

## The Lessons of Genocide

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### Book Review: Linda Melvern, *Conspiracy to Murder: The Rwandan Genocide*<sup>1</sup>

On the eve of Wednesday, 6 April 1994, a jet ferrying the President of Rwanda, an ethnic Hutu, was shot down on its approach to Kigali Airport. It is unknown for certain who fired the rockets,<sup>2</sup> but mass killings of ethnic-minority Tutsis, as well as Hutu politicians opposed to the Rwandan Government, soon erupted. By the beginning of the following week, the French newspaper *Libération*<sup>3</sup> and the *New York Times*<sup>4</sup> were referring to the events in Rwanda as genocide.

The word ‘genocide’ was repeated – by the media, in the pleas of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and in politicians’ pronouncements – with increasing frequency and alarm as the month progressed, but to little avail. On 28 April 1994, the Associated Press (AP) bureau in Nairobi received a frantic phone call from a man in Kigali who described horrific scenes of concerted slaughter that had been unfolding in the Rwandan capital ‘every day, everywhere’ for three weeks. ‘I saw people hacked to death, even babies, month-old babies... Anybody who tried to flee was killed in the streets, and people who were hiding were found and massacred’.<sup>5</sup>

The caller’s account, in retrospect, proved a remarkably thorough description of the genocide’s machinery. He told of youth gangs that had erected roadblocks at key intersections of the city and were stopping every vehicle, killing anyone whose ID identified

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<sup>1</sup> Linda Melvern, *Conspiracy to Murder: The Rwandan Genocide* (London & New York: Verso, 2004), 256 pp., hardcover.

<sup>2</sup> French Judge Jean-Louis Bruguière concluded a six-year inquiry into the assassination with a January 2004 report that the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), a mainly-Tutsi rebel army, had hit the plane with an anti-aircraft rocket. See Stephen Smith, ‘L’enquête sur l’attentat qui fit basculer le Rwanda dans le génocide’ *Le Monde* (Paris) 10 Mar. 2004 at 1 and 2. General Paul Kagame, then a military leader in the RPF and now the country’s President, has denounced the report, and all suggestions that the RPF was involved, as baseless. A confidential United Nations (UN) document that came to light in March 2000 also suggested Kagame had ordered the assassination. See Steven Edwards, “Explosive” leak on Rwanda genocide: Informants told UN investigators they were on squad that killed Rwanda’s president – and a foreign government helped’ *National Post* (Toronto) 1 Mar. 2000 at A1. Standard accounts of the genocide offer two possibilities: that the RPF shot down the president’s plane, or that extremists in his own party did so to scupper a power-sharing plan between the government and the Tutsi insurgents.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Philippe Ceppi, ‘Kigali livré à la fureur des tueurs Hutus’, *Libération* (Paris), 11 Apr. 1994, at 1 and 14-15.

<sup>4</sup> Jerry Gray, ‘2 Nations Joined by Common History of Genocide’, *New York Times*, 9 Apr. 1994, at 6.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Survivor’s story of horror: Slaughter in Rwanda was beyond imagination’, *The Gazette* (Montreal), 29 Apr. 1994, at A8.

them as ethnic Tutsi. He described the marauding, door-to-door militias that sought out and slaughtered Tutsis (he had been spared because he was a Hutu, the 85 per cent majority ethnic group). The militias also worked alongside units in the Rwandan Presidential Guard searching for and killing Hutu politicians opposed to the country's governing regime. The caller pinpointed ordinary civilians, including his neighbours, for their involvement in the killings.

The caller's story was dispatched on the AP newswire for the planet to read, and complemented an OXFAM statement from the same day declaring that the slaughter – the toll of which had already reached 200,000 – 'amounts to genocide'. The following day, United Nations Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali acknowledged the massacres and requested that the Security Council deploy a significant force, a week after the Council had reduced the number of blue berets in Rwanda from 2500 to 270.

Yet the killings continued for another two and a half months. By mid-July, when the government was finally routed by exiled Tutsi rebels following a prolonged civil war, the slaughter had been quelled and 800,000 were dead, blue berets reinforcements were only just arriving.

