

Histories of Violence: The Violence of Denial — Rwanda and the Lived Memory of Genocide

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Brad Evans interviews Linda Melvern

THIS IS THE 39th in a series of dialogues with artists, writers, and critical thinkers on the question of violence. This conversation is with Linda Melvern, a British investigative journalist. For 25 years, she has researched and written extensively about the circumstances of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. She served as a consultant to the Military One prosecution team at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, and part of her archive of documents was used to show the planning, financing, and progress of the crime. Her most recent book on the subject is *Intent to Deceive: Denying the Genocide of the Tutsi* (Verso, 2019).

Brad Evans: Ever since the genocide of the Tutsi in Rwanda in 1994, you have been active in terms of both the prosecution and meticulous documentation and writings on the atrocity. Your latest volume, *Intent to Deceive*, offers another very sensitive and crucial reading of these harrowing events. Rather than simply looking upon the genocide as a particular episode in the history of violence, you insist that

any claims for lasting justice demands our continued vigilance. What is it about this atrocity and its memory that should still command our attention today?

Linda Melvern: The crime of genocide — the intent to destroy a human group — proceeds in stages. The crime does not begin with extermination but with the classification of the population, with the polarization of society. The destruction of a human group, in whole or in part, requires effective propaganda to spread a racist ideology that defines the victim as being outside human existence. With the crime of genocide, the ideology serves to legitimize any act, no matter how horrendous. Genocide requires the production of hate speech. The crime requires organization and preparation. As it proceeds in stages, genocide can be predicted — and with an international early warning system is considered preventable.

The warnings of the risks to the minority Tutsi came at every stage of the process in Rwanda, and all warnings remained unheeded. No tragedy was heralded to less effect. In the years beforehand, no one gave the conspirators reason to pause as they rehearsed their killing methods and spread the

hateful propaganda. All the while they remained safe in the knowledge there would be little outside intervention. In the space of three terrible months, April through July, more than one million people were murdered.

You have referred to the genocide in Rwanda as a sadomasochistic inferno. While the ability to dehumanize populations in preparation for their slaughter appears all too common when confronting such extreme violence, what do you think was particularly unique about this event? And how might it better inform our understanding of violence as a process?

A youth militia was central to the plans of the Rwanda “génocidaires,” as the perpetrators are called. They indoctrinated the country’s uneducated and unemployed youth with a noxious racist ideology known as Hutu Power. These recruits received rudimentary training on the use of weapons and thousands were taken to military camps where they were trained to kill people at speed with machetes and other agricultural tools. With sophisticated recruitment techniques, the plan was to have Interahamwe in every Rwandan community. It was tightly controlled and organized with militia committees in every one of the country’s 146 communes.

Understanding hate groups seems essential and the irrational hatred they promote. “All power is Hutu Power,” the gangs of youths had chanted in the weeks beforehand while they terrorized the streets on motorbikes and in military jeeps, drinking beer, hurling vulgarities at Tutsi, waving machetes. “Power, power,” they shouted. “Oh, let us exterminate them.” When

the time came, they did. The work of the Interahamwe became fully apparent when on April 7 the extermination of the minority Tutsi was getting under way.

We need to know more about the Interahamwe, of the transition made from raw recruit to sadomasochistic killer. Most victims bled to death. Later research showed most victims were killed by machetes (37.9 percent), followed by clubs (16.8 percent) and firearms (14.8 percent). Some 0.5 percent of the victims were women raped or cut open, others were forced to commit suicide, beaten to death, thrown into rivers or lakes or burned alive, infants and babies thrown against walls or crushed to death. There were an estimated 250,000 instances of rape. Hutu Power propagandists had targeted Tutsi women; the targeting was woven into the planning of the genocide.

At the end of the genocide of the Tutsi, the militia was 30,000 strong. The Interahamwe broke the world’s most atrocious records for the speed of the killing of human beings, estimated at five times that of the Nazis. A senior US official who visited Rwanda some weeks afterward described the country as “depopulated by machete”; the militia was a “neutron bomb” for its ability to kill quickly and effectively.

What I found particularly compelling about your latest book were the similarities it suggested with the organized violence of the Holocaust. Instead of following a neat and reductive separation between European and African forms of genocide, you also show how the bureaucratization of the violence and the ability to deny the scale of the atrocity

through the logics of disappearance and removal of traces of the crimes appear all too familiar. I'd like to ask you to explain more about this violence of disappearance. How has it been integral to the denial of the genocide (something that's also tragically familiar with the legacy of the Holocaust)?

