

Rwanda: The Steps to Genocide

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How did it come about that by 7 April 1994 a political faction had decided on and initiated the Tutsi genocide? André Guichaoua's book investigates the Rwandan state's genocide strategy, which was carried out by an extremist government after it had eliminated the legitimate authorities.

Reviewed: André Guichaoua, *Rwanda, de la guerre au génocide. Les politiques criminelles au Rwanda (1990-1994)* (*Rwanda: From War to Genocide. Criminal Policies in Rwanda, 1990-1994*) (Rwanda and Paris, La Découverte, 2010, 622 pp., 29 €).

André Guichaoua's book on the Tutsi genocide that was perpetrated in 1994 is the culmination of fifteen years of investigations, in particular those conducted in Rwanda in connection with the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR). The survey is valuable mainly because it establishes how, in a matter of days, the genocide was decided on and organized by a faction of political and military authorities who had seized power.

A counter-investigation into the genocide

At 8:25pm on 6 April 1994, the plane carrying Rwandan President Habyarimana was shot down by a surface-to-air missile when it was about to land in Kigali. On 8 April, extremist elements of various parties formed an interim government, after they had eliminated important members of the government and authorities who favoured coming to terms with the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF).¹ On 7 April, massacres of Tutsi civilians began in Kigali and in the two prefectures in northern Rwanda. They were committed by militiamen and soldiers obeying the military and territorial authorities for whom these killings both avenged President Habyarimana (a native of one of those prefectures) and served as a warning that the Tutsis would pay with their lives for the advances of the RPF. At that moment and for some days

¹ The RPF was a political-military organization established by elements of the diaspora of the first generation of Tutsis who had had to flee their country after Hutu politicians came to power in 1961. On 1 October 1990, they launched a military offensive against the Rwandan state, from Uganda. They were victorious in July 1994.

afterwards, no such organized massacres occurred in the other prefectures. Toward mid-April, the officers opposed to this policy having been neutralized, the interim government initiated a genocide strategy, managed to put it into effect in the whole country, and pursued it from April to July 1994.

Seven chapters of the book (seven to thirteen) recount how, after the attack of 6 April, the interim government sought and organized the genocide. This narrative slots into an on-going controversy; indeed, it contradicts an influential version of the history of the origins of the genocide. The official view, presented by the RPF as the only true one, is that the Rwandan authorities, Hutus in origin, had premeditated the genocide since 1959. As proof of this, they cite the abuses and pogroms suffered by the Tutsi minority since then, crimes which had intentionally prepared the way for the “final solution”. This violence certainly did occur. Moreover, the Rwandan Republic, born out of independence, did not recognize the same rights for Tutsis as for other citizens. In fact, they were deprived of rights in many respects. For decades, hundreds of thousands of Tutsis living outside Rwanda had been excluded from Rwandan nationality. As for those who continued to live in Rwanda, subject to much discrimination, they constituted a group separated from the others, downgraded, “racialized” by the ethnocentric ideology of the ruling powers.

For his part, without going back as far as the troubles of independence, the ICTR Prosecutor supported the contention that the genocide had been planned, and that the planning had taken place before the attack of 6 April 1994. He accepted as proof of the conspiracy a set of facts predating the attack – facts that were indeed influential in the preparation of genocide; among others: the creation in July 1993 of the Rwandan radio station RTLM (Thousand Hills Free Radio-Television), whose violent ethnocentric diatribes became in April 1994 constant calls to murder; the organization of partisan militias, armed and trained by the military since the end of 1993, which would go on to kill throughout the period of genocide; and a program of “civil self-defence” that was restructured in 1994 with a view to strengthening the massacre policy. There was also a secret report in December 1991, emanating from a military commission established on President Habyarimana’s orders, which defined the “ENY” (the enemy) as “extremist Tutsis inside or outside the country who are nostalgic for power”. Public incitements to ethnic hate were also uttered by local political figures and authorities, and some local massacres of Tutsis did occur.

