

Hearts of Darkness

WILLIAM W. FINAN JR.

Gérard Prunier's work on Darfur has made him well known in America. It has also made him a contested figure. For every curious reader who picked up Prunier's 2005 book, *Darfur: The Ambiguous Genocide*, to become better informed about the conflict in Sudan's west, it seemed there was also an ethnographer, human rights activist, or member of the political science professoriate who blasted the volume as academically inadequate, as a bastard history filled with gross generalizations and egregious errors, and, perhaps worst of all, as an analysis that was reluctant to label Darfur's violence unequivocally as genocide.

With this second set of readers, Prunier's new book, *Africa's World War*, will elicit a response similar to the one his last work received. It is a huge, almost unwieldy book filled with facts, figures, names, terms, and incidents. It covers a span of 12 years, shepherding readers across a range of countries and personalities related to a conflict that recently has become a festering wound—after a long time as something worse. If errors are to be found among the mass of details that Prunier provides, they will surely be noted in reviews and perhaps corrected in a new edition. But the sweep of Prunier's argument is nonetheless true, and it is true in a way that will render trivial any carping about a name misspelled, a memo mistranscribed, or a group's ethnolinguistic lineage incorrectly traced.

OUT OF RWANDA

Africa's World War is many stories, but one of its main narratives is that the 1994 Rwandan genocide—and its domestic, regional, and international consequences—are at the center of what later happened in Congo. Although the Rwandan genocide was not the *cause* of Congo's cataclysm (in which 4 million people have died from murder,

starvation, or disease), it was, according to Prunier, a “catalyst, precipitating a crisis that had been latent for a good many years and that later reached way beyond its original Great Lakes locus.” Further, the international community's failure to address Congo's troubles adequately becomes all the more clear when we understand the insufficiency of international policy in Rwanda after the killing in that country stopped.

Africa's World War: Congo, the Rwandan Genocide, and the Making of a Continental Catastrophe by Gérard Prunier. Oxford University Press, 2009.

The first part of *Africa's World War* is in fact a kind of epilogue to Prunier's groundbreaking 1997 book *The Rwanda Crisis*, still the most important work published on the Rwandan genocide. At one

time, Prunier supported with almost partisan fervor the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), which brought an end to the genocide and dislodged the Hutu leadership in Kigali as the West watched from the sidelines. In the years since *The Rwanda Crisis* was published, however, Prunier's sympathies have shifted away from the RPF. The group has showed itself to be not so much a new start for Rwanda as another variety of the “tropical gangsters” who rule much of Africa today. But many in the West (when not struggling to remember whether it was the Hutus or the Tutsis who were the victims of the genocide) often seem stuck in agreement with Prunier's earlier views.

Prunier's description of what happened in Rwanda once the RPF and its leader Paul Kagame came to power is powerful. “National reconciliation” was the rhetorical aim of the new Tutsi-led government—but its real aim was very different. First the government embarked on what Prunier calls the “tutsification” of the genocide, as attention was focused on the Tutsi victims of the killings. (In fact, not only Tutsis were victims; Hutus who had married Tutsis or were associated with Tutsis also were marked for death.) The attitude of many Hutus following the change in regimes—an attitude that also left little room for reconcili-

WILLIAM W. FINAN JR. is *Current History's* books editor.

ation—is captured by Prunier in the words of a “Hutu woman walking by a heap of decomposing corpses and snarling, ‘Why don’t they clean up this mess? It stinks.’”

As many as 2 million Hutus—nearly one-third of Rwanda’s post-genocide population—fled to neighboring Zaire (as Congo was then called) after Kagame’s RPF took over. Tutsis who had escaped the genocide flooded back into urban areas, pushing Hutus out of their homes. Meanwhile, the country had no order, no security, and no social services network. As Prunier writes:

Most of the police were dead or had fled abroad with the former government. So had most of the judges, school teachers, doctors, and nurses. The various ministries had only a skeleton staff left and even the churches, which were full of dead bodies, were closed. The majority Catholic Church, which should have provided some form of moral guidance in the midst of the disaster, was in fact deeply tainted by the genocide. The Church hierarchy had been very close to the former regime and it remained unrepentant after the genocide, in spite of its sullied record.

National reconciliation did not take hold at the societal level; nor did the new regime resemble a cross-section of Rwandan society. The government that came together was not “broad,” with Hutu representation, as the international community wanted. (Nor could it have been, it seems; those with blood on their hands could not have been asked to join, and many Hutus with clean hands were unwilling to join out of “political caution.”) The RPF itself did not seem to think a national unity government was in its (and therefore the country’s) best interests.

“SO NOW WE KILL”

The fact that the RPF was in no hurry to push for justice soon became apparent. As Prunier writes, “*Gutunga agatoki*, ‘pointing the finger,’ was . . . the dominant mode of bringing about charges [against those suspected of participation in the genocide—or even those who were not]. Detainees were shoved in the jails, and when those were full, they were pushed into any available closed space, including metallic containers for cargo, with tiny air vents and no toilets, where many died of suffocation and diseases.” Some prisoners choked to death because of overcrowding and others were beaten to death by

drunken jailers. “It was common for prisoners to develop ulcers or even gangrene of the feet from days of not finding enough room to sit down.” By March 1995, 23,000 had been imprisoned in these conditions. Most of those who did not die languished for the next decade.