Missing from the caller's story were details which would later emerge and be extensively documented by British author Linda Melvern, in her account of the genocide, *Conspiracy to Murder*. Her book concerns the months of assiduous planning in the highest ranks of the military and government: the careful plans to compile lists of Tutsis throughout the country, to form a vast 'civilian defence' hierarchy consisting of teams of youths in every district, to distribute rifles, grenades and machetes to these cells and, when the moment was ripe, to call upon them to mount a massacre.<sup>6</sup>

## 1. The World Can Ignore Genocide

Herein lies the first lesson about genocide to surface from *Conspiracy to Murder*, investigative journalist Melvern's tediously meticulous account of the Rwandan genocide. Despite its morally unambiguous heinousness, despite overwhelming evidence of its occurrence (for example, four days into the Rwandan carnage, the US Defence Intelligence Agency possessed satellite photos showing sprawling massacre sites),<sup>7</sup> and despite the relative ease with which it could have been abated (the UN Commander in Rwanda felt a modest 5,500 reinforcements, had they arrived promptly, could have saved tens of thousands of lives)<sup>8</sup> – despite all this, the world ignored genocide. Melvern writes, 'Since 1990 ... a total of seven international human rights reports on Rwanda ... each contained detailed information about the regime and the violence that it meted out to its own citizens'.<sup>9</sup> As early as 1993, a ten person international commission of inquiry and the then UN Special Rapporteur, Bacre

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<sup>6</sup> On the creation of the 'civilian defence' force, see Melvern, *Conspiracy to Murder*, at 19-48. Details of how it was brought into action are principally at 133-75.

<sup>7</sup> A.J. Kuperman, *The Limits of Humanitarian Intervention: Genocide in Rwanda* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2001) at 23-37. Melvern cites Kuperman's findings concerning the Defence Intelligence Agency. See Melvern, n. 5 above, n. 75 at 187 and n. 24 at 200.

<sup>8</sup> See, among others, Carol Off, *The Lion, the Fox and the Eagle: A Story of Generals and Justice in Yugoslavia and Rwanda* (Toronto: Random House, 2000) and R.A. Dallaire, *Shake Hands with the Devil: the Failure of Humanity in Rwanda* (Toronto: Random House, 2003). Kuperman, n. 4 above, dissents over how readily the atrocities could have been stopped.

<sup>9</sup> Melvern, n. 5 above, 63.

Waly Ndiaye, independently confirmed incipient genocide.<sup>10</sup> Yet, ‘although widely and publicly available, Ndiaye said later that he might just as well have put [his] report in a bottle and thrown it into the sea’.<sup>11</sup> And how timely a tale: as Melvern’s tome was rolling off the presses, authorities were acknowledging another genocide underway in Sudan, referring to the Congo in similar terms, and doing little.

The muted response to Sudan doubtless did not surprise Melvern. The former *Evening Standard* and *Sunday Times* reporter first wrote about the international community’s neglect of Rwanda in her 1995 backroom history of the United Nations, *The Ultimate Crime*,<sup>12</sup> a book that details how, from the beginning, idealists were *personae non gratae* at the world organisation. The Rwanda crisis reached its peak while Melvern was researching at UN Headquarters in New York, where she occupied a front-row seat on the machinations that unfolded in the Security Council and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations. What she saw inspired her to delve deeper. After six years of uncovering secret documents and tracking down witnesses, the result was her 2000 volume *A People Betrayed*,<sup>13</sup> which details how the *génocidaires* armed themselves, how a peace plan for power sharing in Kigali failed, how the major powers of the Security Council reacted to the massacres, and how they did too little to stop them.

*Conspiracy to Murder* is based on largely the same sources, although Melvern also had access to a wider array of Rwandan military and government documents, as well as additional years of testimony and indictments from the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. The most significant difference between her two accounts, however, is in the style, and it is here that the sequel pales against the original. Whereas *A People Betrayed* wove a comprehensive account of the genocide through forceful tales of individual experiences and scene-by-scene reconstructions of speeches and meetings, *Conspiracy to Murder* aims for a detached, impersonal authoritativeness that overwhelms the reader with its cascade of facts, names and places without compelling with its prose. Melvern repeatedly inserts new but inconsequential characters by name into her text, only to have them fade away as abruptly as they, and the tangential episode they take part in, arrive. For instance, the subchapter on the Genocide Bureaucracy, a discussion that ought to be a devastating and pivotal exposé of the core of the brutal operation, becomes a simple list of the soldiers in charge of coordinating the operation in each prefecture.<sup>15</sup> Half of those mentioned do not appear anywhere else in the text; one commander is so trifling to the author’s wider picture that his name is not listed in the index.

*Conspiracy to Murder* is littered with many such instantly forgettable references and secondary stories. As a result, the reader can easily lose sight of the wood and become mired in the trees. There is a substantial and unhappy irony here, for in trying to understand how the world can ignore genocide, one of the lessons that springs from Melvern’s book is that one must ensure that it is first understood. Unfortunately, her tortuous chronicle provides no easy aid to such understanding.

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>12</sup> Linda Melvern, *The Ultimate Crime: Who Betrayed the UN and Why* (London: Allison and Busby, 1995).

<sup>13</sup> Linda Melvern, *A People Betrayed: The Role of the West in Rwanda’s Genocide* (London: Zed, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Melvern, n. 5 above, 54.

