

GENOCIDE OF THE TUTSI - JUDI REVER IN THE MIRROR OF BISESERO

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Rwanda Complicité de la France dans le génocide des Tutsi au Rwanda

In a piece published in the French weekly Marianne in December 2019 the Canadian journalist Judi Rever alleged that the Tutsi of Bisesero were slaughtered by commandos of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), the mostly Tutsi rebellion led by Paul Kagame, which had infiltrated the Hutu militia. It is a misleading accusation and was first promoted by the genocidaires.

This article is a translation ^[1], published 2 July 2020, of the one originally written in french, 26 June 2020, [available here](#).

When the genocide started in April 1994 tens of thousands of Tutsi gathered on the hills of Bisesero in the West of Rwanda near Kibuye. They managed to resist until a big offensive mounted by the Rwandan Armed Forces and Interahamwe militia that killed most of them on 13 and 14 May. The survivors of this massive attack managed to hide starving, were pursued daily by militia and the Hutu population accompanied by officers from the Rwandan military and the civil authorities. On 27 June French soldiers from Operation Turquoise (22 June – 22 August 1994) discovered in Bisesero a hundred Tutsi in a very poor state of health. They claimed there were 2,000 people. However, for the next three days nothing was done to rescue them. Only 800 were still alive when they were finally saved by the French on 30 June. Hundreds of them had been exterminated in the intervening days.

« The official story »

For Judi Rever this is « *the official story* ». According to her account the Tutsi of Bisesero were slaughtered by « *commandos from the RPF battalions* » infiltrated inside the Hutu militia. And Paul Kagame, at that time military commander of the RPF army, gave the order. « *These commandos launched a series of initial attacks in the area, side by side with the Hutu militia called Interahamwe, from the middle to the end of May at the height of the genocide* », writes Judi Rever. The aim of this « strategy of intoxication » was to give the RPF « the political capital necessary to achieve their national and international ambitions ». Putting it clearly: provide the RPF, once in power, the political legitimacy to have put an end to the genocide after having aroused and encouraged and partially perpetrated it.

While Judi Rever gossips about RPF commandos officered by James Kabarebe and Charles Kayonga acting on the orders of Paul Kagame, the Trial Chambers and the Appeals Chamber of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) has already established that the slaughter of the Tutsi in Bisesero was organized by the Rwandan authorities, including at the highest level of state.

According to the ICTR, in the second half of April the minister of information Eliezer Niyitegeka in the genocidal Interim Government, « *led more than 6,000 armed attackers, comprising soldiers, policemen and Interahamwe, in a large-scale attack at Muyira Hill [Bisesero] against Tutsi refugees* ^{2]} ». A meeting with Prime minister Jean Kambanda, Minister of the Interior Edouard Karemera and Prefect Clément Kayishema was held on 3 May in Kibuye, « *in which Kayishema reported there was serious insecurity caused by those gathered in Bisesero and requested reinforcement to resolve the problem* ^{3]} ». A meeting was held the same day at which Karemera and the chairman of the MRND (Mouvement Républicain National pour le Développement – President Habyarimana’s party) Mathieu Ngirumpatse publicly incited the crime of genocide. Kambanda and Niyitegeka were also present ^{4]} .

The most severe attacks occurred in the Bisesero area ten days later on 13 and 14 May 1994. Kayishema participated. He « *directed the assaults [...], gave instructions to the soldiers [...] or gave orders to the assailants to begin the assault* ^{5]} ». For his part Niyitegeka « *was one of the leaders in a large-scale attack by armed attackers against Tutsi refugees at Muyira Hill [Bisesero]* ^{6]} » on 13 May. On the evening of the same day he held a meeting « *for the purpose of deciding on the programme of killings for the next day and to organize these killings against the Tutsi in Bisesero, who numbered approximately 60,000. The meeting was attended by about 5,000 people* ^{7]} ». On 16 May 1994, Interim President Theodore Sindikubwabo held a « *security meeting* » in Kibuye, with Prefect Clément Kayishema. He congratulated the Rwandan Armed Forces and the people of Kibuye, which the ICTR had considered a way to encourage « *the people to attack and destroy the Tutsi as a group* ^{8]} ».

