

PRELUDE TO GENOCIDE

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PROLOGUE

On the evening of April 6, 1994, a full moon shone on Kigali Hill across the valley from the American residence. My wife Sandra and I had just stepped in from the front porch when we heard a huge boom followed by a smaller explosion. Sandra, accustomed to small-arms fire and grenade explosions after three months in country, exclaimed, "That was not a grenade!"

Within minutes, the president's cabinet director Enoch Ruhigira called me from the airport. "They have shot down my president," he said in a broken voice.

"Who is they?" I asked.

"The RPF of course!" was his instant and grieving response.

We later learned that two air-to-ground missiles hit the Dassault Falcon jet bringing President Juvénal Habyarimana back home to Kigali from a regional summit in Dar es Salaam. Three months earlier, Habyarimana had been sworn in as interim president under terms of the Arusha Accords, signed August 4, 1993, between the then Government of Rwanda (GOR) and the insurgent Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF).¹ When the president perished with all aboard that plane, the two contending parties returned to war instead of working out the arrangements of democratic governance and power sharing based on the Arusha principles. A Hutu extremist faction grabbed the reins of government and launched a genocide in which over eight hundred thousand victims were slaughtered within one hundred days.

International Humanitarian Intervention in Rwanda

What was the context in which the downing of the presidential aircraft engendered genocide? What was the role of the international community in structuring that context? This study looks at the international humanitarian intervention in Rwanda² and asks what lessons might be learned from the nearly four-year international effort to halt the conflict between the Rwandan government and the Patriotic Front, and to restore peace and security to Rwanda's people.

From the outbreak of civil war in October 1990, regional states and international partners sought to broker a ceasefire. Once a durable ceasefire was secured in 1992, international Observers accompanied political negotiations in Arusha, while diplomatic missions pushed the peace process in Kigali.³ After the parties signed a peace agreement in August 1993, the United Nations Security Council deployed a peacekeeping mission, UNAMIR, to accompany the establishment of a transitional government with a peacekeeping force.

The international community took the signing of the Arusha Accords as warrant of the negotiation's success and guarantee of peace and progress for Rwanda.⁴ But attempts to implement the accords revealed political chasms that international mediation had not bridged. Only Habyarimana had been sworn in as transition president; the organization of other institutions established by the accords was still in dispute. When the president's plane went down, the peace process blew apart in the renewal of civil war and the launching of genocide.

What seemed a model negotiation had fallen apart in endless political point and counterpoint. Within eight months of the peace agreement, the international community, including the largest part of the UNAMIR mission, was fleeing Rwanda, leaving in tatters a carefully knit humanitarian intervention. What went wrong? What lessons for other humanitarian endeavors might we learn from this well-intentioned but tragic effort?

Participant-Observer

As a diplomat of the United States government, I was a participant in those tragic events. My own encounter with Rwanda's political strife began

in 1973 during my first overseas posting in Kigali, Rwanda's capital. As second secretary at the US embassy, I witnessed, in the spring of that year, the outbreak of ethnic violence, born out of passions stirred by the prospect of elections in the summer. On July 5, a committee of ranking National Guard officers, self-designated as "The Committee for Peace and National Unity," took power, abolished political parties, dissolved the government, abrogated the constitution, and named the chief of staff, Major General Juvénal Habyarimana, as chief of state.⁵

Before I left Kigali in August 1975 for onward posting to Bamako, Mali, Habyarimana had installed a largely civilian government and established the Revolutionary National Movement for Development (Mouvement Révolutionnaire Nationale pour le Développement, or MRND).⁶ Adoption by referendum of a new constitution in December 1978 and the election of Habyarimana as president that same month completed the transition to a single-party state.

Habyarimana was still in power in 1990 when exile forces, brought together in the Rwandese Patriotic Front, launched an insurgent movement from Uganda, seeking to overthrow the regime. Distant from Rwanda by postings in West and East Africa and at the Department of State, I was drawn back to the region as a discussant at a State Department conference in March 1992 that presaged a new policy toward Rwanda. Actively directing this new policy was the assistant secretary for African affairs, Ambassador Herman (Hank) Cohen, who, in August 1992, asked me to delay my next assignment and become the US Observer at the political negotiations in Arusha, Tanzania, following the establishment of a ceasefire between the contending parties. Although these negotiations lasted from August 5, 1992, to August 5, 1993, my own engagement ended in November, when negotiations stalled and headed into impasse.

