

Politics, War, and Genocide in Rwanda 10 Years Later ***Lieutenant Colonel Thomas P. Odom, U.S. Army (ret.)¹***

Twelve years have passed since the Rwandan Genocide. Despite the passage of time, some memories are never dulled; Rwanda has been that way for me. I fear, however, the opposite is true for those not directly touched by the Rwandan tragedy or its expansion into a greater Central African War; very few Americans are cognizant those combined conflicts have claimed somewhere in the vicinity of 4 million dead since 1994.

Recently the films *Hotel Rwanda* and *Sometimes in April* resurfaced the Rwandan genocide. Both are admirable efforts. *Hotel Rwanda*, centered on the exploits of a very courageous Paul Rusesabagina, is a story of personal bravery resisting genocide at time when the rest of the world looked away. I believe *Sometimes in April* better captures the tragedy of Rwanda as genocide tore apart families, the Rwandan people, and Rwanda, again as the world determinedly looked away. Both films are but start points in understanding what happened in Rwanda. Greater understanding demands a more in depth examination of Rwandan events; gratefully there is a growing body of literature to support such a quest.

Thinking the Unthinkable

Before going any further, I would challenge those reading this essay to answer a simple question: is future genocide possible? My answer to that question is not only is genocide possible, it is likely. Man's capacity for genocide is as human as his capacity for mercy. Genocide is the brass ring of conflict resolution. It is not at all "unthinkable" if one is thinking clearly.

Understanding genocide using Rwanda, as a test case is best accomplished in stages. I suggest first understanding the roots of the political conflict, that conflict's transition into civil war, the mechanics of the genocide and its effects, and finally its aftermath.

When History, Race, and Ethnicity Are All Political

Anyone who dismisses the Rwandan struggle as another case of "Africans killing Africans" clearly starts from a position of ignorance. As an African Foreign Area Officer, I specialized in the study of such conflicts and their resolutions. I also encountered the "Africans killing Africans" paradigm repeatedly in dealing with senior officers and policy officials throughout my career, especially in Rwanda after operations in Somalia ran off the proverbial track. I would recommend Mahmood Mamdani's *When*

¹ Colonel Odom was the U.S. Defense Attaché in Kinshasa, Zaire from October 1993 to September 1994. He led the U.S. Embassy response to the Goma refugee crisis and served as the point man for Operation Support Hope. From September 1994 through March 1996, Colonel Odom was the acting U.S. Defense Attaché in Kigali, Rwanda. He is the author of *Journey into Darkness: Genocide in Rwanda* with a foreword by General (ret) Dennis J. Reimer (College Station, Texas: TAMU Press, 2005). See *Military Review*, January-February 2006, for a review of his book.

Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda to anyone looking for in depths study of the roots of the Rwandan political conflict.ⁱ Dr. Mamdani is a Ugandan political scientist who analyzed the Rwandan tragedy in a historical, political, and regional context. His analysis in distinguishing the critical differences between race and ethnicity as they apply to Rwanda is groundbreaking and without peer. Mamdani explains how genocide became a logical solution to a political struggle. I warn the reader in advance that Mamdani's work is not light reading; it is however worth the effort.

Rwanda as the Switzerland of Africa

Those of us old enough may remember that Beirut was once commonly referred to as the "Paris" of the Middle East because its urbane, sophisticated lifestyle and confessional politics allowed severe religious and cultural schisms to be plastered over, largely with money. When things fell apart in Lebanon, Beirut crashed the hardest. The very same phenomenon applied to Rwanda; it appeared to be a success story set against a backdrop of failing or near failing African states. Given that it is a mountainous country, heavily populated, and intensively farmed, Rwanda was often referred to as the "Switzerland of Africa," by Western observers or the small group of Westerners who actually lived there.

Rosamond Halsey Carr's *Land of a Thousand Hills, My Life in Rwanda* is a testament to that view.ⁱⁱ Roz is one of the few Americans (and fewer American women) who have made their lives in Africa. You cannot understand what Rwanda was prior to 1990 without reading her book. Roz's home was made famous in the film, *Gorillas in the Mist*, about Dian Fossey; I can personally attest that Roz's beautiful gardens in 1994 made the reality of Rwanda very distant.

That sense of unreality as it affected Western policy toward Rwanda is best explained by Robert E. Gribbin's *In the Aftermath of Genocide: the U.S. Role in Rwanda*.ⁱⁱⁱ He was U.S. Ambassador in Kigali from 1996 to 1998 and overlapped with my final three months as U.S. Defense Attaché. Ambassador Gribbin's introduction of the reader to the complexity of Rwanda is masterful. Gribbin was the U.S. Department of State desk officer for the country and then Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM) in the late 1970s. He also served as DCM in Uganda in 1988-1991; he arranged then Major Paul Kagame's student assignment to the US Army Command and General Staff College.

