

Denying genocide: the Rwanda plan

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In the aftermath of Rwanda’s genocide against the Tutsi in 1994, the perpetrators launched a campaign to create an alternative “truth”. The first of a two-part article examines its origin and the west’s complicity.

If one inherent certainty of life is that truth is the first casualty of war, another is that after genocide comes denial and revision. The killers, planners, organisers and supporters of genocide will seek to hide the crime, distort its statistics, deflect attention and even rebrand themselves as heroes not villains, saviours not savages. Armenia, the Holocaust, Srebrenica, Cambodia and Rwanda: each is a lesson in human depravity, yet each genocide has been followed by determined and continuous efforts to nullify, downplay and revise the perpetrators’ role.

Peter Balakian, a writer on the Armenian genocide, noted at the time of its centenary this year: “Genocide denial is the last phase of genocide. It denounces the victims and rehabilitates the perpetrators. It also robs the victim’s culture of all moral order.” Today, the rise of social media contributes another weapon to the denialists’ armoury. Its particular climate allows anyone to pose as an expert with an objective, or at least plausi-

ble, view (often with links added to impart a sense of evidence-based authority). Such contributions are often a disguise for well-orchestrated (though “anonymous”) public-relations (PR) campaigns of disinformation. The blizzard can be of such momentum that its lies and propaganda are taken as the “new” truth by credulous sections of the public, even as incredulous survivors look on horror.

Rwanda is a powerful illustration of this trend. Here, an insidious and creeping rise of denial has made the truth of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsis an unwanted battleground. Perpetrators have sought to hide their crimes and responsibility, and made unlikely alliances with those who seek only an opportunity to make easy capital (political or personal) from the horror of 1994. The result has been to implant and cultivate a narrative of genocide denial, merging past horrors and present-day Rwandan politics and condemning the victims to new pain and suffering.

The new “truth”

The genocide of April to July 1994 left a truly shattered landscape. The country was a mass grave, bankrupt of cash and commodities, its new gov-

ernment faced with an enormous post-genocide crisis and task of rebuilding from “ground zero”. But the perpetrators, who had fled to refugee camps in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), Burundi and Tanzania, were in defeat quickly plotting a new agenda. Already, their intent was - breathtaking as it sounds - to persuade the international community that there had been no genocide, and so no responsibility for 800,000 deaths. The extraordinary ambition was made more urgent once the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) was set up in late 1994, and the “category one” criminals (those held to be chiefly responsible) began to be targeted.

In a meeting on 3 April 1995, almost a year to the day that the genocide began, the Hutu extremist leadership “rebranded” itself as the Rally for the Return of Democracy to Rwanda (RDR). The next day, thirteen senior Rwandan military commanders pledged their support for the new party. A primary aim was to convince the west that they were not a “bunch of killers” (a prescient phrase used by their most solid international backer, France’s then president Francois Mitterrand). They were, instead, a “democratic” group - moderate, maligned and misunderstood - who truly represented the Rwandan people, and could again be entrusted with the running of a country that was rightfully theirs.

The medical charity Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) / Doctors without Borders took a different view of this new group:

“They have emerged from the same ideological background as the extremists, they justify the genocide and

paint themselves as victims. They circulate a list of all human rights abuses in Rwanda since October 1990 when the RPF first invaded the country and claim to give a “truthful accounting of the facts “surrounding the death of President Habyarimana. . . Due to continued impunity, these same officials continue to manipulate the refugee population by controlling the flow of information and political discourse.”

The RDR’s military wing was composed of the former Rwandan army (FAR) and the extremist Hutu interahamwe militia, both of which were heavily complicit in the genocide. Soon, its ideologues and media-savvy members began to publish a string of reports, each following a rigid line on the causes and outcome of 1994’s events. In this new “truth” there had been no genocide - only unplanned and “spontaneous” attacks by peasants and, occasionally, military personnel angered by the death of their president, Juvenal Habyarimana, in a plane crash (which the new “truth” said, was the work of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) which was now in power in Rwanda).

There was more. Such “massacres” as there had been involved both sides killing each other (the so-called “double genocide” story), so any responsibility was shared; the Hutu “hate radio” station RTL, in which many of the RDR held shares, was purely a “private company” that promoted free speech; and the interahamwe were mere “civil defence” units, defending the local population against foreign (“Ugandan”) RPF invaders.

