

Gérard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995). pp. 389.<sup>1</sup>

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In Gérard Prunier's 1995 monograph, *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide*, he seeks the genocide's causes in order to create the "most fitting memorial" for its victims. The result is a valuable contribution to both history and genocide studies fields.<sup>2</sup> Between April and June 1994, Rwandan Hutus murdered an estimated 800,000 Tutsis, but Prunier makes a well-reasoned argument that these horrors originated in Rwanda's earlier colonial history.<sup>3</sup> He ultimately claims that the myths crafted during Rwanda's colonial past created a "time bomb" of violence paired with economic hardship and politico-cultural conflict.<sup>4</sup> In 1994, the "totalitarian and strong" government finally lit the fuse of one hundred years of damaging colonial ideology, which exploded into genocide.<sup>5</sup>

Prunier's first chapter explores the "cultural mythology" created by Rwanda's German and Belgian colonizers that would eventually spur the genocide.<sup>6</sup> In his introduction of the Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa people, Prunier effectively dispels a racist and revisionist telling of history by emphasizing that while these distinct groups predated colonialism, it was not until the introduction of Europeans' flawed racial ideology that they were considered biologically distinct.<sup>7</sup> To the same effect, he dismisses the notion of a deep-seated Hutu/Tutsi conflict by portraying their pre-colonial relations as "*centre versus periphery*," not "*Tutsi versus Hutu*."<sup>8</sup> Prunier masterfully shows how European colonialism changed almost all aspects of Rwandan social structure, portraying the Tutsi "race" as socially and physically superior and changing the *ubuhake* client contract system into one of forced labor.<sup>9</sup>

In the subsequent chapters, Prunier traces colonial myths in the Hutu-led republic of 1959-1990 culminating in the Civil War of 1990-1991 and the unsteady negotiations and democratization preceding the 1994 genocide. He provides data, notably citing both Western and African scholars, to argue that European racial discourse created feelings of superiority and resentment among the Tutsi and Hutu people, respectively. This led to the "institutional discrimination" of Tutsis under Hutu rule and the exile of around 700,000 Tutsi refugees.<sup>10</sup>

Prunier does not cover the genocide months, April-June 1994, until the seventh chapter. This is an effective organizational choice, which emphasizes the earlier periods to impart on readers their crucial significance on Rwanda's 1994 ideological, political, and economic state. Prunier purposefully and respectfully depicts the genocide's horrors alongside acts of heroism, effectively portraying the nuanced human reality of genocide.<sup>11</sup>

In the final two chapters, Prunier discusses of the end of the genocide, events he was personally involved in as advisor to French defense minister François Léotard. To facilitate openness about his role, Prunier switches into a first person narrative in this section.<sup>12</sup> Prunier is harshly critical of the French throughout the book, but especially in these chapters. Once again, he successfully rejects a racist, revisionist narrative by denying the occurrence of a "second genocide" perpetrated by the Tutsis.<sup>13</sup> Looking forward, he cites the need for "cash and justice" to prevent further violence.<sup>14</sup>

Prunier's history is not without flaws. His comparisons to the Holocaust and Zionism are not developed fully enough to enhance his argument, and his personal involvement allows for a biased perspective and perhaps too forgiving a representation of the RPF. However, his transparency about his stake in the events, including an afterword addressing early critiques, prevents excessive bias, and his unique role instead delivers a valuable inside look at French involvement. Ultimately, Prunier's history is a comprehensive analysis of Rwanda that not only honors the genocide's victims, but also identifies the dangers of deep-seated colonial ideology, a perspective that has the potential to aid scholars in identifying and preventing future genocides.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Gérard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 389.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 346, 350.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 354.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., 5.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid., 21. *Italics original.*
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., 5, 21.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., 51, 62, 76.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid., 255.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., 282.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., 306.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., 362.