Invasion and Civil War

The October 1, 1990 invasion of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) interjected an external political force into a Rwandan political pot already at boiling point. Ambassador Gribbin's book is quite revealing in his treatment of the RPF's origins, its leaders relationships with the Ugandan President, and the RPF's decision to invade. Another source is Coin M. Waugh's *Paul Kagame and Rwanda: Power, Genocide, and the Rwandan Patriotic Front*.^{iv} Waugh worked in Rwanda with the NGO International Organization for Migration (IOM). The strength of his book lies in its initial chapters on Kagame and the origins of the RPF; Waugh got, what I as a historian would have loved to have, direct access to Kagame as a writer. Waugh also offers details on the RPF military

campaign not found elsewhere. Dr. Mamdani in analyzing the RPF decision to invade Rwanda as set against Ugandan ethnic politics places the war in its regional ethnic context.

Arusha and Internal Political Wars

In looking at the resultant political negotiations at Arusha and the internal political struggles between emerging Hutu parties and the single-party Presidential regime of Habyarimana, one has to begin considering the foundations of the genocide. Ambassador Gribbin, Colin Waugh, and Dr. Mamdani all offer interesting perspectives on the Arusha Accords and the violent emergence of Hutu Power from Rwanda's shift toward democracy. Gribbin's analysis of the RPF's skills in negotiating a victory is excellent. He points out correctly the RPF domination of the bargaining table accelerated the forces of Hutu extremism.

At this stage I would add in another author, Gérard Prunier and his *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide*.^v Prunier is a French political analyst with a background in Ugandan politics. One cannot fully understand the maneuvering of the Habyarimana regime against its internal challengers and the threat from the RPF without understanding the role of France and the French view toward Francophone Africa. Prunier's critical contribution is documenting France's absolute commitment to keeping Rwanda in the Francophone bloc, even if it came to supporting forces preparing and then executing genocide.

The Genocide and the Civil War

Preparation for genocide calls forth the mechanics in setting the stage for genocide and then executing that genocide. The Human Rights Watch and *Fédération Internationale des Liges des Droits L'Homme* book, *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda*, examines this process in detail.^{vi} Alison Des Forges was the book's principal author. A long-term scholar on Rwandan culture, politics, and history, she headed the investigative team. Her writing on the history of Rwanda from pre-colonial to the post-genocide is a concise amalgamation the larger body of scholarship on a very political subject. But the central strength of this work is its meticulous detail on the execution of the genocide. It is the closest thing to a day-by-day account of the genocide as it unfolded. I would say the work has two weaknesses: first as a team effort based on thousands of field reports, it reads much of the time like a logbook, with little emotion attached to its text. Second in addressing the RPF's behavior in the war and the immediate aftermath, the book openly states it has no good documentation and then makes claims that have been disputed by others (including me).

Prunier's writing on the genocide and the civil war is equally insightful and more thematic, making it more readable and easier to grasp. Where he excels is his discussion of Operation Turquoise, the French intervention. Where he falls seriously short is his absolute dismissal of UNAMIR in doing anything constructive. Then strangely in reissuing his book with an added chapter, Prunier revises his earlier (accurate as far as I

am concerned) writings on the subject of RPF atrocities making essentially revisionist claims based on the same doubtful sources. I would also say that Prunier's writing on the genocide avoids the human perspective in favor of drier--though often rightfully sarcastic--political analysis.

The Human Aspects of Genocide

There are two works out there I believe fully capture the insanity and the horror of the genocide. And both have won well-deserved awards. The first is Philip Gourevitch's *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families, Stories From Rwanda*.^{vii} I do not claim to be an unbiased reviewer when it comes to this book. I met Philip in his first visit to Rwanda and we would talk on various occasions. I was the military intelligence officer in Goma who called Washington DC from the middle of the defeated ex-FAR referred to by Philip on page 165. And my Navy Chief, Michael "Micky" Dunham was the source of the often quoted "genocide is a cheese sandwich" metaphor, pp. 170-171.^{viii} Philip was one of the few journalists who came to Rwanda and stayed long enough to develop an accurate picture of events. Put another way, Philip earned the right to write what he did. He was our "embed." If there is any weakness in Philip's work, it lies in his style. He is a classic storyteller and he loves to weave stories inside stories, adding emotion and depth to his work even as he gives researchers headaches. I hope that someday he goes back and reissues the book with an index.

