

SCOTT STRAUS. *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power, and War in Rwanda*. Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2006. Pp. xiv, 273. \$27.95 (US).

IN THE THIRTEEN years since the end of the genocide within Rwanda, there have been a plethora of books on the subject attempting to explain why it occurred and why so little was done to stop it, as intervention was easy and information on the possibility of large-scale massacres was abundant. Scott Straus focuses on the internal dynamics. He is part of a growing consensus that dismisses explanations that refer to economic deprivation, psychopathic disorders, age-old ethnic hatreds (Hutu and Tutsi are neither ethnic nor tribal categories), deep-seated prejudices, greed, blind obedience, deeply held ideological beliefs, or the role of the media in

fomenting hatred. Further, he joins the emerging consensus that points to several key factors: the construction of the Other as a threat, one that must be exterminated; the importance of the state in providing power and legitimation; and the use of war to foster the genocide.¹

Within that camp, Straus differs by diminishing the importance of any pre-existing construction of an alien and enemy Other threatening the hegemony of the Hutus from within, or in portraying the Other as sub-human. Rather, it is the unification of all Tutsi as a singular Other, including the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and the civilians, that dooms the victims (p. 225). Straus also traces the negative construction to wartime uncertainty and fear of the enemy; to the ruling extremist elites who first defeat the moderates, aided by the indifference of the international community (p. 89); and to social pressure and opportunism. Straus argues against the thesis that genocide was intended and planned before 6 April 1994, but provides little in the way of alternative evidence and presents the argument that the famous Dallaire cable does not provide *conclusive* evidence for pre-planning. But that was not the only evidence that pushed Romeo Dallaire and both the independent and the UN human rights investigations to that conclusion in 1993. What of the French contractor who received a contract to dig a tremendous hole in Butare three weeks before the mass genocide started on 6 April, and which was used as a mass grave for 18,653 bodies and did not conceivably have any other purpose?

For Straus, a second critical condition is that the killers had greater access to the state relative to the civilians targeted for slaughter; the state, however, not only provides firepower but a source of legitimation. Third, Straus points to the war as a critical factor. Given such a perspective, it is surprising that there is no reference in the book or in his online bibliography to Manus Midlarsky's book *The Killing Trap: Genocide in the Twentieth Century* (2005), comparing the Rwandan genocide to the Armenian one and the Holocaust. Midlarsky argues that war created a perceived *threat* to and *vulnerability* of the perpetrators with respect to their control of the state, reinforced by a sense of loss – as well as an indifference or cynicism of bystanders – as necessary conditions for perpetrators to be able to commit such horrendous humanitarian crimes. Straus has added an important empirical dimension that allows us to understand the mobilization that went into the Rwandan genocide through an examination of a variety of documents, including court records, a survey, a micro-comparative study of the genocidal dynamics in five Rwandan locations, and his multi-angled in-depth interviews with convicted ordinary killers who participated in the genocide. In so doing, Straus focuses on why and how the genocide spread so quickly and what

¹ E.g., a book published at the same time approaches the issue of genocide in a very opposite way from high up in the heavens in a transhistorical perspective on all mass killing as opposed to an in-depth study of a single case, but arrives at many similar conclusions: cf. D. Chirot and C. McCauley, *Why Not Kill Them All? The Logic and Prevention of Mass Political Murder* (Princeton, 2006).

motivated the tens of thousands of ordinary Rwandans to comply with the orders of the elite to engage in the mass slaughter. In the process, he reinforces Alan Kuperman's argument (in *The Limits of Humanitarian Intervention: Genocide in Rwanda*, 2001), which many of us initially resisted, that any intervention, to be effective, would have had to be launched very quickly after 6 April 1994 (see p. 59).

