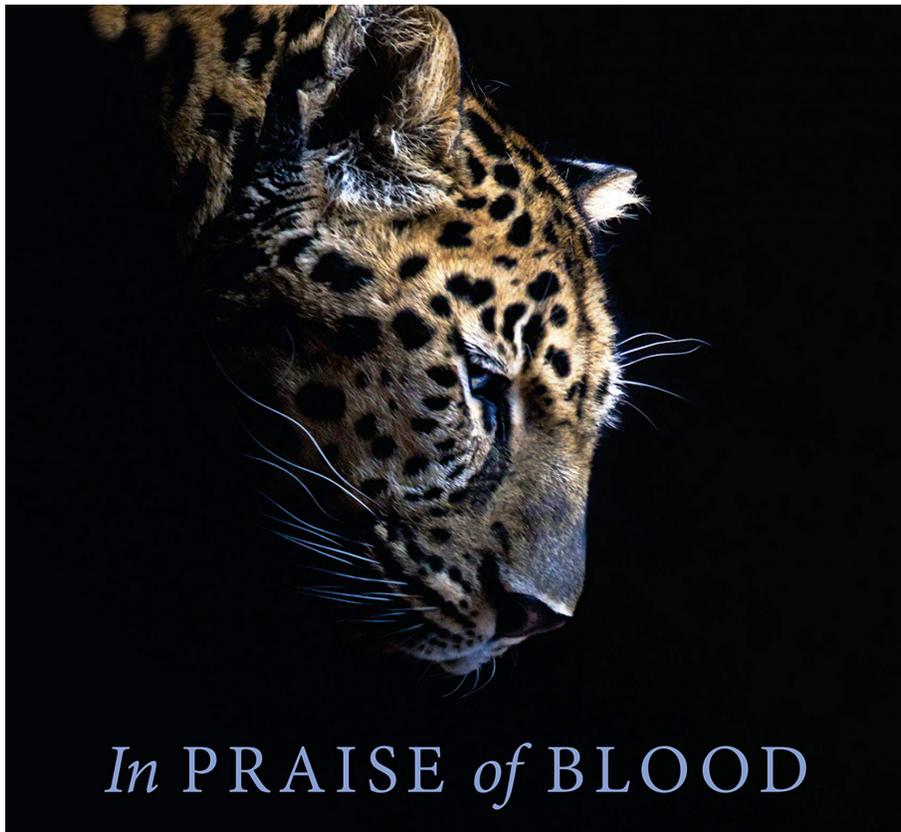


Review - 'In Praise of Blood': Sensational, but  
Does it Fit with Reality?

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In her book *In Praise of Blood*, Canadian author Judi Rever controversially claims that not one, but two genocides were committed in Rwanda in 1994.[1] The first genocide nearly wiped out the

**Tutsi minority. A second one, secretly committed by the Tutsi dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), allegedly targeted the Hutu majority. It's a sensational story, but how well does it fit with reality? How well researched is it?**

## Smokescreen

Although Rever's book is promoted as a ground-breaking piece of investigative journalism, the double genocide theory is not new. It was used by genocidaires in their trials, and is an idea promoted by their acolytes and supporters.[2]

Hutu hardliners have accused the RPF of genocide throughout the Rwandan civil war of the early 1990s.[3] Then in May 1994, with half a million Tutsi killed, the extremist regime accused the RPF of having slaughtered hundreds of thousands of Hutu.[4]

Human Rights Watch and other observers commented at the time that such counter accusations were part of a smokescreen, designed to distract foreign attention from the ongoing genocide against the Tutsi and to instil fear in the Hutu-population. The regime, supported by extremist radio station RTLM, consistently blamed the RPF for crimes they were themselves committing.[5]

Judi Rever claims the allegations must not be dismissed as propaganda. Her argument is that the RPF got away with massive crimes because they committed their genocide in total secrecy, under the cover of night, and cleaned up after themselves. "It was mass murder leaving barely a trace", she writes.[6] One further claim is that the Western allies even lent a hand in covering up the atrocities.

However, as far as the facts of the book can be checked, Rever's revelations appear to be riddled with errors, omissions and scientifically unsound theories that warrant scrutiny before her book can be regarded as a valid contribution to our knowledge.

## Nazi Death Camps

The first element of Rever's theory raising eyebrows is a comparison she makes with Nazi-Germany.[7] The methods used to accomplish the Hutu-genocide, she writes, resembled those of the Third Reich. The RPF supposedly operated Nazi-style death camps, deployed Einsatzgruppen and mobile gas chambers, and used cremation pits, "... where up to hundreds of thousands of Hutus from different areas of the country were killed during and after the genocide".[8]

Nazi death camps, mass transports, open air cremations, organized by an outnumbered rebel army in the midst of war, all going unnoticed in a tiny country like Rwanda seems far-fetched, to say the least. Without any physical evidence or consistent witness accounts, this story might just as well be a hoax. So where did Rever's death camp theory originate?

