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Rwanda

A look back at the genocide and the essential role of France

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For the French authorities, things are very simple. The plane carrying the presidents of Burundi, Cyprien Ntaryamira, and Rwanda, Juvénal Habyarimana, was shot down on 6 April 1994 by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), representing the Tutsis, immediately triggering a widespread massacre of the latter by the Hutus. France, in an uprush of humanitarian concern, sent its valiant paratroopers in order to avoid a second genocide that the RPF would not fail to perpetrate in retaliation.

It is so simple that this message was taken up by most of the major news agencies. Then, the small and big manoeuvres continued to try to hide the truth.

A consequence of colonialism

The genocide is, above all, a consequence of colonialism. The Belgians, who were the masters of the country at the time, used Tutsis as auxiliaries to the colonial power for decades, which obviously caused resentment among the Hutus. Faced with Tutsi demands for independence in the 1950s, Belgium changed its tune and supported the Hutus and the "1959 revolution", which saw large-scale massacres of Tutsis. The colonialists, with the help of Christian missionaries, helped to crystallize the two ethnic groups.

In the 1990s, the French government supported Juvénal Habyarimana, who saw his power faltering, caught between a Hutu opposition and an increasingly powerful RPF, oscillating between a national union with the latter and the extremist Hutu line of undivided power. The Élysée then saw the RPF as a threat. This aversion can be explained in several ways. The RPF, composed of descendants of the Tutsis who fled the "1959 revolution", is said to be an agent of English-speaking countries disputing French hegemony in the region. Above all, this organization has never pledged allegiance to Paris. In military circles, its members are called the "Khmer Noirs".

Decisive role of the French army

After the RPF offensive in 1993, which was halted thanks to the decisive role of the French army, the genocide was clearly prepared. Militias were formed and trained, weapons were distributed, and the media, such as Radio des Mille Collines, continued to stir up hatred. But France's support did not wane. Before the genocide, at the beginning of the 1990s, serious abuses were committed under the eyes of the French military, as several testimonies attest: "I saw the French instructors in the military camp of Bigogwe. It was there that civilians were brought in by the truckload. They were tortured and killed, then buried in a mass grave." [1] In 1992, the military chiefs of the Rwandan Armed Forces (FAR) defined the enemy as follows: "The principal enemy was: the Tutsi inside or outside the country, extremist and nostalgic for power, who have NEVER recognized and will NEVER recognize the realities of the 1959 social revolution and who wish to reconquer power by all means necessary, including arms." [2]

Belgian journalist Colette Braeckman reports on a visit to Paris on 9 May 1994 by Lieutenant-Colonel Ephrem Rwabalinda, deputy chief of staff of the FAR, to General Huchon, head of the military cooperation mission; in the midst of the genocide, it is above all a question of improving the image of Rwanda so that France can continue its aid!

Recycling

The international community was slow to realize the reality. More than 800,000 Tutsis, but also moderate Hutus, had been massacred. France then launched Operation Turquoise, claiming a humanitarian objective. The truth was quite different. This operation served above all to prevent the defeat of the Rwandan army and the genocidal militias in the face of the RPF advance from turning into a debacle. Thus, France took charge of the withdrawal of thousands of armed men to Zaire, where it could count on the unfailing support of the dictator Mobutu. Thus, these men, all of whom were involved in the genocide, were stationed at the Rwandan border, with their weapons. This situation explains the subsequent conflict between Zaire and Rwanda, which will result in hundreds of thousands of victims, including civilians caught in the crossfire.

As humanitarian organisations pointed out, France would go on to protect the leading staff of the genocidaires, first and foremost Colonel Théoneste Bagosora, considered to be the organiser of the genocide: "According to UN officials, the French military flew important officers, including Théoneste Bagosora and the leader of the Interahamwe militia, Jean-Baptiste Gatete, as well as elite FAR and militia troops out of Goma, to unidentified destinations between July and September 1994. [3]"

The French military recycled other genocidaires, notably in Congo-Brazzaville, where General Bizimungu, another dignitary of the Rwandan regime, was found alongside Sassou-Nguesso. Complaints were deemed admissible by the Paris Court of Appeal. They refer to the direct participation of French soldiers in the massacres of Tutsis, alongside militiamen. In the remarkable work of the citizens' commission of enquiry, testimonies were collected, particularly in the Bisesero region, where survivors recount in detail the exactions of French soldiers. France's neo-colonialist networks, the autonomy of the army in the field, the dispossession of the French Parliament regarding external military interventions, the consensus between the socialist and right-wing leaders - both parties being in business at the time - favoured France's complicity in the genocide in Rwanda and its attempts to cover up the truth.

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[1] Jean Carbonare, *le Nouvel Observateur*, 4 August 1994.

[2] April 2006 Human Rights Watch (HRW). "[The Rwandan Genocide: How It Was Prepared A Human Rights Watch Briefing Paper](#)".

[3] HRW Report 1995.