The denial of genocide is the last stage of the process. It is when the perpetrators cover up and destroy the evidence, try to block investigation, and proclaim their innocence. In the circumstances of Rwanda, the génocidaires argued the killing was justified as self-defense and they tried to minimize the number killed. They claimed the massacres were spontaneous, the actions of a fearful population. There had been an "inter-ethnic war" caused by centuries-old hostilities and the situation difficult for outsiders to properly understand.

Like those who tried to prove the gassings exaggerated in the Nazi concentration camps, the supporters of Hutu Power are determined to minimize, obscure, and diminish what happened. In the trials of the génocidaires at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), there was no shortage of scholars, regional experts, journalists, and military officers who appeared to testify in court or write reports in their defense.

The pernicious influence of Hutu Power lives on in rumor, stereotype, lies, and propaganda. The movement's campaign of genocide denial has confused many, recruited some, and shielded others. With the use of seemingly sound research methods, the génocidaires pose a threat, especially to those who might not be aware of the

historical facts.

The denial of genocide ensures the crime continues. It is intended to destroy truth and memory, and it does the utmost harm to survivors. The denial of the genocide of the Tutsi poses a direct threat to their rights and welfare and contributes to their suffering. The promotion of denial demonstrates a callous indifference.

The genocide is not an event to be commemorated every year for the survivors, but something they live with every day. It devalues the gravity of their experiences and their memories. For them, genocide is a crime with no end.

Mindful of what you explained in terms of the politicization of memory, to what extent does the history of European colonization work itself into narratives of denial? Much has been written about the contested colonial legacy to the slaughter, but how has it been mobilized in the context of critiquing external agents and actors who have pressed for justice and reconciliation?

The European colonization of this region of Africa brought theories of race and the same ideas and stereotypes that the deniers use today widely promoted by the administrators. The genesis of the 1994 genocide of the Tutsi came some 30 years earlier, in 1959 when a so-called social revolution was engineered by the Belgian military administration and the 46-year-old Tutsi king died in suspicious circumstances. The country was put under military control, and the Tutsi monarchy ousted in violence and terror with the Hutu peasantry incited to rise up and kill Tutsi neighbors. There was genocide conducted against Tutsi

in the '60s and '70s.

The role of the Belgian military in events in Rwanda is crucial. In *A People Betrayed*, I recount the decisive role of the Belgian Special Military Resident Guy Logiest, who ensured the Tutsi monarchy was abolished. I found some of his papers when consulting archives in Kigali. Here I found how the Belgians had institutionalized and bureaucratized the racism. A quota system had determined only a small percentage of Tutsi would be allowed further education, opportunities abroad, or employment in the administration. From 1959, the Tutsi were excluded from public life. In the vast amount of paperwork in Kigali, it was clear how the control was exercised by agents of the insidious security services tasked with ensuring that people had the right race marked on each mandatory identity card and Tutsi did not exceed the quota. Political parties were created as either Hutu or Tutsi; Rwanda was considered to be a democracy with majority rule by Hutu.

When carrying out your detailed research and work, you acknowledge a very privileged access to many archived documents. While I have no doubt this evidence has weighed heavy on you and raised serious questions about personal responsibility and ethics, I would like to ask how it has also changed your understanding of what actually constitutes a crime against humanity.

A crime against humanity is a crime directed at a civilian population, with attacks that are widespread and systematic. With the crime of genocide, the perpetrators have a central and distinct purpose — the elimination of a people entirely. The victim is cho-

sen purely, simply, and exclusively because of membership of a target group. In his landmark book, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, published in 1944, the father of the Genocide Convention, Raphael Lemkin, explained that genocide is not a sudden and an abominable aberration. It is a deliberate attempt to reconstruct the world. The instigators and initiators of genocide are cool-minded theorists first, and barbarians only second.

During these three terrible months in Rwanda in 1994, nowhere was safe for Tutsi. The wounded who sought medical help found killers waiting for them in clinics and hospitals. There were doctors and nurses who were accomplices to the killing or participated directly. Tutsi patients were taken from the wards and hacked or shot to death.

Thousands of victims believed the guarantees given to them by government officials who had urged them to congregate together to ensure their safety. At one soccer stadium offered as a refuge the massacre on April 18 saw grenades thrown into the crowds and machine gun fire coming from the surrounding hills, that had lasted until there was no more ammunition when the militia then came onto the football pitch with their machetes and nail-studded clubs to make sure there were no survivors. They returned the next morning looking for the wounded to kill and bodies to loot. Some 2,500 families were entirely wiped out on the Gatwaro playing field among the 30,000 people murdered.

