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Book Reviews: Popular Books Section



...METICULOUSLY RESEARCHED ...The book is meticulously researched. In fact the main part of the book ends at page 182. Endnotes and the bibliography take up the rest. All humanitarian organisations need to have an understanding of this scholarly and thought-provoking book in view of the continuing conflicts throughout the world...

Accounting For Horror - Post-Genocide Debates in Rwanda by Nigel Eltringham. Softcover, 9.3" x 4.5" x 0.6".
Pluto Publishing Ltd, 345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA. . . Email: pluto@plutobooks.com. Publication Date Jan 20, 2004. 248 pages, ISBN-10: 0745320007. ISBN-13: 978-0745320007 (Paperback). ISBN: 9780745320014 (Hardback). Price - (Paperback) Special Discount Price: £5.00/$9.25/€7.50. (Hardback): £55.00/$79.95/€75.00

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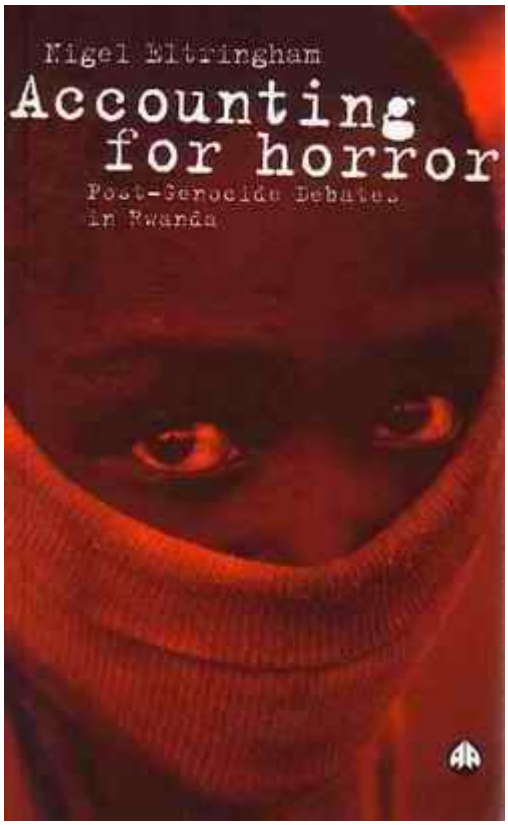

In 1994 whilst the world largely looked on, at least 500,000 Tutsi and several thousands of Hutu were systematically murdered in Rwanda in a space of less than four months. This was undoubtedly genocide but it was a while before it was recognised as such. Colonialism, the Roman Catholic Church, ethnicity and the struggle to control the state all contributed to the genocide. Whilst most people agree on this many still disagree over the way these factors evolved and the relationship between them.

Eltringham compares other accounts of the Rwandan tragedy to the identification of an elephant by blind men. (The one who touched the side thought it was like a big wall, the one who touched the trunk thought it was a long soft hose and so on.)

For most people the Rwandan genocide started off with the shooting down of the presidential aircraft. The Rwandan president, Juvénal Habyarimana, was returning from a summit in Dar es Salaam on the 6th of April 1994 when his aircraft was shot down. (This extremely significant attack remains largely uninvestigated and its authors yet to be identified.) This event signalled the start of the genocide but Eltringham goes even further back in time. He does not accept the exiles' view that the genocide would not have occurred unless the plane had been shot down, but instead argues that preparations for the massacre were already underway when the plane was shot down. In fact the massacres began, in a systematic manner, within minutes of the plane being shot down. This alone is sufficient to show that the preparations had been well made. In any case the massacre of Tutsis had been taking place since 1990.

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This book is not a simple account of the genocide and nor is it a Rwandan account of what happened. It is an exploration of how the author's accounting merges and diverges with that of the Rwandese. Eltringham explores how different groups within Rwandan society interpret the genocide of 1994. He does so by using mostly first hand material. Exploring various interpretations

and eyewitness accounts, he convincingly argues that these contradictions and competing interpretations give us important new insights into the past, and into the nature of the ways we can account for violence and genocide.

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The author admits that he is “self consciously partial” and chooses not to deal with three issues: International complicity and failure, the role of religious institutions and socio-economic development. Understandably, the author's sympathies are with the Tutsi. This of course brings in a slight bias, which cannot be helped.

The book opens with a discussion of what is meant by "ethnicity". There is also a discussion on what constitutes "genocide" and in particular the initial reluctance of various agencies and governments to acknowledge that this indeed was genocide. Whilst the World dragged its feet the Rwandese got on with the slaughter!

The mindless nature of the killings is horrifying. Victims were largely selected on the basis of their identity cards. Having ‘Tutsi' on your ID card guaranteed death. However, the lack of correspondence between identity and physiognomy meant that where someone lacked an ID card but ‘looked' Tutsi they were likely to be killed, or if someone held a ‘Hutu' ID card but looked ‘sufficiently Tutsi' they would also be killed. This is exemplified by the following incident: The Hutu relatives of Col. Tharcisse Renzaho were killed having been mistaken for Tutsi. Renzaho was the *préfet* of Kigali and was active in the genocide.

