

From Genocide Denial to Denial of Genocide Denial: Merchandising Doubt

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By Jos van Oijen,

Abstract

Denial is an integral part of genocide before, during and after the fact. As a tool of propaganda, denialist rhetoric is similar in most genocides. Its expressions are thematically summarised in terms of literal-, interpretive- and implicatory denial. With the abundant evidence of large-scale genocides like the Holocaust and the Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, literal denial is difficult to sustain. This notion led several scholars to discard the study of genocide denial as inconsequential. However, denial is an evolving process of rationalising and re-interpreting, rather than simply rejecting the empirical facts. This chapter explores the next level of denial, its history and contemporary manifestations. It shows how deniers of the Genocide against the Tutsi adapt to changing expectations and attitudes which are turned into opportunities for disseminating their message. Rather than denying the physical aspect of the extermination campaign, deniers sow doubt about key facts such as the element of intent and recycle as rediscovered truths the myths and conspiracy theories from the 1990s propaganda industry. These merchants of doubt produce or appear as experts in documentaries of public broadcasting companies in Europe, persuade mainstream media companies and university presses to publish revisionist theories, arrange guest lectures for the authors at universities, and so on. Drawing on social- and cognitive psychology research into persuasion, gullibility, and illusionism, the chapter explains how extremist propaganda penetrates the media and the scientific record and offers suggestions for recognizing and possibly reversing this development.

Keywords:

genocide, genocide denial, propaganda, persuasion, merchants of doubt, media, Rwanda.

1. Introduction

Genocide does not happen overnight. It requires planning and preparation.¹ The detection of a design to commit genocide should, theoretically, increase the chance of outside intervention and, after the fact, criminal punishment for those involved. From the perspective of the architects of genocide, proactive deception and denial tactics are therefore indispensable tools throughout the genocidal process.²

¹ Kjell Anderson. *The Dehumanisation Dynamic. A Criminology of Genocide*, (Galway: National University of Ireland, 2011), 89; Sarah E. Brown, *Gender and the Genocide: Women as Rescuers and Perpetrators*, (London: Routledge, 2018), 16; Roland Moerland, *The Killing of Death: Denying the Genocide Against the Tutsi*, (Cambridge: Intersentia, 2016), 65-69.

² Anderson, *The Dehumanisation Dynamic*, 81; Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, (Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, 2015), 232; Moerland, *The Killing of Death*, 71, 97.

All forms of propaganda, including genocide denial, are built on the same foundation: the power of suggestion.³ When we fail to recognize suggestions for what they are, they are easily absorbed and remembered as factual information.⁴ To this end, propagandists create alternative realities that cater to the presumptions and prejudices that already exist in the groups on the receiving end, much like a conjurer uses the audience's expectations and misdirects their focus of attention to create an illusion.⁵ The difference between consumers of propaganda and the audience of a magic show is that the latter will be conscious that the performer is skillfully manipulating their senses. Propaganda, on the other hand, needs believers who are neither suspicious of the deception nor aware of its intentions.⁶

Relative to genocide, “propaganda is an exercise in decision-priming”, Kjell Anderson writes, “it does not dictate perpetrator action but it helps to shape the perpetrators’ perspective in a way that encourages the commission of violence”.⁷ In the case of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, hereafter: the Genocide, there was little resistance to this priming process during the years of civil war that preceded it, even when experts recognized it and raised the alarm. In hindsight, we can argue that the path to genocide in Rwanda was illuminated rather than obscured. The warning signs were clearly visible.⁸ They were reported to the authorities both in Rwanda and abroad, but the implications were

³ Bela Szunyogh, *Psychological Warfare. An Introduction to Ideological Propaganda and the Techniques of Psychological Warfare*, (New York: William-Frederick Press, 1955), 11; Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson, *Age of Propaganda: The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion*, (New York: Freeman & Company, 1992), 8; Jason Stanley, *How Propaganda Works*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 65. For an overview of definitions see Randall Marlin, *Propaganda and the Ethics of Persuasion*, (Buffalo, NY: Broadview Press, 2013), 8–12.

⁴ Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 123; Brendan Myers et al, *Clear and Present Thinking: A Handbook in Logic and Rationality*, (Gatineau, QC: Northwest Passage Books, 2013), 93; Joseph P. Forgas, “On the Role of Affect in Gullibility,” in *The Social Psychology of Gullibility: Fake News, Conspiracy Theories and Irrational Beliefs*, eds. Joseph P. Forgas and Roy F. Baumeister. (New York: Routledge, 2019), 186.

⁵ Jordi Cami, Alex Gomez-Marin and Luis M. Martinez, “On the Cognitive Biases of Illusionism,” *PeerJ* 8:e, no. 9712 (2020), 12. DOI:10.7717/peerj.9712; Gustav Kuhn, Alym A. Amlani and Ronald A. Rensink, “Towards a Science of Magic,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 12, no. 9 (2008), 351; Joachim Krueger, Claudia Vogrinic-Haselbacher and Anthony M. Evans, “Towards a Credible Theory of Gullibility,” in Forgas and Baumeister, *Social Psychology of Gullibility*, 108.

⁶ Roger Mucchielli, *Psychologie de la Publicité et de la Propagande*, (Montrouge: Les Éditions ESF, 1972), 4; Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 160; Alternatively, see Jowett and O’Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, 44.

⁷ Anderson, *The Dehumanisation Dynamic*, 83.

⁸ Alison Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda*, (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999), 96-121; Gregory Stanton, “Could the Rwandan Genocide Have Been Prevented?” *Journal of Genocide Research*, 6, no. 2 (2004), 211-228.

overlooked, misinterpreted, downplayed, or purposely denied for political reasons until it was too late.

After the fact, suspects charged with the crime of genocide used the myths and denial tactics of the 1990s propaganda to sow confusion in their attempts to establish reasonable doubt.⁹ Attorneys, journalists, and scholars, persuaded by the denialist discourse of the defendants, became its conduits outside the courtroom. Once the seeds of genocide denial were sown and nursed to maturity, the phenomenon proved impossible to weed out. A complicating factor is the polarized nature of the research community. Rather than opposing genocide denial, certain scholars and journalists invest their time and energy to discredit the study of genocide denial as well as individuals who work in this field.¹⁰ This presents the public with a second layer of confusion. Denial of genocide denial undermines research in this area and simultaneously creates the perception that denial rhetoric is a sincere attempt to correct a biased historical record.

To trace the recycling of extremist propaganda and define its main distribution channels I conducted a systematic survey of the documentation and literature on Rwanda.¹¹ Unsurprisingly, the results indicate a pivotal role for influential contacts of the former interim *Hutu Power* government, especially in countries with historical ties to Rwanda like Belgium.¹² These agents and their strategies are the main focus of this chapter which is organized as follows. The next section starts with the key facts of the Genocide, followed by a brief discussion of denial during the Genocide and renewed propaganda efforts afterwards. Section 3 focuses on foreign actors affiliated with the former government: merchants of doubt who were instrumental in disseminating its discourse to the press and the academic world. Section 4 examines how the Rally for the Return of Refugees and Democracy in Rwanda (RDR), created in 1995 as the political wing of the Rwandan Armed Forces in exile (ex-FAR), took

⁹ Linda Melvern, *Intent to Deceive: Denying the Genocide of the Tutsi*, (London: Verso Books, 2020), 31.