My other favorite is Lieutenant General Roméo Dallaire's *Shake Hands with the Devil, the Failure of Humanity in Rwanda*.^{ix} General Dallaire was the Force Commander for the first United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR 1). The book is both condemnation and testimony for the human spirit. Dallaire spares no one including himself for allowing the genocide to unfold in Rwanda. His writing also testifies to the spirit of those willing to act when others did not. Some 400 UNAMIR soldiers, many unarmed observers, stayed in Rwanda and saved thousands of lives. As a work of military history, the book is very much a commander's diary--complete with his darkest fears, doubts, and angers. Too many observers--including military officers--do not understand that "Force Commanders" in UN operations like Rwanda do not have what we consider basic command authority, even within the deployed forces, as witnessed by the unilateral withdrawal of Belgian and Bangladeshi forces by their national governments. Although General Dallaire had trained Canadian troops for U.N. missions, he had never deployed on an operational U.N. mission as a U.N. soldier. He had to learn by doing in an extremely complex arena, one not given to Western style of command. Moreover, Dallaire was saddled with an incompetent political counterpart: Jacques-Roger Booh Booh was the Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) for UNAMIR 1. All of this made Dallaire's mission more difficult, a challenge he took head on even as he internalized them personally. Nothing speaks louder on this than his failed efforts to secure permission to preempt the genocide and his anguish over that failure. I believe that Dallaire could have preempted the genocide with the forces he had in hand--if their national command authorities and U.N. Department Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) had supported him. That is, however, a very doubtful "if" because DPKO repeatedly shied from placing forces at risk, hesitation supported by the U.S. and Great

Britain. Finally this book is a milestone in addressing the issue of combat stress. Dallaire's near death from attempted suicide documents how torn this senior officer was when he left Rwanda.

The Aftermath of Genocide and Civil War

First of all there is a very large and dangerously incorrect assumption in discussing an aftermath to the Rwandan Civil War. In 2006 I hold as I did in 1994 that the Civil War did not end with the end of the genocide. The Rwandan civil war morphed into an insurgency and then morphed again into a full-blown regional war that lingers on today. But one can discuss an aftermath to genocide with a backdrop of ongoing civil war. That is my litmus test on books out there that cover this period: do they set the post-genocide period against the back drop of ongoing civil war? Most of the ones I have mentioned above do, some more effectively than others. Certainly Ambassador Gribbin's book is the best on the issue of U.S. policy after 1996 because that is when he became the U.S. Ambassador in Rwanda. His description of July 1994 to that period is equally accurate when it comes to U.S. policy. Waugh's book, *Paul Kagame and Rwanda*, is especially useful because he had access to the inner RPF circles when he was writing his book. Prunier's book is quite good in addressing the issue of the refugee camps as a threat. He does a poor job, however, in describing UNAMIR 2 or Operation Support Hope. His greatest strength is his focus on France's continued support to the extremists after they were in exile.

My final addition to this list of recommended works is that of Shaharyar Khan, *The Shallow Graves of Rwanda*.^x Ambassador Khan was the second Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) in Rwanda. His position made him the political head of UNAMIR 2. An experienced diplomat, Khan's insights into the workings of the U.N. in the field is illuminating, especially when set against post-genocide Rwanda. Khan as SRSG for UNAMIR 2 was everything his predecessor, Jacques-Roger Booh Booh, was not. This book in many ways serves as a political and diplomatic partner to Dallaire's work. Like Dallaire, Khan had never been inside the U.N. in the field and he shared many of Dallaire's frustrations.

Suggestions to the Reader

As I close this essay, I will finish with some suggestions to the reader interested in the Rwandan genocide. First and foremost is that you read various viewpoints to synthesize and develop your own viewpoint. What I offered above relates my own reading to date; as a participant in these events and an author, I am still learning. Second I would suggest to you (as does Prunier) that all writers on issues Rwandan including me do end up taking sides. Your measure of our writings is whether we present a case or simply offer emotions. That is often a difficult measure to take, as genocide is an extremely emotional topic. Neither General Dallaire nor I can distance ourselves from Rwanda. Third I would say that the full story has yet to be told. Others are writing their experiences: David Rawson, U.S. Ambassador to Rwanda before, during, and after the genocide has a book underway, one that I hope to see soon. There will be others. Finally I would warn all

against wishing away genocide as a phenomenon or trivializing its horrors. Genocide is definitely not a "cheese sandwich."^{xi}

ⁱ Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001).

ⁱⁱ Rosamond Halsey Carr with Ann Howard Halsey, *Land of a Thousand Hills: My Life in Rwanda* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1999).

ⁱⁱⁱ Robert E. Gribbin, *In the Aftermath of Genocide: the U.S. Role in Rwanda* (Lincoln, Nebraska: iUniverse, 2005)

^{iv} Colin M. Waugh, *Paul Kagame and Rwanda: Power, Genocide, and the Rwandan Patriotic Front* (Jefferson, North Carolina: MacFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers, 2004).

^v Gérard Prunier, *The Rwandan Crisis: History of a Genocide* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

^{vi} Human Rights Watch and Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits l'Homme, *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda* (London and New York: Human Rights Watch; and Paris: Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits l'Homme, 1999).

^{vii} Philip Gourevitch, *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families, Stories From Rwanda* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1998)

^{viii} Ibid, 165, 170-171.

^{ix} Roméo Dallaire, *Shake Hands with the Devil, the Failure of Humanity in Rwanda* (New York: Carol and Graf Publishers, 2005).

^x Shaharyar Khan, *The Shallow Graves of Rwanda* (New York: I.B. Tauris, Publishers, 2000).

^{xi} Gourevitch, 170-171.