<sup>15</sup> Melvern, n. 5 above, 213.

## 2. Sometimes There Are No Heroes

Man-made atrocity is often presented as a morality play pitting villains (Adolf Hitler, Slobodan Milosevic, Saddam Hussein) against heroes (the Allies, Bosnian Muslims, the 1991 US-led Coalition). Casting the world in such morally stark roles makes it easier to see the villain as an aberrant monster. It also enables us to avoid acknowledging that real, quotidian humans are capable of enormous crimes.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, clad in familiar idioms, the fuzzy data of perception can be more briskly and efficiently understood and acted upon. Once a politician has been pigeonholed as ‘a dictator’ or a people’s plight described as ‘tragic,’ a warehouse of pre-manufactured rational and emotional responses is made available.<sup>17</sup> But there is a risk that looms as a result of this: the more one sees the world in archetypes, the more one relies on them to define the world. When the world resists such categorisation – when it does not clothe current events in the garb of dramatic roles– we are befuddled. Thus it was in Rwanda, where there were no heroes.

Previous books about Rwanda’s genocide have attempted to mine it for easily digestible dramatic tropes. Philip Gourevitch, who won laurels for his reportage in *The New Yorker* magazine and his subsequent book,<sup>18</sup> falls into precisely such a pattern. Gruesome descriptions of slaughter sites are interspersed by interviews with eloquent Tutsi rebel leaders and Rwandan President General Paul Kagame. Trained in military tactics in the United States, Kagame is presented as the rational, noble hero who righted his country.

Melvyn does not tumble into this kind of crude typecasting. Her perspective is too dispassionate to offer any shining knights. She reminds us that Kagame’s Rwandan Patriotic Front, the Tutsi rebel army that eventually toppled the military-controlled Hutu government and its genocide apparatus, bombed forty people waiting in line at a hospital for medicine, destroyed a medical tent, killed thirteen clergymen under its protection, and implored the UN not to intervene even when the genocide was in full force and hundreds of thousands could have been safeguarded by a reinforced contingent of peacekeepers. Once it had seized control of the north eastern corner of the country, the RPF barricaded the border to Tanzania, blocking hundreds of thousands of refugees from fleeing to UN camps there, leaving them to starve in limbo between the homes they had fled and the camps they could not reach. Melvyn also tells of UN peacekeepers who were too pliant to defy the Rwandan army in its Tutsi hunts through Kigali’s streets, of peacekeepers who shunted refuge-seekers out of one of their UN compounds into the hands of waiting *génocidaires*, and of a 90-person Belgian unit that abandoned 2,000 Tutsis sheltered at a school; the abandoned Tutsis were immediately slaughtered. She also focuses on the Security Council, where she takes aim at American and British reluctance to augment the UN’s token intervention, at Belgium’s withdrawal of its 440 soldiers, and at France’s perfidy throughout the ordeal. Indeed, there was no virtuous team to cheer for, no protagonist in whom to invest hopes of vindication. To a considerable degree, the Rwandan genocide defied these habits of thought.

## 3. The Worst Orgies Are Planned

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<sup>16</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of this kind of response to horrors, see Brian L. Ott and Eric Aoki, ‘The Politics of Negotiating Public Tragedy’ (2002) 5 *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 483-505.

<sup>17</sup> Psychologist Gordon Allport suggested that a need or desire for precisely this kind of cognitive ‘efficiency’ was what led people to hold stereotypes. See G.W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1954).

<sup>18</sup> Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish To Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families: Stories From Rwanda* (New York: Picador, 1998).

Melvern's book also provides an account of the long-simmering civil war between the Rwandan Patriotic Front and the Hutu Government, which flared up anew after the President's assassination. The warfare filled civilian body bags, but not at a pace comparable to the depravity enacted against non-combatant Tutsis and opposition Hutu politicians. One failure of the international community, as *Conspiracy to Murder* makes clear, was that it failed to distinguish the genocide from the war. 'Attempts to secure a ceasefire... was the subject of most discussion in the Security Council',<sup>19</sup> the assumption being that a cessation of hostilities would end the 'orgy of violence' against civilians. But the worst of this violence stemmed from the civil war only in that the war provided a facade for the thoroughly planned campaigns of feverish extermination.

Melvern's greatest authorial asset, and addition to existing accounts, is her extensive documentation of this planning. She has waded through Rwandan government memos and military communiqués to trace a trail of premeditation originating at least three years before the mass slaughter began. 'The idea that genocide of the Tutsi would solve all problems was spread in a series of secret meetings starting at the end of October [1990]',<sup>20</sup> she writes. A top army officer instructed 'the army and the gendarmerie to establish lists of people identified as "the enemy and its accomplices"'<sup>21</sup> – the former, namely, the RPF and the latter, every Tutsi. At the UN in 1994, however, it was too easy to dismiss the bodies floating down the Akagera River as casualties in a very visible civil war instead of victims of invisible extremism.