¹⁰ E.g., Susan Thomson, “How Not to Write About Rwanda”, *Africa is a Country*, September 2020, <https://africasacountry.com/2020/09/how-not-to-write-about-the-rwandan-genocide>; Filip Reyntjens, “Rwanda”, in *Political Chronicles of the African Great Lakes Region 2020*, ed. Filip Reyntjens, (Antwerp: University of Antwerp, 2021), 61-86, 65.

¹¹ The initial stage of the survey, using the facilities of Leiden University, the Internet, libraries, and archives, yielded more than 20,000 documents, ranging from academic literature to propaganda pamphlets. Due to the progress of digitization projects at media- and judicial archives, the survey was repeated several times between 2015 and 2023. The collected material was screened for denialist rhetoric and malevolent persuasion techniques familiar from the propaganda and social-psychology literature. The resulting subset was studied in detail to answer specific research questions, e.g., which actors produced, financed, and/or spread extremist propaganda, how were they organised, who they targeted, and which methods they used?

¹² For a lucid description of the contemporary situation in Belgium, see Charlotte Wirth, “La Mémoire Refusée,” *Médor*, December 1, 2022.

root in Europe and North America and joined forces with an international network of radically anti-imperialist genocide deniers in the Rwandan Political Prisoners Support Network (RPPSN). Section 5 focuses on a highly effective propaganda technique that has been employed to convey denialist rhetoric to an international audience. Section 6 concludes the chapter with a look at the present situation and discusses some of the challenges faced in the struggle against genocide denial.

2. A moderate cover

The pretext for setting the Genocide in motion was the death of President Juvenal Habyarimana.¹³ On the evening of 6 April 1994, one of two missiles fired from the military domain on Kanombe Hill hit the president's private jet, causing it to crash outside his residence near the airport.¹⁴ Systematic massacres of Tutsi began almost immediately. The next day, anyone in a position to keep the extremist Hutu leaders from seizing power was murdered or hunted by the Presidential Guard and the militia. Their victims included the political Hutu opposition, most notably Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingiyimana, cabinet ministers, leaders of opposition parties and the president of the Constitutional Court. Most Tutsi victims – estimates range from half a million to a million – were killed before the end of April, but the massacres continued until July when the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) defeated the Rwandan Armed Forces (FAR) and the militia. In the aftermath of the Genocide, the United Nations Security Council established the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), to prosecute individuals responsible for genocide and other crimes against humanity.¹⁵

Did the Genocide come as a surprise? Parliamentary inquiries in Belgium and France,¹⁶ and declassified communications of the United Nations and the United States government reveal that the international community was informed about the early warning signs by their intelligence services, by UNAMIR (the UN peacekeeping force in Rwanda), by scholars and

¹³ Des Forges, *Leave None*, 185; Scott Straus, *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power, and War in Rwanda*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 1; Omar McDoom, *The Path to Genocide in Rwanda: Security, Opportunity, and Authority in an Ethnocratic State*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 4.

¹⁴ Claudine Oosterlinck et al, *Destruction en Vol du Falcon 50 Kigali (Rwanda)*, (Paris: Cour d'Appel de Paris Tribunal de Grande Instance de Paris, 2012), C22 [337].

¹⁵ United Nations, *Resolution 955*, (New York: United Nations Security Council, 8 November 1994), 2.

¹⁶ Philippe Mahoux and Guy Verhofstadt, *Commission d'Enquête Parlementaire Concernant les Événements du Rwanda*, (Brussels: Sénat de Belgique, 1997); Paul Quilès, *Rapport d'Information Sur les Opérations Militaires Menées Par la France, d'Autres Pays et L'onu au Rwanda Entre 1990 et 1994*, (Paris: Assemblée Nationale, 1998).

by human rights activists.¹⁷ These government officials and diplomats may not have expected a full-scale genocide in Rwanda to happen but once the FAR and the militia were systematically killing thousands of unarmed civilians every day, they should have realized the true nature of the violence.¹⁸ Despite being aware that genocide was taking place, this was not publicly acknowledged in the media.

According to Gregory Stanton, the founder of Genocide Watch, the US government knew exactly what was going on: “The U.S. Embassy's Deputy Chief of Mission, Joyce Leader, has told me personally that she began using the word genocide in her daily telephone calls to the State Department from the start: It was clear to her that the *Interahamwe* militia and Presidential Guard were committing genocide”.¹⁹ Stanton’s recollection is confirmed by a declassified cable of 12 April 1994. It relayed a message from Leader, reporting that a senior FAR officer had informed her that “the president’s death was the provocation needed to put a long-standing plan into effect”.²⁰ Outcries by human rights experts, academics, and representatives of aid agencies, who throughout April all said the violence was genocide, were ignored.²¹ The US government refused to use the word genocide until June.²² “The real problem was genocide denial,” Stanton concludes, “first through denial of the facts, and then through denial that the mass murder was genocide”.²³

The willful blindness abroad encouraged the interim government in Rwanda to proceed with their official denial. It feigned ignorance, denied the systematic nature of the massacres, and stimulated prejudices about Africa that existed in the minds of foreign journalists. As long as the international media associated the violence with tribal anarchy and random violence, no foreign nation with the resources to intervene was willing to risk its soldiers.²⁴ In contrast with the higher echelons in Rwanda and abroad, the actual killers were remarkably open about their

¹⁷ Gregory H. Stanton, "The Rwandan Genocide: Why Early Warning Failed," *Journal of African Conflicts and Peace Studies*, 1, no. 2 (2009), 6-25.

¹⁸ Des Forges reports that UNAMIR Force Commander Romeo Dallaire kept asking for reinforcements. On 10 April he requested 5,000 troops and a clear mandate to stop the killings. The initial response, Dallaire recalled, was “that nobody in New York was interested in that” See Des Forges, *Leave None*, 598.

¹⁹ Stanton, *Could the Genocide*, 218.

²⁰ U.S. Department of State, *Colonel Blames Right Wing Military for Kigali's Nightmare*, Unclassified Memo, Washington DC, April 12, 2014.

²¹ Stanley Cohen points to similar bystander behaviour during the Holocaust. See Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 161.

²² Douglas Jehl, "Officials Told to Avoid Calling Rwanda Killings 'Genocide'," *New York Times*, June 10, 1994.

²³ Stanton, *Could the Genocide*, 223.

²⁴ Des Forges, *Leave None*, 595.

“work”. The Genocide was ordered by the authorities and enforced by soldiers and zealous citizens on the ground.²⁵

“It’s a war against the Tutsis because they want to take power and we Hutus are more numerous,” *Interahamwe* president Robert Kajuga told reporter Lindsey Hilsum.²⁶ Kajuga argued he was only performing his duty as a patriot. Asked about the corpses of women and children at the roadblocks he explained: “We defended ourselves. That’s why there were bodies at the roadblocks. Even 11-year-old children came with grenades”.²⁷ Interim government Minister Casimir Bizimungu related a “bizarre catalogue of conspiracy theories” to journalist Chris McGreal, implicating the United Nations in an RPF plot to kill President Habyarimana and slaughter the Hutu.²⁸ To make it more convincing, Bizimungu suggested he was waiting for the evidence to be delivered to him at that very moment. Social psychologists Pratkanis and Aronson call this type of reasoning the escalating spiral of a rationalization trap, explaining that “the more we justify our cruelty, the easier it becomes”.²⁹

In mid-July, the interim government and the FAR fled across the border to reorganize in the refugee camps. As soon as they established their control over the camps, the production of reports, pamphlets, and testimonies to exonerate themselves began. Alison Des Forges was the first expert to recognize the new propaganda industry. In December 1994, she reviewed a document with the title: *Le Peuple Rwandais Accuse...*³⁰

According to numerous observers in the region, the government-in-exile uses extensive propaganda to keep the refugees ready for war. Human Rights Watch/Africa secured a prime example of such propaganda, a tract entitled “Le Peuple Rwandais Accuse...”. [...] According to this nineteen-page pamphlet, circulated at the end of September by then Minister of Justice Agnes Ntamabyaliro, it was the RPF that was guilty of genocide and the Hutu who were the victims. In this brazen distortion of the events of the recent past, there is no mention of the slaughter of more than half a million Tutsi by the then-government of Rwanda.³¹

Not all propaganda efforts were recognized this easily. Conscious of his lack of credibility in the outside world, Jean Kambanda, the fugitive Prime Minister of the interim government,

²⁵ Straus, *Order of Genocide*, 165-174; McDoom, *Path to Genocide*, 342-361.

