

## Review – The Path to Genocide in Rwanda

Written by Andreas Moeller

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ANDREAS MOELLER, AUG 24 2023

**The Path to Genocide in Rwanda: Security, Opportunity, and Authority in an Ethnocratic State**  
By Omar Shahabudin McDoom  
Cambridge University Press, 2021

Omar Shahabudin McDoom's latest book *The Path to Genocide in Rwanda* contributes important new insight into the well-studied Rwandan Genocide and examines two fundamental questions at the core of the wider field of genocide scholarship: "(i) what are the circumstances that gave rise to the genocide; and (ii) how did these affect individuals and motivate some, but not others, to kill?" (p.12). In other words, what caused the Rwandan Genocide? And why did people participate in it? The structure of the book can broadly be divided in two, with chapters 2-6 addressing the first question, while the lengthy final chapter addresses the second. These are questions that have and continue to occupy genocide scholars and McDoom answers them authoritatively through meticulous and detailed analysis.

The book's introductory chapter includes a comprehensive and exhaustive literature review on the Rwandan Genocide and genocide studies, which can itself be used independently for teaching or as a primer on the topic. McDoom presents a summary of the causes of the Rwandan Genocide, "*security* (civil war and democratization), *opportunity* (democratization and assassination), and *authority* (the state)", which "[t]o borrow a popular idiom from criminal law, [they] represent the means (a powerful and privatized state), the motive (a war-time and liberalization threat), and the opportunity (multipartyism and the president's assassination) for genocide" (p.35).

While the core arguments on the causes of the genocide represent the main chapters of the book, McDoom casts the net far wider in the many subsections in each chapter that diligently build the argument and leave few stones unturned. Chapter 2 lays the historical context and other factors (demographic, cultural, ecological, social, and infrastructural) that were preconditions for genocide. Through careful statistical analysis that is presented in the form of cross-comparative data sets and tables, McDoom demonstrates what was extraordinary (and not so extraordinary) about Rwanda compared with its sub-Saharan African neighbours. Important as they were, we see that these contextual and structural factors did not themselves cause the Rwandan Genocide.

The ongoing civil war in the years before 1994 between Hutu-dominated forces and the Rwandan Patriotic Front led to a progressive radicalisation of the Rwandan population, and this is the subject of chapter 3. In this environment, in-group and out-group boundaries were hardened, and this pervasive threat contributed to the likelihood of genocide. Yet, as McDoom points out, Rwanda's civil war was similar to other African civil wars and is insufficient in explaining why genocide broke out in 1994. Similarly, in explaining participation in the genocide, McDoom argues, "perpetrators and non-perpetrators alike felt threatened by the war. Fear alone did not explain why some killed and others not, but it was an important background condition for the violence" (p.84). Another interesting conclusion presented in this section is that the often-highlighted role played by atrocity-inciting radio broadcasts, particularly those of *Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines* (RTLM), on participation in genocidal violence was more limited than we might assume: "RTLM, as we now know, took a significant radical turn only after the president's assassination. However, I find that much of the killing had been completed before it broadcast most of its inciteful and incendiary language" (p.120).

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Political opportunity, the second factor in the book's subtitle, is analysed in chapters 4 and 5. The coincidence of civil war and political liberalisation "escalated elite contestation and brought ethnicity to the foreground of Rwanda's politics" (p.123). While macro level analysis is already well-developed in the literature, these sections importantly explain how these processes affected politics at both the meso and micro level. Alongside the potent force of political liberalisation amidst the threat of civil war came the assassination of President Habyarimana on 6 April 1994. This event produced political uncertainty and a power vacuum, both of which were exploited by extremist factions at macro, meso and micro levels. The multi-level analysis is further supported by the third prong of the book's thesis in chapter 6, which examines the significant role of state authority and the high organisational capacity of its institutions: "the *means* for the crime" (p.248). One of the contributions of McDoom's analysis is that it explains the variations in levels of violence over time and space. This is frequently missing from studies of genocides, and one without which an understanding of a particular context is incomplete. McDoom argues, "The killing only became nationwide *after* the centre fell to extremists. Genocide then became state policy" (p.196).

