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Rwanda

France was the “main accelerator of the genocidal process” in Rwanda

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In 1994, France, under president François Mitterrand, was at the heart of the genocide of the Tutsi in Rwanda. Thirty years later, it is our duty to know and recount the course and responsibilities of this historic event.

In 1922, the Belgian settlers found in Rwanda a political system that was highly hierarchical in social terms. The Tutsi dynasties prevailed, unlike in neighbouring Burundi, where power was shared between the Tutsi and Hutu aristocratic lineages. In Rwanda, the Tutsi and Hutu categorization is primarily of a social nature: “Yet there is no ‘Hutu’ without ‘Tutsi’: one cannot go without the other.” Moreover, ‘Hutu’ had a double meaning since it designated the dependent or the inferior in a client or hierarchical relationship, even if the latter was a ‘Tutsi.’” [1]

The settlers took up the theory of the Tutsi, descendants of a Hamite population from Ethiopia invading the country and enslaving the Hutu. This racialization of social domination by a Tutsi elite was part of the racist theories of thinkers such as Gobineau. The Tutsi were seen as closer to the European populations than to the African ones. The Belgian settlers therefore relied on them to govern the country: “The Batutsi were destined to rule, their presence alone already assures them, over the inferior races that surround them, a considerable prestige... It is not surprising that the brave Bahutu, less clever, simpler, more spontaneous and more confident, allowed themselves to be enslaved without ever making a gesture of revolt.” [2]

This ideology spread throughout society. In the schools run by the Order of the White Fathers, priority was given to Tutsi pupils to become civil servants, while Hutu pupils were systematically directed towards manual tasks. The Belgian settlers introduced social segregation based on ethnicity.

The “revolution” of 1959

In 1957, the Bahutu Manifesto was published. It called for social justice and denounced the situation of discrimination experienced by the Hutu. This criticism integrated the colonial and ethnicist view of the Tutsi by denouncing their non-native character. Following this publication, the Parmehutu party was formed, which was supported by the Belgian colonizers. This change was due to their desire to maintain their influence at the time of the country's independence in 1962. The settlers thus avoided the formation of a coalition of interests between Hutu and Tutsi. Indeed, Kayibanda, the leader of the Parmehutu: “preferred to unite the ‘Hutu’ against the ‘Tutsi,’ rather than unite the poor ‘Hutu’ and the ‘little Tutsi’ against the well-to-do, ‘Hutu’ and ‘Tutsi’ combined.” [3]

A competition developed between Hutu parties to win leadership, favouring hate speech against the Tutsi. In 1959, what would be called the revolution was nothing more than a huge pogrom over the whole country, pushing tens of thousands of Tutsis into exile.

A racist regime

In 1962, the country gained independence, with strong support from Belgium. Kayibanda was the first president. He wielded increasingly violent power, including against Hutu opponents. During his reign, there were veritable campaigns of ethnic cleansing in schools and administrations against the Tutsi minority. In July 1973, Juvenal

Habyarimana seized power in a coup d'état. At the same time, France, under the impetus of Giscard d'Estaing, gained a foothold in the country and integrated it into its sphere of influence. It provided the government with financial, diplomatic and, above all, military assistance.

In 1990, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), made up of Tutsi refugees in Uganda as well as some Hutu opponents, launched an operation to seize power. The RPF was described by Paris as a Ugandan aggression supported by the Anglo-Saxon world. France was a stakeholder in this war while advocating, at least officially, a diplomatic solution that took shape with the Arusha Accords in 1993. The latter provided for the dismantling of anti-Tutsi apartheid, the sharing of power and, above all, the departure of the French military. This was a slap in the face for the French generals.

Genocide

At least since 1990, extremists who supported “Hutu power” had been preparing for the extermination of the Tutsi. French officials could not have been unaware of this given their strong presence in the Rwandan security apparatus. This is confirmed by General Jean Varret, former head of the Military Cooperation Mission from October 1990 to April 1993. During his testimony to the parliamentary committee, he reported the words of the chief of staff of the Rwandan gendarmerie: “they are very few, we are going to liquidate them.”