²⁶ Lindsey Hilsum, “Hutu Warlord Defends Child Killings,” *The Observer*, July 3, 1994.

²⁷ Hilsum, *Hutu Warlord*.

²⁸ Chris McGreal, “Rwanda Through the Looking Glass,” *The Guardian*, June 29, 1994.

²⁹ Pratkanis and Aronson, *Age of Propaganda*, 38.

³⁰ Agnès Ntamabyaliro, *Le Peuple Rwandais Accuse...*, (Bukavu: Ministère de la Justice du Gouvernement de Salut National, 1994).

³¹ Alison Des Forges, “Rwanda: A New Catastrophe?” *Human Rights Watch/Africa* 6, no. 12 (1994), 3-4.

instructed the creation of refugee associations to publish information supplied by his intelligence service.³² The first of these “NGOs” was the Association Pour La Défense des Droits de l’Homme en Afrique Centrale (ADHEAC), followed by Solidaire–Rwanda/Dufatanye, the Ligue des Réfugiés Rwandais Pour les Droits de l’Homme (LIRDHO), the Association Justice Et Paix Pour La Réconciliation au Rwanda (AJPR), and others. Notes in Kambanda’s 1994 diary confirm appointments with and payments to Solidaire-Rwanda, Agnès Ntamabyaliro, and other distributors of propaganda such as François Nzabahimana and Georges Ruggiu.³³ The officers of the ex-FAR developed a similar strategy.³⁴ Fiona Terry of *Médecins sans Frontières* studied a collection of documents recovered from an abandoned filing cabinet of General Augustin Bizimungu.³⁵ Terry writes that on the initiative of the ex-FAR’s Social Commission, many NGOs and reflection groups were created that “served as an important medium through which to transmit the revised Rwandan history and messages of Hutu victimization”.³⁶

The output of pamphlets and reports with an extremist signature swamped the information market. This propaganda tactic is sometimes referred to as “flooding the zone”.³⁷ It blurred the perceptions of foreign observers as it distracted them from more reliable information. Its effectiveness is demonstrated by Terry herself as she recommends LIRDHO, one of Kambanda’s NGOs, as a reliable source.³⁸ However, the initial effect on opinions overseas was limited. What the exiled officers and politicians needed were representatives who could pose as a moderate cover. François Nzabahimana, a bank manager and former Minister of Trade, fit the description. He was well connected to the international Catholic community and the Christian People’s Party (CVP), the ruling party of Belgium. During the Genocide,

³² Pierre Dupont, *Cassette ID JK*, (Arusha: International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, 1997), 4; Pierre Dupont, and Marcel Desalnier, *Cassette T2K7#78*. (Arusha: International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, 1998), 19; Jean Kambanda, *Rwanda Face a l’Apocalypse de 1994*, (Brussels: E.M.E. & InterCommunications, 2012), 309. ISBN: 978-2-8066-0795-9.

³³ Jean Kambanda, “L’Agenda/Planning 1994”, in André Guichaoua, *Annexe 111-1: Jean Kambanda, Agenda Quo Vadis 1994*, <https://rwandadelaguerreaugenocide.univ-paris1.fr/category/types-of-documents/agendas-en/>.

³⁴ Fiona Terry, *Condemned to Repeat? The Paradox of Humanitarian Action*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), Ch. 5; Tom Ndahiro, *The Friends of Evil: When NGOs Support Genocidaires*, 2013, 17–53. <https://friendsofevil.wordpress.com/2013/08/29/the-friends-of-evil-when-ngos-support-genocidaires-2/>; Moerland, *Killing of Death*, 153-178.

³⁵ Terry, *Condemned to Repeat*, 156.

³⁶ Terry, *Condemned to Repeat*, 179.

³⁷ Paul Starr, “The Flooded Zone: How We Became More Vulnerable to Disinformation in the Digital Era,” in *The Disinformation Age: Politics, Technology, and Disruptive Communication in the United States*, eds. Lance W. Bennett and Steven Livingston, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 67–91, 69.

³⁸ Terry, *Condemned to Repeat*, 174.

Nzabahimana was in Belgium, so he was free of suspicion.³⁹ He founded the Rwandan Action Committee for Democracy (CRAD) and contributed to a book by the NGO Agence de Coopération Technique (ACT), chaired by CVP politician Rika de Backer.⁴⁰ The first author was Serge Desouter, a Catholic missionary and founding member of ACT, who would become a catalyst for extremist propaganda to penetrate the academic world.

3. Merchants of doubt

In August 1994, Nzabahimana visited the refugee camps near Goma and Bukavu on behalf of CRAD. The people he interviewed spoke of multiple genocides and said that everyone, including the civilian Tutsi population, participated in the killings.⁴¹ His mission report did not reveal the identities of the informants, but several are mentioned in other sources, including Colonel Théoneste Bagosora,⁴² and Jean Kambanda.⁴³

Two months later, Nzahabimana organised the visit of a European committee that included Serge Desouter, Rika de Backer, and Alain de Brouwer, the policy adviser of the *Internationale Démocrate Chrétienne* (IDC).⁴⁴ When Kambanda and former Minister Jerome Bicamumpaka met De Brouwer in Bukavu, they had no trouble convincing him of their innocence and good intentions. In his mission report, De Brouwer barely managed to conceal his admiration for Kambanda and Bicamumpaka, who gave him “une impression de grande ouverture” [an impression of great openness].⁴⁵ He praised the work of NGOs like Solidaire–Rwanda and wondered if “genocide” or “genocides” had occurred in Rwanda.⁴⁶

The committee collected a bundle of documents in Bukavu that inspired Desouter to build a case against the RPF upon his return. He was joined by Filip Reyntjens, a law professor at the University of Antwerp, who had actively opposed the RPF since October 1990.⁴⁷ The

³⁹ Alain De Brouwer, *Rapport Succinct Concernant la Rencontre de Bukavu sur le Theme Crucial du Retour des Refugies Rwandais*, (Brussels: Internationale Démocrate Chrétienne, 1994), 2.

⁴⁰ Serge Desouter, François Nzabahimana and Anonymous, *Rwanda, Achtergronden van een tragedie*, Agence de Coopération Technique, (Brussels: Uitgeverij KomKom, 1994), 65–77.

⁴¹ François Nzabahimana, *Le Rwanda ou l'Urgence Politique: Rapport de Mission* (Stoumont: Comité Rwandais d'Action Pour la Démocratie, 1994), 2.

