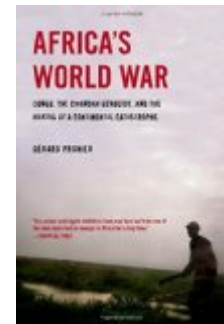


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## Examining the Toxic Fruit of the Congolese Wars

The story of war in the Congo, which began with the Rwandan genocide of 1994, has attracted much attention but little serious scholarship. Hence, the conflict is popularly understood as a chaos of child soldiers, ravaging militias, and an ungovernable country over which Joseph Kabila somehow manages to preside. Of course the complexities of the Great Lakes region, the multiple Congolese wars, and the consistent but confusing mass atrocities cannot be captured by such simplistic narratives. The oversimplification of the conflict can be seen in the 2010 UN Mapping Report that attempted to document conflict-related human rights abuses from 1993 to 2003. The 565 pages of dense accounting of a web of atrocities and counter-atrocities is truly only the tip of the Congolese iceberg. The report's claims that Rwandan government forces committed genocide against Hutu refugees from Rwanda and civilians in the Kivu provinces only further complicates the misunderstandings that are unfortunately promoted by international and popular narratives on the Congolese war.

Gérard Prunier's assessment of what he labels "Africa's World War" reaches from this tip of the iceberg and delves deeper into the dynamics that made the last two decades in the Congo so terrible and violent. The framing of "World War" is the crucial starting point from which Prunier makes his analysis. Prunier is not referring to Niall Ferguson's "pitiful" war of 1910s Europe, caused by Great Power militarism, political elite gambling, and imperial alliances, but rather to the Thirty

Years' War of seventeenth-century Europe. Like that earlier war, the wars in the Congo have been stimulated by regional conflicts and aggravated by perceived national identities, which melted local violence into two successive large-scale regionalized wars and radicalized relations between multiple groups within the Congo and between its neighboring states. For Prunier the Rwandan genocide was the beginning of endless warfare in the region; Paul Kagame's decision to systematically pursue genocidaires into eastern Congo resulted in "continental catastrophe." It was as if "all the peripheral conflicts started to roll down into the Congo basin like so many overripe toxic fruits" (p. xxxi). Prunier's analysis of this has become standard for regional specialists and academics researching the area. Recent evidence of this includes Jason Stearn's fast-paced narrative, *Dancing in the Glory of Monsters: The Collapse of the Congo and the Great War of Africa* (2011), which takes a micro level of analysis, using interpersonal perspectives, and describes, through the eyes of the actors themselves, the magnitude and depth of the political causes of the conflict from Rwanda to present-day eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

Writing from years of experience on eastern and central Africa, and after producing valuable works on both Darfur and Rwanda, Prunier crafts an analysis that draws from English and French sources, contacts with local and global nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and relationships with actors on the ground.[1] The most

compelling source is the personal correspondence with Seth Sendashonga, a prominent Hutu opposition politician in the post-genocide transitional government, who was murdered by unidentified gunmen in 1998. Initially a voice of moderation in the National Unity Cabinet, Sendashonga was forced from his position and exiled in 1996 for his criticism of the Kagame government, after which he established an armed opposition party, the Forces de Résistance pour la Démocratie (FRD). Sendashonga's correspondence presents a unique and critical window into the Rwandan post-genocide government under Kagame that became ever increasingly belligerent and dictatorial. It is widely believed that Sendashonga's assassination was a result of the growing suspicion that the Tutsi-led government had of him, not necessarily because he was a moderate Hutu, but because of his constant questioning of Kagame's methods, which were alienating the Hutu population and villainizing refugees who had returned from Congo. Prunier uses Sendashonga to show the chipping away of moderate voices in post-genocide Rwanda, demonstrating his mastery of local politics and its regional impact.

Other texts that approach Prunier's high standard, such as those by René Lemarchand and Christian Scherrer, come from a less concentrated regional perspective, but offer more on the question of genocide and mass violence in the region. By contrast, Prunier's analysis of genocide is not comprehensive in its treatment of the Rwandan genocide and is limited to the role of the genocide as a catalyst for the Congo conflict. Interestingly, he rules out as genocide the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) purging of the Hutu opposition within Rwanda, as reported by the infamous 1994 Gersony Report, and instead treats the government crackdown as politically strategic and planned massacres. "Unlike the killings carried out during the genocide, these new massacres were decentralized, secret, limited, and fluctuating.... We have something (here) that resembles neither the genocide nor uncontrolled revenge killings, but rather a policy of political control through terror" (p. 20).<sup>[2]</sup> Prunier does not sufficiently assess the possibility that the RPF used genocidal violence for the purposes of establishing political control. This connection may be helpful in understanding the claims of genocide against the RPF in the United Nations report, *DRC: Mapping Human Rights Violations 1993-2003*. This issue will be returned to later, since it is problematic that Prunier dismisses genocide in this case but applies the term to the destruction in Darfur in his *Darfur a 21st Century Genocide* (third edition, 2008).

