

France: Proud of her Role During the Rwandan Genocide?

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FIONA CUMBERLAND, JUN 4 2012

In reference to Rwanda, the French right-winger, Jacques Myard, has claimed that France ‘can and should be proud of the role she played in this unfortunate country’. To what extent is this an accurate assessment of France’s role in Rwanda before, during and after the 1994 genocide?

Let there be no doubt: the Rwandan genocide was the ultimate responsibility of those Rwandans who planned, ordered, supervised and eventually conducted it. Their extremism was the seemingly indestructible and ugly harvest of years of power struggles and insecurity that had been deftly played upon by their former colonial rules.
– General Roméo Dallaire

Rwanda is a nation marred by colonial conquests, ethnic divisions and the worst genocide in modern African history. The international community failed to intervene and protect the 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus who were systematically slaughtered in less than 100 days, despite substantial evidence of human rights violations and plans for ethnic cleansing. Belgium, the USA and the United Nations have been particularly criticised for their actions, however no nation has been blamed to the extent that France has. The evidence is substantial; from actively supporting the Habyarimana regime, to training and arming the Forces Armées Rwandaises (FAR) to the alleged participation in acts of genocide. Despite this, a small faction of individuals defend France’s role as well intentioned and somewhat positive. To assess the degree to which France is responsible we must not only critique her actions, but we must consider the information that was available to her, and her capacity to impact change at the time. These elements are critical to addressing the claim that inaction partially facilitated the mass murders. By examining evidence from before, during and after the genocide, it is clear that France’s strategic interests dictated its involvement in Rwanda and that the incentive to preserve *la francophonie* superseded any humanitarian action she might have taken.

Before the colonial period, social divisions conveyed a flexible concept of class, with Hutu peasants and Tutsi pastoralists living peacefully together (De Heusch, 1995 p4). Ethnic divisions were crystallised by German colonisers in 1897, then further solidified by Belgium after the First World War (Grünfeld and Huijboom, 2007 p28). The Catholic Church provided the possibility of social mobility to marginalised Hutus, which gave rise to an elite that would rival the Tutsi aristocracy. Grégoire Kayibanda led a social revolution on the principles he had outlined in the 1957 Bahutu manifesto, a document calling for Hutu solidarity and equal treatment by Tutsis. Independence in 1962 formalized Hutu majority rule, with Belgium and the Catholic Church switching allegiances due to certainty of Hutu domination. Kayibanda’s presidency and racist doctrine forced 130 000 Tutsis into exile, causing an increase in attacks on Rwanda (Morrock, 2012 p66).

The massacre of 200 000 Hutus in neighbouring Burundi provoked Juvénal Habyarimana to overthrow Kayibanda and his anti-Tutsi campaign in 1973. He established a totalitarian regime and cultivated closer ties with France, recognising the economic benefit of joining *la francophonie* and signing military assistance agreement in 1975 with President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing (Frindéthié, 2010 p75). By 1990, the UN estimated 900 000 Tutsi refugees had

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fled the nation, with 14 000 of those in Uganda joining Museveni's Ugandan National Resistance Army (UNRA). They became trained and unified as the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), with the goal of returning to their homeland (Grünfeld and Huijboom, 2007 p32).

From the RPF invasion in October 1990 until four years after, France was indisputably Rwanda's closest ally due to her military, financial and political support (IPEP 2000, 12.4). Rwanda was a strategic acquisition that was intended to bolster France's international prestige, as well as enhance her economic dominance in francophone Africa (Adleman, 2009 p6). In keeping with traditional French African policy, national interests were prioritised over Rwandan concerns and a distinctly neo-colonial relationship emerged (Martin, 1995 p6). This was characterised by the close personal ties between the political elites of both governments, and the resultant corruption due to a lack of accountability. Jean-Christophe Mitterrand, an arms dealer, not only benefitted from Rwanda's high demand for weaponry, it is also evident that he profited from the marijuana plantations set up by army officers.

The fall of the Berlin Wall catalysed a new approach to African policy that centred on political conditionality. President Mitterrand emphasised the relationship between aid and democracy at the franco-African Summit of La Baule, heralding a positive symbolic step towards enforcing the elusive "good governance" criterion for which African nations continually strive (Roessler, 2005 p215). This intention was never achieved with authoritarian regimes receiving a larger share of overall aid in 1991, but partial successes and explanations may alleviate some of the burden of France's failure. She was a substantial donor of development aid, contributing \$160 million of economic aid throughout the Habyarimana regime, and substantial military aid from 1990 until 1994 (Schraeder, 2000 p412). Evidence suggests that prominent French NGOs and individuals exploited their political power and profited from these funds (Greer, 2000 p181). The Quilès Report asserts that French military intervention throughout these years was intended to promote stability and was somewhat successful insofar as French and government forces halted the initial RPF invasion in 1990 and subsequent attacks.