⁴² Guy Artigues, *Audition Nzabahimana François*, Auditorat Militaire, Brussels, September 2, 1994.

⁴³ Kambanda, *L'Agenda*.

⁴⁴ De Brouwer, *Rapport Succinct*, 2.

⁴⁵ De Brouwer, *Rapport Succinct*, 4.

⁴⁶ De Brouwer, *Rapport Succinct*, 12.

⁴⁷ Reyntjens, *Les Risques du métier: Trois Decennies Comme "Chercheur–Acteur" au Rwanda et au Burundi*, (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2009), 21–27.

result was published as a university working paper.⁴⁸ Working papers do not usually carry much weight in the academic world, but this one is different. Its main text is a compilation of quotes and summaries extracted for the most part from the camp documents. However, scholars and journalists still cite it as genuine, richly documented evidence of atrocities committed by the RPF.⁴⁹ Reyntjens himself cites it in at least fifteen of his other publications, including peer-reviewed journal articles and books at major university presses. These other publications have, in turn, been cited a few thousand times by others. The repetition created a truth effect that secured the essence of the camp propaganda a place in the scientific record.

How a paper that relies on extremist, anonymous, and otherwise unverifiable sources escaped the scrutiny of an entire academic field is an interesting question. The methodology section alone gives reason to be cautious. It states that two randomly selected binders with documents from June and October 1994 were analyzed and, for specific cases, additional sources that appeared later.⁵⁰ However, of the 55 sources with a known date, only nine are from June or October. Of the other 46 documents, thirteen are dated before June, twelve after October, and the majority, twenty-one, are in between. This resembles a normal distribution, indicating that no sampling took place. Another red flag is the *Annexes documentaires*, a supplement with samples from the cited documents. It includes only 19 of the more than 60 sources mentioned in the working paper.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss each of these sources, but it is worthwhile to highlight some of them and see which methods were used to obscure their extremist origins. An anonymous source, for instance, is presented as “Témoignage d'un ancien bourgmestre (nom et source gardés anonymes pour la publication)” [Testimony of a former burgomaster (name and source kept anonymous for publication)].⁵¹ However, there was no need to anonymise it because the “testimony” was broadcast during the Genocide by Radio

⁴⁸ Serge Desouter and Filip Reyntjens, *Rwanda: Les Violations des Droits de l'Homme Par le FPR-APR. Plaidoyer Pour Une Enquête Approfondie*. (Antwerp: University of Antwerp, 1995).

⁴⁹ E.g., Pierre Péan, *Noir Fureurs, Blanc menteurs*, (Paris: Mille et un Nuit, 2005), 260; René Lemarchand, “Rwanda, the State of Research,” section The Manichean Temptation, *SciencesPo*, June 25, 2018, <https://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/en/document/rwanda-state-research.html>, 14; Roland Tissot, “Beyond the “Numbers Game”: Reassessing Human Losses in Rwanda During the 1990s,” *Journal of Genocide Research*, December 31, 2019, 6. DOI: 10.1080/14623528.2019.1703250.

⁵⁰ Desouter and Reyntjens, *Rwanda Les Violations*, 6.

⁵¹ Desouter and Reyntjens, *Rwanda Les Violations*, 6.

Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM), the extremist radio station.⁵² The “burgomaster” was identified as Jean Marie Vianney Rutagengwa, a category one genocide suspect.⁵³ Rutagengwa’s story is reproduced in the *Annexes* but the information that links it to the genocidaires is omitted. In contrast, a letter to Pope John Paul II, signed by fourteen Rwandan priests in Bukavu, is cited as such, but the letter itself is not reproduced in the *Annexes*. This omission prevents the readers from noticing propaganda elements in the text. The letter states, for instance, that the number of Hutu killed by RPF troops far exceeded the number of Tutsi victims “des troubles ethniques” [of the ethnic disturbances], and the priests complain about the arms embargo against the government in exile.⁵⁴

Also missing from the *Annexes* are the reports of Solidaire–Rwanda/Dufatanye and LIRDHO; the pamphlet of exiled Minister Ntamabyaliro;⁵⁵ a newsletter of Remigius Kintu, a Ugandan conspiracy theorist based in the US,⁵⁶ and so on. Ironically, parts of the HRW report that flagged Ntamabyaliro’s pamphlet as extremist propaganda are in the *Annexes*, but the pages with Des Forges’ critique are left out.⁵⁷ Similarly, the *Annexes* contain another document debunked by Des Forges, that accused the RPF of genocide against 40,200 Hutu in February 1993.⁵⁸ In 1994, Reyntjens cited the HRW report in which Des Forges dismissed that allegation,⁵⁹ but there is no reference to it in the working paper or the *Annexes*. It is not my intention to deny any crimes committed by RPF troops, nor do I exclude the possibility that Desouter and Reyntjens genuinely believed the camp documents to be accurate, but as science philosopher Lee McIntyre argues, “Merely to be right, without justification, is not knowledge”.⁶⁰

⁵² Antoine Habyambere [translated by], *Cassette de la RTLM 27 [26] du 9/6/1994: interview du bourgmestre de la commune Muhazi par Mr. Gahigi Gaspard*, Arusha: International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, December 5, 1995.

⁵³ Republic of Rwanda, "Publication de la liste No1 de la première catégorie prescrite par l'article 9 de la loi organique no 8/96 du 30 aout 1996," *Official Gazette of the Republic of Rwanda*, November 30, 1996, 31.

⁵⁴ Daniel Nahimana et al, *Lettre des Prêtres des Diocèses du Rwanda, Réfugiés à Goma (Zaire) Adressée au Très Saint Père, le Pape Jean–Paul II*, Goma, August 2, 1994.

⁵⁵ Ntamabyaliro, *Le Peuple Rwandais*.

⁵⁶ Remigius Kintu, *UDC Newsletter* 3, no. 1 (1993).

⁵⁷ Des Forges, *A New Catastrophe*, 3–4.

⁵⁸ Alison Des Forges, “Beyond the Rhetoric: Continuing Human Rights Abuses in Rwanda.” *Human Rights Watch/Africa* 5, no.7 (1993), 23.

⁵⁹ Filip Reyntjens, *L’Afrique des Grands Lacs en Crise*, (Paris: Editions Karthala, 1994), 118, 196, 206.

⁶⁰ Lee McIntyre, *The Scientific Attitude: Defending Science from Denial, Fraud, and Pseudoscience*, (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press (eBook), 2019), 170.

How then do we explain why Genocide scholars, journal editors, and Reyntjens' immediate colleagues, fail to recognize these flaws?⁶¹ Studies in the field of social psychology have established that people, scientists included, are not good at assessing truthfulness and detecting deception.⁶² A complicating factor is our tendency to overlook unanticipated events.⁶³ Such blind spots are opportunities for deception. According to Cami and colleagues, "The key to creating a successful illusion is a presentation that the audience considers logical and predictable".⁶⁴ In the case of the working paper, the illusion is "science", created with the names of a university and a well-known professor on the cover and suggestions in the text that recognized scientific methods such as random sampling were used. Combined with simple persuasion techniques in the introduction and appeals to emotion throughout the text, the readers' attention is effectively distracted from the extremist sources.

After their cooperation, Desouter and Reyntjens proceeded on the chosen path. Desouter, unlike Reyntjens, did not believe in the Genocide at all and called it a myth invented solely for the benefit of "les bons" [the good ones], defined as the Tutsi.⁶⁵ Reyntjens declared the RPF co-responsible for the Genocide and "possibly acts of genocide against Hutu".⁶⁶ Evidence to support the double genocide thesis is still lacking but the repeated suggestion that such evidence exists has created enough doubt in the minds of non-experts such as journalists to erode their professional filters against misinformation.⁶⁷ This is not without consequences.