Militias and the Rwandan Armed Forces (FAR) would carry out executions of Tutsis in the presence of the French army. Testimonies mention the support of French soldiers during the roadblocks manned by the militia in 1991: “I realized that among the soldiers there were French people who also asked for Rwandan identity cards with the words ‘Hutu’, ‘Tutsi’ or ‘Twa’ on them. The Tutsis were taken out of the car and the French soldiers handed them over to the agitated militiamen who cut them with machetes and threw them into a gully on the side of the main asphalt road from Ruhengeri to Kigali.” [\[4\]](#)

The attack on the presidential plane, in which Juvenal Habyarimana was killed, was not the cause of the genocide, at most it was the trigger of a process that had been prepared for a long time. On the other hand, this attack marked the beginning of the coup d'état by Hutu extremists. They liquidated the supporters of the Arusha Accords – thus Agathe Uwilingiyimana, the prime minister, and Joseph Kavaruganda, president of the Constitutional Court, and many others, were assassinated – they formed the Rwandan Interim Government (GIR), supported by France. The genocide of the Tutsi began in an orderly manner and under the supervision of FAR units and Interahamwe militias.

France's support

France was the only state to recognize the GIR, not hesitating to receive its members at the Elysée. It was putting all its diplomatic weight at the United Nations into supporting this government of extremists. Roméo Dallaire, the Canadian general in charge of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR), was desperately trying to alert the international community to the massacres taking place in the land of a thousand hills. As for the French bank BNP Paribas, it authorised the transfer of money for the purchase of weapons, in the midst of an embargo decreed by the UN.

Rwanda would experience three French military operations. The first, *Noroît*, was officially launched to protect the embassy and French citizens following the RPF offensive in 1990. In fact, the purpose of this operation was to support the FAR against the RPF's offensives. For three years, French soldiers waged war against the RPF. They

also participated in the training of militiamen. [5]

The second was Operation Amaryllis, which began two days after the attack on the presidential plane. The aim was to evacuate French nationals. It left behind Tutsis working for the France embassy and other French agencies. Most of them were murdered. The Belgian soldiers of Operation Silver Back embarked nearly two hundred Rwandans, mainly Tutsi, who were turned back by the French military while the militiamen surrounded the airport.

Finally, Operation Turquoise, composed mainly of former members of *Noroît*, was presented as a humanitarian operation. It was initially used to try to stop the RPF's offensive. This explains the refusal, through this operation, to save the Tutsis on the hill of Bisero, who had been the object of incessant attacks by the *genocidaires* since the beginning. It was only under the joint pressure of the military and journalists that the officers deigned to intervene. Turquoise was an opportunity for the *genocidaires* to implement a strategy of exodus of populations that offered them the double advantage of fleeing without difficulty in the face of the arrival of the RPF and of keeping people under control in the refugee camps in Zaire. It was from these camps that militias were organized. They benefited from the transfer of arms organized by the French army. [6]

The presence of the Hutu *genocidaires* has also completely destabilized the eastern region of Zaire, since their armed offshoot, the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), were still provoking wars and massacres against the Congolese civilian population.

France's denials

The French authorities repeatedly denied their responsibility. They hid the war they were waging against the RPF during Operation *Noroît*. They then tried to portray the genocide as an inter-ethnic massacre, and when information began to reach France, the authorities spoke of a double genocide, a way of covering their tracks and hiding their responsibilities in supporting the GIR.

At the legal level, with the help of Juge Bruguière, they tried to give credence to the idea that the attack on the presidential plane was perpetrated by the RPF under the pretext that it considered the Tutsi to be “collaborators of the Habyarimana regime.” [7] Do we need to recall that it was the RPF that put an end to the genocide of the Tutsi?

France would drape itself in its role as saviour of human lives with Turquoise. This was a way of silencing international critics by using the fact that on 21 April 1994, in the midst of the genocide, the United Nations withdrew its peacekeepers. Except that France also voted for this withdrawal. In order to avoid accountability, manoeuvring in parliament was well underway. At the request of the creation of a parliamentary commission of inquiry by the Communists and the Greens, the socialist leaders fought back by creating an information commission without prerogatives of investigation. This committee would avoid asking embarrassing questions as much as possible. The prosecutor's office also manoeuvred in vain to prevent the trials against French soldiers involved with Turquoise for rape, which are still ongoing, thanks to the tenacity of a socialist and humanitarian, Annie Faure.