In 1996, Canadian filmmakers Danièle Lacourse and Yvan Patry released 'Chronicle of a Genocide Foretold', an influential documentary which also devotes a great deal of attention to war crimes ascribed to the RPF. [9] One of

the witnesses in the film tells a story about a military camp near Gabiro, in the northeast of Rwanda, where he claims to have worked as a nurse as of August 1994.

"That's where I started to worry about the RPF," the man explains on camera..

A soldier stationed at Gabiro told him that more than a thousand Hutu were murdered every night. In the space of five days the soldier had counted 6.000 victims, according to the nurse. Their remains were allegedly burned, their ashes dispersed in the surrounding area.

Judi Rever uses a different version of this story, based on a letter she found in a binder of old documents. In this version, the nurse works at a military hospital. The story of the soldier and the exterminations now takes place a month earlier, not in Gabiro but in a Kigali suburb.[10] Later, after being transferred to Gabiro, the nurse saw smoke rising from an adjacent camp, prompting him to assume that what he had been told in Kigali was also true for Gabiro.

More versions were published in French and English newspapers.[11] The details keep changing but one thing all the different versions have in common is that this witness, who turned out to be a Hutu named Pierre N., never saw any crimes for himself during the eight months he says he had spent in Gabiro.

Journalist Nick Gordon ended up driving to the camp in early 1996 to take a look.[12] But although one of Judi Rever's key witnesses - a former RPF soldier - claims that the killing and burning of Hutu was still continuing at that time,[13] all Gordon found were three primitive army barracks, nothing remotely resembling a death camp.

"It's hard to believe that this dot on the map is an extermination camp," Gordon wrote. He nevertheless compared the camp to Auschwitz, based on Pierre N.'s story.

## American TV Show

In the years that followed, more Nazi-elements were added to the story by other authors. In Rever's book, Gabiro has completed the transformation from the few ramshackle army barracks seen by Gordon, into a fully functional Treblinka-style extermination camp.

The hundreds of thousands who, according to Rever, had vanished in Gabiro were either burned or dissolved in acid, their ashes dispersed in the area with bulldozers.[14] If true, this theory would certainly make a sensational story. But how do specialized scientists look at it ?

Reza Gerretsen M.D., the senior forensic anthropologist of the Netherlands Forensic Institute (NFI) and Dr. Sophie Churchill OBE, who has headed the Corpse Project, a body farm in England, were kind enough to comment on the methods described by Rever.[15]

"Cremating human remains is a relatively quick process that requires little fuel," says Gerretsen. "This is a consequence of body fat being released when heated, which sustains the combustion. However, bone is a different story, you don't get rid of it very easily."

“If you burnt bodies then you would be left with skull fragments and large bones such as femurs”, both experts explain.

“Is it being suggested that the remains reduced to an even dust that could be spread?” Churchill asks. “This seems unlikely. What we call ashes here are ground bones.”

Churchill is also sceptical about the detail of the bulldozer. “If there were many fires night after night the bulldozer would be moving over a very big area ultimately. It isn’t a good machine for incorporating ashes into the soil.”

And the alternative, the acid method?

“Getting rid of human remains in acids is impractical and hazardous”, according to Gerretsen, who has investigated acid murder cases with his NFI-colleagues. “It takes a very long time and you are still left with some remains”.

According to the scientific publication about the investigated cases, the perpetrators had been messing around with containers filled with acids for weeks in their attempts to disappear a couple of victims.[16]

“You mustn’t believe that a body completely vanishes in acid,” Gerretsen adds. “That’s what they show on American TV shows. But reality is different. The logistics are also problematic.”

So, not a credible story?

Gerretsen : “In that context and with such huge numbers of victims, it is highly unlikely.”

A comparison with the actual Nazi extermination camps does not make Rever’s story any more plausible. The SS had been experimenting for months to cope with the problems they encountered with open air cremations. They finally turned their extermination campaign into an industrial process with tools that were lacking in Rwanda.

Even then they found it difficult to hide the remains. “Attempts to mix the ash with dirt and dust proved unsuccessful as a means of concealing the ash”, Yithzak Arad writes in his book on the Operation Reinhard camps.[17] Eventually the ashes - meaning the crushed bone fragments - were simply buried.