⁶¹ This situation has not improved. Twenty-five years later, Reyntjens, a jurist without any qualifications in science and technology, published a working paper to sow doubt about exhaustive investigations by specialized French scientists into the assassination of President Habyarimana. Among his curious mistakes, Reyntjens dismisses the part of the acoustic research that supports his theory and omits the part that refutes it. See Filip Reyntjens, *The RPF Did It: A Fresh Look At the 1994 Plane Attack That Ignited Genocide in Rwanda*, (Antwerp: University of Antwerp, 2020), 8; Oosterlinck et al, *Destruction*, C23 (337), and Jean Pascal Serre, *Rapport Complémentaire en Acoustique*, Cour d'Appel de Paris, 4 January 2012, 24.

⁶² E.g., Forgas, *Role of Affect*, 186; Lee Jussim et al, "Scientific Gullibility," in Forgas and Baumeister, *Social Psychology of Gullibility*, 282; David G. Myers, "Psychological Science Meets a Gullible Post-Truth World," in Forgas and Baumeister, *Social Psychology of Gullibility*, 107.

⁶³ Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons, *The Invisible Gorilla and Other Ways Our Intuition Deceives Us*, (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010), 6; David Eagleman and Jonathan Downar, *Brain and Behavior: A Cognitive Neuroscience Perspective*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 236-238. ISBN 978-0-19-537768-2.

⁶⁴ Cami et al, *Biases of Illusionism*, 10.

⁶⁵ Serge Desouter, *L'usage Usurpé du Terme Génocide*, Antwerp, 30 April 2002.

⁶⁶ Filip Reyntjens, "Rwanda: Background to a Genocide," in *Bulletin des seances*, ed. M. F. de Hen and Y. Verhasselt, (Brussels: Académie Royale des Sciences d'Outre-Mer, 1995), 281-291, 288.

⁶⁷ Roland Moerland, "Mainstreaming the Denial of the Genocide Against the Tutsi," *Denial of genocides in the twenty-first century*, ed. Bedross Der Matossian. (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2023), 382-425, 406.

As Roland Moerland notes, “Doubt is a powerful denial strategy that makes audiences more receptive to denialist narratives”.⁶⁸

This type of industry recalls a study by American scientists Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway: *The Merchants of Doubt*.⁶⁹ The book describes in five case studies how a small group of unscrupulous scientists managed to obstruct public awareness and legislation about important public health issues and global threats such as climate change. The merchants of doubt in Oreskes and Conway’s study usually served the interests of stakeholders, but the most successful ones appeared to be driven by their political ideology or personal resentments. In the context of the Genocide, we see a similar pattern. The following sections discuss how doubt-sowing and blame-shifting gradually replaced literal genocide denial as the more persuasive propaganda techniques.

4. Creating a network

In a meeting in April 1995 chaired by ex-FAR commander General Bizimungu, the RDR was created to replace Kambanda’s government in exile. François Nzabahimana was appointed as the first president.⁷⁰ The RDR established chapters in countries that already hosted Rwandan communities, such as Belgium, Canada, and France. After the first Congo War (October 1996 – May 1997), the RDR set up its headquarters in the Netherlands near The Hague. The branches in Belgium and Canada proved to be fertile ground for spreading genocide denial. The diaspora group Cercle Rwandais de Réflexion (CRR) in Quebec, had already published an elaborate mirror accusation, describing the violence in Rwanda as “l’holocaust des Hutus par le FPR” [the holocaust of Hutu by the RPF].⁷¹ But another group in Quebec was about to become more significant: radically anti-imperialist lawyers and journalists, already in the business of denying the Srebrenica genocide, who rejected the legality of the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia (ICTY). Christopher Black, one of their most vocal advocates, and an admirer of Slobodan Milošević and Ratko Mladić, described the ICTY as “a kangaroo court, a bogus court,

⁶⁸ Moerland, *Mainstreaming the Denial*, 393.

⁶⁹ Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*, (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010).

⁷⁰ Aloys Ntabakuze, *Reunion du 29 Mars au 03 Avril 1995*. Goma, 1995; Terry, *Condemned to Repeat*, 180.

⁷¹ Cercle Rwandais de Réflexion, *Front Patriotique Rwandais: Véritable Auteur des Massacres des Hutus et des Tutsis Depuis Octobre 1990*, Québec, September 1994, 16.

with a political purpose serving very powerful and identifiable masters”.⁷² It was a small step toward denouncing the ICTR and denying the Genocide against the Tutsi.

Black’s colleague John Philpot, citing Desouter and Reyntjens, the CRR, Remigius Kintu and similar authors, blamed the RPF and foreign powers for igniting “the tragic chain reaction which we are all aware of”.⁷³ The narrow mandate of the ICTR, Philpot argued, was just a ploy to prevent the potential indictment “of Belgian, American or Ugandan Government officials for the April 6, 1994, murder of these two Hutu Presidents [Habyarimana of Rwanda, and Ntaryamira of Burundi] in spite of ample evidence that such crimes deserve serious investigation”.⁷⁴ Defendants at the ICTR subsequently invited Philpot, Black, and like-minded colleagues to plead their cases.

The group’s most notable success was convincing Edward S. Herman, a professor emeritus of finance, of their denialist discourse. Assisted by Christopher Black and members of Black’s ICTR team,⁷⁵ Herman and his co-author, journalist David Peterson, published books in 2010 and 2014 in which they express their belief that “the standard model of the ‘Rwandan genocide’ [...] is a complex of interwoven lies which, when examined closely, unravels in *toto*”.⁷⁶ John Philpot meanwhile dedicated a book to his client Jean-Paul Akayesu, the first person in history to be convicted of rape as an act of genocide and crime against humanity.⁷⁷ Philpot objected to the ICTR’s “perpetuation of dishonest myths including that of a planned genocide of the Tutsi by the Hutu”.⁷⁸ The book includes contributions from five of the seven future board members of the RPPSN (see below) and reveals the influence of RDR leaders.⁷⁹ The editors acknowledge the help of Charles Ndereyehe, who in 1998 replaced Nzabanimana as President of the RDR,⁸⁰ and the book includes a chapter praising Ndereyehe’s successor

⁷² Christopher Black, “An Impartial Tribunal, Really?” *Counterpunch*, June 15, 2000. <http://www.counterpunch.org/2000/06/15/animpartialtribunalreally/>.

⁷³ John Philpot, *The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda: Justice Betrayed*. (Montréal: American Association of Jurists, October 1995), 10.

⁷⁴ Philpot, *Justice Betrayed*, 10.

⁷⁵ Edward S Herman and David Peterson, *Enduring Lies: The Rwandan Genocide in the Propaganda System, 20 Years Later*, (Baltimore, MD: The Real News Books, 2014), 8.

⁷⁶ Herman and Peterson, *Enduring Lies*, 7. For an elaborate discussion of the denial rhetoric in Herman and Peterson’s work, see Moerland, *The Killing of Death*, 188–213.

⁷⁷ Sébastien Chartrand and John Philpot, *Justice Belied: The Unbalanced Scales of International Criminal Justice*, (Montréal: Baraka Books, 2014), 7.

