

Shake Hands with the Devil: The Journey of Romeo Dallaire

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JOSHUA FENLON, MAY 13 2013

How does the film *Shake Hands With The Devil: The Journey of Romeo Dallaire* relate to the conflict in Rwanda in 1994, and how does it contribute to our understanding of the conflict?

Shake Hands with the Devil is a documentary film, released in 2004, based on Canadian Lieutenant General Romeo Dallaire's book about the atrocities which occurred in Rwanda in 1994.[1] The Rwandan genocide began after President Habyarimana, a Hutu, was shot down in a plane on April 6th, 1994.[2] Prior to this Hutu elite close to the deceased president had planned a Tutsi slaughter.[3] Subsequently, around eight hundred thousand were killed with ruthless efficiency by Hutu extremists before the Rwandese Patriotic Front took control of the country, on July 19th. [4] The film is centred on the beliefs and actions of Dallaire, the man chosen by the United Nations to oversee war torn Rwanda's transition to peace. It focuses on Dallaire as he returns to the country for the first time since the genocide.[5] The film explores Dallaire's transition from a confident military General, to a hollow eyed, traumatised man with suicidal tendencies and alcohol problems.[6] The film investigates the responsibilities behind the failure of Dallaire's "easy peacekeeping mission"[7]. General Dallaire's return to Rwanda, and by proxy this film, is his attempt to find a sense of justice amongst all the horror which occurred previously.

During the film certain key points become clear. Firstly, Dallaire rationalises that humans are only able to commit such horrific acts due to the influence of supreme evil, the "Devil".[8] Additionally, the lack of agency that Dallaire believes he had in Rwanda. This was due to the bureaucratic nature of the United Nations and the international system, and a lack of commitment from key nations.[9] Furthermore, that Dallaire attempted to publicise his lack of agency by utilising the freedoms of the western media to alert people of the severity of the horror occurring.[10] Also, the film suffers from the stereotyping of men as aggressors, and women and children as victims.[11] [12] Finally, the film demonstrates Dallaire trying to communicate what he believes occurred in Rwanda. Dallaire was in Rwanda, in a position of high command, experiencing the physical and mental affects of the terror firsthand. As the film's blurb states, "Dallaire's story must be told and its lessons must be learned." [13] The film increases our understanding of the genocide by showing the perspective of someone who experienced and understood the political intricacies behind it.

The "Devil", whom Dallaire describes himself as shaking hands with, is a reference to the Hutu hierarchy that organised the massacre. The Hutu paramilitary organisation, the Interahamwe, carried out the majority of the murders, along with the Presidential Guard.[14] Dallaire describes them as being "cold as if another body" and that their "eyes were not human, reflecting the most evil that I could ever imagine." [15] A devout Christian, Dallaire uses his religious beliefs to justify his actions, "as much as I was negotiating with the Devil, I felt a very positive entity come over me." [16] This shows how, by depicting the perpetrators as inhuman and evil, Dallaire is able to explain why they acted as they did and in turn justify his own actions. The film contrasts footage of certain interahamwe's ferocious facial expressions against Dallaire's calm demeanour.[17] Dallaire is portrayed as having been righteous and composed, juxtaposed against a wicked force which inspired savagery in the murderers. This is used to show the religious context behind Dallaire's perception of the conflict, good fighting against bad. During the film, the UN Envoy for Africa, Stephen Lewis, disagrees with Dallaire's belief that it was the Devil who made certain Hutu carry

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out rapes, murders and mutilations. Lewis claims that “human behaviour is capable of the most ferocious and irrational activity.”[18] He believes the atrocities that occurred in Rwanda were due to the evil that “lies in human behaviour.”[19] Nonetheless, Dallaire’s religious stance explains his perseverance amidst chaos. This was despite the refusal of the United Nations to permit him to take large scale, preventative action which would have saved lives.[20]

