

Review - The Role of France in the Rwandan Genocide

Written by Alasdair McKay

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ALASDAIR MCKAY, SEP 28 2010

“Thou shalt not be a victim.
Thou shalt not be a perpetrator.
Above all, thou shalt not be a bystander”
–Yehuda Bauer

Some sixteen years after the Rwandan Genocide, the event remains a heated topic of discourse within many schools of thought. This is indeed a necessary ramification of an event that cost the lives of more than 500,000 people (Human Rights Watch, 1999), and posed serious questions about the commitment to the pronouncement made after the Holocaust of “Never Again”. There are several distinctive aspects of this event that have garnered particular scholarly attention. The first is the speed, effectiveness and scale of the violence. This event was, after all, the fastest recorded genocide in history, and removed possibility 10% of Rwanda’s population in three months. Experts examining this aspect of the genocide have also placed a heavy emphasis upon identifying and understanding the causes of the genocide (Human Rights Watch, 1995 & 1999; Gourevitch 1998; Mamdani, 2001; Semujanga, 2003; Gatwa, 2005; Straus, 2009; Kimonyo, forthcoming). Secondly, certain historical accounts have examined the role that previous colonial powers, particularly the Belgians, played in the future genocide in Rwanda (Prunier, 1995; Mamdani, 2001).

The third and perhaps most uncomfortable strand of debate relates to the role of the international community in the crisis. The genocide’s unfolding was watched by the world and yet little was done by

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leaders to alleviate the suffering. Certain publications have been highly critical of the UN and its Member States for their response to the crisis (Melvern, 2000 & 2004; Barnett, 2002; Power, 2003).

The fourth approach to the genocide, which dovetails with the third, examines the role of France within the genocide (see Mamdani, 2001: 254; Gouteux, 1998; Ba, 1997). It is this aspect of the genocide that Daniela Krosiak's (2007) publication *The Role of France in the Rwandan Genocide* examines, and this book serves as the subject of this review essay. Krosiak contests that France was not only involved in events through passivity, but actually enabled the genocide through its support for the Hutu regime before, during and after the killing. This monograph was stemmed from an Aberystwyth University PhD thesis (Krosiak, 2002). Overall, this study represents an estimable and rigorously researched contribution to the subject, though, as this essay will unearth, there are some problematic elements to the book.

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Identifying the gap the book fills within the literature is not as conspicuous as it may initially seem. As already stated, the book expounds the relationship of the French government with the Hutu regime and the deficiencies of the former to effectively stop the genocide. As such, this represents a significant contribution to a small section of literature with Wallis' (2006) *The Silent Accomplice* being probably the best known of these works. A further point to note is that Krosiak's book is one of the few academic investigations into this aspect of the genocide with a great deal of texts being more journalistic rather than scholarly and her employment of methodological techniques is a welcome addendum. Assuredly, Krosiak's usage of methodologies rather than simply impassioned polemics distinguishes this work from journalistic outings.

However, the conceptual issues addressed by Krosiak resonate broader themes in applied ethics. In some ways, it may be apt to connect Krosiak's analysis with the vast debates in International Relations (IR) concerning concepts such as humanitarian intervention, the politics of rescue and the protection of human rights beyond the borders of states (see: Hoffmann, 1981 & 1996; Walzer 1992; Vincent, 1986; Wheeler, 2000; Bellamy, 2006; Woodhouse and Ramsbottom 1996).

Yet with greater precision, this work can be situated within the somewhat acute discipline of "Genocide Studies" and the central research question addressed by Krosiak identifies the main subjects of the analysis which will follow: 'To what extent can collective external actors, such as France, be held responsible for not preventing or not suppressing genocide, and how can this responsibility be evaluated?'. The terminology "collective external actor" is elaborated upon to mean external bystander (Krosiak, 2007: 7).

It is with this concept of the bystander to genocide that the main academic gap in the theoretical side of the literature is discerned. Habitually, the study of genocide focuses upon three main agents: the victims, the perpetrators and the bystanders. The first two points of analysis have given birth to a plethora of work in theoretical terms and with reference to the Rwandan genocide. Comparatively, the third agent of analysis in "Genocide Studies", the bystander, has been comparatively underexplored (Adler, 1993; Fein, 1993; Hilberg, 1995; Levine, 1996). This is observable in regards to the Rwandan case and other studies of genocide. In addition, the works that have examined the bystander to genocide have focused largely upon the *internal bystander* to genocide (see: Prunier, 1995; Strauss 2006: 145-146). Contrarily, Krosiak examines the *external bystander* and the obligations that they possess to the victims. In elaborating upon what is meant by collective external bystander(s), Krosiak echoes Straub (1992: 168) who suggests external bystanders to be 'other nations and outside groups who remain passive' in the case of genocide. So, ultimately, states are presented as the main bystanders in cases of genocide and in this instance the state government of France assumes the lead role in Krosiak's inquiry.

