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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/temoigner/8420>

DOI: 10.4000/temoigner.8420

ISSN: 2506-6390

Publisher

Éditions du Centre d'études et de documentation de l'ASBL Mémoire d'Auschwitz

Printed version

Date of publication: 2 April 2019

Number of pages: 181-184

ISBN: 978-2-930953-090

ISSN: 2031-4183

Electronic reference

Anneleen Spiessens, "Susan Thomson. *“Rwanda: from genocide to precarious peace”* ", *Témoigner. Entre histoire et mémoire* [Online], 128 | 2019, Online since 30 March 2022, connection on 22 April 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/temoigner/8420> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/temoigner.8420>

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REFERENCES

Susan Thomson. *Rwanda: from genocide to precarious peace*. New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 2018, 321 + xv p.

- 1 Susan Thomson's *Rwanda: From Genocide to Precarious Peace* offers a highly critical report on the state of post-genocide Rwanda. Thomson is associate professor of Peace and Conflict Studies at Colgate University (NY), a trained lawyer and, in 1994, present in Rwanda during the crisis. In her new book, she assesses the policy choices of Paul Kagame and his Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF): Are they sufficient to avoid future episodes of violence? The Introduction sets the tone for the rest of the volume, urging the reader to differentiate between the image of Rwanda promoted by the RPF and "how most Rwandans actually live." (p. 2) According to Thomson, Rwandan's rapid economic progress benefits only the privileged few and comes at the expense of true justice and liberal democracy. She develops this thesis over four large parts that guide the reader chronologically through the history of Rwanda before, during and mostly after "the most efficient genocide of the twentieth century." (p. 4)
- 2 In Part I, "Genocide: its causes and consequences," the author reconstructs the run-up to the 1994 events with a particular focus on power dynamics in Rwanda. The comprehensive, yet very accessible overview starts with "natural" Tutsi rule in the colonial era, then looks at Hutu emancipation, the birth of the PARMEHUTU party, and the subsequent persecution of Tutsi, in three large waves from 1959 to 1973. It discusses tensions within the Hutu majority, leading to the 1973 coup by Habyarimana, and explains the military and political ambitions of young Tutsi refugees in Uganda, like Paul Kagame, by referring to the harsh realities of exile and a desire to return to the (idealized) homeland. The overview ends with the RPF crossing the Ugandan-

Rwandan border in 1990 and sparking civil war. The ensuing polarization of political alliances would eventually lead to genocide.

- 3 Scattered over the 60-page long Part I, the reader finds surprisingly few references to ethnic animosity, or hate propaganda. It is the author's belief that "multiple and varied factors determined who lived, who died, and how and why" in 1994, and that ethnic hatred was a minor factor, at best (p. 30). The cause of the genocide was power politics, Thomson asserts, with both sides employing ethnicity "to rationalize their attempts to seek power." (p. 36) As a consequence, she only briefly discusses the Belgian colonizer's racist vision of natural Tutsi superiority, one she believes not only failed to capture the social, political and cultural inequalities, but mirrored that of the Tutsi elite at the time (so not the other way around). Also, Habyarimana's racial construct of Tutsi and the rhetoric of his key supporters is touched upon (p. 75-76), but quickly disqualified by the author, who insists on the fluidity of ethnic categories and the variety of physical characteristics due to mixed marriages (hence the need for the extremist government to compile lists of Tutsi).
- 4 However, even though the Hamitic Hypothesis, upheld by Colonel Bagosora among others, is a pure fiction, and it does not make any sense to identify all Tutsi by the shape of their body and nose, the fact remains that such racist propaganda was efficiently diffused by a national radio station, and inspired very specific mutilations during the killings (victims were "shortened"). Whether ethnic hatred of Hutu for Tutsi was real or performed, a more extensive analysis of the ways in which ethnically divisive language functioned in an – indeed – already very tense political climate could have led to a better understanding as to why Hutu hardliners in search of power were able to prompt such a large number of civilians to take part in the genocidal violence.
- 5 All the same, Susan Thomson's volume convincingly underscores the importance of (also) considering the complex history and power relations in Rwanda. In fact, the risks of a purely ethnic approach, with corresponding views of "dark" Africa, became abundantly clear when in 1994 international journalists put the mass killings aside as an outburst of "tribal" and "primitive" violence. Without insight into the specific political context, the situation appeared to foreign reporters as a labyrinthine jigsaw puzzle, or, as Philip Gourevitch wrote in 1998, "the horror became absurd." (*Nous avons le plaisir de vous informer que, demain, nous serons tués avec nos familles*, p. 258) Moreover, such an approach would, according to Susan Thomson, play into the hands of the RPF who traces the whole genocide back to ethnic categories "imported" by the Belgian colonizer.
- 6 Part II, then, examines the early post-genocide period and constitutes an answer to the (rhetorical?) question: "Transitioning to peace?" Susan Thompson presents a damning report about the RPF's response to new challenges both at home and abroad. She subsequently brings up accounts confirming RPF human rights abuses (the Gersony report and Kibeho massacre), questions the party's true commitment to a power-sharing government, and criticizes its management of the land and housing crisis following the mass returnee resettlement in the years after the genocide. The RPF's initially legitimate concern with homeland and border security finally resulted in what Thomson considers to be "RPF-style" democracy: "intrusive, controlling and violent."
- 7 Part III, "Setting up for success," assesses new policies to reduce rural poverty. For Thomson, the RPF fails on its education program, which looks promising at first glance, but did not substantially improve the situation of young Rwandans. While primary

schooling is free, public schools are overcrowded and provide low-quality education (p. 167). National land policies, aimed at boosting the Gross Domestic Product, in fact increased the vulnerability of rural families (p. 168). Finally, Rwanda's rising Gini coefficient reveals a high income inequality.

