

Book Review: Scott Straus, *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power and War in Rwanda* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 288 pages.

RECONSTRUCTING THE RWANDAN GENOCIDE In Search of Local Dynamics

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Within the space of just one hundred days during the months of April to July 1994, an estimated 500,000 to one million Rwandans were killed—what is widely regarded as the most intensive case of genocidal extermination of the twentieth century (rivaled perhaps by only the violence following the Partition of India). The event is the subject of many publications, including notable books by practitioners,¹ activists,² scholars,³ journalists,⁴ and even individuals implicated in the conflict,⁵ as well as formal inquiries by both the United Nations (UN) and the Organization of African Unity.⁶ A common desire among

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¹ Something of a *mea culpa* is provided by Roméo Dallaire with Brent Beardsley, *Shake Hands with the Devil: The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2003). See also, Shaharyar Khan, *The Shallow Graves of Rwanda* (London: IB Tauris, 2001), and Michael Barnett, *Eyewitness to a Genocide: The United Nations and Rwanda* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).

² Among the most widely read books on Rwanda (which Straus uses as a data source) is Allison Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999).

³ See in particular, Jean-Pierre Chrétien, *Rwanda: Les Médias du Génocide* (Paris: Karthala, 1995); Gérard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); Filip Reyntjens, *Rwanda: Trois Jours Qui Ont Fait Basculer L'Histoire* (Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 1995); Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); and Aimable Twagilimana, *The Debris of Ham: Ethnicity, Regionalism and the 1994 Rwandan Genocide* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003).

⁴ A particularly gripping account is presented in Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families* (New York: Picador, 1998). The current Rwandan government was angered by the claims made in Charles Onana with Déo Mushayidi, *Les Secrets du Génocide Rwandais: Enquête Sur Les Mystères d'un Président* (Paris: Dubois, 2002). See also, Linda Melvern, *A People Betrayed: The Role of the West in Rwanda's Genocide* (London: Zed Books, 2000), and Linda Melvern, *Conspiracy to Murder: The Rwandan Genocide* (London: Verso, 2004).

⁵ Abdul Ruzibiza, *Rwanda: L'Histoire Secrète* (Paris: Editions du Panama, 2004).

⁶ United Nations, *Report of the Independent Inquiry into the Actions of the United Nations during the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda* (New York: United Nations, 1999), and Organization of African

these studies is to afford greater insight into the nature and origins of these atrocities.

This well-received contribution by Straus, now an Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, shares those same aspirations, yet his research has various novel features that distinguish it from the crowded field of existing literature. In particular, he aims to address a serious gap by assembling a detailed picture of the local dynamics of the genocide, which to a significant extent have been overlooked, taken for granted, or at least treated in a superficial manner, without adequate investigation, proof, and nuance. His working assumption is that the violence may exhibit certain salient patterns across individuals and communities, but that it was not necessarily monolithic in character. Straus also seeks to confront traditional assumptions and to sort out the many competing explanations for the outbreak of conflict and the phenomenon of varying participation in genocidal violence.

A key to the study is the collection, aggregation, and analysis of substantial primary data, triangulating quantitative and qualitative information drawn from multiple sources and levels. The most unique aspect of the research is a semi-structured survey that Straus conducted in 2002 with 210 detainees in the fifteen central prisons across the country—a random sample of the roughly six thousand individuals who were arrested for participating in the genocide, subsequently confessed and pled guilty to crimes, and had been sentenced by that point. As a follow up, he interviewed another nineteen individuals whom he identified as either leaders or especially aggressive perpetrators of the violence. In addition, Straus derived estimates of when the genocidal activity commenced in 116 of Rwanda's 145 communes. He omits those for which details were unavailable, or that were controlled by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF)—a rebel group whose invasion from Uganda in 1990 precipitated a three-year civil war, but is credited with bringing an end to the genocide by launching an offensive and taking control of the country. Straus also assembled a micro-comparative analysis of five communes that exhibit contrasting forms of mobilization. Furthermore, he examines the historical context, which is punctuated by episodes of violence dating back to the lead up to independence from Belgium in 1960, as well as the distinctive structure of political authority in Rwanda. Among the impressive aspects of the book is how Straus integrates these many disparate elements into a unified narrative.

