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*Hotel Rwanda: A Twisted Perception* \*

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Historians, philosophers, political scientists, and social activists have long analyzed how American media represents political and social events in order to support various governmental policies and stances. Whether it be through literature, news, or the filmed adaptations of a certain event, discrepancies are bound to be discovered when pulling from multiple sources in order to create an American approved version of events. In 2004, Terry George directed and released *Hotel Rwanda*, a movie that follows the life of hotel owner Paul Rusesabagina and his efforts to save members of the Tutsi community during the Rwandan Genocide. The film was highly criticized for its inaccurate depiction of Mr. Rusesabagina, the leniency that the Hutus had on the Tutsi people, the implied lack of interest that UN soldiers had in the conflict, and the root and intensity of America's interest within Rwanda. These deliberate changes made by the film are used to shape American public opinion on the genocide in Rwanda.

To understand the inaccuracies portrayed in the film, it is important to first emphasize that the Rwandan Genocide was not an event set off solely by the assassination of President Juvenal Habyarimana (1937-1994), but instead a century long political battle between the Tutsi and Hutu tribes. The first ethnic divide between the two groups arose in 1931 when Rwandan

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law began mandating individuals carry identification cards stating their ethnicity. During this time period, favoritism was shown to those of Tutsi bloodline while the Hutu people were often discriminated against and were forced into the more laborious jobs such as farming. This discrimination lasted until 1959 when the last Tutsi king, Mutara Rudahigwa, died leading to the first massacre of the Tutsi people by the Hutus. This massacre led to a massive exodus of the Tutsis and a political flip within the country of Rwanda. As the Hutu tribe's power and influence increased throughout Rwanda, so continued the violent massacre of thousands of Tutsi people. This violence would continue until the signing of the 1993 Arusha Peace Agreement which would effectively, even if for only a short amount of time, end the three year-long Rwandan Civil War (1990-1993) and halt the tribe on tribe violence. The Arusha Peace Agreement would hold steady until April 6<sup>th</sup>, 1994 when President Habyarimana was assassinated, triggering the Rwandan Genocide.<sup>1</sup> While Habyarimana's assassination was most definitely the tipping point that led to the bloodshed, it was not the sole event that caused the genocide, much to American media's dismay.

One of the most prominent controversies that surrounds the movie *Hotel Rwanda* lies in the way that the main character, Paul Rusesabagina, is portrayed. In the film Mr. Rusesabagina is depicted as a very caring and generous man who provides the Tutsi people in his area with as much protection and support that his means will allow. In fact, Mr. Rusesabagina is so generous to these individuals that he allows these people to live in his hotel free of cost, issuing bills for their stay only so he can continue to keep up the image of a running hotel. However, individuals that lived through this disaster and stayed with Mr. Rusesabagina have a much different image of the man that the movies portray as almost angelic. For example, reports have surfaced that claim

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Hatzfeld, *Machete Season: The Killers in Rwanda Speak: A Report* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006.)

Mr. Rusesabagina would often exploit the individuals that stayed in his hotel.<sup>2</sup> He would frequently overcharge the guests staying with him. When those guests could not, or would not pay him, he would often turn them over to the Hutu forces.<sup>3</sup> Turning these individuals in was a guaranteed death sentence and is strong evidence that Mr. Rusesabagina was only in this business to exploit others for monetary gain.

Another issue that was brought up regarding the film *Hotel Rwanda* was the depiction of Tutsi exclusive violence, implying that only members of the Tutsi community were affected by the onslaught. While the majority of the victims of the Rwandan Genocide were of Tutsi descent, hundreds of Hutu individuals were killed for reasons such as their moderate outlook on Tutsi affairs, aiding Tutsi individuals in escape, having close relations with individuals other than Hutus, and just general political backlash.<sup>4</sup> In fact, when the Hutu extremist first began targeting individuals, they started with Hutu individuals that were higher up in power who they thought would oppose the extermination of the Tutsi race. However, rage linked to the current political turmoil wasn't the only reason that individuals would be targeted during this time period. Some instances have been recorded that show personal vendettas leading to an individual's demise. Members of the hunting parties that were formed to track down and kill Tutsi people would implicate neighbors, old friends, and colleagues that they had previous conflicts with. These victims would be accused of aiding Tutsis in escape, conspiring against the national party, and other fabricated charges. With little to no proof, these individuals would be murdered.

