

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Chronicle of a Genocide Foretold. First Run/Icarus Films.

Reviewed by Peter C. Limb

Published on H-AfrLitCine (February, 2000)

"Let us sing! The Tutsi have been killed. God is always just!" "It was a failure of all of us [...] we all failed Rwanda" Koffi Annan, UN Secretary-General "The objective was very clear for everybody: kill, kill and kill" Colonel Luc Marshal, UN-AMIR[1] The 1994 genocide of an estimated 800,000 Rwandese is the focus of this long film. *Chronicle of a Genocide Foretold* consists of three parts.[2] Part one ("Blood was flowing like a river," 63 minutes) outlines the massacres in Kibuye and Bugesera regions and probes their causes. Part two ("We were cowards," 43 minutes) focuses on the massacres in the capital, Kigali, and the passive, ineffective role of on-the-spot United Nations (UN) forces. The final part ("We felt betrayed," 56 minutes) exposes the continued human rights violations and massacres since the Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF) came to power in July 1994. Directors Daniele Lacourse and Yvan Patry avoid an overly didactic or detailed introduction to the highly complex socio-political relations of Rwanda (outlined elsewhere in numerous books and various other films-see footnotes). Instead, the main technique employed is the personal narrative. The course of the genocide and motives behind it are gradually revealed through case studies of selected individuals whose stories are recounted (in French, with subtitles, and in English) in interviews shot between 1994 and 1996. This enables the lives of survivors to be traced before, during and after the genocide and helps viewers to better understand the personal dimension of the tragedy (and the struggle for justice). The narratives are spliced with relevant archival footage of the period, and bolstered by accurate comments and analyses by academic specialists. The almost lyrical quality of the cinematography (by Serge Giguere, Alain Dupras and Lacourse), backed by Rwandan music, captures some of the beauty and culture of Rwanda against which the unfolding atrocities stand out sharply.

Clips of grief-stricken victims are juxtaposed with sound-bites from Hutu extremist radio station RTLM exhorting the massacre of Tutsi: "Ah, they must be exterminated. Let us sing! The Tutsi have been killed. God is always just!" These horrors fade into scenes of the calm beauty of a lake, beside which children play peacefully. A football ground, with its lush green fields, suddenly loses its innocence as stadium seats reveal their bloodstained evidence of horrible deeds. This imaginative approach could move students less enamoured with straightforward "talking heads" documentaries. This is not to suggest that this is a lightweight documentary production. On the contrary, the extensive commentaries by historian Alison Des Forges are accurate and probing. She also provides a short background to the 1980s, and the regime of General Juvenal Habyarimana. Moreover, the testimonies of survivors and UN officers who served in Rwanda are valuable primary sources. Excellent use is made of other sources, including amateur video diaries of UN troops, video archives of the Canadian Armed Forces, Belgian RTBF-TV, and TV Rwanda, and audio and photo archives of historian Jean-Pierre Chretien.[3] "Blood was flowing like a river" The first testimonies presented are from Kibuye (western Rwanda), of an attack on a church and those sheltering inside it. The scene moves to central Rwanda, to Gitarama, where we meet a major informant of the film, Andre Sibomana, a priest, journalist and human rights activist. He speaks at length of the killings. The role of the militia, the *Interahamwe* ("those who work together"), responsible for carrying out many of the massacres, is shown briefly in shots of them training and stopping civilians at roadblocks. In Bugesera, the *Interahamwe* was strong and we see graphic footage of their burning of huts. We next see clips of the RPF delegation entering Kigali in 1993 as part

of the Arusha Accords (whereby Habyarimana and the RPF signed a peace accord under which 2,500 UN troops were deployed in Kigali to oversee its implementation). Unfortunately, as a commentator notes, Hutu extremists then invoked genocide as the “final solution” as, they argued, the Accords proved that Tutsi had “too much power.” Part one concludes with the return of two human rights activists to Busegara in September 1994, after the April genocide, to see the utter devastation of their homes as they search for the scattered material remains of relatives. There is a touching scene as they meet a young boy whose mother was killed with a machete after showing the militia her Tutsi identity card.[4]

A “Cheap Success”: Complicity of UN and External States

Part two shifts the emphasis to the failure of external states and international organizations to prevent or slow the killings: a still very current theme as shown by the apology of the UN Secretary-General in late 1999 following an independent report into failings of the Security Council and of leading members such as France, the US and UK.[5]

Head of the UN Assistance Mission to Rwanda (UNAMIR), General Romeo Dallaire, had warned the UN Security Council in advance (January 1994) of imminent genocide. He is a major witness in the film. The Security Council, he states, under United States pressure after the failure of the U.S.-led Somalia mission, wanted a “cheap success” and so cut back the vital resources needed to implement the Arusha Accords.