Judi Rever uses a ‘top secret’ interim report of an ICTR Special Investigations team from 2003 to legitimize her claims.[18] The report mentions one source for executions in the Gabiro area between May and August 1994.[19] It also mentions bodies transported to be burned in the Akagera National Park in September and October.[20] However, the death toll is very different : between several hundred and a couple of thousand, not the hundreds of thousands estimated by Rever.

## Smoking gun

Efforts to find solid evidence for a genocide against the Hutu were never successful. “For roughly a month after the Tutsi victory,” Pulitzer Prize winner Mark Fritz explains in an email, “I spent most of my time hunting down reprisals in southern Rwanda. I never found a smoking gun that showed systematic reprisals against the Hutu. One of the sources of these allegations was a Belgian priest who had rumors but not much else.”[21]

A Belgian journalist who witnessed a quarter of a million Hutu refugees arriving in Tanzania, allegedly escaping the RPF onslaught, was not convinced either : “These people had all their possessions with them, mattresses, goats, cornsacks, cooking utensils. They were not traumatized either, had no blood on their clothes, had all their children with them. Something was not right.”[22]

Other journalists and human rights researchers had similar problems finding proof for genocidal massacres targeting Hutus, “... although the UNHCR, relying on second hand reports from Hutu-refugees, has said this is the case,” Mark Huband noted in *The Observer*. [23]

One UNHCR report has gained an almost mythical status among genocide revisionists. Consultant Robert Gersony and his team spent five weeks interviewing people in refugee camps outside Rwanda, and in villages inside Rwanda, in the aftermath of the genocide. [24]

“What they discovered was disturbing”, Judi Rever writes. “RPF soldiers appeared to have carried out genocide against Hutu civilians.” [25]

What she doesn’t tell is that Gersony did not confirm the allegations in the field when he had the chance. [26] However, according to Shaharyar Khan, the UN special representative in Rwanda, several investigations were carried out afterwards, also by himself. [27] In one instance, Gersony’s information turned out to be correct, except the identities of killers and victims had been reversed.

The mass graves? We found nothing.

French magazine *L’Express* noted in November ’94 that Canadian Peacekeepers had spent three weeks following up Gersony’s information. [28] “In vain”, one of them had said. “The mass graves? We found nothing. Except for mass graves from before the RPF’s conquest.” This was later corroborated by a military attaché of the US embassy in Kigali, involved in the investigations. [29]

“The report circulated unofficially very widely”, according to Howard Adelman, a scholar who has investigated one of the massacres during field research in 1995, despite its confidentiality. [30] Adelman and his colleague Astri Suhrke found that a number of civilians had indeed been killed by RPF troops while repressing a rebellion, but that their number had been grossly exaggerated.

“The conclusions of the Gersony Report of occurrences within Rwanda could possibly have been true,” Adelman reflects on his website, “but the evidence we examined undermined the credibility of those conclusions and fit in too well with the Hutu revisionist claim that, on the one hand, denied the genocide, and, on the other hand, claimed that it was Kagame that had perpetuated a genocide.” [31]

An empirical study conducted by Philip Verwimp in central and south western Rwanda confirmed this general picture. [32] Verwimp found that nearly all Tutsi households had lost members in the genocide, a third having been completely exterminated. In contrast, a small minority of Hutu households (8%) had lost one or more members due to either extremist Hutu or RPF violence.

## Fact checking

Many details concerning the double genocide theory appear to be deliberately misleading. After Rever tries to discredit the late Alison Des Forges of Human Rights Watch as anti-Hutu,[33] she writes : “Academics at the University of Rwanda estimated that some forty thousand civilians had been killed by the RPF in Byumba and Ruhengeri prefectures by early 1993.”[34]

The likely reason for discrediting Des Forges is that Human Rights Watch dismissed that huge estimate in June 1993 as not credible,[35] and has repeated this conclusion in at least two other reports.[36] According to Des Forges, the report of the intellectuals included “spurious detail” that would have been impossible to obtain given the lack of access to the region at the time.

In another example Rever suggests that the many corpses floating in the Kagera River from late April 1994 onward were Hutu-victims of the RPF,[37] without mentioning that in late April and May 1994 NGOs were still reporting that upstream, in government territory, up to 5.000 Tutsi a day ended up dead in the river.[38]

Even the ‘top secret’ report of the Special Investigations team of the ICTR, which summarizes accusations collected from political dissidents and army deserters in the Diaspora,[39] several of whom later retracted their statements,[40] did not reach conclusions or casualty figures anywhere near those put forward by Rever.

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss in detail every misconception in Judi Rever’s book. Her information about the assault on president Habyarimana’s plane alone will need another article to discuss.

