

Book Review

PRUNIER Gérard, 2009.

FROM GENOCIDE TO CONTINENTAL WAR: THE ‘CONGOLESE’ CONFLICT AND THE CRISIS OF CONTEMPORARY AFRICA. London, UK: C. Hurst & Co. Publishers Ltd. Hardcover £28.50, pp. 529. ISBN 9781850655237

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Civilians in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic (DR) of Congo paid a very high price during the recent conflicts of the Great Lakes region. Mass killings, rape, torture and serious human rights abuse was the order and disorder imposed by the militants and armed groups operating in that region, particularly in the provinces of North and South Kivu and Orientale.

Gérard Prunier’s book, *From Genocide to Continental War: The Congolese Conflict and the Crisis of Contemporary Africa*, offers a lurid explanation of how the Rwandan Genocide of 1994 served as the matchstick that touched-off the much broader conflict that engulfed the Congo basin. The prelude for this conflict was the death of the Congolese leader, Laurent D. Kabila, who ended the thirty-two-year despotic rule of Mobutu Sese Seko. Although Kabila was credited with overthrowing the tyrannical rule of Sese Seko, it was no secret that his military victors could hardly have materialized without the external military support that he received from neighboring Rwanda and Uganda. Both had their own ambition and interest, and when Kabila went his own way – particularly after his assassination – it was no longer possible to hide the ambition of either. When the power struggle to fill the political vacuum created by Kabila’s death started in earnest, the forces of neighboring Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, Angola, Namibia, and Zimbabwe all intervened, igniting what came to be known as “Africa’s first world war.”

Prunier is a French historian specializing in the Horn of Africa as well as Central and East Africa. He was a key figure in the French Ministry Defense’s crisis unit in Rwanda, which oversaw French intervention in Operation Turquoise – a plan to protect displaced persons, refugees as well as civilians in danger in Rwanda by establishing humanitarian safe zones in that country. Prunier has synthesized a praiseworthy, and multi-disciplinary account of the violence that has trounced this region of Africa. Based partially on his personal

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account of the events that have taken place in this corridor of the African continent, Prunier very explicitly addresses perpetrators in the state-sanctioned crimes against peoples discriminately and indiscriminately targeted and branded for death and brutal dismemberment.

Unlike those who are quick to apply simple labels to this otherwise complicated and deep-rooted conflict, Prunier asserts that the events in Rwanda had a profound domino effect in this region, stirring conflict in neighboring countries that were ultimately fuelled by years of intense but underlying enmity. In 1959, animosity began to surface once again between Hutu and Tutsi peoples in Rwanda, resulting in members of the Tutsi clan being pushed into exile mostly in neighboring Uganda. In the aftermath of Idi Amin's failure to hold power from Milton Obote during the early 1980s, Tutsi émigrés became actively involved in a local war to overthrow the unpopular régime of Obote.

During the early days of unrest, Yoweri Museveni became an ally of the Tutsi members in Uganda, receiving aid from them in his bid for power in his own country. In turn, he helped them strengthen their Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), which was harassing the despotic Hutu régime of Rwanda. By 1993, the RPF had emerged as a force that could no longer be ignored. When the régime of Habyarimana accepted the Arusha deal for a cease-fire and a transitional government that would accommodate the Tutsi and other opposition forces, the Hutu hardliners were infuriated. Following the shooting of the plane carrying Habyarimana in Kigali, these Hutu extremists and their paramilitary forces wasted no time in perpetrating the three-month genocide against the Tutsi. The RPF saw no option but to break the cease-fire and take power. France, a supporter of the régime of Habyarimana, sent a peace force into the région as a result.

As Prunier describes, "About 600 men and 40 officers of the ex-FAR (Rwandese armed forces) were united behind him (Seth Sendashonga). They were ready to follow him as they could no longer stand neither the Kagame régime in Kigali nor their competitors in ALIR (Army for the Liberation of Rwanda; French: Armée pour la Libération du Rwanda), both representing in their eyes the opposing but symmetrical forms of violent racism."² According to most estimates reported in the media, "800,000 Rwandans from the Tutsi minority were slaughtered during 100 days in 1994."³

In a move that greatly advanced the scope of the rampant violent-conflict, Tutsi Paul Kagame undertook an ambitious campaign against the two million Hutu who had taken refuge in neighboring DR Congo. The move, though sparking little concern among Western populations, laid the foundation for a prolonged and regionally destabilizing conflict that continues flaring to this day.