On an international level, responsibility for the “massacres” was pinned on the Anglophone (United States and British) governments, which were al-

leged to have trained and assisted the RPF as part of their geostrategic plan to gain a new ally in central Africa. The role of France, which in reality was the major backer (military, diplomatic, political and financial) of the genocidal regime, was portrayed as nothing but neutral assistance (see *Silent Accomplice: The Untold Story of the Role of France in the Rwandan genocide* [IB Tauris, 2014]).

The recovery plan

A year after the birth of the RDR, its coordination committee issued a nineteen-page report on its operational strategy. The focus was the pressing need to raise funds to achieve its military, political and PR objectives. The report carefully avoids the word genocide, and instead uses the RDR's preferred "Rwandan crisis" and "Rwandan tragedy". It noted the pressing need to "change the image of the Rwandan refugee" while ensuring an "efficient defence" for "refugees" facing prosecution before the newly created ICTR.

The strategy proposed launching a diplomatic charm offensive in European Union countries, especially France and Belgium, as well as other friendly African countries, Russia and China. An RDR presence at African Union and Francophone conferences would also be required to push the denial agenda; vital new links necessary within United Nations institutions such as the UNHCR and Unicef; and connections with NGOs such as Amnesty International. The targets for active political, diplomatic and financial support included sympathetic former diplomats, church hierarchy,

and foreign businessmen. This was an early agenda to create an entire revisionist bandwagon.

The report further urged a common stance to questions by the international media about the genocide, the role of militia and death-squads, the involvement of the former Rwandan army, and issues around "impunity". Press releases must be sent out to "present a saleable image to the exterior" and promote this alternative view of the "Rwandan tragedy". Alongside this strategy, the RDR was insistent it should continue to work hard in "destabilizing and sabotaging the economy of the enemy" (i.e., the new Rwandan government), "provoking subversive activities inside Rwanda", retraining and arming youth in the refugee camps, and finally reconquering Rwanda.

The Hutu extremist leadership set up a "Société Civile" group inside the refugee camps, aiming to become the sole representatives of the latter to the international community. By early 1995, the group's work was extensive. It had, said MSF, set up:

"92 affiliated non-profit-making organizations such as: l'Association des Journalistes Rwandais en Exil, le Cercle des Intellectuels, l'Association pour la Promotion Féminine et la Réhabilitation de la Famille Rwandaise, and l'Association des Juristes pour les Droits de l'Homme... Most were founded by members of Rwanda's well-educated elite, the MRND, and of the extremist media that functioned in Rwanda before the genocide. Some receive substantial funding from abroad... Another one of these NGOs, the Association Justice et Paix pour la Réconciliation au Rwanda in collaboration with the Société Civile,

states that no evidence incriminating the self-proclaimed government-in-exile has come to light and that it was the RPF who committed the genocide of the Hutu.”

In addition, other pre-1994 backers of Habyarimana’s regime, such as senior members of Catholic church and religious communities like the Pères Blancs (White Fathers) continued to lend their hefty financial and political support to pushing RDR propaganda and defending individual priests. The latter protected and assisted Father Wenceslas Munyeshyaka, charged with genocide and rape, in his escape to France and a new parish; and Father Anastase Seromba, accused of bulldozing his church onto thousands of Tutsi refugees, who was found a new parish in Italy.

The spreading lie

In June 1996, the RDR’s wing in Cameroon, where dozens of those wanted for complicity in the genocide had fled, issued a public statement entitled “United Nations Security Council misled about presumed ‘Tutsi Genocide’ in Rwanda”. Colonel Theoneste Bagosora and his fellow genocidaire had been severely riled by a number of detailed reports written by the UN Special Rapporteur to Rwanda, Rene Degni-Segui, in 1994-95 that concluded by calling for the arrest of those responsible for the genocide.

The title of the RDR statement betrays its content. It did not recognise that “genocide” (always in inverted commas) had taken place. A flavour of its denial can be seen in the stalwart defence of Radio RTLM, which many signatories of the RDR document had

helped to finance and set up. RTLM had gained particular notoriety for its presenters’ role in actually announcing on air the names of people who were to be hunted down and killed, and for its frequent proclamations that the “work” (killing) must be finished. This RDR statement said that RTLM was acting merely as any radio station would: gathering, processing and disseminating information, while abiding by professional ethics and the code of conduct for journalists.

Several contributors to the Cameroon report were later convicted at the ICTR for their role in the horror, including its “architect” Theoneste Bagosora, the RTLM and propaganda chief Ferdinand Nahimana, the “butcher of Gisenyi” Colonel Anatole Nsengiyumva, and local mayor Laurent Semanza.