On or about 10 June 1994, Minister of Information Niyitegeka « *attended a meeting at Kibuye Prefectural Hall as one of the leaders [...]. The objective of the meeting was to find ways to kill all Tutsi in Bisesero* ^{9]} ». During another meeting held sometime around 17 June 1994 Niyitegeka « *sketched a plan for the next day’s attack* ^{10]} ». On 18 June, Minister of the Interior Karemera, « *acting on behalf of the Interim Government, ordered a “mopping-up” operation in Bisesero* ». To this end he wrote to Lieutenant Colonel Anatole Nsengiyumva, who was the commander of the Gisenyi Operational Sector, Clément Kayishema, who was the prefect of Kibuye Prefecture, and the commander of the Kibuye Operational Sector, requesting their assistance in the operation ^{11]} .

Indirect, anonymous and dubious witnesses

Evidently Judi Rever has made no effort to read the judgements of the ICTR about the genocide in the Bisesero area, in spite of the fact that the judges spent months hearing testimony and the cross-examination of witnesses, both the prosecution and the defence and examining the material evidence, before passing the sentence first in the Trial Chamber and then in the Appeals Chamber.

Judi Rever sweeps away the enormous work of the ICTR in establishing the facts. She is happy instead to rely on indirect or anonymous or dubious witnesses. One of the witnesses she quotes claims that « *those who participated in the operation told him this and further claimed there were members of the commandos of Kagame’s battalions* ». Another one heard members of the RPF say in bars « *what they had done and how many Tutsi they had killed* ». Anonymous sources « *establish that hundreds of members of RPF commandos went down to Bisesero and the surrounding areas* ».

The only witness who is identified is James Munyandinda. He is presented as a member of Kagame's bodyguards. He claims that he « *heard Kagame ask Kabarebe on the radio how things went in Bisesero [...] if the slaughters were successful* ». Munyandinda's name is not unknown. He testified in 2017 in the investigation led by a French judge into the missile fire on President Habyarimana's plane on 6 April 1994, which gave the signal for the genocide of the Tutsi to begin. He claimed that he had seen the RPF carry the missiles which shot down the plane. Unfortunately what he said did not correspond to what two other so-called witnesses of the same event said (*Jeune Afrique*, « France-Rwanda : les contradictions du nouveau témoin qui incrimine le FPR dans l'attentat du 6 avril 1994 », 17/10/2017). How could it ? The hypothesis that the crime was committed by the FPR was demolished in 2012 after a ballistic investigation by French experts and confirmed in witness statements by French and Belgian military. This investigation proved that the missiles were launched from the Kanombe camp, fortress of the Hutu Power extremists, a place impossible to access by RPF commandos. Had Munyandinda, a convinced monarchist and opponent to Kagame, crossed the line in order to accuse the president of Rwanda ? Why would he not lie again about Bisesero ?

Eager to find witnesses who heard it from the horse's mouth, Judi Rever quotes « *a former high ranking intelligence officer* » who « *claims that the official Hutu military forces had fled the area at the end of June and had not participated in the killing of the Tutsi* ». If this intelligence officer really exists, then he has no future career in intelligence: French military documents show that the Rwandan Armed Forces were near Kibuye till 18 July ^[12] . On 27 June an attack against the Tutsi in Bisesero is reported by the intelligence bureau of Operation Turquoise : « *On the 27th around 11 AM a group of a hundred of armed militia officered by military attacked a hill in the area of Gisovu (25 [km] south Kibuye) ; 200 Tutsi belonging to the commune were gathered in the area and were threatened by the Hutu* ^[13] ».

At the end of June 1994 French soldiers of Operation Turquoise began to enter the South West of Rwanda especially the region of Kibuye. Operation Turquoise was officially described as a humanitarian operation aiming to stop the slaughter, but it had another aim : to stop the RPF and to protect the « *Hutu land* ^[14] ». For Judi Rever « *the accusations against France are nothing but a transparent manoeuvre aiming to divert the attention from the major role of the RPF in the slaughter of the Tutsi* », including the Tutsi of Bisesero : « *through one of their most devilish and best planned operations of 1994 the RPF ended by stamping out the resistance of the Tutsi of Bisesero. They made sure that thousands of them died at the end of June when the French army arrived in Rwanda with a mission of humanitarian help* ».