Every Rwandan had carried a compulsory identity card that bore ethnic identity. A series of roadblocks, part of the genocide planning, was established as the killing began in April. Each

identity card was checked, and anyone who was designated Tutsi was killed. But the checking of cards became tiresome and after a while anyone who looked like a Tutsi was killed. Some roadblocks were well organized with corpses piled neatly alongside. Others had piles of bodies cut in pieces. Tipper trucks sometimes came by with prisoners detailed to collect bodies from the streets. Roadblocks became chaotic with drunkenness, drug abuse, and sadistic cruelty. Some people paid for death by the bullet. On one stretch of road in Kigali, there was a barricade across the road every 100 meters.

In their trials, their defense lawyers argued the 1948 Genocide Convention was inapplicable in the case of their clients because there had been no intent to destroy a human group. With no planning or preparation, they argued, the intent to destroy a human group was lacking, and so with no intent, the 1948 Genocide Convention did not apply.

I'd like to press you more here on your claim that "initiators of genocide are cool-minded theorists first, and barbarians only second." It's often comforting for us to think of perpetrators of extreme violence as being monstrous, irrational, and behaving in an unreasoned way. And yet we know from history that often the greatest violence is cold, reasoned, and calculated. Thinking of this in terms of the "warning signs" about the genocidal, at what point do you think that derogatory racialized language becomes dangerous?

For the génocidaires of Rwanda, it had apparently seemed quite logical to get rid of the Tutsi. How else

were they to retain their power and privilege? The Hutu Power extremists from the north, who for 20 years had run the country as a personal fiefdom, did not want their way of life to end and were horrified by an internationally sponsored peace agreement, the Arusha Accords agreed in 1993. As far as they understood the situation, they had been backed into a corner. The accords provided for power-sharing with the largely Tutsi Rwandan Patriotic Front, a highly disciplined army that in 1990 had invaded from Uganda determined to oust the racist regime.

For the extremists of Hutu Power, the peace agreement that had ended the civil war with the Rwandan Patriotic Front was a humiliation. The peace agreement provided for the demobilization of both the Rwandan army and the Rwandan Patriotic Front and a shared officer corps. It provided for the repatriation of an estimated one million refugees, the families of those Tutsi forced from the country in past pogroms and living in neighboring countries. The agreement provided for elections to create a power-sharing government. The once all-powerful presidency held in the name of the Hutu majority was to become largely ceremonial. The French military forces would leave, and there would be disarmament. With the implementation of the agreement, the extremists feared they would be held accountable for their long years of human rights abuses.

The president had sold out the farm to Tutsi, the traditional enemy, they believed. The warnings came right at the outset with language of division and difference.

One of the most challenging issues we face today in our soci-

eties is how do we educate about such atrocities so future generations can understand the horrors of the past in more considered ways. I'd like to end by thinking about how we might teach about this violence to younger audiences. If you were to speak to youths today about the violence, what would you tell them and what positive message would you hope they were left with?

The Convention on the Punishment and Prevention of the Crime of Genocide of 1948 was the world's first human rights treaty, and it stood for a fundamental and important principle: that whenever genocide threatened any group or nation or people, it was a matter of concern not just for that group, but for the whole of humanity. The Convention preceded the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by 24 hours and it was the first truly universal, comprehensive, and codified protection of human rights. While the Universal Declaration was an affirmation, the Genocide Convention was a treaty. The prevention and punishment of genocide is not a choice — it is an obligation, incumbent upon all government signatories to respect. The Genocide Convention was intended to prevent and in the worst case to judge transgressors of the crime.

Following World War II, the international community accepted the responsibility of constructing an international order aimed at avoiding the recurrence of state-sanctioned racist policies that are directed against specific groups. On December 11, 1946,

at its first session, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution formally recognizing genocide as a crime under international law. Resolution 96(I) affirmed that:

Genocide is a crime under international law which the civilized world condemns, and for the commission of which principals and accomplices — whether private individuals, public officials or statesmen, and whether the crime is committed on religious, racial, political or any other grounds — are punishable.

The Genocide Convention enshrines the never-again promise, the world's response to the Nazi Holocaust in Europe and the revulsion at the systematic policy to exterminate the Jews.

The Security Council of the UN is central to the application of the Genocide Convention: Article VIII states that any contracting party may call upon the competent organs of the UN to take such actions under the Charter as they consider appropriate for the prevention and suppression of acts of genocide. The United Kingdom has a permanent seat on the Council, which carries special responsibility. It is up to us to ensure that our own government abides by the Genocide Convention. It is up to us to hold accountable those politicians who fail to uphold its treaty provisions.

Brad Evans is a political philosopher, critical theorist, and writer, who specializes on the problem of violence. He is the founder/director of the Histories of Violence project, which has a global user base covering 143 countries.