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Although estimates vary it is generally thought that 10% of the Hutus actively planned or carried out the killings. A number of Hutus were labelled as ‘moderate Hutus' and were also killed.

In chapter 3 entitled **The Holocaust: The Comparative Debate**, the author argues convincingly that although it is legitimate to draw parallels between the events in Rwanda and the Holocaust, the price of such comparison is high. He goes on to say that if in future genocide is to be prevented, detected and quickly halted, then each episode must be granted equality within a generic framework, a framework as found in the **United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948).**

The author, Nigel Eltringham, is a Lecturer in Anthropology at the University of Sussex. He worked in Rwanda for three years with a conflict resolution NGO. He also conducted doctoral research in Rwanda as well as among the Rwandan Diaspora in Europe.

Readers without a basic idea of the Rwandan genocide might find the going a little heavy and would be well advised to read up a simple account first. The author helpfully provides a list of abbreviations at the very start of the book. A map of Rwanda and her immediate neighbours would have been helpful as well.

The book is meticulously researched. In fact the main part of the book ends at page 182. Endnotes and the bibliography take up the rest.

All humanitarian organisations need to have an understanding of this scholarly and thought-provoking book in view of the continuing conflicts throughout the world.



-Gyan Fernando
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Comments from the Editor-in-Chief Dr. Anil Aggrawal, and some excerpts from the book:

The three main native peoples of the nations of Rwanda and Burundi in central Africa are the Hutu, Tutsi and the Twa. The Hutu are the largest of these three ethnic groups. According to the United States Central Intelligence Agency, 84% of Rwandans and 85% of Burundians are Hutu. The smallest group are the Twa, also known as Batwa. These are a pygmy people who remain the oldest recorded inhabitants of the Great Lakes region of central Africa. Besides Rwanda, current populations are found also in the nations of Burundi, Uganda, and the eastern portion of the Democratic Republic of Congo. In 2000, the Twa numbered just about 80,000 people, making them significant minority groups. The Tutsi occupy the middle position as far as numbers are concerned. A Human Rights Watch analysis estimated that 77% of the Tutsi population of Rwanda was slaughtered in the Rwandan Genocide of 1994.

Why did the Hutu majority kill Tutsis? For most of us, the reasons can be traced back to 1962, when the Rwanda and Burundi gained independence from Belgium. Hutus seized full control of Rwanda, and Tutsis gained control of Burundi. Once in control in Rwanda, the Hutus began killing Tutsis in thousands. In 1994, as the United Nations peacekeepers stepped back watching, the Hutu extremists killed an estimated 800,000 Tutsis, as well as moderate Hutu politicians. About 30% of the Twa population of Rwanda also died in the fighting.

Although most of us like to believe that it were the Hutu who killed Tutsis and not vice-versa. However Tutsi killed Hutu too. This situation was not unlike the one when India gained freedom from Britain in 1947. The country was divided; Hindus got hold of India and Muslims of Pakistan. India came to be viewed largely as a Hindu nation and Pakistan, a Muslim nation. Although Hindus

and Muslims had lived together peacefully in India for almost 2000 years, even intermarrying freely, they forgot their glorious past and began killing each other. Mass genocides of Muslims in India and of Hindus in Pakistan followed.

At the time of publication of this review, the violence between the Hutu and Tutsi has subsided, but the situation in both Rwanda and Burundi is still tense, and tens of thousands of Rwandans are still living outside the country.

This is an important book which gives a good account of the causes of this Genocide. So important is this book, that the board of editors at the journal office thought it would be a good idea to give the reader a brief glimpse of what is inside the book. Here on pages 57 till 59, the author argues whether the Rwandan genocide should (or could) be compared to the Holocaust by Nazis.

COMPARISON WITH THE HOLOCAUST: REFLECTION (pages 57-59)

Interpreting events in the Great Lakes Region through the comparative prism of the Holocaust is not unique to the post genocide Rwandan government nor the events of 1994. As mentioned, Bertrand Russell described the 1963 massacre of Tutsi as ‘the most horrible systematic human massacre we have had occasion to witness since the extermination of the Jews by the Nazis'. Likewise, a broadcast by Vatican Radio on 10 February 1964 called the massacres ‘the most terrible and systematic genocide since the genocide of the Jews by Hitler'. The killing of 100,000-200,000 Hutu in Burundi in 1972 by the Tutsi dominated army is described by Stephen Weissman as ‘the first clear genocide since the Holocaust' and is the subject of an article by Stanley Meisler entitled `Holocaust in Burundi'. The same associations were made in Rwanda as early as December 1991, when an article in *La Griffe* described Hassan Ngeze (editor of *Kangura)* as a dangerous racist, a ‘“nazi” born half a century too late'. Likewise, in December 1993 the editorial of *Le Flambeau* reported that ‘Rwandan fascists and their chief have decided to apply “the final solution” to their fellow citizens'. Similarly, the UNCE observed (in December 1994) that it was ‘unlikely that the world will ever know the exact number of men, women and children slaughtered in this holocaust'.