The Tutsi of Bisesero abandoned by the French military

This account has no basis in fact. On 26 June journalists informed French military that the genocide continued not far away in Bisesero. On 27 June a detachment commanded by Capitaine de frégate (Commander) Marin Gillier arrived in Gishyita, a few kilometers far from Bisesero as the crow flies. At the end of the morning Gillier saw a hundred of armed men, most of them civilians, who left for Bisesero. Then he saw them attack in Bisesero. In his daily report to the commander of the French special forces of Operation Turquoise Colonel Rosier, Gillier spoke of « *combat* » and not of slaughter in spite of the information he had received from journalists the previous day.

On 27 June at the beginning of the afternoon, a patrol commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Duval went to Bisesero apparently without informing Gillier. A Tutsi survivor named Éric Nzabihimana compelled the French to stop. Then a hundred of Tutsi in a very poor state of

health, some of them wounded, came forward and met the French. They said that they were 2,000 people in the hills. Duval left them without protection. He only advised them to go back and hide till the French come back « *in two or three days* ». Duval reported to his superiors the same evening but for the next three days nothing was done to rescue the survivors in spite of the fact that their situation was described in French military documents ^[15] and medias (RFI on 28 June, *Le Figaro* and *Libération* on 29 June).

On 30 June Gillier's marine commandos went through Bisesero but their orders were not to rescue Tutsi. The rear guard of Gillier's detachment, with soldiers from 13ème Régiment of Dragons Parachutistes and gendarmes of the GIGN ^[16] – among them Sergeant-Major Thierry Prungnaud – commanded by Capitaine Dunant decided to find the Tutsi survivors. This time the French stayed with the survivors and called for a rescue operation. Gillier returned to Bisesero and discovered the reality of the genocide. The day afterwards he fetched the bourgmestre of Gishyita and held him to account for the attackers that had departed from his commune the previous days. Gillier did not fetch the infiltrated commandos of the RPF, the version preferred by Judi Rever for a good reason : he found no trace of them, as he testified to the French Mission d'information parlementaire in 1998 ^[17] .

From 27 June to 30 June hundreds of Tutsi were exterminated in Bisesero while French troops knew and stayed a few kilometers away as far as the crow flies. Did the French do nothing in order to let the killers act freely ?

The investigation opened by the French justice in 2005 is now close to its end. Survivors from Bisesero had pressed charges against French military of Operation Turquoise. A case has been opened that is now being investigated by the bureau specialising in crimes against humanity of the Paris tribunal. In July 2018 the judges in charge have communicated their intention to close the case. Still crucial questions remain. Why did Commander Marin Gillier and Colonel Rosier keep telling the media from 27 to 30 June that « men of the RPF » were in Bisesero, instead of speaking of the civilians who were being exterminated ? Did Marin Gillier's soldiers let the killers go through their check-point in Gishyita as some witnesses claim ? Above all, why did the French military high command give no order to rescue the Tutsi ^[18] ?

Judi Rever in the footsteps of the genocidaires

As a journalist Judi Rever has evidently failed in her first duty and that is to verify the testimonies she collected and compare them with the judgements handed down at the ICTR and with the available French military documents. Was she just too lazy or too credulous and thus easily manipulated by her sources ? Might the entire article just be deliberate disinformation ? In any case her perverted account of the genocide of the Tutsi of Bisesero feeds a thesis dear to those who seek to deny the genocide of the Tutsi. Judi Rever spells it out herself : « *The Tutsi who lived in Rwanda, were opposed to those who grew up as refugees in Ouganda, Burundi, Congo and Tanzania and were sacrificed on the altar of RPF's big ambitions* ».

This accusation, also taken up by the Belgian law professor Filip Reyntjens and the French sociologist André Guichaoua, originated with the genocidaires themselves. The former chairman of MRND Mathieu Ndirumpatse wrote in 1996 : « *The life of the Tutsi was not a priority concern of the RPF. They could all die if that was the price of power* ^[19] ». Sweeping away ballistics expertise and credible testimony, Reyntjens and Guichaoua accuse the RPF for the attack on President Habyarimana's plane, to bolster their claim that they risked triggering the genocide of the Tutsi, and had « sacrificed » them in order to take power. As for Judi Rever,

she uses a fable about Bisesero enunciated by the extremist ideologue Ferdinand Nahimana, who was condemned by the ICTR : « *General Paul Kagame infiltrated his soldiers among the young people controlling the roadblocks. These infiltrators had the role of killing as many people as possible, exposing their bodies on the roads in order to draw the attention of journalists to the ongoing atrocities in Rwanda, to lead them to accuse the government of being responsible for the massacres and to condemn it through the international press* ²⁰ ».