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Krosiak structures the book into ten chapters. The first chapter serves as an overview of the main conceptual issues which will proceed. The notion of France as the bystander provides much of the epistemological foundations for the

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analysis which will follow, particularly the collective composite of bystanders. Although with somewhat of a dilution of argument from her PhD thesis (Krosalk, 2002), Kroslak uses the opening chapter as a means of providing a benchmark for how the responsibility of collectives can be assessed. Collective responsibility is explored through reference to the work of May (1987) whose work essentially provides a via media between collectivism and methodological individualism, and serves as the epistemological starting point for Kroslak.

The values anchoring this book find weight largely with the legal and moral commitments made in the Genocide Convention. To Kroslak (2007: 9), the declarations made in this document provide a “normative standard” from which to respond to genocide. Kroslak quotes Brown to assert the morally and legally binding dynamic of universal condemnation that the document has relating to genocide: “the Genocide Convention of 1948 seems a plausible example of a piece of international legislation that outlaws an obvious wrong—obvious in the sense that any moral code that did not condemn genocide would not be worthy of respect” (quoted in Kroslak, 2007: 10). As such, Kroslak’s ethical position is Universalist insofar as she asserts the responsibility to prevent and suppress genocide as a global commitment to a common humanity.

Therefore, Kroslak follows the likes of Todorov (2006:231) and attaches a dimension of *moral responsibility* to the collective bystander to genocide. The term responsibility in the context of the book relates predominantly to the retrospective usage of the word, namely, “why one acted as one did” (Kroslak, 2007:6).

Three criteria are established to assess the responsibility of the French government in the Rwandan genocide and in turn, to address the central research question. These criteria being: French knowledge of plans for the genocide and its implementation, involvement in supporting the government that executed the genocide, and the capability of France to intervene to prevent or stop the genocide. Harnessing such criteria, Kroslak’s argument then addresses two aspects of responsibility: the failure of France to *prevent* the genocide from happening and the failure to *suppress* genocide as it transpired (Kroslak, 2007: 15-17).

Three chapters are used to put forward the case for France’s responsibility in failing to *prevent* the genocide. In “Preparing for the unimaginable: what the French knew”, she argues that the French possessed enough channels of knowledge to perceive the threat of genocide which had been brewing in the years before 1994 through a propaganda campaign and ethnic radicalization (Kroslak, 2007: 72-98).

Following on from this, she presents a detailed analysis of the French political and military involvement with the Habyarimana government between 1990 and 1994 when the Hutu government was militarily challenged by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and civil war erupted. The last chapter of this section (chapter six) investigates the French capability to prevent the genocide, in both political and military senses, during the period (Kroslak, 2007:153-174).

The second section looks at what Kroslak describes as the France’s passivity which prevented it from *suppressing* the killings. Chapter seven analyses the knowledge of the genocide that the French government is supposed to have gathered through NGOs, repatriated personnel, the secret service, the media and the UN. The eighth chapter intends to excavate the reasons why the French remained vindictive to calls for a ceasefire, presenting this as the only solution to cease the Rwandan conflict. Moving with practical considerations, this chapter also documents operations *Amaryllis* and *Turquoise*, as well as possible French military support to the interim government between the operations.

The ninth chapter presents Kroslak’s view on “what the French could have done” if they had decided to distance themselves from the interim government and apply greater pressure to them (Kroslak, 2007: 174-271). Kroslak disputes that France could have been more proactive at the Security Council, had combined operation *Amaryllis* and the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR), have agreed to contribute to the reinforcement of UNAMIR and made *Turquoise* more efficient at stopping the killings. The tenth and last chapter of the book criticises France for its refusal to acknowledge its responsibility (Kroslak, 2007: 271-280). There are some harrowing quotations from Mitterrand cited to illuminate the attitude of some of France’s elites to the problem: “in countries like Rwanda, genocide is not very important” (quoted from Kroslak, 2007: 193) and “our responsibility is none” (quoted

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from: Krosiak, 2007: 271). Essentially, the book's concluding chapter calls for a recognition of bystander's responsibility in genocide, "a responsibility that is different from the perpetrators but a responsibility nonetheless" (Krosiak, 2007: 271).

