

Reckoning with Genocide ideology in the Great Lakes region: Deconstructing history, confronting the present, building peace

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Nturo village slowly rebuilding after 300 homes of Tutsi residents were burned to the ground by FDLR in October 2023.

Genocide ideology continues to threaten peace and stability in the Great Lakes region of Africa, particularly in Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo). Rooted in Europe's colonial legacy, reinforced through racist discourses, and perpetuated today through political rhetoric and violence, this ideology demands urgent dismantling.

This article examines the roots of geno-

cide ideology, its evolution, present manifestations, and offers pathways to confront and combat it sustainably.

Colonial foundations of violence

The shared histories of Rwanda, Burundi, and DR Congo—countries once under colonial Belgian control—serve as a backdrop to the pernicious growth of genocide ideology.

During the colonial period, particularly in the 19th century, ethnicity was weaponized through structured hierarchies that racialized the Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa populations. These classifications were tools of subjugation, setting the stage for systematic discrimination and future violence.

The 1884-85 Berlin Conference, where colonial powers arbitrarily drew African borders, further dislocated communities and institutionalized ethnic fragmentation. This framing, deeply entrenched in the "us ver-

sus them” colonial discourse—what scholar Valentin Mudimbe called “the invention of Africa”—promoted violence and dehumanization as the norms governing African societies under European scrutiny.

Colonial continuities: From discursive to physical violence

Colonial violence was not solely physical; it began as discursive violence—the language, imagery, and narrative imposed upon Africans as inferior and violent beings. Early forms of written captions, photographs, and museum displays conditioned European audiences to accept colonial brutality as necessary “civilizing” acts.

Iconic acts of violence, like the assassination of Patrice Lumumba and the mutilation of Congolese by missionaries, reflect this deeply embedded colonial ideology. These acts were not anomalies but representations of a manufactured worldview that cast Africans as subjects of taming by violent means.

1994 Genocide against the Tutsi and the power of de- nial

The genocide against the Tutsi in 1994 was not sudden—it was a culmination of decades of propaganda, discrimination, and political

manipulation. From the 1950s onwards, the Tutsi population in Rwanda was systematically targeted, with early warnings issued as far back as 1964. Yet, the world remained largely indifferent.

Key figures like Jean Carbonare in 1993 and General Roméo Dallaire early in 1994 sounded alarms about planned mass killings. Despite these pleas, international institutions—including the Clinton administration—refused to label the atrocities as “genocide.” This denial, both during and after the killings, has become a defining feature of genocide ideology.

Today, descendants of perpetrators, their ideological supporters, journalists, and even academics engage in genocide denial—justifying, minimizing, or ignoring the facts. This continues the lasting dehumanization of Tutsis and undermines justice and reconciliation efforts.

Dangerous speech and the normalization of hate

One of the most insidious tools of genocide ideology is language. Rwandan politician Léon Mugesera, in a 1992 speech, deployed rhetoric labeling Tutsi as “foreigners” and “invaders,” and called for their expulsion—symbolically relayed through killings and removal through the Nyabarongo River (considered as the shortest pathway back to Ethiopia). This kind of speech, classified by Susan Benesch as “dangerous speech,” incites people to view violence not just as

justifiable—but necessary.

Benesch explains how metaphors likening targets to “cockroaches” or “bacteria” erode empathy, and mirror accusations that portray the victim group (the Tutsi) as aggressors. This manipulation naturalizes genocide in the public psyche, removing moral constraints against atrocities.

Genocide ideology in DR Congo today

Although Rwanda has contained genocide ideology within its borders, it lingers and spreads throughout the eastern DR Congo. In Goma until recently and broader North Kivu, the conflict offers a modern stage on which old ideologies are revived. International humanitarian organizations like USAID and Doctors Without Borders maintained long-term operations, offering aid but doing little to solve root causes.

