for the commencement of already completed preparations for the annihilation of Rwandan Tutsis and so-called moderate Hutus to commence.

I will also not waste time recounting from my thesis rebuttals of all the arguments advanced by proponents of the dominant narrative of the planning and implementation of a programme of annihilation of Rwandan Tutsis. I will simply list the arguments that have been put forward.

We're told that evidence of a plan to commit genocide by Hutu extremists is given by:
The so-called "genocide fax" sent by Dallaire;
The military report which contained a definition of the enemy said to mean all Tutsis;
The claim that there was a large import of machetes that was for distribution among the killers have all been demonstrated to be problematic, to say the least. The outcome of the 'Military 1' trial and that of Zigiranyirazo reveals that people said to be at the heart of the *Akazu* conspiracy were not engaged in a conspiracy to commit genocide.

Furthermore, the material offered that purports to demonstrate that the conduct of various individuals and groups after Habyarimana's assassination is evidence of the unfolding of a prepared genocide is equally deficient:
The story of Interahamwe-controlled roadblocks springing up within half an hour of the death of the President;
The supposed confession of Jean Kambanda for genocide;
The actions taken by Bagosora;
The charge of the interim government being an instrument of genocide implementation;
The claim that Kambanda had sanctioned massacres at Butare
– have all in fact been shown to be indicative of something other than genocide implementation.

Furthermore, we do know that a substantial proportion of the bodies that floated down the Kagera River was the work of the RPF.

We also know the lengths to which the United States and United Nations have gone to protect the RPF from its involvement in assassinations and massacres being investigated and brought to light.

So we are left with no evidence that any group of Hutus conspired to annihilate Rwandan Tutsis. We can also demonstrate that the killings of Tutsis were not controlled, but took place in conditions of complete anarchy. The army was pinned down in one losing encounter with the RPF after another, and the government had been driven out of Kigali.

If we reject the claims of a planned and controlled programme of extermination of Rwandan Tutsis, and if we allow for a significant percentage of the victims to have been Hutus, how do we characterise the killings of civilians over this period?

The killings that commenced on 6 April 1994 were conducted according to different logics. They can be categorised and presented chronologically as they were perpetrated:

- 1 Political assassination of presidents Habyarimana and Ntaryamira and their senior officials by means of shooting down President Habyarimana's plane.
- 2 Killing by the RPF of members of the Hutu elite in Kigali that began the following day.
- 3 Killing by members of the Presidential Guard of opposition members that began the following day.
- 4 Fighting between the RPF and FAR the following day, signifying a resumption of the war.
- 5 The targeting and killing of Tutsi civilians on a massive scale, assisted by individual members of the Presidential Guard and the FAR.
- 6 Killing of civilians by the RPF, mostly of Hutu, on a large scale.

If we isolate 5 and agree that a huge number of Tutsi civilians were killed simply for being Tutsi, is that a sufficient condition for the term of genocide? That of course depends upon how we define genocide. I would argue that since the matter of intent cannot be demonstrated – that no-one conspired to annihilate Rwandan Tutsis as a group, and since the killings were not under organised control - being more “bottom-up” than “top-down” in character - they do not. The application of the term of genocide to these killings obscures what actually took place.

In my thesis I argue that there are three clearly discernable genocides in the twentieth century: the Nazi holocaust, the killings of Armenians in Turkey and the killings of Herero and Nama in South West Africa. In each of these examples, a clear line was crossed, from systematic persecution to systematic annihilation. The issues of intent,

organisation and systematic, controlled application of a programme of annihilation can be demonstrated.

The attraction of the term of genocide for the proponents of the dominant narrative is that this single word has a two-fold property: it is a political analysis of what happened, and a moral certainty about who was responsible for what happened. It is this moral certainty that is key. Anyone who challenges it is confronted with the charge of “denial” which carries with it the odious implication of holocaust denial. Fear of this profound moral condemnation and isolation is the main reason why people who agree with most of what I have outlined above still balk at an outright rejection of the term in Rwanda’s case. Arguments that there was a genocide for which Kagame is principally to blame, or that there was a second genocide against Rwandan Hutus, are highly problematic in my view. The problem we are faced with is the acceptance of the Rwandan genocide as a kind of “greater truth” that is above and beyond counter-factual evidence. And it is the force of this “greater truth” that explains why Western support for one of Africa’s most repressive and dictatorial regimes is so strong, with people like Tony Blair providing their services as Kagame’s international secretary.

It is important to repudiate the dominant narrative not only for the truth about the Rwandan War to be established, but also for the true meaning of genocide to be preserved for the instances where specific identity groups have been subjected to a consciously organised and controlled process of annihilation. My thesis analyses three genocides in the last century: the Nazi holocaust, the genocide of the Armenians, and the genocide of the Nama and Herero in South West Africa. In each case it can be demonstrated that a line was crossed from systematic persecution to systematic annihilation. The issues of intent and control are clearly demonstrable and contrast strongly with the dynamics that drove the mass killings that took place in Rwanda. The current fashion for widening the definition of genocide threatens to submerge genocides like these mentioned within a sea of hundreds of other genocides.

In conclusion I would argue that for Rwandans to win back democratic rights and civil liberties, an outlook that is independent of the dominant narrative needs to be forged. It is hoped that this paper and my thesis are a contribution to this process.

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