- 8 Also, in Part III, and continuing in Part IV, "The fruits of Liberation," the author evaluates the RPF's control over discursive space in Rwanda. The party soon implemented an official narrative of the 1994 events, she states, according to which the genocide was caused by imported ethnic hatred and stopped single-handedly by the RPF. In 2008 Kagame introduced the term "genocide against the Tutsi" (*jenoside yakorewe abatutsi*) to replace the everyday language of *itsebabwoko* (genocide) as a legitimate response to "a thriving culture of genocide denial" and claims of double genocide (p. 163). However, it was also a way to formalize the Tutsi as the sole victims of the 1994 violence and "Hutu as its lone perpetrators." (p. 181) Hutu are suspected of collective guilt, and clearly there is no place for them in the new Rwanda.
- 9 The RPF version of events is promoted through school teaching, reeducation camps, and legislation. Thomson particularly refers to changes in the Constitution, which since 2003 criminalizes public references to ethnicity identity. New laws against "genocide ideology" are defined so vaguely that they can easily be used to police language and "control what people are thinking." (p. 163) The reader is reminded of the case of Victoire Ingabire Umuhuza, an oppositional presidential candidate in the 2010 campaign arrested and convicted for "genocide ideology" and "divisionism," and that provoked an outcry in human rights organizations.
- 10 As Susan Thomson rightly points out, commemoration is another powerful instrument to shape the state narrative about 1994 and to consolidate the RPF's position. Her critique of Kagame capitalizing on the genocide through the "mantra" "Never again" (p. 242) is not new. In Belgium, Filip Reyntjens has repeatedly stated that the RPF exploits memory as an "ideological weapon" to claim a moral high ground and discredit any form of criticism on his policies. The "duty to remember" is indeed unrelenting in Rwanda today: anyone who has visited, or seen photos of memorial sites in Nyamata, Ntamara, or Murambi, remembers the spectacle of open graves filled with skulls and decomposing body parts. The public exhibition of corpses not only constitutes a radical reversal of the traditional relation Rwandans have with the dead, as Claudine Vidal noted in 2004, it also adds a symbolic violence to the grief of the survivors. In a way, the memory work is taken out of the hands of the Rwandans and cemented into a simplistic story that serves the ruling elite.
- 11 Thomson insists that the RPF does not tolerate any departure from the official line. Their version of the 1994 events eventually came to exclude, and supplement, a variety of personal experiences of violence before, during and after the genocide, thus compromising any genuine attempt at reconstruction and reconciliation. Like the Urugwiro Village talks, which were presented as broad-based participative consultations with citizens, but were in reality dictates from the government (p. 121), Thomson asserts that the *gacaca* did not succeed in providing true transitional justice. She refers to research by Belgian anthropologist Bert Ingelaere, demonstrating that this form of grassroots justice in fact "short-circuited individual truths in favor of a government-sanctioned 'truth.'" (p. 178) In her book, Susan Thomson regularly yields the floor to "ordinary" Rwandans, people whose stories do not reflect the RPF narrative and therefore are not able to express themselves freely.

- 12 The Epilogue suggests an answer to the main question of the book: Are the policies of the RPF sufficient to avoid future episodes of genocide? "There is little to indicate an immediate or even short-term return to mass valance," the author concludes. "Nonetheless, there are socio-political risk factors and historical patterns of violence to consider." (p. 243) On a number of occasions throughout the volume, Thomson hints at these patterns, suggesting that "in words and deeds," Kagame's authoritarian leadership bears strong resemblance to both precolonial and postcolonial political structures and tactics. In this sense, history is indeed repeating itself (p. 131). Often the author acknowledges that the RPF's original intuitions are legitimate, or at least understandable, but then illustrates how the adopted policies tend to degenerate and serve only to help the party maintaining control over the population: its "noble vision of national ethnic unity" (p. 66) ends up prompting extremist positions among Hutu political opponents, its concern with security slips into militarized democracy, and its attempt to fight genocide denial results in censorship and arbitrary detention of government critics.
- 13 Susan Thomson's evaluation of post-1994 Rwanda is part of a growing body of work that critically engages with the current regime. In an effort to demystify RPF ideology and to megaphone silenced voices, the volume focuses almost exclusively on ill-fated RPF maneuvers and on experiences of violence that do *not* fit in with the state narrative. Such an approach certainly has its drawbacks: some of the RPF's policy choices have actually proven to be successful, and the personal stories that (happen to) fit in with official discourse are no less authentic or painful and deserve more attention. All the same, *Rwanda: From Genocide to Precarious Peace* makes a compelling case for a power-political analysis of both the lead-up to the genocide and the current state of the country. It resolutely calls for resistance against the exploitation of memory and urges the international community to stop "funding violence in Rwanda." (p. 245)