² Gérard Prunier, *From Genocide to Continental War: The 'Congolese' Conflict and the Crisis of Contemporary Africa*. (London, UK: C. Hurst & Co. Publishers Ltd., 2009), p. 366.

³ Stephen Kinzer, "In Rwandan Genocide, Words Were Killers, Too." *The New York Times*, 7 December 2003. Available at: www.nytimes.com/keyword/rwandan-genocide. (accessed 18 February 2011).

The nature of the incursion into Mobutu's DR Congo, Prunier reasons, drastically changed as a result of the wealth of minerals located within the country's borders. The author argues that the overall action soon became the first instance of post-colonial imperial conquest within the continent of Africa by another African country while completely utilizing African manpower. In this sense, Prunier exposes several unsettling verities regarding the nature of events as they took place over a decade ago in this part of Africa.

However, he falls short of delivering a compass detailing the critical events as they transpired. When reflecting on Tanzania's agreement to provide training camps for soldiers wishing to reinvade Rwanda, Prunier neglects to mention the true extent of their role in preparing soldiers for the invasion, and the larger impact that such relations had on the ongoing events of the conflict. His general lack of clarity on this point is echoed by the ambiguities on the establishment of the camps, when he states, "he requested me to help him enter discussions with Kampala and I arranged the necessary contacts. On Sunday, 3 May 1998, there was a meeting in Nairobi between him and Salim Saleh, President Museveni's brother. The climate between Kampala and Kigali was not at its best, and Salim was sufficiently open to the idea of supporting a new moderate force for it to have a chance of seeing the light of day."⁴

Noting that African states generally lack the means for unleashing total war, Prunier discusses the privatization of war, drawing upon instances of looting and other occasions of asocial behavior during armed-conflict. However, his work would have benefited significantly from the inclusion of a more nuanced discussion of the impact of the "privatization of war" as well as further examples elsewhere in the region regarding this trend. In doing so, Prunier might be accredited with demonstrating African states' abilities not only of unleashing war but of supporting and fuelling wars comparable to some of the most destructive seen elsewhere in the world. Moreover, his exploration of this major outgrowth of conventional military engagement does not achieve an appropriate explanation about the progression that 'normal' members of the African community undergo when graduating from soldiers to killers-for-pay. The author's observation of this phenomenon warrants further insight into the psychological impact that is made on those being paid to kill others. Thus, an opportunity is missed to explore the growing trend of turning children into soldiers of war in the developing world.

How does ideological and cultural indoctrination prefigure in the dramatic acts that these individuals ultimately take part in? Is payment the sole factors in the acculturation of genocide on the battlefields and within the communities of these lands? Prunier's work, in spite of his multi-disciplinary approach, is devoid of critical literatures and theories on these concepts. His work would greatly benefit, in a psycho-sociological manner, from the inclusion of such perspectives and considerations, particularly given that the author likens the

⁴ Prunier, 2009: 366.

slaughter of innocent bystanders in Africa to Europe's Thirty Years' War (1618-1648).

Notwithstanding his analyses and expertise on the region, and the events that forever changed the political, social, and cultural landscapes concerning it, Prunier does not put forward any practical recommendations for the safeguarding of communities from the "privatization of war" or for the processes of rebuilding the communities and families that were and continue to be torn apart as a result of the carnage sweeping the region. Furthermore, at no point in his work, does the author attempt to address the ongoing conflict that continues to assume a serious toll in human life. Prunier's mentioning of African leaders' efforts at believable hypocrisy only serves to discredit African communities' capacity to take hold of matters and act in accordance with the vision of a more peaceful and inclusive future.

Although he addresses the impact that past events have had on the security and stability of the countries discussed in his work, and even though he believes that what has occurred is part of history, seeing it as a part of a shift to a new era of Africa, strangely he suggests that little interest would be found in implementing a solution. Perhaps one of the most naïve contentions present in his book is that much of the future depends on what happens in South Africa; that as a perceived anchor state of African peace, stability, and security, South Africa is somehow responsible and capable of solving decades of social, cultural, and racial discord irrespective of its own internal challenges. These shortcomings aside, *From Genocide to Continental War* should certainly be seen as a contribution to the nascent pool of literature on violence and conflict in Africa.