Relying on a rich repertoire of evidence, Straus reaches several conclusions. First, the April 6, 1994 assassination of the presidents of both Rwanda and Burundi—whose plane was shot down by unconfirmed assailants while they were returning from discussions about the implementation of the

Unity, *Rwanda: The Preventable Genocide. The Report of the International Panel of Eminent Personalities to Investigate the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda and the Surrounding Events* (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: Organization of African Unity, 2000).

Arusha Accords, which brought a formal end to the civil war—was a critical catalyst for the genocide. This provocative act created a sense of insecurity, especially among hardliners but also across members of the Hutu ethnic group (about 90 percent of the population), that was heightened by the renewal of political conflict when the RPF launched an offensive. Second, coercive threats against those who failed to take part in the violence, which were backed up by the killing of thousands of perceived resisters and moderates, greatly expanded the ranks of perpetrators. Third, ethnic/racial idioms were invoked—with hate radio a vital medium—to depict the entire Tutsi minority as enemies and accomplices to the RFP. The message resonated under the conditions of crisis, despite Hutus and Tutsis having coexisted as neighbors and as family members, with extensive interaction, in a highly integrated society. Fourth, Rwanda's centralized state and extensive administrative apparatus supplied an effective infrastructure to engage in extermination (building on long-standing informal compulsory-labor schemes), ensured that its scope was broad (aided by Rwanda's hilly topography and population density), and contributed to a widespread perception that the killings were officially sanctioned.

These findings challenge the conventional wisdom concerning the causes of genocides, which has tended to emphasize the importance of deep-rooted antagonisms along lines of social division that eventually manifest in ideologies of aggression, stoked by elites and indoctrinated into a large segment of the population that is disposed to engage in mass slaughter. It is not that Straus finds all of those elements missing in Rwanda. He views the violence, however, as a contingent outcome that transpired due to a particular cascade of circumstances, instead of the inevitable by-product of preexisting conditions that are combined with sinister, meticulous planning.

The basic argument that the dynamics are not simply preordained or entirely premeditated is compelling, but his understanding of the violence as initially a reaction to an emergent threat and eventually a desperate rear-guard recourse is problematic. Although characterizing the genocide as essentially a defensive response may not absolve the perpetrators of responsibility, the effect is to remove a meaningful degree of willful agency from the equation. Yet, the remarkably rapid and systematic nature of the killings—which wiped out at least 50-70 percent of the Tutsi population, with most of the violence concentrated in the first twenty days of the genocide—implies that somebody had designs upon achieving this sort of result. As Straus's evidence indicates, a majority acted under direct duress from the principals of the genocide, rather than because of a spontaneous impulse (unlike certain past outbreaks that he describes, despite analogous conditions of transition and/or uncertainty), blind obedience, or an abstract fear that evolved amid the violence (which influenced some participants, but a relatively small minority). Thus, the leaders and enforcers, most of whom presumably embraced extremist views long in advance, provide necessary impetus and remain as influential facilitators. Straus does not ignore this aspect. Nevertheless, his account of these individuals' role

in the violence again gives precedence to self-protection amid conditions of vulnerability.

