

H-Net Reviews

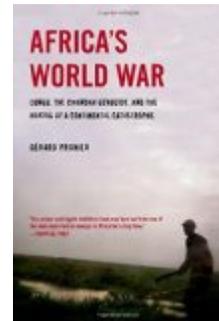
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Gérard Prunier. *Africa's World War: Congo, the Rwandan Genocide, and the Making of a Continental Catastrophe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. xxxviii + 529 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-537420-9; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-975420-5.

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The New African Century: From Rwanda's Genocide to Congolese Reconstruction, or Africa's Thirty Years' War

This is an incredibly impressive account of the emergence of a system of “political control through terror,” especially in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) since 1994, following the spill-over of the Rwandan genocide’s poisonous legacy into what was then Zaire. By tracing events from the genocide onwards, Gérard Prunier supports his central thesis that, more than an inter-Congolese war, this has been “a war fought among foreigners on Congolese territory” (p. 274). Indeed, he sees the war as primarily between Congo-Kinshasa and Kigali. In African Great Lakes scholarship, the same schisms and mutual antagonisms that beset the Rwandan population, have also divided scholars who tend to identify (and identify with) one set or other of “good guys” and “bad guys” in the region. Interestingly, Prunier views himself as both one of the good guys and a bad guy. Best known for having produced a study on the Rwanda genocide in 1995, entitled *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide*, Prunier now views his own book as partisan, and regrets ignoring some evidence of mass killings by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) at that time. His own position has moved from uncritically celebrating the RPF for bringing peace in 1995, to a more skeptical position today. He cannot help being somewhat bitter towards those he previously admired, and this sometimes gives his study a certain “flavor.” He takes allegations of mass killings by the RPF, both in Rwanda during the genocide and afterwards in former Zaire, where fighting continues till this day, very seriously. Everywhere, he

sees the heavy hand of Rwanda, not only in communication and information warfare but also in supporting violence by various militias and armed forces in the east. Whilst the United Nations now has 20,000 troops in the MONUSCO force in the DRC, according to Prunier, the Rwandan government still supports an unknown number of armed fighters across the border.

Prunier has a deep understanding of the African Great Lakes region. He lives in Addis Ababa, and speaks English, French, German, and Spanish, with “general knowledge” of Sudanese Arabic, Amharic, Russian, and Swahili. Employed by Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique or CNRS (the national research foundation), in Paris, he occasionally works as a journalist, and writes for *Le Monde Diplomatique*. His writings have covered the conflicts in Darfur, Somalia, Somaliland, Chad, Congo, and Uganda, among others. Prunier knows about some of the events he discusses first- or secondhand. Whilst he is weary at the West for misunderstanding the DRC, in this study he is much more concerned with identifying those forces that seek to violently transform and dominate the DRC and Congolese nationals from within the region. The sins of the West are an important part of the overall picture for Prunier, but the key problem, as he sees it, is a lack of interest in Congo, rather than the self-interest that seems to guide most Western policymaking in the African Great Lakes region.