Rever suggests, for instance, that an RPF commando shot down the aircraft from Masaka, an area several kilometers south-east of the airport, under the guidance of a civilian RPF-infiltrator in the control tower communicating with them over a two-way radio.[41] This assumption is disputed by Filip Reyntjens, who investigated the assault in 1995.[42]

Government soldiers were present in the control tower which made communications with the alleged missile commando very unlikely.[43] Moreover, the location of Masaka has been ruled out by independent forensic research commissioned by the French judiciary, published in 2012,[44] which convincingly discredits Rever’s witnesses.

This is not to say that *In Praise of Blood*’ is completely without merits. The facts about US involvement during the invasion of Congo in 1996, for example, appear to be correct as they are confirmed by Gregory Stanton of Genocide Watch.[45]

But the mixing of accurate facts with ones that are demonstrably rooted in the old Hutu Power propaganda, such as her story of Tutsi-infiltrators terrorizing their fellow Tutsi at roadblocks, an allegation broadcast by RTL radio in June 1994,[46] makes the puzzle difficult to unravel, even for some experts.

Most alarming about this book is that nobody appears to have bothered with fact checking to establish the veracity of the information. Judi Rever didn’t, but neither did Random House Canada, a renowned publishing house. This is very

confusing to readers, not to say insulting to genocide survivors. And as the book is being translated into other languages, even listed for literary awards, again no one involved seems to bother with what might be real and what not.

If revelations sound too good to be true, when counter-evidence is omitted, and dubious sources are mentioned as credible informants as is the case in Judi Rever's book, the reader would be wise to seek out more reliable information, available in the huge amount of thoroughly researched scholarly studies published over the years, before taking 'In Praise of Blood' at face value.

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[1] <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/books/546081/in-praise-of-blood-by-judi-rever/9780345812094>

[2] Alison Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story : Genocide in Rwanda*. New York-Washington-London-Brussels : Human Rights Watch ; 1999, p. 78 ; Thierry Cruvellier, *Court of Remorse : Inside the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda*. The University of Wisconsin Press 2010, p. 32-34 ; Klaus Bachmann & Aleksandar Fatic. *The UN International Criminal Tribunals : Transition without Justice ?* Routledge, London, New York, 2015, p. 243 ; Roland Moerland, *The Killing of Death, denying the genocide against the Tutsi*. Intersentia, Cambridge, Antwerp, Portland 2016, p. 154.

[3] *The Killing of Death*, p. 167-171. Allegations of a Tutsi conspiracy to exterminate the Hutu majority were published since 1991 in booklets and the newspaper Kangura. Accusations of a genocide committed against the Hutu were published since February 1993 in press releases of political parties MRND and CDR.

[4] United Nations Security Council, 3377th Meeting, 16 May 1994. Doc. No. S/PV.3377, p. 4-5, available at :

<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Chap%20VII%20SPV%203377.pdf> ; The counter accusations were taken from an undated report, titled : *Donnees sur L'Agression menee par L'Ouganda contre le Rwanda*, sent to the UN Security Council by interim minister Bicomupaka on 21 April 1994. Also see : Human Rights Watch, *Genocide in Rwanda April – May 1994*. Human Rights Watch/Africa May 1994, p. 8.

[5] *Leave None to Tell the Story*, p. 88-89.

[6] *In Praise of Blood*, p. 4.

[7] *Id.* p. 229.

[8] *Id.* pp. 92, 200, 241 (quote).

[9] Yvan Patry & Danièle Lacourse, *Chronicle of a Genocide Foretold*. Alterterce 1996. My copy : 2007, National Film Board of Canada.

[10] *In Praise of Blood*, p. 173-174.

[11] Stephen Smith (1996), "Au Camp de Gabiro, les Corps etaient brules et les restes enterres au bulldozer". *Libération*, 14 March ; Nick Gordon (1996), "Return to Hell". *Sunday Express*, 21 April.

[12] See : *Return to Hell*.

[13] *In Praise of Blood*, p. 95.

[14] Id. p. 92.

[15] Gerretsen commented by phone and email, Churchill by email, April-May 2018.

[16] Erwin Vermeij, Peter Zoon, Mayonne van Wijk and Reza Gerretsen (2015) "Microscopic residues of Bone from Dissolving Human Remains in Acid". *Journal of Forensic Science*, May, 60(3) : 770-776.

[17] Yitzhak Arad, Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka : The Operation Reinhard Death Camps. Indiana University Press 1999, ebook, p. 90.

[18] In Praise of Blood, p. 2.