Straus is partly led in this direction by the data at his disposal, which display some major limitations. He concedes his survey sample is unrepresentative of the perpetrator population. Significant segments are omitted, including those who fled the country, were killed in retaliation, or faced prosecution by the UN International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. Moreover, the sample is almost devoid of military and police personnel. In addition, none of the respondents is identified as belonging to an armed militia such as the Hutu extremist *interahamwe* (which may be attributable to the lack of an explicit question on that front). These groups include many of the genocide's organizers and hardcore participants. Straus also observes that such individuals are generally less likely to confess—and be eligible for his survey—because of their actions and the resulting prospect of severe punishment (even with the inducement of a reduced sentence). For the same reason, the details of their admissions may not be fully credible: in particular, they have an incentive to understate their roles. Straus maintains that the survey respondents' answers to open-ended questions about the attacks in which they took part still offer a good gauge of the relative extent of their involvement. Yet, this notion effectively assumes that the underreporting is uniform, whereas intentional inaccuracies need not be universal and can easily vary in degree. The effects of the latter tendencies are probably magnified by imprecision and inconsistency in the respondents' reporting of these incidents, as well as in the transcription and subsequent coding of their answers—typical difficulties with questions that yield descriptive responses.

Straus does not explicitly confront the implications of all these issues. Within his sample, just 1.3 percent of respondents identified themselves as leaders. A further 27.2 percent disclosed that they had killed, but only 6.8 percent more than one person (concentrated in the range of two to four persons). The remaining 71.5 percent indicated that they did not kill anyone, including about 15 percent who claimed no active participation in the genocide. A rough extrapolation based on this distribution comes nowhere close to approaching the standard estimates of the total number of deaths, even when employing the upper bound of the perpetrator population that Straus calculates (210,000). To make the math work, one or more factors must be altered. Of course, underreporting of killings is to be expected. For this situation alone to explain the discrepancy, however, it must be widespread, with reductions averaging upward of 80-90 percent. Along similar lines, some may falsely claim to have been merely bystanders when killings took place. It is also conceivable that the most aggressive killers each murdered dozens, if not hundreds, of people. Straus does not provide any evidence of such activity, but maybe it is not captured for the reasons described earlier. The likely scenario is a combination of these possibilities. In that case, his outcome of interest—the level of participation—is measured with significant error and the actual perpetrator population has a

markedly different composition (i.e., a greater share of killers, plus a different distribution and wider range of killing activity), which precludes arriving at valid, general conclusions from the survey about the reasons for involvement in the genocide.

Even absent the concerns about representativeness and measurement, the small sample presents a clear hindrance to making reliable inferences, due to an inherent lack of appropriate statistical power. In particular, the numbers of respondents who said that they directed the violence (at most a few), were especially aggressive (approximately fifteen), or admitted to killing someone (approximately sixty) are quite modest to be the foundation of a study that is fundamentally about a massive genocide involving tens of thousands of perpetrators. Possibly for that reason, Straus bolsters the survey data with information from the in-depth interviews. In the process, however, he often intermingles the two sources and does not delineate the basis of his conclusions. Also, the interviewees are small in number and intentionally selected to capture only certain exceptional types of involvement in the violence. Moreover, the survey and the interviews miss an opportunity for a constructive comparison against a control group of those who were not implicated in the genocide at all. Straus says such research was infeasible; perhaps the portion of his sample that claimed no active participation could have been used as a proxy.

The analysis itself has evident flaws. Missing responses—ranging from a handful to as many as thirty-five, according to the univariate tabulations—to numerous survey questions exacerbate the small sample size, though the exact extent of the impact upon the nearly forty bivariate and multivariate estimations is unclear, since Straus curiously neglects to report the number of observations associated with each. His stepwise method of constructing a comprehensive multivariate model, in addition to being highly dependent upon the sequence of specifications that he evaluates, does not conform consistently to his stated criterion of retaining only the variables that were statistically significant at each prior stage. The final model is noteworthy also for the factors (e.g., fear of the RPF) that are revealed to have no material association with differences in the level of participation, conflicting with statements elsewhere in the book, which are often based upon univariate, bivariate, or intermediate multivariate results. The lone variable to achieve statistical significance is one Straus developed to capture respondents' motivation(s) for joining attacks, using a debatable approach whereby he aggregated and reorganized, along a scale, the answers to several open-ended questions. A respondent's placement on the scale is therefore sensitive to whether he happened to summon up one or more specific motivations. Omissions can merely be inadvertent oversights, which the administration of a comprehensive set of close-ended questions might have avoided. In addition, the estimation hinges upon the order of (and intervals between) the nine categories that comprise the scale, which requires some amount of guesswork and appears arbitrary in places. The complicated scale also makes interpreting this result far from straightforward. A distinct