Another principle focus of the film is Dallaire’s lack of agency. The Rwandan president and former rebel leader, Paul Kagame, describes Dallaire’s role as having been that of a mere “pawn”.[21] Dallaire’s numerous requests for more resources and expanded operations, to limit human losses, were ignored by the United Nations.[22] Instead, under draft resolution 488, the United Nations withdrew the majority of the two thousand five hundred UN peacekeepers.[23] This left Dallaire with an ill equipped staff of “approximately 200”.[24] Under UN orders, the Rwandans suffered whilst the peacekeepers were “sneaking away”.[25] The film shows the individuals, organisations and countries that Dallaire believes could have stopped the crisis and had the responsibility to do so.[26] They are principally, the Catholic Church in Rwanda, General Theoneste, the United Nations, and certain western states. There is one notable instance where it is implied that Dallaire had agency, a verbal attack made by the Belgian senator, Alain Destexhe. He claims that the UN orders Dallaire obeyed were “criminal” and that it was his moral duty to disobey them.[27] Nevertheless, throughout the film Dallaire is described as “abandoned”, “helpless”, “chopped off at the knees” and generally that he “couldn’t have done a damn thing”.[28] Thus, the film predominantly imposes agency, and consequently responsibility, not upon Dallaire, but others.

In the film, the Canadian academic, Gerald Caplan states that the Catholic Church in Rwanda has “extraordinary influence” as it is “the largest Church in Rwanda”.[29] The implication is that the Church should have denounced anti-Tutsi behaviour as sinful. The refusal of the Church to discourage the genocide leads Caplan to accuse them of “murder, literally”.[30] This blame is reiterated by footage of a Church filled with broken skulls. Also in the film, Dallaire claims that General Theoneste Bagasora, Head of the Ministry of Defence in Rwanda, “had the power, the authority, to stop the whole thing.”[31] Instead, Bagasora undermined the UN force in Rwanda by authorising the murder of Belgian troops, leading to the Belgian withdrawal.[32] However, Dallaire gives primary responsibility for the genocide to western nations, specifically the Belgians. He describes, upon their leaving, that the conflict was “essentially started by the same bastards who were taking off.”[33]

The film gives a historical background for the misconceived differences between Tutsi and Hutu. Footage is shown of Hutu in European run schools,[34] during the time from 1919 when Rwanda was colonised by Belgium.[35] The Hutu are shown being measured and “learning that the Tutsi were different, probably alien.”[36] It describes how European anthropologists’ work resulted in administrators including ethnicity on identity cards. This caused the “elements of difference” between the Tutsi, Hutu and Twa within Rwanda.[37] The European notion that the Tutsi were “alien” meant that the Hutu elite in charge of Rwanda believed “the Hutu were not just a majority, they were the nation.”[38] The film describes how the colonial segregation of Rwandans laid the foundations for the extremist Hutu government. It allowed them to launch racist propaganda against the Tutsi, such as “they will take your baby away, whilst we, the Hutu, are innocent.”[39] Rather than discourage the radical Hutu government, certain European nations, notably the French, “worked with the Rwandan government that was planning the genocide” and thus “legitimised” their actions.[40] The blame which Dallaire and the film attribute to European nations is made clear when it states that Dallaire was “abandoned by the western powers.”[41] The film describes how the French, Belgians and Italians sent planes into Rwanda to rescue expatriates, but left Tutsi behind to be murdered.[42]

Final, damning criticism is given to the United Nations and the international system. The United Nations’ “failure to protect Rwandan citizens”[43] is attributed to the general disorganisation and bureaucratic chaos of its composition. The UN is described as working “as if it were held together with a piece of string.”[44] The film shows how Dallaire used what little agency he had to suggest ways of destabilising the Interahamwe, such as raiding their arms caches.[45] However, the United Nations “forbid” such operations.[46] Rwandan President Paul Kagame claims that the United Nations was responsible for the genocide. “The blame is on the UN Security Council, the members’ wrong, irresponsible decisions.”[47] He states that Dallaire “did not have the mandate” to carry out operations in order to protect more lives, he was, in effect, in “handcuffs”.[48] Dallaire’s supposed lack of support is backed by official documentation. The Rwandese Patriotic Front requested that the UN Security Council permit UN forces to

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“apprehend, put in custody, and if possible bring to justice” individuals participating in the violence in areas under UN control.[49] However, the UN denied such permission. The film shows who Dallaire believes had agency during the Rwandan crisis, and thus had responsibility to prevent it. The film offers an explanation for how and why the genocide happened, whilst attributing blame to certain people and groups of people. However, the film content is subject to the biases of its producers and Dallaire and is therefore limited in its conclusions.