In March 1993, President Clinton named me as his intended ambassador to the Republic of Rwanda, presumably to be accredited to a transition regime as structured in the Arusha negotiations. Arriving at post in January 1994, I found that only the president had been sworn in to his transition position under the Arusha Accords. Three months of intensive diplomacy thereafter could not bring the parties to establish the transitional government or national assembly. When the president's plane was

shot down on April 6, Hutu extremists rushed to fill the power vacuum, launching war and genocide in their quest to hold onto power.

The Rwandese Patriotic Army (RPA) vanquished government forces and stopped genocide in four months of fighting. In the meantime, some eight hundred thousand innocents had been brutally slaughtered as states debated how to restore an international force within Rwanda. Having on April 10 evacuated Americans and closed the embassy in Kigali under orders from Washington, I was now asked on July 24 to establish the base for cooperation with the new government and to oversee the launching of a humanitarian airlift, in effect reopening the US mission. For the next eighteen months, our embassy was engaged in providing humanitarian relief, rebuilding infrastructure, promoting justice, and increasing the capacities of the new government. I passed these responsibilities to my successor, Robert Gribbin, on January 6, 1996, and went on to West Africa as the US ambassador to Mali.

From Memories to Documents

Memories abound, but they are often selective, sometimes inaccurate, and always circumscribed by one's personal experience. More reliable are observations refined and inscribed, fixed in the official record. Upon my retirement from the US Foreign Service in 1999, I was encouraged by the late Senator Paul Simon to write about US engagement in Rwanda—policies and actions in which he had taken a personal interest. His recommendation evolved into a proposal to the United States Institute of Peace to look at the documentary record of international humanitarian intervention of that period, especially the US classified documents that were accessible to me as a former presidential appointee. Following reinstatement of my security clearance, I began the perusal of those documents in the summer of 2002. Had I known how laborious it would be to sort through the thousands of documents covering the period from 1990, when the RPF invaded, to 1996, when the United Nations withdrew its peace mission, I might never have undertaken the task. Nor did I have any idea of how slow the process of getting critical documents declassified and available to the public would be.

CAUTIONS

The analysis that follows is made with a great deal of hesitancy. I am reminded of Claude Lanzmann's remark, when asked to describe Hitler, that any attempt to explain Hitler is obscene because you are led, whether you want it or not, to justification.⁷ Similarly, to discuss state and interstate response to genocide in Rwanda may well be seen as an attempt to explain away failure or to diminish responsibility. Nor can one claim powerlessness or lack of jurisdiction. Genocide happened "on our watch"! The observation of Czesław Miłosz, made in the context of the Holocaust, is thus appropriate here, "There is no such thing as an innocent bystander. If you are a bystander, you are not innocent."⁸

There are, as well, the issues of historiography in the African context. Joseph Miller reminds us that "Africans have had, and have, distinctive ways of thinking of themselves and their worlds . . . alternative casts on the Modern Western imaginings that make up our reality. . . . A world history that evaluates Africans only in terms of their relations with others' worlds catches only the most fleeting glimpses of what they were in fact about."⁹

A particular difficulty with this study is precisely that it evaluates the advent of Rwanda's genocide from the perspective of the others' world—namely, that of the international community engaged in humanitarian intervention. There is a much deeper story here that must be included in any comprehensive narrative, and it must be told from African perspectives, and hopefully from more Rwandan ones. Such would be a signal contribution to "the multi-centric world history of complexity" that Miller invokes.¹⁰

A larger problem of historical craft and the human condition remains. Hannah Arendt argues that "action reveals itself fully only to the storyteller, that is, to the backward glance of the historian, who indeed always knows better what it was all about than the participants."¹¹ I was a participant and still must live with the consequences of my actions in that troubled time. My rendition of the "intentions, aims and motives," of the international community in its effort to extricate Rwanda from civil war is admittedly partial. I have sought to ground my narration in the documentary record of the time.