Their presence in refugee camps like Mungu marks a form of passive observation of African suffering—a continuation of colonial voyeurism. Similarly, the presence of children growing up in prisons like Munzenze, learning about “summer vacations” behind bars, is a painful symbol of normalized dehumanization.

Role of the international community and local alliances

International actors in DR Congo, such as MONUSCO and SAMIDRC, actively collaborate with the Congolese army, which has integrated members of FDLR—the very group responsible for the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi.

Additionally, European mercenaries have coordinated with MONUSCO and the FARDC, exacerbating distrust and insecurity.

Instead of standing against genocide ideology, these alliances have empowered those who perpetuate it. In Bwiza, for instance, a displaced persons camp housing 17,000 civilians was attacked in November 2023 by a coalition involving the FARDC, FDLR, MONUSCO, Burundian forces, and foreign mercenaries. M23 intervened to prevent mass atrocities.

Economic interests disguised as security and justice

Critical to understanding the persistence of genocide ideology is acknowledging the region’s economic dimension. Coltan mines like those in Rubaya have become geopolitical flashpoints. The South African-led SADC forces allied with the Congolese government allegedly in exchange for mining rights—a

deal that ties violence to profit.

Such alliances reinforce dangerous narratives, portraying Tutsi and M23 fighters as “foreign invaders” or “mineral plunderers.” These terms are widely echoed by officials like Patrick Muyaya and Constant Mutamba, who blend hate speech with state policy. Even Nobel Peace Prize winner Denis Mukwege has been criticized for amplifying the “plundering” myth, aligning with colonial tropes that devalue Tutsi identity.

Media, civil society, and academic complicity

Western journalists and researchers, including Jason Stearns and others, have been spotlighted for reinforcing genocide ideology through academic language and reporting. Civil society organizations like LUCHA stir hate by promoting slogans such as: “*Banyarwanda bote barudiye kwabo*”—a call for Tutsi to “return” to Rwanda, portraying them as outsiders in their ancestral lands.

These narratives are not isolated. They bleed into mainstream discourse, from press releases to peacekeeping mandates, framing the Tutsi as aggressors, destabilizers, and colonizers in their own land.

Repeating history: Modern-day pogroms

Recent atrocities—including the October 2023 attack on Nturo and lynchings in Lulihi

in April 2025—demonstrate that genocide ideology is not merely rhetorical. It manifests in physical violence directed specifically at Congolese Tutsi. Civilians’ properties were torched, and multiple lynchings carried out under slogans popularized by so-called civil society movements.

Indigenous and regional solutions: Education and engagement

Combating genocide ideology requires home-grown and regional solutions rooted in cultural restoration, education, and communal healing.

Drawing from Rwanda’s post-genocide recovery, practices like *kitamadun* (political education through songs promoting unity and accountability) and *umuganda* (community service) offer blueprints.

M23 fighters have adopted similar approaches. In M23-controlled areas, soldiers like “Afande Mandela” perform skits where corruption, tribalism, and hatred are treated as diseases requiring collective healing. Colonel Julien Mahano, addressing residents in Lulihi, echoed these messages, asserting M23’s core goal: to eliminate genocide ideology, not inflame it.

Conclusion: Toward a Pan-African response

Genocide ideology, if left unchecked, will continue to destabilize the Great Lakes region. The repetition of 1994's horrors in today's DR Congo is both a tragedy and a call to action. Rwanda offers a transformative model—a society that has risen from the ashes of genocide to foster unity, justice, and international peacekeeping leadership.

As General Ronald Rwivanga has stated,

Rwanda's contribution to peace in Central Africa, Mozambique, and South Sudan proves that African-led, ethical military and civic engagement can offer lasting peace. It is now the collective responsibility of Africa and the international community to choose actions over rhetoric, and peace over profit.

Only by confronting genocide ideology—rooted in colonial history and thriving in modern conflict—can sustainable peace be pursued, forged in justice, and secured by collective will.