Diplomatic intervention also resulted in some success; pressure on Habyarimana led to the introduction of a new constitution in 1991, which legalised parties of the opposition and ended a sixteen-year authoritarian regime (Roessler, 2005 p215). French diplomatic relations in Kigali were also key to negotiating the Arusha peace process (IPEP 2000, 8.1). However, this limited success is significantly undermined by the negative impact of French involvement. Military intervention in support of Habyarimana legitimised his totalitarian regime and expressly contradicted Mitterrand's commitment to democracy. Furthermore, French-sponsored militarization of Rwanda reinforced the authority of extremist Hutu leaders and the power of the Réseau Zero, therefore contributing to the training and armament of the death squads (Charbonneau, 2008 p122).

Overwhelming evidence testifies to France's awareness of the impending genocide before it was officially declared. Denial to this degree is inexcusable, but deliberate misinformation of the media further indicts French officials in Kigali of complicity in the massacres, and holds responsible those in Paris who ignored information brought before parliament (IPEP 12, 2000). The failure of the Arusha accords demonstrates the multitude of obstacles to peace, and it is clear that the international community, notably the USA, UK, Belgium, and the UN were equally reluctant to get involved. A theoretical perspective questions whether Rwanda is a tragic case study of a "collective action problem"; despite universal agreement that action must be taken, "free-riding" incentive for individual states undermined the capacity for effective multilateral intervention (Gent, 2007 p1095). Regardless of context, the French military continued to train and support the FAR soldiers throughout the ethnic violence that preceded the genocide, and well as maintaining arms imports and distribution (Greer, 2000 p180). They had both motivation and means; the suppression of Anglophone Tutsis for continued geopolitical dominance, and an army willing to fight to secure it.

Hours after the assassination of President Habyarimana on April 6 1994, the presidential guard began to kill members of the opposition and Tutsi officials (Greer, 2000 p.180). The French response was the most rapid and remains the most contentious; despite partial successes in peacekeeping, substantial failures question her motives and effectiveness. France was the only nation willing to intervene as peacekeeper, largely to correct the bad image created by previous involvement in Rwanda (Nalbandov, 2009 p140). Myard rightly claims that France was the first nation to alert the international community to the genocide and argues that Operation Amaryllis, a rescue mission for French nationals, also aided some Rwandans regardless of race (Myard 2012). He neglects to include that those

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Rwandan evacuees were the political elite, and that the call for help came long after the French intelligence reached Paris and the armament and training of genocidaires had begun (Greer, 2000 p181).

The international community was equally culpable of inaction; the “Somali debacle” resulted in America’s refusal to join any future UN military interventions for peace. The Clinton administration not only prevented the deployment of 5500 troops as the conflict escalated, but also explicitly avoided the word “genocide” to avoid obligatory intervention in compliance with international treaties (Schraeder, 2000 p411). Belgium’s loss of ten soldiers on the first day provoked their complete withdrawal from the UN mission; this seriously weakened the force of opposition to the genocide, as well as ideologically undermining peacekeeping efforts. UN Security Council Resolution 912, which called for reduction of UNAMIR troops from 2258 to 270 on April 20th, ignored substantial evidence in support of intervention, such as the express demands of General Roméo Dallaire for more soldiers (Adelman and Suhrke, 2004 p516). Quilès claimed that French ratification of 912 was “regrettable”, however this error was rectified by the humanitarian effort in “Opération Turquoise” (Quilès 1998). Burundi, Tanzania and Uganda declined to help stage the UN-approved French mission to create a safe zone; despite these obstacles there was partial success (Astroff and Meren, p63 2005). Up to 20000 lives were saved and peace was initially restored, however French withdrawal saw a return to conflict, demonstrating no lasting impact of the operation. Many sources also claim French efficiency was emphasised for propaganda purposes (Seybolt, 2007 p78).