#### 4. The Hardest Targets Are Soft Targets

If the world had intervened, what could it have done? The Rwandan genocide was perpetrated by a suspected 100,000 people, mostly civilians, with most killings carried out by machete<sup>22</sup> and much of the coordination carried out over public radio. Under these conditions, in which masses of civilians with knives assume a role normally played by cadres of armed militants, the question of who can be targeted arises.

NATO incurred widespread indignation when it bombed radio stations in Serbia in 1999 in the name of halting ethnic cleansing. But in Rwanda, as Melvern writes: 'A fundamental role in the routine of genocide was given to the radio. ... Broadcasts encouraged the population to kill'.<sup>23</sup> Dispatches sent over the airwaves of Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines, a private broadcaster, listed the names and whereabouts of 'enemies' to be tracked down and slain, all the while repeatedly branding Tutsis 'cockroaches' who required extermination. The inevitable outrage of ironclad pacifists means it is difficult to countenance bombing a civilian radio station, but in Rwanda it would in all probability have saved thousands of lives.

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<sup>19</sup> Melvern, n. 5 above, 201. Karel Kovanda, at the time the Czech ambassador on the Security Council, told Melvern in an interview not reproduced in her book: 'Thousands and thousands of people were being killed, and yet 80 per cent of the Security Council's time was spent discussing the possibility of a ceasefire in the renewed civil war and the rest of the time deciding what to do about the peacekeepers in the UN assistance mission in Rwanda, UNAMIR'. Linda Melvern, 'Briefing', speech at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (Washington), 11 Mar. 2002. Available at:

<http://www.ushmm.org/conscience/events/melvern/melvern.php>.

<sup>20</sup> Melvern, n. 5 above, 19.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>22</sup> Thirty-eight per cent, according to a subsequent government census. *Ibid.*, 251.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 204, 208.

This is not to say that the world could not have easily intervened. The UN Force Commander's plan for 5,500 troops with which to establish secure havens would have done much to safeguard lives. However, it would have required passively defending civilians while the civil war ran its course, not actively seeking out targets to subdue. Such tactics defy the standard military logic of 'reconnoitre problem, eliminate problem'.

## 5. Why Genocide?

From the events as Melvern recounts them, we can infer that the Rwandan genocide threw up hurdle after hurdle to normal mannerisms of thought. Such mannerisms enable us to readily digest the world into binaries such as good/bad, hero/villain, war-casualty/massacre-victim, and sacrosanct/target. But we are flummoxed when the world resists facile categorization. As a result, and as exposed by Melvern, the UN and its major players saw no identifiable heroes to support, no clear causes for hundreds of thousands of deaths beyond collateral damage in a civil war, and no apparent linchpins in the genocide machine to be surgically removed. Hence, despite the flood of reports and firsthand accounts of ethnically motivated slaughters, Madeleine Albright, at the time the US Ambassador to the Security Council, recounted that 'it would be weeks before most of us understood the nature and scale of the violence'.<sup>24</sup> Weeks before they understood, perhaps, but not before they knew.<sup>25</sup>

The gulf between what people see in the raw and how they interpret it into a meaningful understanding of the world is at the crux of the Rwandan genocide. Melvern does not explicitly claim this, but the events she describes can inspire such an interpretation. Genocide results from the sloppy mental categories of persecutors, who see 'Tutsi' and translate it as 'cockroach'. In our failure to avert it, genocide also relies on a conceptual architecture, one that needs heroes, causes, and targets in order to understand and act in the world. But Rwanda, as *Conspiracy to Murder* demonstrates, provided none of these. Instead, it delivers a chilling lesson about how humanity's greatest strengths can also be the source of its starkest depravities. The very ability to categorize perceptions is one of the most profoundly human aptitudes. Yet the worst acts of genocidal 'inhumanity' – the perpetrators' vicious stereotyping and the bystanders' mental rigidity – emerge directly from it.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>25</sup> To be sure, US President Bill Clinton's aversion to extending the UN mission in Rwanda must have had something to do with the fact that a third of the UN's peacekeeping budget is paid by the US. As he said, the UN has to learn 'when to say no.' Also, less than a year after the notorious 1993 Black Hawk Down incident in Somalia, in which 18 elite US soldiers died in the course of a UN mission, the US was more than reluctant to risk its troops' lives in what was felt to be another so-called African quagmire. See, among many, John Hillen, 'Picking Up UN Peacekeeping's Pieces: Knowing When to Say When' (1998) 77:4 *Foreign Affairs* 96-106.