While in most Western countries, Hutu *genocidaires* have been tried and convicted, in France, the first trial of a man accused of participating in the genocide took place only in 2014. Recall that the wife of Juvenal Habyarimana, one of the fervent supporters of “Hutu power,” lives in France. Mitterrand said of her at the time of her evacuation by Operation Turquoise: “She has the devil in her body, she wants to make public calls for the continuation of the massacres.” This did not prevent the Ministry of Cooperation from paying her 200,000 francs when she moved in, and above all that she was not in any way worried by the law. It would take the actions of the Collective of Civil Parties for Rwanda (CPCR) for *genocidaires* to be unmasked and finally tried.

Two questions

Why has France been so involved in Rwanda? There is no one-size-fits-all answer. We can mention: the desire to be present in this country as a point of support for the policy of control of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), a desire to assert France vis-à-vis its Anglo-Saxon partners following the fall of the Berlin Wall, the lack of knowledge of the country's history. Védrine, secretary general of the Elysée Palace, compared the 1959 pogrom to the French Revolution, speaking of the “Hutu sans-culotte”. There is also the need to show the other African dictators in the sphere of influence that France was not abandoning them. And, on a personal level, Mitterrand appreciated Habyarimana for his Francophilia. The sons of the two presidents struck up a friendship, and Jean-Christophe Mitterrand was then the Elysée Palace's Africa adviser.

How could France be complicit in a genocide? France's presence in Africa is taken for granted by the political class. Of course, there are different views, but the prevailing idea is that the shared past with Africa – as a result of colonization – implies a special responsibility, even a common future. It is on this consensual basis that all the excesses of French policy in Africa have been able to prosper. All the more so since beyond this consensus there is no information, as we saw with Operation *Noroît* in Rwanda, let alone any counter-power. Everything is decided within a circle of a few people at the Elysée Palace.

When Habyarimana went to ask France for help, the French soldiers were drawn into a dynamic of war. From training and supervision, they would quickly be on the front alongside the FAR. The anti-RPF ideology spread among senior French officers. The terms Black Khmer, Ugandan agents or Tutsi were used to refer to the RPF. The DGSE and even the Directorate of Military Intelligence warned the Élysée Palace of the massacres perpetrated against the Tutsi. But in the tradition of French interventions, human rights abuses are commonplace in support of African dictatorships or coups. Except that here “France integrated itself into the genocidal mechanism because it supported the regime that organized the elimination of the Tutsi minority” and Vincent Duclert, president of the Research Commission on the French archives relating to Rwanda and the genocide of the Tutsi, adds: “this unconditional support for Habyarimana's power was even, I would say, the main accelerator of the genocidal process”. [8] This conclusive observation is a powerful condemnation of France's African policy which, despite this tragedy, remains unchanged.

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[1] Léon Saur, “‘Hutu’ et ‘Tutsi’: des mots pour quoi dire?” *Histoire, monde et cultures religieuses* 2014/2 (n° 30), Éditions Karthala p.123.

[2] Jean-Pierre Chrétien “Au cœur de l'ethnie. Ethnies, tribalisme et État en Afrique.” Edited by Jean-Loup Amselle, Elikia M'Bokolo p.138.

[3] Léon Saur, “Le Rwanda de Kayibanda: un avatar démocrate-chrétien des socialismes africains”, *Socialismes en Afrique* [on line], Paris, Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2021.

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[4] *L'horreur qui nous prend au visage. L'État français et le génocide au Rwanda*, coordinated by Laure Coret and François-Xavier Verschave, éditions Karthala p.20.

[5] Laure de Vulpian, Thierry Prunghaud, *Silence Turquoise: Rwanda*, éditions Don Quichotte. p.64.

[6] Guillaume Ancel, *Rwanda, la fin du silence*, éditions Les belles lettres.

[7] Juge Bruguière, “Délivrance de mandats d'arrêt internationaux,” p.61

[8] “Le jugement de l'histoire n'est pas rien”. Interview with Vincent Duclert, *Politique africaine*, 2022/2, p.43-44.