

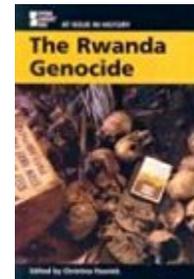
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Christina Fisanick, ed. *The Rwanda Genocide: At Issue in History*. Chicago: Greenhaven Press, 2004. 141 pp. \$29.95 (board), ISBN 978-0-7377-1985-7; \$21.20 (board), ISBN 978-0-7377-1986-4.

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Genocide: A Student Guide

This book, *The Rwanda Genocide* is part of a series intended to help students—most likely graduate students—learn about historical events through readings of a diverse selection of sources. These are intended to enable the students to become more discriminating and thoughtful readers of history. On this first requirement, to present a diverse selection of sources on the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, this book certainly succeeds.

“The Greenhaven at Issues in History” series, of which this book is a part, is endowed with greater ambition. The series, as described in the “Foreword” to this volume, is designed to present historical events that have been “interpreted differently” and that have sparked “controversy among eyewitnesses, contemporary observers, and historians” (p. 6). In this respect *The Rwanda Genocide* barely qualifies. Far from presenting controversial interpretations that are at odds with each other, the essays here are broadly and wonderfully complementary, each covering an important aspect of a milestone event in history.

The Rwanda Genocide is divided into chapters variously headed “The Causes of the 1994 Genocide,” “The Role of the International Community,” and “Rebuilding Rwanda.” Under each chapter is a series of essays by the following experts: Fergal Kean, Villia Jefremovas, Todd Salzman, Peter Uvin, Shaharyar Khan, Iqbal Riza, Samantha Power, Joseph Ndereyimana, and Heather Hamilton. There is also an essay written under the Human Rights Watch byline about juvenile prisoners in Rwanda. The

book ends with a rather intemperate article about the perceived failings of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), which was established to bring to justice those who planned and perpetrated the genocide. Included in the text, most usefully, is a speech by President Bill Clinton when he went to Kigali, the Rwandan capital, four years after the genocide. The speech was an apology on behalf of the United States for its failure to respond to the slaughter and to outline ways in which the United States could help rebuild the country.

In a book such as this, of collected essays, the introduction is of vital importance for it must set out as clearly as possible the basic facts of what happened. In the case of Rwanda, and central to the tragedy, is the scandalous failure by the Security Council of the United Nations to help Rwanda when no attempt was made to either prevent the start of, or even delay, the progress of the genocide. The United Nations Security Council is central to the application of the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, which was the world’s first truly universal, comprehensive and codified protection of human rights. The Genocide Convention relies on the United Nations, its procedures and institutions, to prevent, and in a worse case, to punish genocide. Yet in the book’s introduction there is no central role for the Council; instead one finds a description of how “debates raged in the U.S., France, the UN and elsewhere around the globe over how to respond” (p. 8). This is not quite the case. In 1994, the last resort for the people of Rwanda was the Security Council. It is

here that the failure to act is manifest through a decision taken among the ten non-permanent members and the five permanent members—France, the United States, United Kingdom, China, and Russia.

The 1948 Convention Article VIII recognizes that “any contracting party may call upon the competent organs of the U.N. to take such action under the Charter of the U.N. as they consider appropriate for the prevention and suppression of acts of genocide or any other acts enumerated in Article III.” Article VIII, while adding nothing new to the UN Charter, is important in that it states explicitly the right of states to call upon the United Nations to prevent and suppress genocide. It is the only article in the Genocide Convention which deals with prevention, referring to the possibility of preventive action by UN bodies. It is a document that should be central to any debate about genocide prevention and suppression.

With that said, the “Introduction” focuses on the United Nation’s failure to prevent the genocide through the now famous January 11 cable from Lt. General Romeo Dallaire, the Commander of the UN Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR), warning that genocide was planned. In this account, the responsibility slips yet again from the various governments whose politicians took a series of decisions vital and disastrous for Rwanda’s future. It was the United Kingdom (not mentioned here at all) together with the United States that refused reinforcements for Rwanda even before the genocide began, telling those people sounding alarm bells that for reasons of economy it was not possible. It was the UN Security Council that decided to leave the peacekeepers in Rwanda with no mandate or means—not the international civil servants trying to fulfill Council mandates without the means to do so. The decisions taken in the Council affected the lives of an incalculable number of victims—and there are countless dead who believed that with UN peacekeepers in their country they would be safe.

Of immense value in this volume are the essays written on aspects of the terrible Rwanda genocide that have received somewhat less attention than “international failure” or the press stories of victims, perpetrators, and heroes. The Catholic Church had considerable influence in Rwandan society, and to understand its role is vital to an appreciation of what really happened in 1994. In this volume, Todd Salzman provides a fascinating look

at the history of church involvement and how mission schools exacerbated racism in Rwandan society. Peter Uvin’s work is invaluable in understanding how years of poverty and hopelessness among young Hutu men with no future created a society of hatred. Villia Jefremovas describes how poverty, the shortage of land, and staggering population growth played a part; Jefremovas argues that the suffering of the Rwandan people made them more vulnerable to racist propaganda and more likely to succumb to political manipulation. Most of the people in Rwanda were terrified by the prospect of a Tutsi monarchy that would enslave them once again. Jefremovas’s explanation of how the genocide differed in each region is particularly useful.

A book aimed at students of history would have benefited from a more comprehensive timetable of events. In the three months that the genocide lasted, April–July, the killing was faster at the outset; the end of May, when the large-scale massacres were over, bore no resemblance to the coherence and systematic nature of the killings when they began. What was needed at the end of May was a protection force for the hundreds of thousands of people trapped in ninety-one sites throughout the country, most of them under the threat of militia or military. By then, those UN peacekeepers who remained behind when the vast majority was withdrawn, were trying to protect four such sites.

A fascinating glimpse of Rwanda post-genocide is provided by Heather Hamilton in her essay in the chapter “Rebuilding Rwanda.” This evaluates the changing role of women in Rwandan society. Today women comprise the vast majority of the adult working population and they are often left to rebuild the society without the assistance of men. The challenge of reconstructing Rwanda, writes Hamilton, “seems like an overwhelming task to most observers” (p 100). Hamilton’s understanding of Rwanda today is manifest in her sensitive explanation of what the word “reconciliation” might mean to a Rwandan, the word “reconciliation” conceived by foreign aid donors. There are still entrenched divisions in Rwanda but she writes: “Simply by finding a way to live together in peace is perhaps the key to national reconciliation, and women have a special role to play in this process” (p 110). This is a rare note of hope for it points to a future for Rwanda, a country whose terrible history will be studied for years to come.

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