[19] International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. General report on the Special Investigations concerning the crimes committed by the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA) during 1994. Arusha 2003, p. 7.

[20] General report on the Special Investigations, p. 29.

[21] Mark Fritz, email message of 27 February 2017.

[22] Parlementaire commissie van onderzoek betreffende de gebeurtenissen in Rwanda, Verslag. Brussels, 1997, Available at : <http://www.senate.be/www/?Mival=publications/viewPubDoc&TID=16778570&LANG=nl#nc79> see quote of Els de Temmerman in paragraph 3.11.1.2. "De rol van RTLTM met betrekking tot de genocide".

[23] Mark Huband (1994), "Church of the holy slaughter". *The Observer*, 6 June ; also : Anonymous (1994), "Hutu refugees accuse rebel forces of massacring entire villages in revenge for genocide." *The Guardian*, 27 May. Hutu refugees told aid workers the RPF had killed an incredible fifty thousand civilians in 48 hours.

[24] UNHCR Emergency Repatriation Team, Summary of UNHCR presentation before commission of experts 10 October (ICTR pages R0002907-R0002920) : attachment of a letter dated 11 October 1994 by Francois Fouinat addressed to Mrs. Molina-Abram, Secretary to the Commission of Experts on Rwanda.

[25] In Praise of Blood, p. 96.

[26] Summary of UNHCR presentation, p. 9.

[27] Shaharyar M. Khan, *The Shallow Graves of Rwanda*. I.B.Tauris London, New York 2000, pp. 50-56.

[28] Huges Vincent (1994). "Rwanda : le prêtre et les démons." *L'Express*, 11 November.

[29] Thomas P. Odom, *Journey into Darkness*. Texas A&M University Press, 2005, pp. 174-175.

[30] <https://howardadelman.com/2014/10/14/fathers-and-sons-part-ii-review-of-the-judge/>

[31] Id.

[32] Philip Verwimp, "Testing the Double-Genocide Thesis for Central and Southern Rwanda." *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol 47 No 4, 2003, 423-442.

[33] In Praise of Blood, p. 98. Rever for example highlights a quote from p. 14 of *Leave None to Tell the Story*, to wrongly suggest Des Forges only spent a sentence on the Byumba Stadium massacre, although that massacre is described on pp. 705-706 as part of a 35 page section focusing solely on RPF crimes. Later in the book Rever portrays Des Forges as disinterested in RPF crimes.

[34] Id. p. 216.

[35] Africa Watch, *Beyond the Rhetoric, Continuing Human Rights Abuses in Rwanda*. Human Rights Watch, New York, 1993, p. 22.

[36] *Leave None to Tell the Story*, p. 81 ; Human Rights Watch, *Law and Reality : Progress in Judicial Reform in Rwanda*. New York : Human Rights Watch 2008, p. 93.

[37] *In Praise of Blood*, p. 104 ; also : *The Guardian*, 27 May. Hutu refugees who claimed the RPF had killed fifty thousand Hutu in 48 hours also claimed they had thrown dismembered bodies in the Kagera River.

[38] Laurence Binet et al (ed), *Genocide of Rwandan Tutsi 1994*, Médecins Sans Frontières 2013, p. 25 ; Jens Meierhenrich “The transformation of lieux de mémoire : The Nyabarongo River in Rwanda, 1992–2009”, *Anthropology Today*, 25(5) :13-19, p. 16.

[39] General report on the Special Investigations, p. 2-3, notes : “We thus succeeded in infiltrating the circles of the political dissidents of the RPF and that of the deserters of the RPA.”

[40] The most notable retraction was by Abdul Ruzibiza, a major witness for the Special Investigations team as well as the Bruguiere inquiry in France, who later admitted that most of his testimony, which he had phrased in the first person, had actually been based on hearsay. See : Havard Aalmo, *Audition sur Commission Rogatoire Internationale*. Kripos Oslo, 2010.

[41] *In Praise of Blood*, p. 189.

[42] Filip Reyntjens, *Rwanda : Trois jours qui ont fait basculer l’histoire*. Brussels : Cahiers Africains-Afrika Studies, 1995, pp. 25-26.

[43] Filip Reyntjens, email message of 26 October 2018.

[44] Oosterlinck C, van Schendel D, Huon J, Sompayrac J, Chavanis O. *Destruction En Vol Du Falcon 50 - Kigali (Rwanda)*. Paris : Cour d’Appel de Paris : Tribunal de Grande Instance de Paris ; 2012, p. C 23.

[45] Gregory Stanton, email messages of 11 and 12 April 2018.

[46] Jean-Pierre Chrétien, *Expert Report*. ICTR 2001, p. 253.

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