

# The Big Man

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From War to Genocide : Criminal Politics in Rwanda 1990-94 by André Guichaoua, translated by Don Webster Wisconsin, 424 pp, £73.95, October 2015, ISBN 978 0 299 29820 3

Did the Rwanda genocide happen because a few army officers and politicians, squabbling over whom they should appoint as leader, casually used mass murder as a means of obtaining a temporary consensus? The idea that the largest mass murder of the last 25 years came about through banal politicking is perhaps even more disturbing than the notion that it was the enactment of a grand ideological project.

Trying to make sense of the massacres in Rwanda while they were taking place, many writers – including me – were anxious to rebut the popular narrative that they were the result of ancient tribal hatreds that had turned more or less spontaneously into violence. Instead, determined that the crime should be classified as genocide, and the génoci-

daires defeated and eventually prosecuted, we stressed that this campaign of mass murder was a state project, which could only have been brought about by a conspiracy at the highest levels. We assumed that such a crime demanded significant planning and preparation, ideological commitment and mobilisation, as well as thorough implementation. We sought out key pieces of evidence : the arming of the Interahamwe militia, the racist tracts of the extremist press, the massacres committed against the Tutsis in previous years. This version of events, forged in the heat of the moment, became the dominant narrative, and indeed it is the basis of the state ideology of President Paul Kagame, who heads the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), which took power by overthrowing the genocidal regime. It suits Kagame because it justifies his seizure of the state and his determination not to cede power. The basic fact – that the genocide was an organised state crime – also happens

to be true.

André Guichaoua, who spent much of the last twenty years working for the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, has compiled a meticulous account of the politics of the civil war of 1990-94 and the genocide that followed. He recounts, day by day and sometimes hour by hour, what the main actors were doing. He describes a political class very similar to those found in other small nations. Some of its members are brave, some are indecisive, some rash, some cruel, some more capable than others. They know one another intimately through family, school, university, military college and the village-style politics of a small capital city. This is the story of a tightly regulated political business, run by the Hutu president Juvénal Habyarimana and his wife, Agathe Kanziga, disintegrating under the simultaneous pressures of a military invasion mounted by the exiles of the RPF, the end of single-party rule, the demand for democracy, and an economic crisis which meant that the standard practice of co-opting every political aspirant by offering jobs and money was becoming unworkable. As his ruling party, the Mouvement Révolutionnaire National pour le Développement (MRND) fragmented, Habyarimana got businessmen and the heads of parastatal companies to finance a new MRND youth wing, loyal to him,

in anticipation of the need to mobilise the vote – and intimidate the opposition – in the scheduled multi-party elections. Meanwhile, others sensed an opportunity, including ethnic extremists and leaders of groups marginalised by the cabal around the president's wife, Agathe, known as the Akazu, or 'little house'. Some bargained with the leaders of the RPF, who by their invasion of the country in 1990 and subsequent guerrilla actions had shown themselves militarily capable, others tried to find a middle way between these two groupings. Meanwhile, the army officer corps was fractious, since the peace accords signed with the RPF in Arusha in 1993 required the retirement of a large number of senior officers so that the RPF could take up half the posts in the army.

The outcome was a volatile politics of continual repositioning, second-guessing, prevarication and manoeuvre, spiced with assassinations. There was certainly a determined effort to kill every Tutsi in Rwanda between April and June 1994, and it was state policy. But it was a hastily improvised policy, cobbled together a few days after the assassination of Habyarimana, whose presidential jet was shot down near Kigali Airport on 6 April, when the decapitation of the government led to the panicked radicalisation of the regime's lieutenants.

Guichaoua's account explains some of the mysteries of the Rwanda genocide. Why did Théodore Sindikubwabo, a lethargic man of little renown, become interim head of state during the genocide? Why did Agathe, the leader of the best organised and most ruthless political machine in the country, spend the few weeks after her husband's death making a panicked attempt to flee the country? Why was a retired colonel called Théoneste Bagosora, the engineer of the assassinations of the moderate political establishment in the days after Habyarimana's death, convicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda of acts of genocide, but acquitted of conspiracy to commit genocide?

The outline of Guichaoua's story is roughly as follows. The two key sets of political players – the coterie around the president and the RPF leadership – believed that the Arusha peace agreement was unsustainable, that power-sharing was not feasible. Both were preparing for the military option. The RPF struck first, bringing down Habyarimana's plane. (Guichaoua discusses the idea that Hutu extremists shot down the plane, unhappy at the concessions that Habyarimana had made in the peace talks, and dismisses it on grounds of lack of evidence and improbability of motive.) The RPF expected a quick military takeover; the human cost

– Guichaoua quotes one senior RPF cadre who anticipated that 'maybe five thousand, at the most, twenty thousand' Tutsi civilians would die as a result – was a price they were prepared to pay.

The assassination of the president, along with some key army officers including the chief of staff, did indeed jam the state machine. The struggle over who would replace them resulted, as anticipated, in violence. Colonel Bagosora seized the initiative, ordering the assassination of the figures who, according to the constitution, should have succeeded to senior office, including the prime minister, Agathe Uwilingiyimana. In this he had the enthusiastic backing of the Akazu. The daughter of the dead president's doctor, who was with the family after the assassination, reported that 'during the day of 7 April 1994, we noticed that the entire family that was present, including the nuns, rejoiced whenever the death of an opponent was announced. It was the presidential guards who announced such when they returned from carrying out murder.'