The film also includes interviews with Belgian commanding officer, Colonel Luc Marchal, who states that UN troops saw withdrawal as an act of cowardice (“Our mission was a tragic failure”) and Lieutenant Luc Lemaire, in charge of Belgian troops in Kigali. An Interahamwe leader, bothered by his conscience, visited Lemaire and revealed plans for the genocide. He confirms that UN troops were well aware of secret arms caches but were refused a search mandate by the Security Council. The UN thereafter lost credibility in Rwanda and the killing accelerated. Footage from amateur video diaries of UN officers adds a valuable source that captures the threat posed by the militia and the despair felt by Tutsis sheltering at UNAMIR headquarters as they plead with Belgian troops not to abandon them to certain death.

The evidence the film presents on the UN role (interviews with UN officers) does not make any new claims, but use of the video footage makes available additional visual evidence. Since it was made in 1996, similar claims have been aired on various television productions, adding to the growing chorus of criticism of UN inaction.[6] Neither does the film really enter theoretical debates on humanitarian intervention[7] and definitions

of genocide.[8]

The conclusion of the directors appears similar to that of a recent article by Bjorn Willum, namely that “the handling of the Rwanda crisis was a political decision taken by top [UN] Secretariat officials, rather than an intelligence failure or the result of bureaucratic inertia.”[9]

French, Belgian and Canadian[10] roles in Rwanda are similarly exposed, with greatest emphasis on the Belgian military role before and during the massacres. Little footage is devoted to French support of the regime, or France’s Operation Turquoise in June 1994.

“We feel betrayed”

Part three deals with the aftermath of genocide. We revisit Kibuye in February 1996. Survivors are coming to terms with the catastrophe. Pupils draw crayon pictures of killings. Excavation of mass graves prompts an anthropologist to comment that “even the dead tell their story.” In Gikongoro, in the southwest, the ruins of a school and skeletons are kept intact as a genocide museum.

Prospects for reconciliation are examined, and the prognosis is bleak in the short run. Ex-RPF soldiers and an ex-RPF minister tell of substantial RPF massacres. The atrocious conditions of arrested suspects in Gitarama Prison are shown. Experts and human rights activists explain how Tutsi extremists now use the judicial system for their own ends as an invisible parallel government impedes reform in a climate of intolerance and censorship. However, flickers of hope are glimpsed. An experiment of bringing Hutu and Tutsi together on building sites in Gitarama in February 1996 shows that collective work can gradually forge new ties across over old divisions.

As the film ends, the haunting voice of a Nazi Holocaust survivor is dubbed over pictures of skeletons of the Rwandan genocide.

The Rwandan conflict took place in the era of the Internet and a wealth of film and television documentaries abound on the Net for scholarly use. It should be pointed out (it does not do so on the video container) that this film is part of the 272 minute “Rwanda Series” which also includes *Sitting on a Volcano* and *Hand of God, Hand of the Devil* (both 1996).[11]. This series, with *Chronicle* at its heart, is the most comprehensive single coverage on film of the Rwanda genocide.

Other films also seek to portray or explain the genocide. *Forsaken Cries: The Story of Rwanda* (Amnesty International USA, 1997) asks similar questions and also features interviews with survivors, but is much briefer.[12] However, it does include substantial historical background, including footage of the colonial period as well as accompanying notes suitable for classroom use, something *Chronicle* might have considered. *A Republic Gone Mad: Rwanda 1894-*