By treating Rwanda as the catalyst—from the 1994

genocide, to the flood of refugees, the *Interahamwe* paramilitary forces, and former Hutu state officials and military over the border into the Kivus, and the aggressively militarized nature of the RPF–Prunier maps out with great clarity exactly how how this tiny African state is at the root of Africa's World War. Prunier's second chapter, "From Kibeho to the Attack on Zaire," shows how the geopolitical issues of ethnic politics and pervasive fear incubated in the Kivus fostered the first catalytic reaction. Central to the politics of this region and the first war in 1996 were the Banyamulenge. These Congolese Tutsi became an immediate rallying point for both the genocidal aims of the Hutu-dominated Rwandan "government in exile," and Kagame's burning passion to quash all threats to Rwanda, internal and external. Prunier claims that Kagame's feigned protection of the Banyamulenge in the Kivus and a decisive military response to the looming threats posed by the *genocidaires* would have demanded a "coalition of the willing," since RPF enemies harbored by France's Operation Turquoise and the international community clearly could not have been dealt with by appeal to the United Nations, which had at any rate already proven itself to be ineffective.

Initially Kagame's "coalition of the willing" was a mishmash of rebel groups and regional actors who were bound together by mutual animosity toward the polarizing figure of Mobutu Sese-Seko. It was enough for Kagame that Mobutu was aiding and facilitating the rearming of the *genocidaires*, and sufficient for the other parties that an ousting of Mobutu would solve enough of everyone else's problems as well. The leadership of Uganda, Angola, Zimbabwe, and Tanzania fell in line behind Rwanda, and from within what was then Zaire the somewhat obscure figure of Laurent-Désiré Kabila, himself just as much a relic of the cold war as Mobutu, was hoisted up as the chief of the domestic rebellion against the rotting Mobutu regime. Prunier contrasts this old revolutionary with his son, the present leader of the DRC, in the following way: "whereas his father remained a prisoner in a cold war time capsule, Joseph Kabila understood the nature of modern politics: never mind reality, image is all" (p. 260). Kabila the younger is portrayed as a match for Kagame's savvy shrewdness in dealing, or manipulating, the disconnected elements in eastern Zaire, such as the rebel movements in the Kivus and international community. It is certainly Kabila's fresh appearance that contributed to the latter and its donor machine returning to the Congo after nearly a decade of war.

The majority of the book goes on to articulate with intricate detail the ebbs and flows of rebel groups within

each of the two wars, the complexity of which demands frequent use of the front matter indexing of the multifarious parties involved. The umbrella organization of *Alliancedes Forces Democratiques pour la Liberation* (AFDL) met the easily achievable goal of racing to Kinshasa and installing Laurent-Désiré Kabila. However, as Prunier explains, it was this success and subsequent fracturing that really led to a continuance and further complication of the conflict. Central to his analysis is the relationship between Uganda and Rwanda. Each initially supported Laurent Desire Kabila, and both turned against him as he ejected “foreign troops” from the freshly minted DRC. From the second war onward, both intermingled their covert presence and meddling with the regime by supporting and, eventually, dividing rebel movements and stuffing their own state exports with exploited natural resources. Throughout the book, Prunier’s narrative shows that these parties remained embattled against both father and son Kabila and against each other. The rebel group components resulting from the growing divisions between Ugandan and Rwandan policy in the Congo is demonstrated by Prunier’s cataloging of the next generation of the AFDL in the *Rassemblement Congolais pour la Democratique Conglese* (RCD). After its founding in 1998, as part of the second war to oust Kabila, the RCD fractured into several splinters mirroring the Ugandan-Rwandan split.

As suggested by an article in the *New York Times*, Prunier’s sweeping analysis does not produce any heroes.[3] The international community constantly reinterpreted or ignored the chaos and when acting as a negotiating partner worked from a “reality gap” that politicized the already chaotic appearance of the wars (p. 225). The only parties that worked toward establishing a functional path to peace were Joseph Kabila, who opened the DRC for development, political dialogue, and reconstruction, and the regional arbitration of South Africa. Johannesburg’s effort to take advantage of war-fatigue, through the Sun City negotiations, proved to nudge over at least a few dominoes in bringing Jean-Pierre Bemba, businessman turned militia leader considered to be the only truly “Congolese” rebel with national appeal, and other rebel groups to the table with Kinshasa. This process also signaled the beginning of withdrawal from Uganda and Rwanda, a crucial step in deescalating the continental and regional dimensions of the war. However, while South Africa played a crucial role, it was certainly by default, being the only power significant enough and African enough to influence the warring parties.