⁷⁸ John Philpot, “The Dubious Heritage of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda.” *Justice Belied: The Unbalanced Scales of International Criminal Justice*. Eds. Chartrand, Sébastien and John Philpot. (Montréal: Baraka Books, 2014), 161–178, 161.

⁷⁹ John Philpot, *Board of Directors*. <https://rappr-rppsn.org/executive-board/> (defunct). Rwandan Political Prisoners Support Network, 2016. (3 May 2019).

⁸⁰ Chartrand and Philpot, *Justice Belied*, 281.

Victoire Ingabire Umuhoza, written by Joseph Bukeye who in 1995 was a member of the RDR's executive committee.⁸¹

In April 2016, Philpot took the initiative to unite the denialist enterprise into a new organization: the Rwandan Political Prisoners Support Network (RPPSN).⁸² Genocide denial had by this time become so widespread on social media and in the press, that Philpot and the board of directors saw no more need for ambiguity. The organization's website came online in August 2016. The website echoed the familiar arguments of Holocaust deniers as summarized by Gill Seidel: Victor's justice; not genocide but a war of aggression; a conspiracy to enrich the victim group; and labelling victims of genocide as war casualties.⁸³ Until 2019, when the website was taken down, it mentioned thirty of the prisoners the RPPSN supported. They were the main architects and instigators of the Genocide such as Théoneste Bagosora, Jean Kambanda, Hassan Ngeze, Tharcisse Renzaho, Aloys Simba, Obed Ruzindana, and two dozen others.

The Belgian RPPSN branch, headed by Christiaan De Beule, a teacher and development worker in pre-Genocide Rwanda with close connections to the Habyarimana government,⁸⁴ was founded in 2017. The founding meeting was moderated by Philpot and Patrice Mbonyumutwa of Jambo ASBL, an internet-based news organisation run by children of convicted and suspected genocidaires. It was attended by ex-convicts, relatives of convicts, and "militants sensibilisés à la cause pour des raisons politiques ou idéologiques" [activists who were sensitized to the cause for political or ideological reasons].⁸⁵ The report stated the need for transmitting information to the media, "avec l'aide des journalistes dont l'un d'entre eux était présent dans la salle" [with the help of journalists, one of whom was present in the room].⁸⁶

The journalist in the room was identified as Peter Verlinden of the Flemish public-service broadcaster VRT. As most of Verlinden's books and TV work are in the Dutch language, few anglophone and francophone scholars have paid attention to it. However, the involvement of a popular author and TV personality warrants a closer look at his career.

⁸¹ Joseph Bukeye, "Victoire Ingabire: Chronology of a Pinochet-style Case of Repression," in *Justice Belied*, Chartrand and Philpot, 55–65; Ntabakuze, *Reunion*.

⁸² John Philpot, *Our Mission*, <https://rappr-rppsn.org/our-mission/> (defunct). Rwandan Political Prisoners Support Network, 2016, retrieved: 3 May 2019.

⁸³ Gill Seidel, *The Holocaust Denial: Antisemitism, Racism & the New Right*, (Leeds: Beyond the Pale Collective, 1986), 129-131.

⁸⁴ See De Beule's testimonies of 11 and 12 February 2008 at the ICTR during the Military II trial.

⁸⁵ Roxanne Gendron, *Report of Founding Meeting of Belgian Branch*. Rwandan Political Prisoners Support Network, 2017, accessed: June 14, 2019, <https://rappr-rppsn.org/report-of-founding-meeting-of-belgian-branch/> (defunct).

⁸⁶ Gendron, *Founding Meeting*.

Verlinden's activities include the promotion of books written by Genocide revisionists, deniers, and convicts, and, until 2019, spreading denialist rhetoric on the VRT website.⁸⁷ More important, internationally, is his influence on public opinion with TV documentaries. Two prime examples are examined in the next section.

5. Television as a propaganda tool

According to Jowett and O'Donnell, movies are an extremely potent source of modern propaganda.⁸⁸ Cheaper but equally useful alternatives are TV documentaries that reach millions of potential targets, at once or by accumulation if the production is available online for an extended period. This section discusses two prime examples: Peter Verlinden's *The Killing Fields: Rwanda, April 1994*, and the BBC film *Rwanda's Untold Story* on which Verlinden consulted.⁸⁹ *The Killing Fields* first aired in 1999 in Belgium but is still popular on the Internet.⁹⁰ Analysis of its narrative and footage makes it clear that the film is almost entirely fictional.

Two days before the broadcast, Verlinden told the press that 400,000 Hutu from the eastern prefecture of Kibungo were still unaccounted for.⁹¹ At least half of them, he concluded, were killed by the RPF. Two witnesses of the alleged atrocities, a Belgian/Mexican couple, are interviewed on camera. Verlinden illustrates their "testimony" with images of many, many corpses, inviting the viewers to assume they are watching the murdered Hutu of the story. However, the crew that filmed the bodies in May 1994 identified them as the victims of government soldiers and civilian militia.⁹² Additional images of Genocide victims borrowed from the *European News Exchange* are shown without dates, places, and author credits. The visual manipulation is clear, but what about the story?

⁸⁷ E.g. Peter Verlinden, "De Vele Taboes Over Rwanda," *VRT Nieuws*, 10 April 2014, https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2014/04/10/de_vele_taboes_owerrwanda-peterverlinden-1-1936344/. Verlinden suggests, for instance, that seven out of ten *Interhamwe* were RPF infiltrators.

⁸⁸ Jowett and O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, 138.

⁸⁹ Peter Verlinden, director and writer, *The Killing Fields: Rwanda 1994*. Brussels: Vlaamse Radio- en Televisieomroeporganisatie (VRT), January 14, 1999; John Conroy, director and producer, *Rwanda's Untold Story*, London: British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), 2014.

⁹⁰ The film is on YouTube and Daily Motion, e.g., <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x24s8v> and <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x24sdf>.

⁹¹ Kris Hoflack, "'De Huidige Tutsi-machthebbers hebben in 1994 minstens evenveel mensen vermoord als de extremistische Hutu's,'" *Humo*, January 12, 1999.

⁹² Guy Polspoel, director, *Achter het Front*, Brussels: Belgische Radio en Televisieomroep (BRT), May 26, 1994, 00:21:20.

International newspaper archives reveal that Marcel Gérin, the husband of the interviewed couple, had told the story before, in late April 1994. In the original version, Gérin identified the perpetrators as *Interahamwe* and “death squads”.⁹³ Asked to explain the deception, Verlinden deflected, claiming he double-checked the story with independent sources: two Catholic missionaries stationed in the east, a “Reyntjens report”, and an anonymous former RPF member.⁹⁴ However, one of these missionaries was stationed in the north and was evacuated when the Genocide started.⁹⁵ The other, stationed close to the Tanzanian border, left before the RPF arrived.⁹⁶ The “Reyntjens report” is the working paper discussed earlier in this chapter. Based on data from *Solidaire-Rwanda*, Reyntjens and Desouter suggested that 400,000 people were missing. However, Verlinden does not consider the equal number of new caseload refugees who reportedly returned to Kibungo after the Genocide.⁹⁷ The “former RPF member” suggestion was unverifiable for lack of details.

Based on this information it is safe to conclude that *The Killing Fields* is not a documentary but a cleverly handcrafted work of fiction. It nevertheless convinced international journalists and prominent scholars.⁹⁸ According to philosopher Jason Stanley, propaganda is effective if it bypasses rational deliberation.⁹⁹ This effect can be facilitated by overloading the senses with stimuli and creating emotional tension.¹⁰⁰ The shocking footage, explained by a sensational narrative, beamed into the viewers’ living rooms by a trusted broadcaster, appealed to primal emotions and intuitive judgment, not reflective thinking.

