

## REVIEWS

Linda Melvern, *A People Betrayed: the Role of the West in Rwanda's Genocide*

Zed Books: London 2000, £16.95 paperback

272 pp, 1 85649 831 x

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### NEW YORK AND KIGALI

Between 7 April and early July 1994 somewhere between 500,000 and a million people were killed in Rwanda, not—as many announced at the time—as the bloody climax of a ‘chaotic tribal war’ between Tutsi and Hutu, but as a deliberate and systematic slaughter of the former by the latter. Later, the ‘international community’ acknowledged that a genocide had indeed occurred, and proffered its ignorance of events as an excuse for its inactivity. However, as Linda Melvern’s devastating account of the Rwandan genocide shows, the nature of the killings was plain to see: ‘There were no sealed trains or secluded camps in Rwanda. The genocide was broadcast on the radio.’ Moreover, and most tellingly, ‘conclusive proof that a genocide was taking place was provided to the Security Council in May and June, while it was happening.’ Over the last seven years Melvern has pieced together a wide range of sources: the reports of Belgian and French parliamentary enquiries, a leaked account of secret UN Security Council meetings, interviews with key political actors as well as documents held in Kigali. Her book is a masterly synthesis of this evidence.

What emerges from it is a chilling revelation of the political realities behind the ‘human rights’ rhetoric of the Western powers of the past decade. Long before 7 April—as early as 1992 in the case of Belgium—these were regimes that had been told of a coherent plan for the elimination not only of Tutsi but also of moderate Hutu opposed to Juvénal Habyarimana’s rule. The origins of this plan are to be found not so much in deep-seated ‘ethnic’ hatreds as in the

manipulation of social tensions by fanatical chauvinists bent on retaining power at any cost. It was this regime that poured loans and grants provided by the World Bank and the IMF into the purchase of weapons and the training and organization of the Interahamwe militia, fuelling the killing machine instead of development projects. Thus ‘the international community, which passed laws fifty years ago with the specific mandate of ensuring that genocide was never again perpetrated, not only failed to prevent it happening in Rwanda but, by pumping in funds intended to help the Rwandan economy, actually helped to create the conditions that made it possible.’

Europeans first became involved in Rwanda in 1894, with the arrival of a German count at the court of King Rwabugiri. He found that Rwandan society was divided into three groups: the Tutsi, who were by and large cattle-herders and formed the upper strata of society (and provided the country’s rulers); the Hutu, mostly peasant farmers and by far the biggest group; and the Twa, hunter-gatherer pygmies who formed less than one per cent of the population. Tutsi and Hutu shared a common language, common religion and diet, but were—somewhat like the castes of India—divided by an intricate and draconian feudal order, which gave the Tutsi aristocracy seigniorial powers over Hutu cultivators reduced to virtual serfdom. German conquest did not alter this structure, and when Rwanda was transferred to Belgium by the victorious Entente in 1918, the new rulers reinforced it with a system of official ethnic classification, reliance on extant Tutsi hierarchies, and sweeping use of forced Hutu labour. Association of traditional oppressors with a foreign colonial power intensified the natural resentments of the Hutu underclass against their Tutsi superiors.

With the coming of modern politics in the late fifties, these tensions exploded. In November 1959 Hutu violence against Tutsi erupted, and Rwanda was placed under martial law. Reversing their historic policy, the Belgians now keeled over to favour the Hutu—encouraged by the local Catholic Church, whose priests were active in fostering Hutu aspirations. Around 150,000 Tutsi fled to neighbouring countries, and the elections held in 1960 resulted in a large Hutu majority government, which declared independence in 1962. In November 1963 a group of Tutsi monarchists invaded from Burundi, and the new president Grégoire Kayibanda reacted by ordering the execution of opposition leaders and then, with government radio warning that the ‘Tutsi were coming back to enslave the Hutu’, killings of Tutsi began. Melvern gives a clear-headed account of Rwanda’s history, on the understanding that, as her chapter title indicates, ‘The Past is Prologue’, and indeed, the killings of 1963 can be seen as a smaller-scale rehearsal of those of 1994. The key difference was that in 1963, Western public opinion was alarmed—comparisons to the Holocaust were made by, among others, Bertrand Russell.

Kayibanda ruled until 1973, in a one-party state with clerical blessing—Rwanda becoming a favourite African state of European Christian Democracy.