The problems arise in the interpretations and the theory offered, not the valuable empirical material on mobilization. A bias emerges that may be based on the identification with the perpetrators in re-enacting their thought processes or in failing to distinguish and adjudicate between what they believed and other versions of reality. What they believed became, in part, Straus's construction of reality. For example, the book begins with a generalized statement that is never backed up: "Two years later [after the genocide in Rwanda, the victory of the RPF, and the flight of a million and a half Hutus], the one-time rebels (who then controlled the Rwandan state) attacked Zaire, trying to finish off their rivals' (p. x). What is left out is that the *génocidaires*, after they fled Rwanda, initially continued to attack Rwanda and kill those who were alive and willing to testify about what was done. When these efforts became too costly, they spread the genocide to Zaire by launching an effort to exterminate the Tutsi in Zaire, creating the very threat they purportedly projected onto the Other. For only then did the new RPF-dominated army back Zairean rebels and invade Zaire. However, Straus offers no evidence that the new Rwandan government was 'trying to finish off their rivals'.

But the distorted narrative also begins before the genocide. Straus writes: 'By war, I mean here the civil war that began on April 7, 1994, after the president was assassinated and which the hardliners were losing' (p. 7). Most scholars cite the beginning of October 1990 as the start of the war between the rebels and the Rwandan government of Juvénal Habyarimana. That war was resumed when the extremists began killing members of the cabinet and Hutu moderates as well as Tutsi civilians, but Straus holds that the timing was poor for the hardliners to instigate the resumption of the war, since the defence minister and chief of military intelligence were away (p. 45). But why would that be relevant to the Akazu, the informal power clique behind Habyarimana, especially his wife's family? And is it not more relevant that Habyarimana had finally signed on to implementing power sharing? For Straus, the roadblocks in Kigale were set up *in response to* the RPF breaking out of their barracks on 7 April (pp. 47-8), when nearly all the evidence points to the roadblocks being set up within a half hour of the downing of Habyarimana's plane. My own accounts refer to the genocide as a second anti-civilian war as distinct from the war between the government armed forces and the RPF.¹

¹ H. Adelman, 'Rwandan Civil Wars (1959-1994)', in *The Encyclopedia of Political Revolutions*, ed. J. Goldstone (Washington, 1998), pp. 436-8.

The most far-out claim is that 'the Hutu hardliners fomented mass violence against the Tutsi population in order to combat the RPF' (p. 49), when the evidence suggests that the war against the civilian population undermined the war effort against the RPF army (a position even Straus seems to endorse on page 50), just as the war against the Jews by Adolf Hitler weakened the Nazi effort to repel the allied military forces.

This idiosyncratic approach is consistent with Straus opting for the lowest number of figures of Tutsi killed without any adequate analysis of the numbers of deaths documented by the new government (cf. p. 51 n. 28), and concluding that the balance of evidence (p. 44) points to the RPF for shooting down Habyarimana's plane, also with very little effort to balance that evidence. The war, then, is not the responsibility of the extremists; rather, the war threatens them and they respond to that threat in an extremist but defensive way, a position repeated many times in the book (cf. pp. 62-3). Their strategy was premised 'on eliminating a threat, on self-protection and the re-establishment of order' (p. 7). But who fostered the disorder, where was the source of the threat to the Arusha Accords, and what evidence is there that the Tutsi civilians posed a threat? Why did the extremist leaders adopt an extremist vision of the Other while other Hutu Rwandans did not? That question remains unanswered. Nor does the book include evidence on the mindset of the leaders and elites. Is it the case that losers who are reality-challenged choose strategies of extermination (Pol Pot), while winners who are open to adjusting to reality (the Vietnamese leadership) avoid scorched-earth strategies?

Nevertheless, in spite of these very serious flaws, this is the most original, well-documented, and challenging book on the mobilizing of the extremist genocidal killers in Rwanda, but also the most repetitive, frustrating, illogical, and ultimately flawed thesis concerning the genocide. It is a must-read for all scholars concerned with either Rwanda or theories of genocide and mass killing.