In 2014, Verlinden was instrumental in the success of *Rwanda’s Untold Story*, another TV production using sensational claims, appeals to emotion, and visual manipulation.¹⁰¹ At first glance, the film offers a different but rational perspective on the evidence. It features

⁹³ Reuters, “It’s like what the nazis did,” *The Independent*, May 1, 1994; Mark Huband, “Church of Stinking Slaughter,” *The Observer*, May 1, 1994.

⁹⁴ Hoflack, *Huidige Tutsi-machthebbers*.

⁹⁵ Lisa Brille, *Etnische Breuklijnen in Rwanda: De Verschuivende Mentaliteit van de Witte Paters in het Rwandese 'Dual Colonialism', 1900–1962*, (Ghent: Ghent University, 2008), 103-104.

⁹⁶ Jacques Broekx, “Les Evenements d’Avril 1994 au Rusumo,” *Dialogue* no. 177 (1994), 99–104, 104.

⁹⁷ Dorothea Hilhorst and Mathijs van Leeuwen, *Imidugudu, Villagisation in Rwanda: A Case of Emergency Development?* (Wageningen: Wageningen University, 1999), 37.

⁹⁸ E.g., René Lemarchand cites Verlinden’s film as an important document. See René Lemarchand, “Genocide in the Great Lakes,” in *The Routledge History of Genocide*, eds. Cathie Carmichael and Richard C. Maguire, (London: Routledge, 2015), 181. ISBN: 978-1-315-71905-4.

⁹⁹ Stanley, *How Propaganda Works*, 35.

¹⁰⁰ Mucchielli, *Psychologie de la Propaganda*, 81.

¹⁰¹ Conroy, *Rwanda’s Untold Story*, 00:45:10. The film highlights a single sentence from par. 31 of the UN Mapping report but omits contradictory information provided in par. 32. See United Nations. *Democratic Republic of the Congo, 1993–2003*, (Geneva: United Nations Human Rights Office, 2010), 14–15.

several university professors and eyewitnesses. Professor Allan Stam and his colleague Christian Davenport of the University of Michigan present a spatiotemporal analysis of the major massacres of the Genocide, showing that most victims were killed in government-controlled territory, which confirms the scholarly consensus. However, they also claim that the victims were mainly Hutu, not Tutsi.¹⁰² Ten years earlier when they first presented their research, Davenport declared that the slaughter in 1994 was not genocide: “We consider this more of a totalitarian purge, a politicide, rather than ethnic cleansing or genocide”.¹⁰³ In the BBC film, Stam repeats in his own words: “Random violence happened and hundreds of thousands of people died for no particular purpose”.¹⁰⁴ However, genocide is never random. Although Stam denies that he and Davenport deny the Genocide,¹⁰⁵ their statements are examples of interpretive genocide denial. As Cohen explained,¹⁰⁶ interpretive denial does not deny the facts but gives them a different meaning, in this case, “totalitarian purge”, “politicide”, or “random violence”.

Who persuaded the BBC to broadcast genocide denial and present it as an “untold story”? Filip Reyntjens made an appearance in the film and published many articles to defend it, but he denied any involvement in its production. The film zooms in on RDR/FDU–Inkingi president Victoire Ingabire,¹⁰⁷ and several RPF dissidents, but the interviewee who leaves a lasting impression is Peter Verlinden’s wife, Marie Bamutese. Presented as “the schoolgirl from Kigali” and filmed in close-up against a dark background, Bamutese tells a harrowing tale that appeals directly to the viewers’ emotions. On the BBC website, director John Conroy explains how Bamutese ended up in the film.¹⁰⁸ Conroy had called on Verlinden to help him find footage. Verlinden jumped at the opportunity to draw Conroy’s attention to a book he and his wife were writing about her childhood memories.¹⁰⁹ It persuaded Conroy to interview Bamutese for the film.

The book was published in Belgium a year later. In the book version, Bamutese’s first encounter with RPF soldiers is after the first Congo War. In the BBC version, however, she is

¹⁰² Conroy, *Rwanda’s Untold Story*, 00:30:30.

¹⁰³ Mathew Green, “Rwanda 1994 killings weren’t ‘genocide’ – U.S. Study.” *Reuters News*, April 3, 2004.

¹⁰⁴ Conroy, *Rwanda’s Untold Story*, 00:29:55.

¹⁰⁵ Conroy, *Rwanda’s Untold Story*, 00:31:50.

¹⁰⁶ Cohen, *States of Denial*, 7.

¹⁰⁷ Conroy, *Rwanda’s Untold Story*, 00:55:50.

¹⁰⁸ John Conroy, “The Making of... Rwanda’s Untold Story,” London: BBC Two, 2014, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/4GXplnBCF3RBslndxp1XgTL/the-making-of-rwandas-untold-story>.

¹⁰⁹ Marie Bamutese and Peter Verlinden, *Marie, Overleven met de Dood*, (Leuven: Davidsfonds, 2015).

a direct witness to RPF crimes, confirming that “yes, they were killing us”.¹¹⁰ The powerful illusion of a vulnerable schoolgirl witnessing atrocities allows her to take liberties with key facts of the Genocide. Bamutese reduces the number of Hutu perpetrators to a bare minimum and inflates RPF violence to a scale and intensity that diminishes the Genocide. The war in the DRC then becomes the ultimate genocide, the “apocalypse”.¹¹¹

As much as we want to believe Bamutese, the many discrepancies between the two versions of her story make it impossible to tell which parts of which version are real. Even the duration of her stay in the Congolese forest is unclear. The book version states that the story is based on a recorded interview at a school in Bukavu,¹¹² but Verlinden post-dates the tape from 1997 to 1998.¹¹³ On their march through the jungle, the family carried with them two double, and three single mattresses, enough plastic sheeting to build tents, cooking utensils, and food, which suggests they had not fled in a blind panic. The journey jumps back and forth across great distances, which conveniently places Bamutese in the vicinity of notable events but also defies the laws of physics. In some parts of the book, she survives on muddy water and raw snails or insects,¹¹⁴ while in other parts she feasts on the meat of wild animals, including species that are not indigenous to eastern Congo such as pandas.¹¹⁵

As explained earlier, efficient propaganda diminishes the capacity for rational reflection. To merchants of doubt, it does not matter whether their narratives are inconsistent.¹¹⁶ What counts is the impression that is stored in memory: a strong emotion associated with a convincing narrative. The details fade over time and what remains is an intuition that invites new propaganda efforts.¹¹⁷

6. The new reality

The BBC documentary was a pivotal moment in the history of genocide denial. The BBC’s international reputation as a reliable news source lent credence to previously debunked myths and hoaxes, setting off a wave of “untold stories” around the globe. As Barnett and Kaufman note, “Fighting for truth is a battle against an amaranthine flow of true believers armed with

¹¹⁰ Conroy, *Rwanda’s Untold Story*, 00:25:05.

¹¹¹ Conroy, *Rwanda’s Untold Story*, 00:44:15.

¹¹² Bamutese and Verlinden, *Overleven*, 7, 159.

¹¹³ Bamutese and Verlinden, *Overleven*, 159.

¹¹⁴ Bamutese and Verlinden, *Overleven*, 76, 89.