Parmehutu, Kayibanda's party, enjoyed the support of the Hutu majority, invigilating the Tutsi by the use of identity cards and quota systems. In southern Rwanda there had been a good deal of intermarriage between the groups, but Kayibanda's brand of Hutu nationalism—valuing 'purity' above all else—was a product of the north of the country, which had not been part of the traditional Tutsi kingdom; it was conquered by the Germans only in 1912 and had a tradition of resistance to Tutsi dominance. The general who overthrew Kayibanda, Juvénal Habyarimana, was also from the north—as was the power clique that came to surround Habyarimana, the *akazu*, centred on his wife Agathe and her relatives.

After 1963, many Tutsi and Hutu opposed to Kayibanda and Habyarimana lived in exile in Uganda, Burundi, Tanzania and Zaire. The Ugandan exiles, persecuted by Milton Obote, sided with Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army, which overthrew Obote in 1986. It was these Rwandans, trained and equipped in Uganda, who formed the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), which invaded the country in October 1990 in a bid to oust Habyarimana and install a government of national unity. Denouncing the RPF as a Tutsi army bent on slaughtering Hutu—echoes of 1963—the government in Kigali immediately orchestrated local massacres of Tutsi. Earlier that year Habyarimana had conceded to international pressure and allowed the formation of opposition parties so that, when the RPF invaded, Habyarimana appealed as the head of a 'democratic state' to France, Belgium and Zaire for troops and to Egypt and South Africa for weapons. A Structural Adjustment Programme for Rwanda was approved late in 1990, providing more funds which Habyarimana used to buy arms. Indeed, between 1990 and 1994 the Habyarimana regime obtained \$83m worth of arms, purchases greatly facilitated by Egypt's foreign minister at the time, Boutros Boutros-Ghali.

It is to the period immediately after the RPF invasion that Melvern traces the origins of plans for the 1994 genocide. Following the invasion, government officials were requested to draw up lists of opposition leaders and prominent Tutsi, lists which were regularly updated. In the three years of intermittent fighting which ensued, there are repeated instances of plans being made to target the Tutsi as a group, including a report prepared for Habyarimana in December 1991 which identified as 'the enemy' Tutsi 'from inside or outside the country, who are extremists and nostalgic for power'. Behind these lay acute fear of military defeat: the superior field experience of the RPF was proving more than a match for much larger numbers of hastily recruited, ill-trained forces.

By 1992 neighbouring African states were sufficiently alarmed by the situation to pressure Habyarimana into peace talks with the RPF in Arusha, Tanzania, designed to bring the Rwandan government and the RPF to a negotiated solution. A peace agreement, stipulating power-sharing arrangements in the country, was eventually signed in January 1993, though—significantly—it was viewed

with reserve by functionaries of the State Department. Inside Rwanda, the economy had not recovered from the collapse of the International Coffee Agreement in 1989, engineered by Washington on behalf of the big US importers to lower the price of what was Rwanda's main export earner. Under the Arusha Accords, 16,000 soldiers from the government army had to be demobilized, without provision for pensions or retraining, with few job opportunities. Those so threatened became a rich source of recruits for the Interahamwe—'those who work together'—the militia that was to spearhead the planned massacres. During the negotiations at Arusha, Habyarimana was meanwhile purchasing vast quantities of arms—\$12m worth between August 1992 and January 1993 alone. Melvern provides a detailed description of the process of stockpiling and distribution of weapons during 1993; the scale of involvement in the plan and the premeditated brutality is revealed by the number of machetes imported from China in 1993; in that year \$4.6m was spent on agricultural equipment 'by Rwandan companies not usually concerned with agricultural tools'. The flow of firearms, grenades and more primitive weapons into the country was, meanwhile, significantly eased by the IMF's insistence on the loosening of restrictions on import licences, and even when the World Bank sent missions—five in all between 1991 and 1993—to monitor the progress of the SAP, the regime's creative accounting was somehow missed.