The final chapter is the most substantial at 81-pages and addresses the second research question at the heart of the book. This will be the focus of the rest of this review. Entitled, "Why some killed and others did not," this section will appeal most to students and scholars who are interested in the literature on understanding what motivated people to participate in the Rwandan genocide. Participation is explained through analysis of survey and interview data the author compiled over the span of two decades. As in the rest of the book, McDoom conducts thorough detective work and clearly exhibits his evidence and reasoning for the reader to see. Although the argument progression may feel a little slow in consequence, the careful guidance through a wealth of both qualitative and quantitative data analysis results in compelling conclusions.

Some of these conclusions to the question of what motivated perpetrators will not be particularly ground-breaking to those familiar with the growing literature on motivations and perpetrator participation. For instance, McDoom concludes, "with the exception of being male and having slightly fewer children, Rwanda's perpetrators did not have a demographic profile that distinguished them from non-perpetrators" (p.302). Perpetrator heterogeneity is certainly not new and has been consensus among researchers studying perpetrators. As such, where it is stated that "[d]ispositional heterogeneity is an important finding" (p.329), one might reasonably disagree. Similarly, neither situationist nor dispositional explanations adequately explain participation in Rwanda, McDoom states, and substantial empirical support for both are presented. For example, it is argued that "[s]ituationism over-predicts participation as, logically, it implies that all individuals, when faced with similar situational pressures, would succumb and commit violence" (p.282). These are also consensus views among scholars of perpetrators and perpetration.

However, that the evidence points towards a middle ground view and supports well-established ideas about perpetrators should not be surprising to the reader. It certainly does not take away from the quality of the analysis, and the many in-depth research findings that derive from it are insightful. One of these is on the highly contentious issue of estimating the total numbers of victims and perpetrators of the Rwandan Genocide, and here McDoom builds on his previous work on these questions. He concludes, one in four Hutu men participated directly in acts of genocide (p.284), while "between 491,000 and 522,000 Tutsi were murdered in Rwanda between 6 April 1994 and 19 July 1994" (p.296).

Most interesting are McDoom's two key conclusions in explaining participation in the Rwandan Genocide: the first is that the closer somebody lived in relation to a perpetrator, the more likely they were to perpetrate themselves (p.348); secondly, the closer their relationship with a perpetrator, the more likely this connection would lead them to perpetrate also (p.350). The micro-sociological and micro-spatial findings break new ground and significantly contribute toward existing debates around perpetrator participation. They also complement McDoom's analysis on individuals' motivations, such as conformity, obedience to authority, peer pressure, fear of retribution, and opportunism. Perpetration therefore depended on where you lived and whom you knew. Set within the substantial context provided by the previous chapters, this thesis is convincingly made and is supported by an abundance of data. In a field dominated by qualitative research of personal accounts from victims, witnesses, and perpetrators, this kind of quantitative analysis and the important, new insights it can yield is very welcome indeed. Research into other contexts of mass atrocities would benefit from similar research methods.

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In sum, this is undoubtedly a new and important contribution to the existing literature on the Rwandan Genocide. McDoom demonstrates that the core, fundamental questions in genocide studies continue to remain relevant and still deserve our attention. *The Path to Genocide in Rwanda* sets out with ambitious goals and successfully arrives at its destination. As such, it should be considered alongside existing seminal studies of the Rwandan Genocide, notably those of Scott Straus (2006) and Lee Ann Fujii (2009).

### References

Fujii, Lee Ann. (2009) *Killing Neighbours: Webs of Violence in Rwanda* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press).

Straus, Scott. (2006) *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power, and War in Rwanda* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press).

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### About the author:

Andreas Moeller is a doctoral candidate at the Department of War Studies at King's College London, whose research focuses on understanding motivations and agency in the perpetration of mass atrocities during the Bosnian War (1992-95). His broader interests centre on drivers of violence at the micro and meso levels in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century comparative genocide, as well as perpetrators and perpetration in atrocity crimes.