We can understand that the perpetration of the Tutsi genocide, starting in April 1994, has encouraged a retrospective reading of a set of facts that undoubtedly did include attitudes and speeches that were explicitly genocidal, as well as murderous practices against the Tutsis. However, in the various trials of political and military authorities, the ICTR judges have not accepted the Prosecutor's contention that there existed an understanding about committing genocide that was established before 7 April 1994 among the defendants themselves and with other figures². This judgement has been bitterly contested by representatives of various groups according to whom the "planning" of the genocide had been conceived in the upper echelons of the Rwandan state ever since the October 1990 attack carried out by the RPF. The judgement has even been stigmatized as "denialist".

It is very likely that this label will be applied to the narrative constructed by Professor Guichaoua. Against such an accusation, it seems to me that a historical account that treats speeches and murderous acts targeting part of the population as tantamount to forward planning is far from self-evident. That is to view as inevitable a process that in fact could have been prevented. Here we are returning to a past program in the historiography of the Jewish genocide: to show that there is a difference in kind between discrimination, the abuses that were at first applied to the Jews, and the systematic policy of extermination that followed. Historians no longer think that the fate of the European Jews was sealed in 1933, when the first definition of what is "non-Aryan" was composed. With this analogy we can more readily explain the controversy aroused by the issues concerning the planning of the Tutsi genocide, its origins, and its instigators. It was indeed very similar: although genocidal actions and speeches targeted the Tutsis as early as 1959, and more intensely starting in 1990, initiating and perpetrating the genocide were not possible until after 6 April 1994, when the interim government had a free hand, having eliminated the legitimate authorities.

The burden of proof

It is crucial to reconstruct what happened in Kigali among the various Rwandan and non-Rwandan protagonists during the night of 6 April and the following days. That is why Professor Guichaoua presents so much evidence that makes it possible to establish who attended which meetings and their various avowed and secret purposes, and to trace the

² The Prosecutor v. Théoneste Bagosora et al., *Case No. ICTR-98-41-T Judgement and Sentence 540*, 18 December 2008: "2113. Accordingly, the Chamber is not satisfied that the Prosecution has proven beyond reasonable doubt that the four Accused conspired amongst themselves or with others to commit genocide before it unfolded on 7 April 1994."

murderous expeditions in the capital. There is no shortage of sources, and they have several origins: judicial sources, the most important ones coming from the ICTR (witnesses' statements, especially those of survivors; depositions by persons charged; indictments made by the prosecutor; and judgements by the Tribunal), and others from lawsuits filed in Belgium and Canada on the basis of universal jurisdiction; sources arising in other investigations, such as the parliamentary investigations conducted in 1998 by the Belgian Senate and also the French National Assembly; and sources constructed by the author himself, who had many interviews with Rwandan protagonists (some free, some imprisoned), from which he reproduces testimonies and analysis.

Oral evidence, particularly testimony in judicial settings, is an important part of the documentation. Nevertheless, a reconstruction that was based exclusively on this would not be convincing. In this regard, the practice of producing and using personal attestations concerning Rwanda is subject to the work carried out by Renaud Dulong³. In fact, witness statements by themselves acquire the status of definitive proof in publications issued by Rwandan government agencies or advocacy organizations, without the conditions of collecting the statements always being known, reported and examined, and without divergent versions of them being compared. Professor Guichaoua shows that written documents are available and that the testimonies must be cross-checked against such archives: communiqués, speeches, agendas, institutional and private documents, correspondence, and so on. For example, in Annex 97, the author traces day by day the actions of the interim government and its members, specifying and publishing the documents necessary for this reconstitution⁴.

Professor Guichaoua systematically includes in his text long extracts from his sources, in order to bring his readers more in on the analysis of the process that led to the decision for and the execution of genocide: "In what happened starting on the evening of 6 April, we can see and study a criminal strategy in action, in which decisions and events (particularly assassinations of political figures) conspired each day to reinforce the most radical outcomes sought by the most extremist actors in this period of the 'final war'" (p. 451).

³ Renaud Dulong, *Le témoin oculaire. Les conditions sociales de l'attestation personnelle (Eyewitness: Social Conditions and Personal Attestations)*, Paris, Éditions de l'EHESS, 1998.