One month before the Arusha Accords were signed a new radio station, Radio-Télévision Libre Mille Collines, began broadcasting. The President was the largest shareholder in the station, and its studios were connected to the generators in the Presidential Palace; broadcasts in Kinyarwanda 'carried no factual reporting' but instead filled the airwaves with crude slurs and anti-Tutsi propaganda, giving the names of people who 'deserved to die'. Seeing the regime systematically and openly stockpiling the resources for mass murder, human rights activists, NGOs and aid agencies working in Rwanda issued warnings late in 1993 and in early 1994. In September 1993 Boutros-Ghali—now Secretary-General of the United Nations—urged the Security Council to dispatch a UN force to Rwanda, as required by the Arusha Accords; these had called for such a mission to provide security throughout the country, confiscate weapons caches, neutralize armed gangs and oversee repatriation of refugees. The US, represented by Madeleine Albright, blocked any notion of respecting the Accords, or Boutros-Ghali's proposals, indeed even trying to reduce any UN presence to a mere symbolic 100 soldiers.

Eventually, after continuous American obstruction, aided and abetted by Britain and Russia, a UN Assistance Mission of 2,500 troops and a tiny budget, confined to Kigali and with a mandate to do no more than 'monitor' and 'assist' the implementation of the Arusha Accords, was set up, and in place by December 1993. UNAMIR was vastly under-equipped, half the size originally envisaged, short of basic supplies and crippled by a lack of information. When

tensions began to escalate in the first three months of 1994, the Québécois commander of the mission, General Roméo Dallaire, repeatedly sent warnings to New York of the imminence of massacres and requested a stronger mandate. On January 11 he telegraphed detailed evidence of an impending slaughter. In the UN Headquarters, the official responsible for handling all peacekeeping missions was Under-Secretary Kofi Annan, long preferred by Washington to his Egyptian superior. Annan cabled back forbidding any 'response to requests for protection' without authorization from New York, and suppressed transmission of Dallaire's warning to Boutros-Ghali. The US knew better than the Secretary-General: a CIA report from January 1994 forecast the collapse of the Arusha Accords and 500,000 deaths as a consequence.

On the night of 6 April 1994 a plane carrying President Habyarimana and President Ntaryamira of Burundi into Kigali was shot down by two ground-to-air missiles. Mystery still surrounds the circumstances of this strike. One possibility is that Hutu military conspirators discontented with the concessions Habyarimana had made—with little intention of keeping—at Arusha, decided to kill two birds with one stone, by removing him in a spectacular action that could be used as the pretext for a pogrom against the Tutsi. At all events, within half an hour of the dispatch of the missiles, Radio Mille Collines was broadcasting the news and roadblocks manned by armed gangs were in place across the city. The massacres began the following day, unfolding steadily, as if by some tidal mechanism, from Ntarama to the south of Kigali to Cyangugu near the Congolese border and in the northeastern town of Gisenyi, as weapons previously distributed by the government were picked up and put to murderous use across Rwanda.

The United States immediately closed its embassy and evacuated all its civilians. Two days later, France sent a military force to secure Kigali airport, closed down its embassy—destroying large amounts of confidential papers—and evacuated its clients and nationals. On April 12, Belgium decided to withdraw its contingent from UNAMIR, depriving the mission of its best-trained and equipped troops. On April 18 Annan started to argue that UNAMIR should be withdrawn altogether. His deputy spoke of 'chaotic, ethnic random killing'. For those on the ground, however, it was clear that this was no spontaneous upsurge of popular rage, but a carefully planned series of operations. There was no lack of order and authority in Kigali. What was absent was any attempt to stop the genocide by the interested Western powers. The Rwandan ambassador to the UN—who in January had taken up a non-permanent seat on the Security Council—was able to report back to the exterminist junta now in charge that there was no support for UNAMIR in the Security Council: it could press on with its 'pacification' measures.

On seeing the slaughter spread, the RPF had taken the offensive from its base in Mulindi on April 9. Marching south and westwards across Rwanda,

it had reached Kigali by July 1. Seeing their advance, France dispatched 2,500 heavily armed troops to the south of the front, ostensibly to create a 'safe zone' in order to prevent further killings. Critics of Operation Turquoise pointed out that this coincidentally provided a secure retreat for the perpetrators of the genocide—forces funded, trained and equipped by France. The relief felt by Hutu Power extremists can only have been matched by the RPF's disbelief at French claims to neutrality—and at the rapid deployment of such well-equipped troops only a few weeks after none had been available to reinforce UNAMIR. The RPF's entry into Kigali intensified further a refugee crisis of staggering proportions, as Hutus implicated in the massacres or intimidated by the propaganda of the perpetrators fled the country. Between 14 and 16 July a million people crossed into Zaire at Goma alone; by this time there were another 500,000 refugees in Tanzania and 200,000 in Burundi. Now the humanitarian response was massive and almost instantaneous—4,000 US troops and hundreds of aid workers arrived in Goma within 3 days. But the \$1m per day spent on assisting Hutu who had fled with the Interahamwe were of no use to the 1.7 million people displaced within Rwanda itself. The survivors of the genocide went almost unnoticed, the West ignoring the needs of a country where 60 per cent of the population were now 'either dead or displaced.'