¹¹⁵ Bamutese and Verlinden, *Overleven*, 74, 91.

¹¹⁶ Ellul, *Propaganda*, 35.

¹¹⁷ Ellul, *Propaganda*, 86–87; John Cook and Stephan Lewandowski, *The Debunking Handbook*, (St. Lucia: University of Queensland, 2011), 2.

ignorance and misinformation”.¹¹⁸ The merchants of doubt had their foot in the door of the international media, which opened a world of opportunities to market their products.

Acting as a moderate cover for the denialist enterprise has never been easier. No eyebrows were raised when the Amsterdam University Press (AUP) published a translation of Judi Rever’s *In Praise of Blood* with the title *De Waarheid Over Rwanda* [The Truth About Rwanda],¹¹⁹ even though Rever acknowledged the help of Christopher Black,¹²⁰ and the book recycles elements of the extremist 1990s propaganda.¹²¹ Peter Verlinden, who persuaded the AUP, used his foreword to revive *The Killing Fields of Rwanda*, discussed in the previous section, as another long-suppressed “truth”.¹²² Verlinden enhanced the aura of academic accreditation created by the AUP by organising a tour of author lectures at Belgian universities.¹²³ As Ellul notes, “[w]hen the eyeglasses are out of focus, everything one sees through them is distorted”.¹²⁴ Clarity did not return when Rever defended RTL radio in the Belgian press,¹²⁵ nor when after the death of Colonel Bagosora, Philpot, Verlinden and Bamutese expressed their sympathy on Facebook.¹²⁶ Philpot used the opportunity to declare Bagosora a hero of the Rwandan people. He was promptly awarded the annual Victoire Ingabire Umuhoza Prize for Democracy and Peace.¹²⁷

Intimidating their critics has become a popular pastime for merchants of doubt. Not surprising in this context is that researchers and journalists who write about genocide denial are their main targets. Gregory Stanton and Genocide Watch were threatened with a lawsuit

¹¹⁸ Paul Joseph Barnett, and James C. Kaufman, “Truth Shall Prevail,” in *Pseudoscience: The Conspiracy Against Science*, ed. Alison B. Kaufman and James C. Kaufman, (Cambridge MA: MIT Press (eBook), 2018), 545–559, 546.

¹¹⁹ Judi Rever, *In Praise of Blood: The crimes of the Rwandan Patriotic Front*, (Toronto: Penguin Random House Canada, 2018); Judi Rever, *De Waarheid Over Rwanda: Het regime van Paul Kagame*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018).

¹²⁰ Dennis Riches, *Interview with Judi Rever, author of In Praise of Blood*, Chiba: Lit by Imagination, September 2018, <https://litbyimagination.blogspot.com/2018/09/interview-with-judi-rever-author-of-in.html?m=0>.

¹²¹ Helen Hintjens and Jos van Oijen, “Elementary forms of Collective denial: The 1994 Rwanda Genocide,” *Genocide Studies International* 13, no. 2 (2019), 146–167, 158–159, 160, 166.

¹²² Peter Verlinden, “Voorwoord,” in Rever, *Waarheid Over Rwanda*.

¹²³ The Catholic University of Louvain, the Université Libre of Brussels, and the University of Antwerp, 9–12 October 2019.

¹²⁴ Ellul, *Propaganda*, 61.

¹²⁵ Maarten Rabaey, “Journaliste Judi Rever: ‘In Rwanda vond een tweede genocide plaats,’” *De Morgen*, November 16, 2019.

¹²⁶ See the replies to Achille Bagosora’s Facebook post “RIP Papa” of 25 September 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/achille.bagosora>.

¹²⁷ John Philpot, *Discours d’Acceptation de John Philpot*, Brussels: Réseau International des Femmes pour la Démocratie et la Paix, 20 March 2022, <https://www.rifdp-iwndp.org/discours-dacceptation-de-john-philpot/>.

for denouncing an example of genocide denial in the Netherlands.¹²⁸ Journalists in France were sued by a genocide suspect.¹²⁹ Filip Reyntjens uses every platform, including academic books and journals, to discredit anyone scrutinizing his work.¹³⁰ The objective is never to stimulate but to stifle debates about the substance of the research.

“Why did the scientific community stand by while this was happening?” Oreskes and Conway asked in 2010.¹³¹ Regarding genocide denial, we can repeat that question today. The halo of credibility lent to the merchants of doubt is a source of confusion. Without visible opposition, their presence in the media gives the impression that they represent the majority opinion or even the consensus view. This illusion, and the false beliefs transmitted by this group, could be dispelled more easily if their peers would find the motivation to publicly defend the integrity of journalism, science, and scholarship.

“Professional gullers [deceivers] know what they can get away with, and it tends to be a lot”, Krueger and colleagues write.¹³² Social psychology teaches us that “[t]here is little to no chance that we can convince True Believers of the errors of their thinking”.¹³³ The battle against genocide denial and other forms of disinformation should start with getting accurate information in first¹³⁴ then reminding people of it regularly and, as Haber and Pinker suggest, providing children of all ages with the tools of statistical and critical thinking to make them less vulnerable at later stages of their lives.¹³⁵ As gullibility does not correlate with intelligence,¹³⁶ universities, academic journals, and the mainstream media would do well to

¹²⁸ Genocide Watch was threatened with a lawsuit by Dutch journalist Anneke Verbraeken, a friend of Victoire Ingabire “and the entire family”. See Caroline Buisman, *Subject: Public statement by Professor Gregory Stanton*, Amsterdam: Stapert Advocaten, October 9, 2017, and Anneke Verbraeken, *Rijke Mensen Sterven Niet: Confronterende Ontmoetingen in Congo en Rwanda*, (Amsterdam: Atlas Contact, 2017), 66.

¹²⁹ Syndicat Nationale des Journalistes, *Enquête Sur les Responsables du Génocide Rwandais: Le SNJ Soutient Maria Malagardis*, SNJ Press Release, January 19, 2023.

¹³⁰ E.g., Filip Reyntjens, “The Rwandan Patriotic Front’s Information and Communications Strategy,” in *Media and Mass Atrocity: The Rwanda Genocide and Beyond*, ed. Alan Thompson, (Waterloo, ON: Centre for International Governance Innovation, 2019), 133–155; Filip Reyntjens, “Intent to Deceive: Denying the Genocide of the Tutsi, By Linda Melvern”, *African Affairs*, 120, no. 478 (2021), 144–145.

¹³¹ Oreskes and Conway, *Merchants of Doubt*, 262.

¹³² Krueger et al, *Theory of Gullibility*, 112.

¹³³ Michael Shermer, *Giving the Devil His Due: Reflections of a Scientific Humanist*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 339.

¹³⁴ Cecile Traberg, Jon Roozenbeek and Sander van der Linden, “Psychological Inoculation Against Misinformation: Current Evidence and Future Directions,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 700, no. 1 (2022), 136–151, 140.

¹³⁵ Jonathan Haber, *Critical Thinking*, (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2020), 116–129; Steven Pinker, *Rationality: What It Is, Why It Seems Scarce, Why It Matters*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2022), 314–315.

¹³⁶ Steven Novella, *Your Deceptive Mind: A Scientific Guide to Critical Thinking Skills*, (Chantilly, VA: The Great Courses, 2012), 18.

employ (better) fact-checkers, to catch misinformation and pseudoscience before they get a chance to pollute the scientific record and add to the general confusion in this age of disinformation.

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