The film shows Dallaire’s use of the media during the Rwandan crisis. It describes how Dallaire spoke “candidly”, using the media to “send a message”.^[50] Using the media’s agency to show what was happening in Rwanda, Dallaire was attempting to compensate for his own lack of agency. The film demonstrates how he utilised the western media because it was less prone to the bureaucratic processes and inaction of states and the United Nations. Dallaire tried to use the media to portray to the western public the true horror of what was occurring, in the hope that it could lead to some form of assistance.

This film is an additional attempt to inform people of Dallaire’s view of what happened in Rwanda. As a result of the genocide, Dallaire not only lost control of a country, he lost control of himself. Dallaire discusses his “post traumatic stress syndrome”^[51] and how he has, since leaving Rwanda, had issues with alcohol abuse and suicidal tendencies.^[52] Dallaire claims that Rwanda was “where he significantly changed.”^[53] He describes how he takes pills “just to stay reasonable.”^[54] Dallaire’s continuing lack of agency within the international system is shown by the confusion and delay which occurs, whilst filming, as he attempts to enter the former UN Headquarters, in Kigali.^[55] After a lengthy delay to entering the premises, an extremely apologetic woman emerges. She explains that “you know UN”, ^[56] as if such an excuse is reasonable. Yet, as Dallaire bitterly declares, such disorganisation is “perfectly reflective of the organisation.”^[57] Throughout the film Dallaire attempts to show who he believes to be responsible for what occurred in Rwanda. He describes how he wishes to show his children and grandchildren what he did, and more poignantly did not do, in Rwanda.^[58] Dallaire uses his return to Rwanda to attempt to come to terms with what occurred there previously. As Lewis states, “his return trip is a pretty crucial part of his therapy.”^[59] The frequent footage of Dallaire’s narrow, haunted eyes and his tight grip upon his wife’s hand shows he is still suffering from his ordeal. Dallaire’s return to Rwanda, and by proxy this film, is his attempt to use his agency, free from state and UN control, to cure his mental ailments and give his view of what occurred, and why.

Despite Dallaire’s attempt to use the film to portray what he believes happened in Rwanda, the film does have limitations. Whilst it is true that the majority of the perpetrators were male, and many victims were women and children, the depiction of male government troops juxtaposed against distressed women and children is not entirely objective.^[60] The film attempts to demonstrate the horror of what Dallaire experienced by showing women and children subject to brutality. This exploits the common perception that women and children are innocent in war, and men either protectors or aggressors.^[61] However, many men were mutilated and killed and the video does not focus on their stories. Furthermore, women and children were not entirely blameless. An alternative account of the genocide describes how Gregoire, a survivor of the genocide, noted that “the men killed, the women protected the killers, and the children went out looting.”^[62] The film’s stance against men is shown when Bonaventure Niyibizi states that he “cannot understand how you can kill a one month old baby” or a “pregnant woman”.^[63] This implies that it is easier to comprehend, and perhaps condone, killing an innocent, defenceless man. Pauline Nyiramasuhuko, Rwanda’s Minister of Women and Family Affairs in 1994, was prosecuted for genocide and crimes against humanity.^[64] There is no mention of this, or anything similar in the film. The film attempts to employ the common perception of men being strong, and women and children being vulnerable, in order to provoke the viewer to experience Dallaire’s resentment of what happened. Thus, the film is subject to editing designed to promote the sympathy of the viewer. Furthermore, though the film is a credible portrayal of Dallaire’s opinions and experiences, it is necessarily limited and subject to bias.

Shake Hands with the Devil relates to the conflict in Rwanda as it portrays the unique viewpoint of Lieutenant General Romeo Dallaire. Dallaire’s position caused him to experience the genocide firsthand, with the comprehension and responsibility, but inadequate resources, to resolve the situation. Nonetheless, the film contributes to our knowledge of the conflict as it shows how isolated Dallaire felt. Dallaire’s lack of agency demonstrates the failings of the United Nations system. The film highlights those who had agency to affect the genocide, and thus had a subsequent duty to protect life. These range from Hutu leaders, the Catholic Church and

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the United Nations itself. The key focuses of the film, Dallaire's religious interpretation of events, his lack of agency, the agency of other entities, and Dallaire's attempt to utilise media, demonstrate Dallaire's perspective of the genocide. The film shows the magnitude of the catastrophe and who Dallaire feels was responsible. Thus, it contributes to our understanding of the genocide by showing the viewpoint of Dallaire, the man tasked with bringing peace to Rwanda.

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