An independent Rwandan investigation produced the Mucyo Report, a collection of highly incriminating evidence of France’s direct involvement in the genocide; testimonies from soldiers instructed to kill Tutsis, and from children who claimed peacekeepers of Opération Turquoise had raped them (Wallis 2008). During the genocide, \$13 million from the Rwandan government went through Banque Nationale de Paris to Rwandan embassies worldwide, indicating French complicity in Hutu power armament and regime maintenance (Melvern, 2000 p182). It is also claimed that France continued to supply arms to Rwanda up to a week after the genocide began (Adelman, 2009 p7). It is argued that France was not alone in her failure to adequately respond, and that due to insufficient international support she is not entirely at fault. However, her direct involvement during the genocide is inexcusable and it is clear that she is not merely guilty of inaction.

As genocide in Rwanda ended, conflict across the Great Lakes Region accelerated to what became “Africa’s first world war”. After the RPF victory, France concentrated on minimising the impact of losing a francophone nation to Anglo-Saxon control and actively pursued policies that would secure her sphere of influence for the future. She approached this by undermining the new government in Kigali, and through strengthening its opposition (Wallis, 2006 p183). French policy intervened where her military forces could not; she vetoed \$200 million European recovery aid, claiming that economic sanctions should remain until the 2 million refugees had returned, and the government was broadened to include more Hutus (Wallis, 2006 p183).

Under the auspices of Operation Turquoise, Hutu Power forces had escaped to neighbouring countries, particularly Zaire, where interhamwe established highly organised refugee camps and plotted their return to Rwanda (IPEP 19. 25 2000). Chirac charged Zairian president Mobutu, an ally of the FAR, with the protection of these refugees (Prunier, 2009 p319). Mobutu’s position was bolstered in Zaire and the genocidaires grew stronger under his leadership, removing any likelihood of the end of regional conflict. Camps remained controlled by militias who continued to attack Rwanda and OAU pleas for UN intervention were ignored until France proposed a European humanitarian intervention to the UN (IPEP 2000,19.39). Few were convinced that French motivation was due to anything other than a strategic move to get French soldiers on the ground, but the camps collapsed before the troops were deployed (IPEP 2000, 19).

This immediate aftermath demonstrates how French policy directly contributed to further deterioration of Rwanda. However, after 1997, France’s African policy became less interventionist and conditions became favourable for improving diplomatic relations (Schraeder, 2000 p414). Some reconciliation was achieved with the Quilès report in 1998, however France further damaged relations when she retaliated to the Mucyo investigation into her role in the genocide. Wikileaks recently revealed that Judge Bruguière’s supposedly independent accusation that Kagamé had assassinated Habyarimana, was in fact supported by the French government and that it was not, as the government had claimed, independent from the state (Torres, 2011). After the judge issued nine arrest warrants to government

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officials in Kigali, Kagamé recalled his envoy to Paris and requested that the French ambassador to leave. Sarkozy recommenced Franco-Rwandan rapprochement during his visit to Kigali in 2010; he admitted that France had made “serious errors of judgment” in the events surrounding the genocide, however no apology has ever been issued.

Claims that French involvement in Rwanda was beneficial to the nation are tenuous at best; any humanitarian intent is significantly undermined by the self-interested motivation and counter-productive actions that seem to have been symptomatic of the deadliest strain of fashoda syndrome in history. Not only did France reinforce Habyarimana’s totalitarian regime, her support of the FAR, who would have otherwise fallen to the RPA in 1990, debatably laid the foundation for the genocide. In the name of peacekeeping she intervened militarily, which not only exacerbated the death toll, but also resulted in the lasting instability of the entire Great Lakes Region.

French officials have tried to attenuate their guilt by emphasising that the previous imposition of Western democracy was inappropriate for Africa where instability is endemic, and that democratisation should be made at each nation’s own pace (Clapham, 1998 p199). However, this belated concern for cultural relativity does not account for the overwhelming number of Africans seeking the very representative democracy that neo-colonialism prevented. Between 1990 and 1994, it is true that Rwanda was in a state of economic, social and political turmoil and that the international community was reluctant to come to her aid. However, the complicity of others does not negate the greater responsibility of France, whose closer partnership allowed her to profit from arms deals, drug trafficking and strategic positioning in central and eastern Africa. What happened in Rwanda was “more than a crime, it was an event that shamed humanity”, and if the Genocide Convention obliges states to “punish and prevent” genocide, then those that failed to achieve this mandate are directly responsible for the atrocities (Vetlesen, 2000 p531).

Contrary to the claim by Mr Myard, which shows a very selective observation of the French involvement in Rwanda, France’s strategic interest have proved highly detrimental to the nation, and she is wholly responsible for causing instability and further conflict. Molière said “It is not only what we do, but also what we do not do for which we are accountable”, and his countrymen are guilty of both.

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