⁴ The author has assembled a collection of 134 annexes – more than 4000 pages – that can be consulted on the internet. They include crucial unpublished documents (including the Bagosora judgement, in Annex 133). Also to be found here are some drafts prepared for the analysis but too long to be included in the book. www.rwandadelaguerraugenocide.fr

Contextualizing the decision making

The perpetration of this genocide is often attributed to a single factor, such as ethnic hatred and popular fury, or the misdeeds of colonialism, missionary Catholicism, and foreign powers, or finally the attacks by the RPF in 1990. Other narratives attribute it to one causal event, the attack of 6 April 1994. The contribution of this work is to investigate the criminal decisions, to locate them in a context – a context to which the decision makers adapted their strategy – and to describe the complexity and the rapid evolution of this context. Without being able to go into detail, it is worth mentioning the almost immediate abdication of foreign powers, who refused to try to stop the spiral of violence.

There was also, in both parties to the conflict, a complete refusal to negotiate, and therefore a commitment to what each of the belligerents referred to as the “final” war. And finally, there was the ability of the interim government to mobilize the resources of the state, mainly those of the territorial administration, at each of its hierarchical levels, by purges and assassinations of those who did not accept the program of genocide, and by locally inciting massacres that brought power to those able to seize it. This consolidation and remodelling of the territorial government by the interim authorities, whose interventions Professor Guichaoua meticulously traces starting on 12 April, explain the rapid spread of the killings: the largest number of victims were murdered during the first six weeks after 7 April.

While the immediate logic of the state’s policy of genocide is convincingly reconstructed in the short space of a few weeks (100 days) during which that policy was implemented, it also has to be understood in relation to previous issues that were still crucial. Using the same method of detailed exposition, the first six chapters of the book analyse the politico-military tensions and conflicts of the years 1973-1994. Professor Guichaoua knows this context, having investigated it for a decade and a half before 1994. That is how he built a network of contacts with whom he talked about the evolution of political issues in the Rwandan society of that time. These six chapters detail how the war of October 1990, in the eyes of the presidential clan and its allies, justified radicalizing its policy of appropriating power while other parties were looking for ways to liberalize politics. They also analyse how the RPF’s strategy, basically a strategy of taking power, was the extremist pro-Hutus’ pretext for creating an ideological coalition. After the attack of 6 April, when it became clear that the RPF would win the war, the idea that the Tutsis of the interior could profit from its victory was intolerable: “Maintaining the genocidal frenzy became an end in itself” (p. 589).

Adversarial logic and academic research

The accusation of “denialism”, already lodged against André Guichaoua’s book, rests on a single argument: that he does not think that the genocide planning went back at least to 1990. This kind of argument, with its adversarial logic, is dictated by the judicial setting of the ICTR and other trial venues, and it has its proponents and its political implications. But it seems to me irrelevant, from the point of view of historical research. It even seems to me that an immunological bias ought to be adopted towards this kind of discourse, and André Guichaoua’s book helps with this.

The field of study of this book is clearly defined: it sticks to conflicts among the circles of notables in the Rwandan political system, decisions made by some of their representatives, and the consequences of those decisions. Against attitudes that are purely polemical or even simply ignorant, other published or forthcoming research also shows the possibility of controversies based on a great diversity of investigations and on some verifiable facts. These works focus in particular on one of the characteristics of this genocide: the rapidity of the massacres – a rapidity that would not have been possible based on action by the military and the militias alone. There had to be individuals participating in the killing who were not part of extremist circles and who had never been trained, physically or mentally, for acts of extreme violence. Their mobilization is a crucial issue, no less than is that of resisters to commands to massacre. On this point too, academic research must confront the Manichean views that some media and publicists impose on the public debate.

Further reading

- Appendices to the book under review: www.rwandadelaguerraugenocide.fr.
- Jean-Paul Kimonyo, *Rwanda: Un génocide populaire (Rwanda: A Popular Genocide)*, Paris, Karthala, 2008.
- Scott Straus, *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power, and War in Rwanda*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2006.
- Claudine Vidal, “Grands tueurs et petits tueurs : la question de l’obéissance dans le génocide des Rwandais tutsis” (“Big and Little Killers: The Issue of Obedience in the Genocide of the Rwandan Tutsis”), in André Loez et Nicolas Mariot (dir.), *Obéir/désobéir*, Paris, La Découverte, collection “Recherches”, 2008.

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