1994

(1996) deals with the historical background whilst *Rwandan Nightmare* (1994) argues that the massacres were carefully orchestrated and rooted not in festering ethnic hatred but in power struggles.[13] Various television programs and some other short films have examined the genocide and related matters such as the International Tribunal for Rwanda and hate radio.[14] However, their brevity precludes an in-depth understanding of the unfolding personal life dramas that this detailed trilogy depicts. A more prosaic film on the effects of the Rwanda conflict is *Crossroads* (1996). Set at a road junction linking several countries in the region, it tells of how the lives of people in a "hotelli" are suddenly changed by a massive influx of Hutu refugees.[15] Rather more comparable to *Chronicle* is *Valentina's Nightmare*,[16] which also captures the personal traumas of survivors. All these films have in common a deep desire to contribute, through shocking visual evidence and equally shocking revelations of bureaucratic uncaring, to a public awareness that might help prevent future genocide. This is a powerful film, and deserving of the honour of "Best Feature Documentary Award" at the 1997 Toronto Hot Docs Festival. Yet, to what extent can a film, even of 2.5 hours, sufficiently probe the reasons for genocide or the complexities of Rwandan politics? Given production constraints the directors have done well to provide such insights into the individual dimensions of conflict, as well as to emphasize important themes such as the negligence of international bodies and continuing human rights violations. However, in places it is padded with too many, or too long, interviews. Concentration on certain individuals or themes means that other significant issues, such as the role of regional states (notably Uganda and Burundi), the fate of the Twa minority, and the abuse of history by the media to whip up racism, are not developed. Hutu-Tutsi relations could have been more thoroughly explicated, as could economic reasons behind the conflict (land scarcity; the 1989 coffee price collapse; etc.). The fate of artists, writers, and other groups during the genocide is another area not covered. On the other hand, a film is not like a detailed tome and artistic license always involves the careful selection of themes. We see only snippets of the perpetrators of genocide, such as Colonel Begosora. Prunier argues that the execution of genocide is always complex: some organize murder squads and issue orders; others give intellectual inspiration; still others pull the trigger or wield the machete.[17] A deeper investigation of the ideology and social composition of the killers, including the role of women,[18]

would have been instructive. Whilst the film proceeds chronologically, it darts across what is little-known territory for many non-specialist viewers and this fact could have been aided by the inclusion of maps. The background data presented is probably sufficient for many viewers, whilst there is much to interest the specialist. However, those seeking a detailed historical introduction should consult reputable written sources.[19]

Chronicle of a Genocide Foretold contributes to our understanding of Rwandan history and politics and the wider context of genocide studies, and the role of international organizations and non-intervention. Its primary sources (testimonies of survivors, extracts from "hate" magazines, video diaries, views of extremists) will benefit a range of scholars and the general public. *Chronicle* is rich in both narrative and imaginative photography. The narratives deal with Rwanda but the film starts and ends with harrowing images of Holocaust victims at Buchenwald in 1944, from the time when the Allies pledged to prevent and punish any future genocidal act. This skilful juxtaposition enables a short, yet sharp, comment on wider themes of genocide and asks viewers why, fifty years after the Holocaust, states and international bodies failed to prevent another genocide. This film will repay use by academics, students, and Africanists in general, as well as policy makers and all concerned to study the tragedy of Rwanda and to ensure that similar events do not recur.

Notes:

[1]. Cited in transcript of documentary *Called to Account* (Lateline, ABCTV, 6 April 1999): <http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/stories/s21240.htm>

[2]. The title of the film appears inspired by chapter six ('Chronicle of a massacre foretold') of Gerard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis* (London: Hurst; New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

[3]. The credits also acknowledge use of the book *Rwanda, les medias du genocide* (Paris: Karthala, 1995) edited by Jean-Pierre Chretien [et al]

[4]. The Belgians in 1926 introduced ethnic-based identity cards that were then used to help employ the Tutsi minority to enforce colonial rule.

[5]. Chris McGreal, "We couldn't believe the UN was going to let us die" *Guardian Weekly*, 23 Dec.1999. On this theme see: Glynne Evans, *Responding to crises in the African Great Lakes* (London: Oxford UP, 1997); A. Walter Dorn, Jonathan Matloff, and Jennifer Matthews, *Preventing the bloodbath: Could the UN have predicted and prevented the Rwandan genocide?* (Ithaca: Cornell University Peace Studies Program,1999); *Rwanda, 'A Waste of Hope': The United Nations*