There are, nonetheless, personal aspirations that emerge from this study. One is the desire that the admittedly partial readings and insights of a participant who has access to the documentary record may bring some light on events and decisions that led to the tragedy of the Rwandan genocide. The second is the hope that this analysis might offer some lessons on the possibilities and limitations of international humanitarian intervention seen through the prism of the Rwandan peace process. The third is the ambition that the long process of declassification of hundreds of documents that are particularly relevant to this story will provide “useful source material in the historian’s hands.”¹² I can only hope that this perusal of the historical record will inspire future historians to evaluate more deeply and narrate more tellingly the events on which the documents report.

SECONDARY SOURCES

A word is in order about the sources I have consulted and how they are presented in this study. There are numerous books and monographs on the history of genocide in Rwanda. Some studies survey the story; some focus narrowly on particular events or dynamics. Some analyses attempt an even-handed evaluation, whereas others are openly ideological; some cite empirical evidence, and others seek theoretical confirmations. Some are autobiographies with stories of horror and triumph. The studies center around those written close to the events, those that take a longer look at middle distance, and those that, on second look and through different optics, challenge the previous record.¹³

OFFICIAL RECORDS

This is a study of official records of the international humanitarian intervention in Rwanda from the opening of civil war in October 1990 to the death of President Habyarimana in April 1994. An epilogue brings the action forward to the installation of a new government in July 1994. State actors in this drama were Belgium, Burundi, Canada, France, Germany, Switzerland, Tanzania, Uganda, the United States, and Zaire; intergovernmental organizations included the Economic Community of the Great Lakes Countries (CEPGL), the Organization of African Unity (OAU), and the United Nations (UN). What is known of the actions of Belgium

and France is a matter of extensive public record brought out by hearings in the Belgian Senate and in the French National Assembly.¹⁴ Germany largely focused on its two-year economic development plans for Rwanda rather than on any political agenda. Although present as an Observer at the Arusha political negotiations, Germany did not participate in political discussions on Central Africa, discussions that brought Belgian, French, and US policy makers together regularly in each other's capitals during the period under investigation. Canada and Switzerland had significant economic assistance programs in Rwanda and occasionally joined in diplomatic demarches through their resident development officers.

In contrast to Belgium and France, the United States Congress never held a hearing on the Clinton administration's policy toward Rwanda, even though that was strongly recommended both by leading human rights groups and, in 1999, by a panel of experts.¹⁵ A critical behind-the-scenes player during the Arusha discussions and the leader in postgenocide reconstruction, the United States covered the role of its decision makers during those events in a blanket of documentary confidentiality.

A significant part of the US story became public record thanks to the tireless efforts of William Ferroggiaro while working at the National Security Archive from 1995 to 2003. His pioneering work has led to full collection of declassified documents at the archives. More recently, the State Department has collated and made available to the public a large number of documents, many of which were first declassified at the request of Mr. Ferroggiaro or myself in the course of this study (foia.state.gov).

UN documents are deposited in UN collections at various institutions around the United States or are available online. The key documents of the period have been collected in the *United Nations and Rwanda: 1993–1996*.¹⁶ Internal UN documents are not available. For what was happening within UN institutions, within the OAU, or in African capitals, this study has relied largely on the reports of the US Mission to the United Nations in New York and the US embassies in Addis Ababa, Bujumbura, Dar es Salaam, Kampala, Kigali, Kinshasa, and Nairobi. I also drew information from conversations with key actors and from my own experiences at the time.¹⁷

Drawing from the documentary record, this study looks at international efforts at conflict resolution in Rwanda from 1990 to 1996, with an

emphasis on international engagement within the Arusha political negotiations of 1992–1994. As background to that narrative, I first review the historic roots of the Rwandan conflict, look at structures of international intervention that sought to mitigate that conflict, and anticipate the effect of international humanitarian intervention.