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Rwanda

France in Rwanda: responsible but not guilty?

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An official report on the Rwandan genocide of 1994 has just been presented to French president concerning the role of the French state and army.

Crocodile tears at the top of government and the military high command deploring the tragedy of the Tutsi genocide.

Alain Juppé, French Foreign Minister at the time of the genocide, endorses the last sentences of the Duclert report submitted to Emmanuel Macron on 26 March: "The reality was that of a genocide, precipitating the Tutsis into destruction and terror. We will never forget them." But at the same time he was pleased that "France [was] finally exonerated of the accusation of complicity in the preparation, or even the execution of the genocide". [1] Commenting on the same report on France Culture, one of the commanders of Operation Turquoise that enabled the exfiltration of the genocidaires to Zaire took the same line: "The intentionality of genocide [of which France is accused] makes me shudder. We had absolutely one intention: to save, protect and help the victims. ...] The idea that French soldiers might have had other intentions is not only foreign to me but also deeply distresses me for my soldiers." [2] The real political significance of the report was therefore not lost on either of them.

Recognition of the genocide: an achievement of the work of historians and activists

The time when Mitterrand could calmly declare that "in those countries, genocide is not too important" seems long gone. Likewise, the theories on the "double genocide", presenting Hutus and Tutsis as equally responsible and victims, seem outdated. After twenty-five years of meticulous research by historians and associations such as Survie and Ibuka, it is no longer time for the crude denial of the genocide. The exclusion of the historian Julie d'Andurain who had published a notice in a military dictionary advocating these theses from the Duclert Commission testifies to the loss of legitimacy of the worst negationist theses. The scandal triggered by the publication of this notice forced the commission to abandon her along the way. [3] This is to be welcomed.

But recognising the existence of the Tutsi genocide is one thing, understanding the role played by the French state in this story, which cost 800,000 people their lives, is another. And it has to be said that from this point of view, the Duclert report does not go far enough. If we follow the report, France acted badly in Rwanda not because it had been unflinchingly supporting a Rwandan regime and its racist and genocidal logic for several decades, but because of "blindness", or even "lack of understanding". [4] By continuing to adopt the colonialist software distinguishing between two distinct races, "Hutu" and "Tutsi", in Rwanda, and supporting the former against the latter, France sinned because of its backwardness and intellectual ignorance.

The Duclert Commission's loaded dice

One should probably not have expected anything else from a report commissioned by the Élysée Palace. Its authors worked for two years in the premises of the Ministry of the Armed Forces. None of them was a specialist in the subject. The reason for this was that historians who had already published on the subject had been carefully excluded at the request of the Élysée. The dismissal of Stéphane Audouin Rouzeau and Hélène Dumas, judged too critical of the French state, was already indicative of the direction Macron wanted the commission to take.

What are the conclusions of the report? "Responsible but not complicit. France, which according to Vincent Duclert "defines itself by its attachment to the truth" (!?) failed because it was unable to understand that a genocide was taking place despite numerous warnings. It is in the moral sense that France would have "overwhelming responsibilities" in the genocide of the Tutsis. The experts of the Duclert Commission, taking up the white man's burden, would fortunately be there to re-establish the truth in the eyes of France, Africa and the world... This fable is not very serious. The categorisations of 'Hutu' and 'Tutsi' as racial categories were imposed by the German and then Belgian colonisers and taken over at independence by the regime in power supported by the French state. If these racial categories were taken over and used by French imperialism, it was not out of ignorance but because they allowed to divide and rule and to keep control over a territory and its population.

The crimes of French imperialism exonerated at little cost

Acknowledging the "complicity" of the French state would have strengthened the weight of the complaints lodged with the International Criminal Court against political and military officials. It would also have strengthened the case in the Paris public prosecutor's office against BNP Paribas, which was responsible for the transfer of funds for the purchase of arms on behalf of the genocidal government until June 1994. In order to cover up for the French officials of the time, many of whom are still in office 25 years later, the conclusion of the report categorically refuses to use the term "complicity".

In the end, only Mitterrand did not find favour with the commission. Accused of "drift to solitary power", he alone bore responsibility for French policy in Rwanda. If Mitterrand had not died, one wonders how the commission would have managed to find a French official to incriminate? That Mitterrand was a central actor in this genocidal complicity is not in doubt, but to summarize the complicity of the French state in his person is completely ridiculous.

The French army and Operation Turquoise are exonerated by the report, even though it was the French army that fought the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), which was the only force to effectively combat the genocide in progress and slowed down its victory for several weeks. With this report, recognizing the genocide but denying the complicity of the French state, it seems that Macron wants to appease the military in France and at the same time warm diplomatic and economic relations with the Rwandan government. Truth and justice were clearly not the problems of the orderly historians.

PS:

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[1] *Le Monde*, 7 April 2021.

[2] "Le Temps du débat ", France Culture, 6 avril 2021.

[3] Théo Englebert, " L'historienne controversée prend la porte", Mediapart, 16 November 2020.

[4] Interview with Vincent Duclert, *Je Monde*, 26 March 2021.