Rever suggests that the genocide of the Tutsis was premeditated by... the RPF : « *Started in February 1992, the formation of the commandos ended in August 1993. [...] At the end of 1993, a senior officer explained, commandos were a very important group. The soldiers claim that several thousand young men took commando training and were deployed in Kigali and throughout Rwanda in January 1994, ready to act after the assassination of Habyarimana on 6 April 1994* ». She thus reinforces the idea of « the accusation in the mirror », which consists of falsely attributing to the RPF and more broadly to the Tutsis the project of the genocide of the Hutus at the very moment when the Hutus extremists were preparing that of the Tutsis. For Judi Rever, genocidal intent is no longer the prerogative of the Rwandan Interim Government and the Hutu extremists, it belongs to Paul Kagame's RPF.

Such a blatant attempt at distorting history, and such impudence, leaves us speechless. Her work is a painful reminder of what French historian Pierre Vidal-Naquet wrote about how a negationist operates : « *The deception is intended to appear as something it is not – an effort to write and understand history. The negationist does not build a true story. It is not about revising history* ». This is a matter of shameless deception, and the effect is to murder the victims a second time.

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^[1] Many thanks to Linda Melvern for her help with the English version.

^[2] ICTR, Trial Chamber I, The Prosecutor v. Eliezer Niyitegeka, Case No. ICTR-96-14-T, Judgment and sentence (May 16, 2003) § 115.

^[3] ICTR, Trial Chamber II, The Prosecutor v. Clément Kayishema and Ober Ruzindana, Case No. ICTR-95-1-T, Decision of 21 May 1999, § 406.

^[4] ICTR, Appeals Chamber, Édouard Karemera Mathieu Ngirumpatse v. the Prosecutor, Case No. ICTR-98-44-A, Judgement of 29 September 2014, § 472 to 491.

^[5] ICTR, Appeals Chamber, The Prosecutor v. Clément Kayishema and Obed Runzindana, ICTR-95-1-A, Judgement of 1 June 2001, § 251 (et sq.).

^[6] ICTR, Trial Chamber I, The Prosecutor v. Elezer Niyitegeka, Case No. ICTR-96-14-T, Judgement of 16 May 2003, § 178.

^[7] ICTR, Trial Chamber I, The Prosecutor v. Elezer Niyitegeka, Case No. ICTR-96-14-T, § 257.

^[8] ICTR, Appeals Chamber, Édouard Karemera Mathieu Ngirumpatse v. the Prosecutor, Case No. ICTR-98-44-A, § 502.

^[9] ICTR, Trial Chamber I, The Prosecutor v. Elezer Niyitegeka, Case No. ICTR-96-14-T, § 225.

^[10] ICTR, Trial Chamber I, The Prosecutor v. Elezer Niyitegeka, Case No. ICTR-96-14-T, § 268.

^[11] ICTR, Appeals Chamber, Édouard Karemera Mathieu Ngirumpatse v. the Prosecutor, Case No. ICTR-98-44-A, § 572.

^[12] Raphaël Doridant and François Graner, *L'État français et le génocide des Tutsis au Rwanda*, Agone, 2020, p. 191-192.

^[13] Benoît Collombat, « Rwanda : les documents qui accusent la France », France Inter, 30 novembre 2015.

^[14] Raphaël Doridant and François Graner, *L'État français et le génocide des Tutsis au Rwanda*, op. cit., p. 188-215.

^[15] Cf. Benoît Collombat, « Rwanda : les documents qui accusent la France », France Inter, 30 novembre 2015.

^[16] Gendarmerie Intervention Group.

^[17] « Note du Capitaine de frégate Marin Gillier, 30 juin 1998. Intervention à Bisesero », in Assemblée nationale, *Enquête sur la tragédie rwandaise (1990-1994)*, tome II, Annexes, annexe 9.C, p. 402 et 404.

^[18] https://survie.org/IMG/pdf/survie_dossier_synthese_bisesero_30-10-2018.pdf

^[19] Mathieu Ngirumpatse, *La tragédie rwandaise : l'autre face de l'histoire*, s. l., s. d. (1996 ?), p. 7.

^[20] Ferdinand Nahimana, Rwanda. *Les virages ratés*, éditions des sources du Nil, 2007, p. 406.