

Rwanda



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When considering how a genocide which killed at a faster rate than the Holocaust could have been “ allowed” to take place in Rwanda, we have two primary considerations that will influence all subsequent analyses. The first is the speed and the tactical nature of the killing and the second is the premise implied by the language of the genocide having been “ allowed”.

One point that Samantha Power makes in her book, *A Problem from Hell*, is that genocide is often folded into, and subsumed by, the chaos of war, making it difficult for outsiders to distinguish the inevitable bloodshed and displacement that accompany any conflict from widespread killing of distinct groups. It is often difficult and time-consuming to make this distinction. The genocide in Rwanda is an exception to this rule, however; there was not a conventional, recognized battle being waged that obscured the genocide, as was the case in World War II or Bosnia.

Indeed, Rwanda was unique in that the genocide was so quickly understood to be exactly what it was. The speed of the killing, however, made it exceedingly difficult for any large-scale Western intervention that could have realistically halted or slowed the killing. This is not to say that the United States, or any other Western nation, was sufficiently motivated to intervene, but it must be recognized that even if such an impulse was widespread, the window of opportunity was very slim when one takes logistical realities into account.

In terms of the language of the genocide being “ allowed” to happen, this has less to do with ethics than with self-absorption and, ultimately, self-loathing. The United States did not “ allow” the genocide in Rwanda to take

place. It may have failed to intervene in a timely manner in the interest of halting it, but to say that the United States somehow “ allowed” this barbarism to happen is totally misleading in two fundamental senses. Firstly, the word “ allowed” implies some sort of sanctioning or approbation of the conduct; nobody asks the United States for permission to commit genocide in Rwanda.

The United States did not “ allow” Hutu to slaughter Tutsi and moderate Hutu en masse. The responsibility for the Rwandan genocide lies with exactly one group: the killers. To imply that such crimes could only take place if powerful states “ allowed” them serves only to partially absolve the murderers. It is this self-centered approach, common in the West, which holds that nothing bad can happen unless the West “ allows” it, as if the West is all-powerful and all-responsible.

This mentality is also, frankly, racist, as it implies that Africans are not responsible for their own actions and only carry out such horrible crimes if a powerful actor “ allows” them to do so. As for the question of whether the United States should have intervened to halt the genocide, we must have an honest appraisal of what this intervention would have looked like. On its face, the question has only one answer: of course the United States should have intervened.

This is not an academic question, however, but rather a practical one: if one argues that the United States should have intervened, it is incumbent on one to articulate the means and goals of such an intervention. Again, the problem of the rapid pace of the genocide is central. The genocide occurred

so rapidly that only a military intervention could have halted or slowed its progress. Samantha Power does an admirable job of noting that the question of intervening in genocide must not be reduced to the two choices of passive indifference and military invasion.

This red herring of an all-or-nothing approach is a favorite tool of those scoff at the notion of any sort of intervention in genocide. If allowed to stand, it is a very compelling argument, but it purposely ignores several options between the two extremes. There are economic and political pressures that can be brought to bear, especially by a country as powerful as the United States. There are also military options short of a full-scale military invasion that can, in certain circumstances, cripple the infrastructure of genocide.

For example, during World War II, Allied warplanes could have bombed the railroad tracks being used to transport Jews to death camps. This would have at least slowed the pace of the killing, which relied on the unmolested transport of victims to death camps. The genocide in Rwanda, however, had no such infrastructure to target from the air. As Mark Amstutz notes, heavy weaponry and industrial infrastructure were not employed in the Rwandan genocide, nor was the majority of the killing carried out by identifiable state actors (98).

In other words, when the killing is done largely by individuals with hand-held weapons over such a condensed time frame, full scale ground invasion is the only realistic option for mitigating the killing. With this realistic appraisal of possible courses of action, we can approach the question anew: should the United States have rushed an expeditionary military force into Rwanda to

halt the killing? Again, this seems in retrospect to be an enticing option, but is important to be cognizant of the nature and limits of American power in this context.

Any American military intervention would have been carried out by soldiers who knew between absolutely nothing and very, very little about Rwanda. They would have been tasked with identifying the killers and, in all honesty, killing them until they stopped killing Tutsi. To assume that the United States Army or Marines could have swooped into Rwanda, identified the belligerents, and coerced them into stopping the killing is to be very naive about the nature of American military power.

If the United States cannot adequately identify the enemy and secure the local populations in Iraq after being there for five years, how could one believe that it could have done so in Rwanda in a matter of days or weeks? A rapid American military intervention could have slowed the killing, but it would have done so only after killing large numbers of Africans, many of whom would have inevitably been innocent of wrongdoing. Put another way, the question can not be, "should the United States have intervened militarily to stop the killing"?

Nobody could argue with this proposition. Instead, the question must be phrased, "should the United States have gone into Rwanda and killed Rwandans until Rwandans stopped killing each other"? This more honest phrasing provides for no simple ethical conclusion, as we are deprived of the misleading option of simply "stopping the killing". Stopping the killing, in

this instance, means being willing to kill. The political guilt for the tragedy must be borne primarily by the killers.

Secondary guilt rightly belongs to those, unlike the United States, who were in proximity to the killings, with some knowledge of the local populations, and some coercive military potential. These groups include neighboring African nations and, in particular, the United Nations. The UNAMIR force in Rwanda understood as well as anyone that genocide was occurring. It had a force on the ground that could have rallied world opinion and resources, especially the resources of the United States, to fund and staff a larger and more aggressive mission to halt the killing.

Instead, it used its limited mandate as an excuse to turn a blind eye to the atrocities. In particular, Belgium, which bore a moral debt to Rwanda in the light of its colonialism there, withdrew its troops from the UN contingent after ten of them were killed. This American ally, with an intimate knowledge of local factions and conditions, could have made a stand and articulated the gravity of the situation to the rest of the world via the UN. Instead, it valued the lives of 10 Belgians over the lives of countless thousands of Rwandans.

In terms of holding people legally responsible for the killing, the gacaca process is as proper a vehicle as any for assigning guilt and executing punishment. One must maintain a realistic appraisal of how limited the resources of Rwanda's legal system actually are. Since outsiders, especially the UN, utterly failed the Tutsi, they have absolutely no ethical or moral ground from which to criticize how the victims choose to find some measure

of justice. While the gacaca may not adequately address Tutsi crimes, this is not a reason to dismiss the system out of hand.

If the UN is willing to help Rwanda deal with legal reconciliation, it can charge and try Tutsis with crimes, but it has no moral or ethical grounds on which to control the legal process for killers who were able to kill, in part, because the UN abdicated its responsibilities. Political forgiveness is the only acceptable conclusion to genocide because, in most cases, the parties must continue to live together after the killing has stopped. This is obviously a daunting task, which can only be facilitated by a genuine willingness of the victimized group to forgive an adversary in the light of literally unspeakable crimes.

This is a calling which many individuals, and ultimately many communities, find very difficult to genuinely answer. Hutu and Tutsi can perhaps find some cause for reconciliation in light of the fact that members of both groups were victimized. This is not meant to descend into moral relativism or situational ethics, but merely to acknowledge that no human interactions, even mass murder, are zero-sum propositions, and that guilt and victim hood undoubtedly bridged the Hutu-Tutsi divide.