As regards the statement ‘Habyarimana was a primitive fascist', films about Hitler and Nazism were reportedly found in Habyarimana's residence in 1994. According to Christian Scherrer, *Mein Kampf* had been translated into Kinyarwanda by a German missionary at the request of Martin Bucyana (Secretary-General of the racist *Coalition pour la Défense de la République)* and presented to Habyarimana. In a document found in Butare *préfecture,* containing instructions for genocidal propaganda, the author claimed to convey lessons drawn from Joseph Goebbels. Reflecting this, in his introductory remarks at the trial of Jean-Bosco Barayagwiza (a founding member of *RTLM,* Hassan Ngeze (the editor of *Kangura)* and Ferdinand Nahimana (programme controller and broadcaster at *RTLM*) at the ICTR, Deputy Prosecutor Bernard Muna compared the work of these ‘hate media' journalists to that of Heinrich Himmler.

From a detached, analytical perspective one can draw numerous cogent parallels between the Rwandan genocide and the Holocaust. And yet, such comparison can border on satisfying what Bauer calls ‘some abstract intellectual urge' detached from how Rwandese themselves refer to the Holocaust and the function such references serve.

Comparing the Rwandan genocide and Holocaust at an analytical level confronts a number of obstacles. First, the Holocaust has been transformed into an ‘emblematic horror against which all other horrors are measured', one that has ‘created an image of victimhood so horrific that all other

suffering must be diminished in comparison or inflated to fit its standards'. For example, Peter Novick quotes A1 Gore speaking of (in 1989) ‘An Ecological *Kristallnacht'* with an ‘environmental Holocaust' to follow and refers to anti-Castro activists erecting a monument to the ‘Cuban Holocaust' in Miami. While such analogies are simply insensitive, we must recognise that ‘Individuals from every point of the political compass can find the lessons they wish in the Holocaust; it has become a moral and ideological Rorschach test'. The need for *in formed* comparison of the Rwandan genocide and the Holocaust takes place in a distorted environment in which the term ‘Holocaust' suffers from ‘semantic stretch'.

Using the Holocaust as the ‘apotheosis of genocide' encounters two further emotive and intertwined debates. First, was the Holocaust a unique event and second, does the term refer only to the genocide of the Jews? Elie Wiesel has eloquently argued that the Holocaust is a sacred and incomprehensible event, for which no representation is sufficient. If the Holocaust cannot be adequately represented then it is incomparable. At another level, the Holocaust is understood to be the only case in which a state attempted to eliminate a group for purely ideological reasons and whose distinctive bureaucratic and technological methods remain unparalleled. Whether ‘uniqueness' should preclude comparison is not clear, for, as Michael Freeman notes, ‘every event is unique; unique events may, however, be similar and comparable ... important events are unique in important respects, but may also be similar in important respects'.

As regards whether the term Holocaust refers only to the genocide of the Jews, Bauer argues that two *different* crimes were subsumed under the UNGC: genocide (partial annihilation) and holocaust (total annihilation). While Czechs, Poles, Serbs, other Slavs and Gypsies were victims of a Nazi *genocide,* the murder of Jews was ‘the only case where Holocaust would appear fully applicable' because the aim was total annihilation. Despite considering ‘the Holocaust' to be uniquely Jewish, Bauer does not believe it was a unique event, recognising that to make it unique (hence incomparable) would deny its lessons for the future.

It also appears that the term ‘holocaust' has undergone a change of meaning. Novick comments that ‘insofar as the word “holocaust” (lowercase) was employed during the [1939-1945] war ... it was almost always applied to the totality of the destruction wrought by the Axis, not to the special fate of the Jews'. While, in Israel, the Hebrew word *Shoah* (whose precise meaning remains ambiguous) has been the primary term for the genocide of the Jews (and is now commonly used in the USA) the term ‘Holocaust' (understood as religious wholesale sacrifice/destruction by fire) has overtaken the secular usage (‘holocaust') referring to ‘catastrophe' or ‘destruction by fire', which until the 1970s was used in reference to nuclear war without alluding to the Nazi genocide. In making ‘holocaust', ‘Holocaust' it has been imbued with a sacrificial, ‘biblical' connotation indicating total *annihilation,* which, for some scholars, restricts its usage to the genocide of the Jews. No comparison can, therefore, be made between the Holocaust and other genocides. The debate still rages, however, of whether ‘the Holocaust' refers only to the genocide of the Jews.

Conversely, making the Holocaust the ‘paradigmatic genocide' also has dangers, generating an axiom that only a Western, industrialised state (armed with a sophisticated, pseudo-scientific ideology) can achieve mass murder. As Fein notes, between 1960 and 1979 there were at least a dozen genocides and genocidal massacres, but that these events went ‘virtually unnoted in the western press and not remarked on in world forums'.

Most of the sentences / statements excerpted above have scholarly citations which have been removed for easy reading. Eltringham goes on from here to describe the Rwandan genocide with the Holocaust by the Jews. The description is lively, illustrative and illuminating. We all enjoyed reading the book at the journal office, and we sincerely hope our readers would enjoy the book as much. For researchers, this book is a must.

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