variable corresponding to each motivation—another place that the close-ended questions can come in handy—would have been preferable (albeit this requires sufficient degrees of freedom that are in short supply with the small sample).

Meanwhile, the estimates of the start dates of genocidal activity are confusing in places. Straus employs information from at least eight different sources, including his own survey and interviews, which provide conflicting details with some regularity. He never explains how these discrepancies are resolved. For the most part, he seems to use the earliest documented date, but is not consistent in this regard. Certain of the estimates appear to be determined based upon the balance of the evidence, while others evidently rely upon select sources—even within a related set of respondents/interviewees—and ignore the rest. In one instance, it looks as though Straus splits the difference between two sources, providing an estimate that does not correspond to either. Ultimately, major questions exist for roughly fifteen to twenty of the communes. Adjustments to these estimates would affect his national map of the timeline of the genocide and could even alter his analysis of variation in the onset of violence across Rwanda's eleven prefectures. The latter again suffers from the constraints of small sample size, which rules out any multivariate analysis. In addition, it depends upon the rather fine distinctions that Straus draws among the prefectures (and their constituent communes), most of which differ in onset by just a matter of days.

The study would also have benefited from a comparable summary of the progress of the RPF's invasion, which is crucial to the analysis and the overall argument. The RPF controlled nine northern communes prior to the genocide and is accused of carrying out the presidential assassinations. (The rationality of such a tactic is disputed, given it could be expected to inflame Hutu extremists who were widely known to be organizing, which has prompted speculation that the extremists were responsible for the assassinations, aiming to create a pretext for further violence.) Straus demonstrates that these circumstances prompted considerable anxiety and anger. Yet, the survey respondents more often attribute their participation in the violence to other motivations, especially coercion, even though they describe the political context and associated emotions as the principal reasons for the genocide. While the perception of the threat posed by the RPF—real or rumored—may have been a stimulus, at least to the hardliners, systematic analysis of its movements (a focus of ongoing research by Christian Davenport of the University of Notre Dame and Allan Stam of the University of Michigan⁷) is necessary to establish a direct, dynamic link to genocide onset at a local level and to assess in each case whether the violence was an offensive

⁷ Some of the preliminary findings of Christian Davenport and Allan Stam's extensive decade-long study are presented in "Rwandan Political Violence in Space and Time," unpublished manuscript, 2008, http://web.mac.com/christiandavenport/iWeb/Christian%20Davenport/Publications_files/rwanda031708c.pdf (accessed July 24, 2008).

action, a preemptive maneuver, or a last-ditch response.

These observations are hardly intended to dismiss the value of the book. Instead, they highlight the sheer difficulty of reconstructing a complex event in a context where the available information is seriously incomplete and the collection of primary data is restricted for various reasons, not least, the sensitivity and politicization of the subject matter. A definitive account of what actually took place in Rwanda during 1994 may be unrealistic, if not impossible, but Straus deserves praise for the originality of his research and his ambitious and conscientious efforts to piece together an elaborate puzzle in a manner that is both empirically informed and theoretically relevant. Although the data collection, analysis, and presentation exhibit important shortcomings, as a result of which the evidence in support of his findings is less conclusive than he claims, the study warrants close attention in as much as it delves into and helps to reveal many interesting intricacies. With its wide-ranging perspective, *The Order of Genocide* is recommended reading for those interested in subjects such as political violence, ethnic politics, and social mobilization.