Whilst this book offers a simultaneous macro and micro study of “Africa’s World War,” it borders on the esoteric for those unfamiliar with the regional significance of manipulated ethnic difference, particularly within the Kivus and Rwanda. The only other shortcoming of this volume is the insufficient treatment of the question of genocide in cases of violence that originated in but were distinct from the genocide against Tutsis in 1994. The atrocities included in the Gersony Report, for example, and reported by other eyewitnesses that Prunier references, paint a picture of organized massacres with the intent of shoring up Rwandan-RPF political power, not only at home but also abroad.

It is clear that the concept of “genocide” is here an underused tool that could have shed further light onto Africa’s World War. This is a shame, since it is unlikely that Prunier would have used the “genocide” label to explain away particularly the early phases of the violence and the war in the DRC, as seen in other work on Rwanda and the DRC, which simply label events of April to July 1994 as “genocide,” as if this term is self-explanatory, and which are thus devoid of deep analysis of the peculiarities and dynamics of the case.[4] Deploying Raphael Lemkin’s notion of strategic and organized violence for the destruction of specific groups, as noted seemingly casually in the UN Mapping Report, would have enabled the reader to connect the significance of this phenomenon with the social structure of war, as emphasized by others like Martin Shaw, in both Rwanda and the Congo.[5] Critical use of the term would have also further added to developing scholarship that defines the term beyond the UN Genocide Convention. Such analysis may have addressed an underresearched dimension within genocidal dynamics: that such acts tend to self-perpetuate in situations where violent conflict remains unabated. This is certainly the case in the DRC where cycles of negotiation, low-intensity conflict, and fracturing of militias produce the violent social environment for, and actual occurrences of, genocide. Further connections could thus have been made between the study of genocide and conflict studies literature, an area that could offer insight into how the type of continually simmering mass violence of places like the Congo connect civil wars with genocide.[6]

Prunier’s outlook for the situation, as it remains a conflict hotspot still today, is ambivalent. Could such a catastrophe be repeated? He thinks not. “The death (and rebirth) of Zaire is a unique case. No other country in Africa today, not even Nigeria or South Africa, has the potential of creating such a continent wide upheaval”

(p. 363). Hope lies, undoubtedly, both with the continued development of democratic institutions in the DRC, paired with transparency, and a greater expansion and mainstreaming of work like Prunier's that accurately depicts how Rwanda kicked over the rotting corpse of Zaire, exposing and catalyzing a level of diffuse genocidal violence previously unseen in Africa. Such an analysis is crucial for nurturing accurate scholarly and popular understanding of this hellish place that is usually only represented by ubiquitous rape and unethical resource exploitation.

#### Notes

[1]. See Prunier's two other major works: Gérard Prunier, *The Rwandan Crisis: History of Genocide* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); and Gérard Prunier, *Darfur a 21st Century Genocide* 3rd ed. (New York: Cornell University Press, 2008). This third edition contains significant classification of violence in Darfur as genocide.

[2]. United Nation High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR), *Prospects of Early Repatriation of Rwandan Refugees in Burundi, Tanzania, and Zaire*, October 10, 1994. This is the summary of the report given by Robert Gersony to the UNHCR.

[3]. Jeffrey Gettleman, "A Wound in the Heart

of Africa," review of *Africa's World War: Congo, the Rwandan Genocide, and the Making of a Continental Catastrophe*, by Gérard Prunier, *New York Times*, April 2, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/05/books/review/Gettleman-t.html> (accessed August 11, 2012).

[4]. Two examples of this "easy" use of "genocide" are works by journalists Linda Melvern and Philip Gourevitch. Linda Melvern, *Conspiracy to Murder: The Rwandan Genocide*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2006); and Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families: Stories from Rwanda* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).

[5]. Martin Shaw, *What Is Genocide?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 17-36. Both chapters 2 and 8 offer ground-breaking perspectives on how groups can be conceived in genocide, with particular relation to Lemkin's sociological inclinations that "genocide" and "groups" ought to be generic concepts.

[6]. This idea is largely attributable to a paper recently presented by Ernesto Verdeja, "Critical Genocide Studies and the Comparative Approach," paper presented at "Genocide: Knowing the Past and Safeguarding the Future," International Network of Genocide Scholars 3rd Global Conference, San Francisco State University, San Francisco, CA, June 29, 2012.

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