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When taking into consideration the task that Krosiak sets for herself and the subsequent arguments she presents, the usage of effective supporting evidence is vital. In order to gather such evidence, Krosiak employs a series of different methods in this study.

The preliminary approach is a consultation with the existing literature. To be sure, the secondary literature consulted by Krosiak is extensive and shows meticulous commitment to understanding the genocide from various disciplinary approaches. With certainty, any serious publication on this subject would need to demonstrate a rigorous examination of the existing research and the book's bibliography confirms this. The second chapter provides a concise historical background to the genocide which not only sets the scene for the analysis to follow, but also illuminates the eruditeness of Krosiak's research. In particular, Prunier's (1995; 1999) works on the subject work become invaluable resources for Krosiak throughout the book.

Additionally, Krosiak undertook a series of interviews with some of the key actors involved in the genocide. Personalities as diverse as the former French President Mitterrand to the current Rwandan President, Paul Kagame, were interviewed in 2002 as part of her PhD research. Of course, the usage of interviews as a research method is not without problems. There is the obvious dilemma of political bias when speaking to policymakers. Moreover, there is the pitfall that findings from interviews are vulnerable to the "failings and selectivity of memory" (Kramer, 1990: 213). Not only this, but also there are ethical considerations about the sensitivity of the subject. Many of those involved in the genocide, through differing roles, are still alive and there still remains a degree of "bad blood" seeping between parties. That said, Krosiak's willingness to attempt to produce an oral history of the genocide gives this study a uniqueness that is lacking in many other pieces of academic research.

Due to the aforementioned problems of interviews, Krosiak uses also archival research in this study, which seeks to obtain a firmer grasp of events that may not have been attainable through interviews. Krosiak cites a diverse range of documents to enforce her case. Referenced primary sources include papers issued by the French Presidency, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the US Department of State and House of Representatives, and NGOs. Additionally, she makes use of the UN Security Council archives and examines French, British and US newspapers.

However, archival research does have its limitations. A fundamental problem with archival research in this area of study is source accessibility. Nevertheless, certain studies have been fortuitous in their capacity to obtain important documents on the crisis with Melvern's (2000: 2004) research being a good example of literature that has obtained vital access to documents in Rwanda. In general, the ability to obtain information on the Rwandan side of things seems to be a less arduous labour in comparison to attempting to view French documents. The thirty year rule is still active pertaining to many sources that could be invaluable to research such as *Ministère de la Défense* papers. A potentially important discovery, for example, would be evidence suggesting that the French actually provided logistical support for Hutu death squads. Notwithstanding the limitations of data collection within this subject area, Krosiak's employment of a vast plurality of sources creates an eloquent case.

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Overall, this book represents a worthy contribution to a difficult subject, but certain aspects are not immune from criticism. Stylistically, this book is generally well written, but there is a tendency for it to provide more of a narration rather than a critical engagement. However, given that the argument is largely contingent upon factual evidence, this may have been an inevitable outcome. At the same time, however, the book does suffer partially from a confusion of intellectual identity between IR and historiography. Further, the theoretical foundations are compressed uncomfortably into one chapter. This contrasts heavily with the PhD thesis which dedicated half of its consistency to developing criteria for assessing the external responsibility of bystanders. Greater elaborations on debates relating to

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the bystander would have been welcomed and strengthened core claims.

Analytically speaking, Krosalak's overall argument does suffer from some weaknesses. Despite the descriptive feel of the book, it is also important to consider that the ethical foundations of the text are based upon *ought* rather than *is*. This being so, Krosalak is somewhat reluctant to entertain reasons why France did not do more to stop the genocide. The aforementioned section entitled "too little, too late" (Krosalak, 2007: 193-247), does stress the French insistence upon establishing a ceasefire as remedial action to the killing but there is no further exploration to account for this. In short, France's motivations are not really understood particularly with reference to the international realm and the events that were transpiring at the time.

To be true, the second chapter goes into great detail in explaining the interests of France in Africa. What is not expored, however, is the possibility that the willingness of France to employ deadly force to manage African conflicts may have been circumscribed by the memory of other events in international politics. The catastrophe of America's intervention in Somalia would most likely have been fresh in the memory of many members of the international community including France. Moreover, the Gulf War of 1990, transpiring coincidentally at the same time as the first instances of violence between Hutus and Tutsis, would still have also been ripe in France's mind (Lannone, 2007:199).