The assassinations – including the murder of ten Belgian peacekeepers – continued for three days. Bagosora's intent was to position himself as kingmaker. His problem was that he didn't engineer the political succession smoothly enough, and the army

high command didn't support him, and in fact remained opposed to the genocide for some days. But the generals were no better at asserting control : they didn't control either the presidential guard or the Inter-ahamwe, the Hutu paramilitary organisation founded by Bagosora, and so there was no counter-coup. Bagosora and his accomplices decided to give themselves time to agree on a successor by establishing a government with a mandate of only ninety days. Just about any Hutu politician associated with 'Hutu Power' would do as a leader, and so Sindikubwabo was chosen. And, to insure themselves against the new government calling them to account for their crimes, they enlisted the likely members of that government in organising massacres of Tutsi civilians in their home regions. Guichaoua describes the bizarre banality of government members' daily activities after they moved from Kigali to a supposedly safer small town :

And while there, constantly monitoring each other's comings and goings, they passed their time in countless cabinet meetings, round-table discussions, sidebars ... interminable arguments, flaring into deadly rivalries and the hatching of plots. It is through the prism of these political games and wagers, whether sophisticated or hare-brained, that they learned about the war and massacres they had directed, with a stunning

detachment in the face of their horrific immediacy.

The policy of massacre was 'simply the price that MRND leaders accepted to pay Col. Théoneste Bagosora in exchange for his withdrawal and to ensure his impunity.'

For the extremist leaders, devoting their military and organisational resources to massacring civilians was a suicidal decision : it meant that whatever chance they had had of halting the RPF's military advance and achieving international respectability was irretrievably gone. But the spirit of vengeance that led them to celebrate the murder of the political elite was evident in their determination that the RPF victory, now fore-ordained, would be at the cost of the annihilation of the Tutsi population. For the remainder of the political class who'd been corralled into government, the primary issue remained who would succeed the dead president ?

If genocide was the product of confusion, error and politicking founded on personal interest, rather than a long-thought-out plan, we require a framework that enables us to understand how everyday politics can turn to violence. During the 1980s, the Habyarimana regime had dominated a closed domestic political marketplace, using patronage funds (aid and export revenues from parastatals) and regulating by coercion. This

model collapsed in 1990. The RPF threatened to take over and run the country using the same model. Unfortunately for Habyarimana, political liberalisation – demanded by both the population and aid donors, especially France – became inevitable at precisely this point, and so members of the political elite felt able to choose between his party and the RPF. Many of them took democratisation and the peace accords seriously, and assumed that the model of political competition regulated by elections and the rule of law would prevail. The price of their loyalty shot up.

Just as important, an element of uncertainty was added to political bargaining. The system of centralised and depoliticised patronage had been remarkably straightforward for the previous twenty years, but now things were more complicated. Western donors were drafting one set of rules, Habyarimana was trying to adapt the old system, and the RPF was promising (or threatening) a different model again.

At this point Habyarimana's political budget – the resources earmarked for efficient patronage management – shrank due to the collapse in the price of coffee and the costs of war. This was the reason he decided to mobilise the party youth wing, as a cheaper way of regulating the political market – intimidating

rivals in the short term, winning the elections in the medium term. All of this is familiar from other countries that have experienced deregulation, a shrinking budget and war. A similar set of events brought about the overthrow of the Nimeiri dictatorship in Sudan, the collapse of the Somali state and the regression of multi-party politics in Kenya into intercommunal violence.

The assassination of 'high-value targets' usually leads to an escalation of violence and often to the radicalisation of those who dispense it. After the death of Habyarimana his immediate subordinates instigated the killings, settling scores now that the big man was no longer in charge. When no new leader emerged, a temporary system was instituted to ensure that the political elite did not direct violence at its own members, but instead at those outside their circle: Tutsi civilians. Deregulated and competitive killing of the Tutsi became a mechanism for regulating internal political bargaining over who should take charge.

Three months later, on 4 July 1994, the RPF took power in a ruined land. The survivors of the genocide are well aware of the painful paradox that, without the war waged by the RPF on Habyarimana there would have been no genocide, but also that, without the RPF in power, the risks of renewed ethnic

killings are very high. Inside and outside the country, Kagame's government is seen as a Tutsi government, ruling on behalf of the ethnic minority. But in the first months of RPF government, that wasn't the way it acted : it was the survivors' organisation that demanded a national day of mourning to commemorate the genocide, pushing the RPF into dropping its plan to celebrate victory day on 4 July. Rather than a Tutsi regime, the Kagame government is an efficiently run business venture. Over twenty years, Kagame has proved a skilled and ruthless leader. He makes sure no other figure attracts loyalty, and keeps things that way through assassination, or the threat of it. This frees up funds for investment in public goods. But the country's institutions are, if anything, less robust than they were 25 years ago. There is no mechanism for regulating political competition other than the actions of the president himself. There is no mechanism for an orderly transition to another political model or another leader – the same shortcomings that brought about the escalatory competitive political killings of 1994.