Melvern describes with terrible vividness and detail how the Western powers abandoned Rwanda to its demons. But one of the great merits of her book is to highlight the courageous exceptions: Roméo Dallaire, who stayed to the end with a handful of volunteers; Philippe Gaillard, head of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Rwanda and Jean-Hervé Bradol of *Médécins Sans Frontières*, who tried to save as many lives as they could. The bravery of these few does nothing to mitigate the force of her conclusion: 'anger and bitterness against the UN will last for decades . . . There is nothing the West can say now to the people of Rwanda to compensate for the failure to intervene in their hour of need.'

The lasting value of Melvern's work lies in her unrelenting focus on the networks of complicity behind the genocide and her refusal to treat the horrifying statistics as an incomprehensible anomaly or aberration. In her analysis, the killings were the product both of an exterminist dynamic within Rwanda and of the deliberate, criminal apathy of the great powers. Melvern's account makes it crystal clear where the primary responsibility here lies. If Belgium was the colonial power that systematically nurtured ethnic tensions between Hutu and Tutsi, and France the neo-colonial patron that supported and armed the brutal regimes of Kayibanda and Habyarimana, it was the United States that gave the green light for genocide, by blocking at every turn any attempt in the UN to avert or to halt it. Melvern rightly concludes that the Rwandan genocide was 'the defining scandal of the Clinton Presidency'. The American regime that claimed to be setting new historical standards in championing human rights round the world coldly

presided over the worst atrocity of the past twenty years, going out of its way to suppress all efforts to call the crime by its name while it was in train.

Why was it so determined to draw a veil over the massacres in Rwanda? The answer is not hard to seek. At the time they occurred, the Clinton administration—having torpedoed the Lisbon Agreement to wind down ethnic conflict in Bosnia—was bent on forcing open the path in the Balkans that would eventually lead to the Fontainebleau ultimatum and the bombing of Yugoslavia. With the Western media in full cry behind it, the US was determined to focus international attention on Serb attacks in Bosnia, freely described by its spokesmen and sympathizers as ‘genocide’. In this setting, nothing could be allowed to distract world opinion from the drama around Sarajevo. The disproportion in scale between the two processes was so enormous that the truth of the one was inevitably a threat to the myth of the other. The real genocide in Africa had to be concealed to keep up the pretence of a fictive genocide in Europe, where the killings never approached the destruction of a people. Endlessly invoking the duty never to permit another Holocaust to justify its intervention in the Balkans, the Clinton regime colluded with the first post-war extermination to be genuinely comparable with the Holocaust. When Senators Jeffords and Simon wrote to Clinton in May 1994, pleading with him to authorize UN action to help stop the slaughter in Rwanda, he did not even bother to reply to them. Albright, his filibusterer in the Security Council, went on to head the State Department and lead the ideological front in the Balkan War of 1999. Annan, an appropriate successor to Waldheim, was rewarded with the fitting promotion. Unable to recommend a UN rescue mission in Rwanda, where there was a legal basis for it, he had no difficulty covering the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, plainly illegal by the UN Charter.

It is little surprise that Melvern’s fine book, carefully researched, lucidly written, moderately expressed, should nevertheless have been completely ignored by the press of the country in which it has been published. She herself writes of the Rwandan genocide that ‘only by revealing the failures, both individual and organizational, that permitted it, can any good emerge from something so bleak and so terrible. Only by exposing how and why it happened can there ever be any hope that the new century will break with the dismal record of the last.’ So far there is little sign of that. For if her book is a singularly courageous interrogation of the past, it also has a tragic contemporary resonance: the scars and the consequences of the genocide are still there, metastases of a cancer of hatred and violence that is still spreading through Central Africa.

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