This study has already been extensively reviewed elsewhere, as it is four years old. Even so, it remains a vital addition to our understanding of the background to the Congo wars, and just as important as when it was first produced. For almost twenty years, Congo and the wider region have been involved in what Prunier calls Africa's "world war," a war he says is more like the Thirty Years War, as we will later explain. Among the many reviews written when this book was first published, almost all were positive, helping to ensure that Prunier's study was quite widely read, as it deserved to be. Very few people—even in Congo—seemed to really understand what was going on in this horribly complex war, which ripped apart the entire African Great Lakes region as well as the DRC and involved several countries from outside the region, as well as the UN troops. Even for experts, knowledge of the situation is patchy, usually being confined to one country, such as in the valuable studies of Thomas Turner (*The Congo Wars: Conflict, Myth and Reality* [2007]) and Adam Hochschild (*King Leopold's Ghost* [2006]). These works offer important insights on the regional and historical backgrounds, respectively, of recent violence in the DRC. A more recent study by Jason Stearns, *Dancing in the Glory of Monsters: The Collapse of the Congo and the Great War of Africa* (2011), has perhaps built on Prunier, and starts from the same premise that, as the latter writes, "Rarely have ground reality and diplomatic discourse been more at variance" than in DRC today, where the violence represents the last throes of a history of Cold War meddling (p. xxxvii). With great patience, Prunier manages to piece together recent events from the Rwanda genocide in 1994 to the fall of President Mobutu's *ancien regime* four years later, right up to the ongoing and increasingly intractable violence of the past few years. Refugees have long been pawns throughout the region, and the continuing chronic weakness of the Congolese state means that in contrast with the high level of state command in neighboring Rwanda, donors appear to have been pouring money into a "bottomless well," as was noted in a recent and quite depressing study by Theodore Trefon, *Congo Masquerade: The Political Culture of Aid Inefficiency and Reform Failure* (2011).

Although most reviewers valued this book, one who was very critical, a former U.S. general, quite unfairly described Prunier's study as "a tale of dark conspiracy woven with incompetence."^[1] Most reviewers hailed Prunier's work as "meticulously researched," even claiming that if Prunier "did not exist already, there would be an urgent need for him to be created."^[2] I agree with Zach Warner, who notes that, in spite of many strengths,

"the sourcing at times relies solely on confidential informants," though this is hardly surprising given that this is a study about an ongoing situation of violence.^[3] I am unhappy that Prunier relies so heavily on reports of the International Crisis Group (ICG), since this particular organization, being funded by various companies, has for a long time ignored the critical role of mineral trade in fueling the violence in Congo. Certain well-placed Western companies have a vested interest in continued violent chaos, as suggested by a recent study on the eastern DRC by journalist Peter Eichstaedt, *Consuming the Congo: War and Conflict Minerals in the World's Deadliest Place* (2011). In his review of Prunier's book, Jeffrey Gettleman summed up the arguments contained in Prunier's four hundred pages or so, as follows: "According to Gérard Prunier, everything conspired to turn Congo into a killing zone: a dying dictator; the end of the cold war; Western guilt; and a tough, suspicious, post-genocide, Israel-like Rwanda, whose national ethos, simply stated, was Never Again."^[4] In his own conclusion, "Groping for Meaning," Prunier proposes that the war in the DRC has been more like the Thirty Years War in Europe, than World War 1 or 2. Here, as in the Thirty Years War, one set of structures started to weaken and collapse, as the foundation was being laid—often through violence—for a new society, perhaps going through its birth pangs, not despite, but precisely because of the scale of the violence. This is a Charles Tilly-like conclusion; perhaps the Congolese state will get its act together, given the challenge of pacifying the entire national territory. The Congolese themselves, and those who care about Congo, need to have this hope that things will start to improve, eventually.

Notes

[1]. Thomas Odom, "Book Review—Africa's World War," *Small Wars Journal* 2, no. 1 (2009), <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/book-review-africas-world-war>.

[2]. William Wallis, "From Genocide to Continental War," *Financial Times* (London), December 13, 2008, <http://www.ufppc.org/book-notes-mainmenu-36/8138-book-review-grd-pruniers-history-of-africas-first-world-war-in-congo-1998-2003-.html>.

[3]. Zach Warner, *Review of African Political Economy* 38, no. 130 (2011): 655-656, quote on 655. Warner's nuanced view is echoed by Jeffrey Gettleman, "A Wound in the Heart of Africa," *Sunday Book Review*, *New York Times*, April 2, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/>

2009/04/05/books/review/Gettleman-t.html; archives/2009/sep/24/kagames-hidden-war-in-
and Howard French, “Kagame’s Hidden War in the the-congo/?~pagination=false.
Congo,” Sunday Book Review, *New York Times*, Septem- [4]. Jeffrey Gettleman, “A Wound in the Heart of
ber 24, 2009, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/>
Africa.”

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