

On the role played by Paris in Rwanda

A « French Hand » in Genocide

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J'accuse senior French officials of complicity in Rwanda's 1994 genocide, of cynically arming thousands of murderous maniacs, despite an international arms embargo, and of covering up crimes against humanity. I further accuse them of deliberately tricking French officers into providing a safe haven for killers, and rescuing evil men as part of Operation Turquoise, a "humanitarian mission".

Exactly 100 years before the genocide, when Emile Zola wrote *J'accuse* to expose the wrongful conviction of (Jewish) Captain Alfred Dreyfus for spying, he set in motion a debate that split the country and disgraced the army. Today France's behaviour again seems far from honourable.

Four years ago this week the mysterious assassination of the Presidents of Rwanda and Burundi, both members of the Hutu tribe, in a mid-air explosion over Kigali sparked genocide by Hutu extremists. For three months an average of 37,500 Tutsis and Hutu moderates were slaughtered each day, most of them hacked with machetes and bludgeoned with clubs. No one has emerged from this horror with any honour. The media, myself included, were slow to recognize the scale of the "ethnic blood-letting". When it became clear that the killing was planned, well-organised and on a massive scale, President Clinton banned his State Department officials from calling it "genocide"; last the United States be called upon to fulfill international legal obligations to intervene. The British government sat on its hands. We must all share in a collective guilt that we did nothing to stop the genocide. Arguments that there was nothing that could have been done are stupid. Well trained and armed Western soldiers could have stopped the

slaughter in a matter of days.

But while we contemplate our guilt of omission, the French have a heavier burden to bear. A small clique of individuals inside the administration was wholeheartedly conniving in a massacre. This week Edouard Balladur, the then French Prime Minister, said that press reports of French backing of *les génocidaires* were "scandalous" and "revolting". Other members of his Government have blamed Paul Kagame's Tutsi rebels for bringing down the presidential plane, and of killing as many Hutus as the Hutus killed Tutsis.

The following facts are not in doubt. France armed the Hutu army before, during, and after the genocide. French troops rescued among others, Colonel Theoneste Bagosora (Chef de cabinet in the Hutu government and the evil genius behind the genocide) in July 1994 as the Tutsi rebels closed in on Butare. French troops who did arrest members of the *Inter-ahamwe*, a brotherhood of killers, released several of them before they could be handed over to United Nations officers and charged.

In addition, special forces officers such as Captain Gillier (who was last week singled out for turning a blind eye to killings in Operation Turquoise) were pumped full of false information by their superiors, who described Tutsi survivors as "rebel infiltrators". At first, he regarded the Tutsis as the enemy, but he soon compared the killings to Nazi atrocities.

Part of the explanation for these actions can be put down to an obsession inside "the French cell" ["the African cell"] of the Elysee Palace (which runs policy in Africa) with an "Anglo-Saxon conspiracy" – the theory that Britain and America are trying to usurp

France in her traditional spheres of influence. Bernard Debré who was cooperation minister in 1994, said this week that he didn't want to "portray a showdown between the French and the Anglo-Saxons, but the truth must be told". This theory has real credence in the Elysée – but surely the French Government could not have been prepared to back a genocide as a mean to combat the spread of English from Uganda, where the Tutsi rebels were based ?

This year the French parliament reluctantly opened a commission of inquiry into the French role in Rwanda, which is likely to be as divisive and damaging as the 1894 Dreyfus Affair and the shame of the Vichy administration. Many serving and former French ministers will appear before the commission and lie. Their statements will make fools of honourable French officers who took part in Operation Turquoise and who are anxious to clear their names. M. Balladur said he would testify before the commission so that "the honour of France and the French Army would be sheltered from completely unjust attacks". Men like Captain Gillier, now French naval attaché in Egypt, should not let their political masters continue to cover up France's activities in Rwanda. The French armed forces have a chance to show that they have more honour than the politicians who embarrassed them in Rwanda. They may be among the few who can explain why France backed the Hutu extremists. If they break military protocol and disclose who gave them their orders, it might be possible to trace the criminals who have so shamed them.