Human Rights Field Operation (London: African Rights, 1995); Alison Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999): <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/rwanda/> <p> [6]. *When Good Men Do Nothing* ("Panorama," BBCTV, 1999 in which war crimes investigator Michael Hourigan alleges UN cover-ups. In a follow-up interview he claims that they continue ("Four Corners," ABCTV, 1 March 1999: <http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/stories/s20012.htm>; *The Triumph of Evil* ("Frontline" PBS, 1999): <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/evil/>; *Called to Account* ("Lateline" ABCTV Australia, 6 April 1999): <http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/stories/s21240.htm> <p> [7]. See Arthur Jay Klinghoffer, *The International Dimension of Genocide in Rwanda* (New York: New York University Press, 1998). <p> [8]. Alain Destexhe, *Rwanda and Genocide in the Twentieth Century* (New York: New York University Press; London: Pluto Press, 1995) with extracts at: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/rwanda/reports/> <p> [9]. Bjorn Willum, "Legitimizing Inaction towards Genocide in Rwanda: A Matter of Misperception?" *International Peacekeeping* 6(3) 1999, <http://www.frankcass.com/jnls/ip.htm> <p> [10]. On France see: P. Krop, *Le genocide franco-africain: faut-il juger les Mitterrand?* (Paris: Lattes, 1994); J.-P. Gouteux, *Un genocide secret d'Etat: la France et le Rwanda 1990-7* (Paris: Sociales, 1998); P. Gourevitch, *We Wish To Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families* (Farrar, 1998) <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/evil/>; on Belgium: Jean-Claude Willame, *Les Belges au Rwanda* (Bruxelles: GRIP, 1997); on Canada: Francois Bugingo, *La mission au Rwanda* (Montreal: Liber, 1997) and *Hand of God, Hand of the Devil* (directed by Lacourse). <p> [11]. *Sitting on a Volcano*, also directed by Lacourse, is on the exodus of Hutu extremists from Rwanda: <http://www.nfb.ca/E/4/rwanda2.html>). She also directed *Nuit et Silence* (1991) a documentary on the Ethiopian-Eritrean war. <p> [12]. *Forsaken Cries: The Story of Rwanda* producer, Andrea Torrice (New York: Amnesty International USA, 1997) 34 minutes, notes (100 p.) <http://www.amnesty-usa.org/country/rwanda/> <p> [13]. *A Republic Gone Mad: Rwanda 1894-1994*, by Luc de Heusch and Kathleen de Bethune (Icarus Films, 1996), 60 minutes (unseen by this reviewer); *Rwandan Nightmare* (First Run/Icarus, 1994) by Simon Gallimore: http://www.frif.com/cat97/p-s/rwandan_.html <p> [14]. *Rwanda: a Quest for Justice*, *Rwanda: The War Crimes Tribunal* (Common Ground, 1997) <http://info.wlu.ca/~{}wwwav/WLUCollection/R/v1165b.htm>; *Rwanda: One Year On* (Unicef, 1995) 16 min. <http://oneworld.org/unicef/rwandavid.html>; *Triumph of Evil*; *When Good Men Do Nothing*; *Called to Account*. <p> [15]. *Crossroads* (Icarus, 1996) by Hillie Molenaar and Joop van Wijk. <p> [16]. *Valentina's Nightmare* (PBS TV, "Frontline", 1997) 60 minutes, is the story of Valentina Iribagiza, who survived by hiding among the rotting corpses of her family (this reviewer has seen only stills and brief text). <p> [17]. Prunier, *Rwanda Crisis* ch.7 ("Who were the Organizers? ..."): <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/rwanda/reports/prunierexcerp> <p> [18]. *Rwanda Not So Innocent: When Women Become Killers* (London: African Rights, 1995); cf. *Rwanda: death, despair and defiance* (African Rights, 1995). <p> [19]. See Prunier, *Rwanda Crisis* and Catharine Newbury, *The cohesion of oppression: clientship and ethnicity in Rwanda 1860-1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988). Journalist accounts include Fergal Keane, *Season of blood: a Rwandan journey* (London: Viking, 1995), Gourevitch, *We wish to inform you* and several books by Belgian reporter Colette Braeckman.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-afrlitcine>

Citation: Peter C. Limb. Review of , *Chronicle of a Genocide Foretold*. H-AfrLitCine, H-Net Reviews. February, 2000.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14958>

Copyright © 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.