Moreover, one thing that is not really considered by Krosalak is that the French may have made a serious error of interpreting the situation in Rwanda. It is important to consider that the invading RPF were supported by Uganda and subsequently, the French perception could have been that this was more of an external act of aggression by Uganda rather than an internal war. Uganda, an Anglophone country, would most likely have been perceived to be inflicting its influence on a Francophone country which would have made support for a conceivably "legitimate" Hutu regime a viable option for French power interests.

Due to the complexity of France's relationship with Rwanda, it is also difficult to realistically understand how the French interpreted the killing in Rwanda. Certainly France would have had reasonably ample knowledge of *what* was happening but comprehending *why* is a different matter. Certain reports and experts did suggest that Rwanda could be heading into a phase of ethnic violence but the reliability of claims is always met with caution and a weariness of hidden agendas. More importantly, the possibility of this actually being genocide was not put forward by many. Contrarily, although it may not excuse France's passivity, a more likely scenario may have been that this violence was perceived as nothing unique and simply a repetition of the same form of violence that had transpired in the 1960s in Rwanda.

In addition, Krosalak's definition of a state in this book is far too narrow. By restricting the state as being consistent of mainly elites, Krosalak (2007:8) detaches blame from other important state agents like the French media. There has been an interesting section of literature that has attached a certain responsibility to the international media for their reporting of the genocide (Caruthers, 2000: 224-229). It is also suggested that two crucial errors were made by the international media at the time in its reporting of the crisis. The first is the depiction of the Tutsis as being a rebel faction in the civil war that had rejected calls for a ceasefire. As such, there was little attempt to suggest that the Tutsis were fighting to prevent the annihilation of their ethnic group and a failure to present the Tutsis as victims. The second major failure of the media is the erroneous presentation by many the significant papers such as *Le Monde*, that the violence was diminishing rather than escalating into genocide (Kuperman, 2007:256-258). Krosalak (2007:179) wrongly assumes the existence of pressure exerted by certain media outlets in France at the time, and so fails to attach a degree of responsibility towards the media for their failures to exert greater pressure on politicians. Some further media research with framing and content analysis on the stories coverage by th French newspapers would have lead to different conclusions.

Moreover, in epistemological terms, Krosalak's belief that May's conception of collective responsibility is applicable to the workings of a state government is problematic. May (1987) never explicitly applies this collectivist framework to states, focusing instead upon conceptions of responsibility of institutions such as corporations. Of course, the formulation of ideas is always contingent upon abstracting some conceptualisations from others to achieve an adaptable paradigm. Yet through utilising May's approach, Krosalak drastically under estimates the more

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individualistic element of elite politics.

As such, Krosiak is hesitant to explore the complexity of inter-elite relations transpiring in the French Government at the time. It is highly likely that the agendas, particularly with consideration of the forthcoming election at the time, of actors such as Chirac, Mitterrand and others would have played significant roles in turning the cogs of foreign policy. In sum, the egoistic dynamic of politics is absent from the analysis.

Furthermore, Krosiak's (2007:247-271) chapter "what the French could have done" does lean towards counterfactualism. A significant problem with this approach is the assumption that a greater form of French intervention would have been successful in stopping the genocide. Naturally, it is a troubling conclusion to entertain that the genocide could have been inevitable. Yet an argument has been that mobilising an effective intervention force in time would have been distinctly difficult considering the speed of the killing (Kuperman, 2000). Of course, a rebuttal could be that the French had more troops in proximate positions in Africa in comparison to other influential states (Krosiak, 2007: 269). However, a further possibility needs to be entertained that the Rwandan Patriotic Front may have fought the French if they had intervened heavily. This is mentioned by Krosiak (2007:271- 273) but still under examined and consequently, the possibility that greater intervention would have been destabilising for the Rwandan state and its neighbours is not taken into consideration.

Conclusively, however, the weaknesses do not detract from the high overall standard of the book too substantively. For those with an intrigue in the Rwandan Genocide, this text should be essential and, to an extent new, reading. Furthermore, the formulation of criteria to assess bystander's responsibility may prove to be an influential lens from which to study genocide. However, due to the recent publication date, it is difficult to ascertain how important and influential it will serve to be in the long term. Nevertheless, the rigorous use of archival sources is also a good example of how a researcher should employ factual evidence to enforce arguments and something more serious researchers of genocide should seek to emulate in their work.

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