Prunier goes on to implicate the international community for not working hard enough to see that real justice was administered in Rwanda. Instead, Prunier says, other countries allowed the RPF to dictate the terms of retribution while foreign governments focused on an international tribunal that tried “big name” criminals, who numbered about 400.

And then there was this incongruity: “The main perpetrators of the genocide remained free. Most of them were just over the border in Zaire and in lesser numbers in Tanzania. Many of the key political actors of the former government were living in Nairobi where President Daniel arap Moi had given them tacit protection because of his strong dislike for Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, a close ally of the new regime in Kigali.”

Although the RPF has been charged with engaging in genocide itself against the remaining Hutu population—and Prunier’s descriptions of prisoner abuse do little to discredit this argument—the author, who today finds little to like in the RPF that he once championed, finds no support for the charge. “Were these killings attempts at a ‘second genocide’ as the former *génocidaires* and their friends were trying to say? Or were they only the unavoidable revenge killings that one could expect after such a horror? Or was it still something else?”

“Something else” is the answer. Indeed the killing, which was limited and decentralized, acted as “a policy of political control through terror.” Prunier does not absolve the RPF of criminal wrongdoing in its march to consolidate control and its move toward absolute power after it took over in Rwanda. For the longtime members of the RPF, “violence was not exceptional, it was a normal state of affairs.” Or, as a Tutsi student remarked to Prunier when the author confronted him in 1997 about the RPF’s actions: “Sir, we have had no justice; so now we kill; what can we do?”

Prunier acknowledges a certain truth in this response. He also notes that in 1995, 154 nongovernmental organizations operated in Rwanda; it was the place to be if you wanted to get funding, “just like Ethiopia in 1985 or Somalia in 1992.” But because the NGOs were there for “humanitarian reasons,” they did not deal with local po-

litical conditions—or justice. He singles out for special opprobrium the United Nations human rights operation and the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). “In January 1995, when trying to visit a dubious mass grave site near Kibungu while on an unofficial UNHCR visit, I was prevented from doing so by the UNHCR country director, who accused me of ‘wanting to create problems with the government.’ With such attitudes the RPF did not have to worry too much about being found out.”

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?

Prunier in *Africa's World War* does not just re-think and reweave his previous work on Rwanda; he sets the stage for discussing how the subsequent tragedy of Congo happened. “Understanding this process,” he writes, “brings us to the very center of the whirlpool which has now sucked in a massive chunk of the African continent and set in motion a radical re-questioning of the whole postcolonial order.”

The predominantly Hutu refugees who arrived in eastern Zaire received a welcome—albeit not a conspicuous one—from President Mobutu Sese Seko, who saw in their arrival an opportunity. “It enabled him,” writes Prunier, “to blackmail the international community into reaccepting him into the mainstream diplomacy from which he had been excluded during the last few years.” It also provided an opportunity to apply pressure on Rwanda by allowing Hutu guerrillas to carry out attacks in that country.

Mobutu enfranchised the new arrivals so they could vote in the elections that he promised to hold to show his democratic bona fides to the international community. And it was, of course, the international community that fed the 2 million refugees—that provided, in fact, more aid to those in the Congo camps than to the 5 million Rwandans still in their own country.

In the years that followed, Mobutu fell from power, Zaire became the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Laurent-Désiré Kabila took over. He was killed and his son “Li'l Joseph” became president, as he remains. *Africa's World War* offers a close study of these events and the war that was

sparked—catalyzed—by the Rwandan genocide. Prunier narrates how Rwandan forces attacked eastern Congo; how guerrilla forces within Congo erupted into the political vacuum that developed with Mobutu's ouster; and how the Kabilas' weak hold on power added to the country's instability and violence.

Folded into this story is another one, about the way the war in Congo spread as surrounding countries became involved for various political, ethnic, and economic reasons (and sometimes all three). Kinshasa had its allies: Angola, Namibia, Zimbabwe. And it had its foes: Rwanda, naturally, plus Sudan, Uganda, Kenya, and others including Libya. Standing apart was South Africa, which believed it had an interest in seeing Congo fail to realize its economic potential.

Prunier can sometimes overwhelm his readers with detail. In the course of one particularly involved explanation, the author asks: “Does the reader at this point want to throw in the towel and give up on the ethno-political complexities of the region? I would not blame him although I can

assure him that I am honestly trying to simplify the picture.”

The towel ought not to be thrown. Yes, Prunier's discussion of the war in Congo, and of the pain and suffering it has caused, is wrenching. But so too is the

realization that, beginning with 9/11, much of the suffering spawned by this regional conflict disappeared from Western media and discussion, and from the world's agenda. *Africa's World War* is one place this story is told—indeed, it constitutes now the primary source on the conflict in Congo. More than that, it is one of the most important books written on contemporary Africa.

Prunier, in a gripping and devastating conclusion to his work, illuminates the hearts of darkness that have for so long corruptly governed both Africa's governments and the international community in its dealings with Congo, Rwanda, and the continent generally. Africa, Prunier sadly observes, was “rendered fragile by 30 years of post-colonial neglect and exploitation. And the West, which was the implicit guarantor of that postcolonial order, rotten as it may have been, was caught napping at every turn.” ■

Beginning with 9/11, much of the suffering spawned by this regional conflict disappeared from Western media and discussion.