In July 1996, a few months after Bagosora was arrested by the ICTR, a meeting of defence attorneys in Nairobi was organised by the Belgian lawyer Luc de Temmerman (who had for some years represented the Habyarimana family). His plan accorded with the RDR’s strategy: getting all the defendants to agree a common stance on the “massacres”, and then showcasing this before the ICTR’s judges and international media. The investigative journalist Thierry Cruvellier, who covered the ICTR for many years, wrote that de Temmerman saw the courtroom as merely another forum to advance the Hutu cause. The latter’s defence-lawyers meeting, itself financed by the RDR, had the additional objective of using substantial commissions from the legal fees to fund “the [Hutu] cause”: that is, negating the genocide of the Tutsis.

Michael Karnavas, an American de-

fence lawyer who was part of this early group, was told by de Temmerman that he was not representing an individual but “the Hutu nation” and “the cause”. Thierry Cruvellier quotes Karnavas: “I was instructed that the genocide had not occurred, that it was simply Tutsi propaganda; but that if a genocide had taken place, the Tutsis were responsible for exterminating the Hutus.” (see Court of Remorse: Inside the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, University of Wisconsin Press, 2010). In light of these defence tactics, several lawyers who have worked for the accused have insisted in court and publicly that there was no genocide, and that the defendants have therefore committed no crime.

Since such early tactics, a number of prominent defence lawyers have continued Temmerman’s campaign – both at the ICTR and in domestic courts where their clients have stood accused of genocide and related crimes. Indeed in some cases their virulent negationist views, promulgated at every opportunity at specially convened conferences, university campuses, media appearances and online, see them revel in the quasi-celebrity status, publicity and self-promotion that such denial gives them. As genocide has repeated itself so have genocide-deniers. Michael Shermer notes that one high-profile Holocaust-denier “slipped into the revisionist movement not because the historical evidence has taken him there, but because he found an audience and a receptive market.”

With Rwanda as with the Holocaust, a reverse “Stockholm syndrome” is operating. This has affected some who have come under the RDR’s influence, albeit many are not aware of

its denialist nature until they have become fully committed supporters. It is clear that several lawyers who began defence work for the genocidaire started out knowing nothing about 1994, but over a short period became indoctrinated by their client’s Hutu extremist ideology; the result, in some cases, saw them taking on even more extreme views than those they represented. An assessment of Holocaust denier David Irving rings all too true of many lawyers and commentators who have cemented their reputations on the basis of denying the genocide against the Tutsi. “Gaining no positive reinforcement from academic circles and scholarly historians, [Irving] began to identify with those who were providing him with primary source documents - old Nazis and Hitler insiders” (see Michael Shermer, “The Faustian bargain of David Irving”, in Michael Shermer & Alex Grobner eds., Denying History: Who Says the Holocaust Never Happened and Why Do They Say It?, University of California Press, 2000/2009).

It’s a sad take on today’s world where denial of the most appalling crime (whether it be by the Ottoman state, Serbian nationalists, anti-semites, or Hutu extremists and their ideological partners) seems more and more to go unnoticed by a public that tires quickly of, or is vulnerable to amnesia over, even relatively recent world events. Into such fallow - and fertile - ground, genocide denial can quickly take root: first revising the truth, then reversing it.

To paraphrase Stefan Ihrig talking about Armenia, again earlier this year: Rwandan denialism “says the men, women and children never died. Or if they did - if those mass graves,

pit latrines, churches, roadsides, banana plantations and hillsides were indeed the final horrific resting place of those who were cut and hacked and shot to death - they were merely victims of a war. And anyway it was their fault because 'their' side started it in 1990. And such violence was in the circumstances understandable. But it was never a genocide."

Yet the victims were not just some sort of collateral damage - all 800,000 of them; Each person had their own loves and lives and hopes and dreams. Nor are they mere statistics to be argued over by those trying to defend their actions or to make cheap polit-

ical or intellectual points. The genocide must not be reduced to an RDR-inspired conspiracy theory that absolves the perpetrators of blame, and absolves the rest of us with having to make any decision as to who was to blame. As the British journalist Lindsey Hilsum, the only English-speaking journalist in Rwanda as the genocide erupted, notes: "You cannot be objective about genocide. It's not 'on the one hand the victims are good and on the other hand they are bad.'" Nor can you be objective about denial or those who promote it. To deny genocide is surely to deny our own humanity.