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<sup>2</sup> Georgianne Nienaber, "Hollywood Debunked: What Really Happened Inside the Hotel Rwanda," *Huffington Post*, May 24, 2014, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/georgianne-nienaber/hollywood-debunked-hotel-rwanda\\_b\\_5013072.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/georgianne-nienaber/hollywood-debunked-hotel-rwanda_b_5013072.html).

<sup>3</sup> Alex Von Tunzelmann, "Hotel Rwanda: History with a Hollywood Ending," *The Guardian*, August 7, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/aug/07/hotel-rwanda-don-cheadle-genocide-accuracy-reel-history>.

<sup>4</sup> Linda Melvern, *Conspiracy to Murder: Rwandan Genocide* (New York: Verso, 2004.)

The representation of UN soldiers in *Hotel Rwanda* has also been widely disputed for describing the soldiers as uncaring individuals who show no desire to save the thousands of Tutsi people being massacred outside of the hotel walls. Specifically, the instance where Colonel Oliver states, “We’re here as peace keepers, not peace makers,” creates an overall feeling of nonchalance by the UN forces.<sup>6</sup> Colonel Oliver is based off of Canadian UN General Romeo Dallaire, who was stationed in Rwanda at the time in order to aid in the humanitarian effort. While the movie portrays the UN General as an uncaring man with no regard towards the people of Rwanda, the General in real life was quite the opposite. Most reports involving Dallaire depict him as an exceedingly compassionate man who did everything in his power to help those affected by the genocide, even reaching out the UN on multiple occasions. Unlike the General portrayed on screen, Dallaire was bound to his orders and did everything possible to help those without deliberately disobeying the overarching end-state declared by his superiors.<sup>7</sup>

A general overview may lead one to believe that the deviations of information found within the film and other media publications are simply errors that arose from misunderstanding or ignorance. When drawing from multiple sources, different viewpoints are guaranteed to arise which may lead to a director or publisher having to choose one of these viewpoints over an alternate timeline of events. This can sometimes lead to an unrealistic and often unfavorable viewpoint being projected from individuals who are angry and frustrated at what happened to them personally. However, the fact that most publications that have covered the Rwandan genocide have taken a similar stance in which they all project a “happy ending” at the end of the film, goes a long way when showing how the film proceeds in selecting facts that benefit

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<sup>6</sup> Terry George and Keir Pearson, *Hotel Rwanda: Bringing the True Story of an African Hero to Film* (New York: Newmarket Press, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Von Tunzelmann.

themselves at the time. People are less willing to indulge in something that implies that they, or in this case their government, acted in an erroneous way that ended in the death of thousands of people, much like the United States government did during this time period. Because of this, the story of the film *Hotel Rwanda* purposefully alters these facts in order to create a positive perception about how we involve ourselves during foreign conflicts.

These efforts were widely successful within the United States as the majority of critics published positive reviews of the film on popular websites such as *The Atlantic*, *The Guardian*, *The Empire*, and *The New York Times*. Along with these positive critic reviews, the film was also placed on a fairly high pedestal within the film community. *Hotel Rwanda* was nominated for several honorable awards regarding the screenplay, writing and the overall concept of the film from renowned awards programs such as the Academy Awards, Golden Globe, British Academy of Film and Television Arts, and the Political Film Society. The combination of extreme acclamation and little to no criticism from opposing parties allowed the popularity of the documentary to be boosted while still presenting some of the horrors to the public. This allows for an altered truth to become the accepted version of events within a country, thus saving the current administration and their reputations from potential backlash from the population.

While American media is not known for its stand-up efforts when trying to preserve the truth in its publications, it is unsettling to think that multiple sources purposefully selected the facts that they wanted to present in order to create a certain image regarding foreign and domestic events like the Rwandan Genocide. The 2004 film *Hotel Rwanda* discussed above serves as an incredible instance in this. A highly criticized film, it allows outside eyes to see the discrepancies between the actual events of the genocide compared to the media selected events and how each version affects human attitude.

### About the author

Ashley Burton is a native of Winder, Georgia who is currently studying at Young Harris College as a history major. Her interests in history include colonialism in America, environmental history, and U.S. studies. After graduation Ashley plans to pursue her Master's degree in historical studies.