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Olivier Lanotte, *La France au Rwanda (1990-1994). Entre abstention impossible et engagement ambivalent*. Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang S.A., 2007. 533 pp. Bibliography. \$60.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 13: 978-90-5201-344-2.

Review by David Ambrosetti, CNRS / Institut des Sciences sociales du Politique, Université Paris Ouest – Nanterre La Défense

Olivier Lanotte offers a somewhat balanced and well-documented account of French foreign policy concerning Rwanda during the civil war and genocide, from October 1, 1990, to August 22, 1994. While activists, scholars and journalists have engaged in passionate debates on France's Rwanda policy[1], as it failed to prevent—or may even have favoured--the last unquestionable genocide of the twentieth century, the author himself espouses a more distant posture. His historical account is anchored in archival sources: official records--including some exclusive French military and diplomatic archive,-- published narratives and testimonies, and interviews with officials and witnesses. Lanotte thus provides both a useful review and update on the existing contradictory theses about these events and well as a clearer picture of the French decision making processes within foreign policy makers.

The first chapter recalls the history of the young decolonized Rwandan state, characterized by a violent shift in ruling elites, from Tutsi groups to Southern Hutu groups from 1959 to 1962, then from the latter to Northern Hutu groups, under the regime of Juvénal Habyarimana in 1973. Two aspects of this post-independence history depicted by Lanotte deserve to be highlighted. First, Grégoire Kayibanda, the Hutu leader, founded his regime in a climate of permanent fear of a military re-conquest by the former Tutsi elites, exiled in Uganda, Tanzania and Congo/Zaire. Facing various military incursions from the latter, the Hutu regime chose to target massively Tutsi civilians as a tool of "dissuasion by terror" against its enemies from the outside, while also containing its internal political opponents (pp. 54-57). Second, despite the violent racist tendencies of Kayibanda, international donors--and particularly Western countries like Belgium and Switzerland--supported his regime almost unconditionally, refusing to address the situation of the exiled Rwandans and the permanent threat of political destabilization they were inspiring in Rwanda but also in host countries such as Uganda. On the contrary, Rwanda was very appreciated by international development agencies, particularly with the new Habyarimana regime and its declared preferences for "development", and for "social revolution" against "feudality" (pp.58, and 61-63). This concealed the return of regional nepotism and corruption in the benefit of the Northern ruling elite surrounding Habyarimana during the 1980s, whereas many Rwandan farmers were becoming impoverished.

The second chapter shows the internal political movements after the attack of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) on October 1, 1990, to Habyarimana's death on April 6, 1994, and the beginning of the genocide. This is an important step before a discussion of French military and diplomatic choices in Rwanda during the same period (chapter three), since it reveals the numerous local constraints of France's policies. Habyarimana's strategy of dissuasion by terror against Tutsi civilians from the inside in order to stop the RPF did not produce any strong international reaction. This paved the way for the rise, within the entourage of the President and the dignitaries of the presidential party, of a lobby of civilians and militaries favoring the intensification and the systematization of violence against the "internal enemies," whereas the RPF was maintaining its military pressure (hit and run strategy) for the conquest of power in Kigali. The author exposes the many political maneuvers during the peace process

in Arusha (Tanzania) whereby the absence of real support from international actors for moderate politicians in Rwanda reinforced the hardliners both within the regime and within the RPF, at the expense of the transitional government of Dismas Nsenyiremye.

Chapter three depicts in detail the French individuals and institutions engaged in Rwanda during this period. According to existing formal bilateral agreements and informal security commitments towards the Habyarimana regime, Paris chose to deploy its army to protect French nationals and other foreigners, but also to prevent a victory of the rebellion, as it did in other occasions in other Francophone African states of its "pré-carré". The most controversial point was the decision to maintain this "guarantee of security" despite the progressive genocidal drift of the regime. Different actors within the French foreign policy apparatus on Rwanda seemed to converge towards a twofold, "carrot and stick" strategy: the carrot was to provide the regime with a military assistance as a protection from the RPF in order to instigate political compromises towards democratization (for the benefit of the political opposition) and national reconciliation (for the benefit of the exiled Rwandans), while the stick was to use diplomatic pressures in order to prevent the military escalation and above all the internal repression and violations of human rights. As Lanotte insists, however, there was a strong discrepancy in the use of each of these tools. The priority was always given to the carrot by many French officials in Paris and above all on the field, and they used the stick only reluctantly. The author accurately echoes the practical dilemmas inherent to the French position, like the fear of losing control of the partner, and he points out the voluntarism and the partial achievements of the new French decision-makers on this case after the victory of the right and the new "cohabitation" in France in March, 1993. Paradoxically, the few-improvements achieved under French pressure (like the security provisions of the Arusha agreements) fueled the hardliners and hastened the genocide.

The next chapter discusses the execution of the genocide. Here arises a major controversy: the instigators of the shooting of the presidential plane that killed Habyarimana in April 6, 1994, remain unidentified. Lanotte enumerates investigations (Stephen Smith, Filip Reyntjens) and testimonies that challenge the thesis largely acknowledged, that of the Hutu extremists, and evokes the competing theses: the RPF, and/or the pro-Arusha and Southern political opposition, with or without the acquiescence of influential external actors aware of the risks of genocide and trying to achieve a "democratic coup" against the genocidal machine of the extremist Hutus, the "Hutu Power". What happened in Kigali during the following hours was crucial for the future of Rwanda. Colonel Theoneste Bagosora succeeded in taking over, to the benefit of the Hutu Power. After the members of the pro-Arusha government and the moderate political class and intellectuals were massacred following a previously well-organized plan, Hutu Power members composed the new Interim Government. Then, they went on to mobilize the efficient state apparatus in order to spread the genocide beyond Kigali and the North. Long—and sometimes nauseating—debates about the reality of the genocide, of the Hutu and Tutsi, of a supposed double genocide, are unambiguously closed by the author. Lanotte assesses the reactions against the genocide. He concludes that the end of the genocide was not the priority of the RPF's agenda, as its strategy ignored the regions with the highest Tutsi density and was exclusively orientated towards the conquest of the power in Kigali. Using testimonies of RPF dissidents (Abdul Ruzibiza) and recent investigations, Lanotte challenges the image of the RPF rebels as saviors of the Tutsi victims of the genocide, or as their representatives. Indeed, the overall book constitutes a harsh charge against the RPF.

As in chapter three, the force of the fifth and last chapter is to update the available information concerning the different phases of the French decision-making process during the genocide, notably through recent interviews. The harsh divisions inside the French state apparatus, between anti-RPF aspirations, political indifference and cowardice, and considerations for international credibility and respectability in Africa but also at the UN and in the international media, could not have been better illustrated. The will of some French officials on the field and in Paris not to abandon their Hutu political partner in the—futile—hope to bring the massacre to a halt, and their readiness to deny its implication in

the genocidal machine, never completely disappeared. This explains that French military instructors very probably remained in Rwanda after April 6, 1994. But these tendencies did lose strength among the top decision-makers during the genocide. What promptly dominated was the will to get out of Rwanda and look away—indeed, such was the mood of the time in all Western countries. As discomfort increased, Lanotte evokes the many adjustments and reciprocal control whereby different official sectors accepted the idea of a French military operation, *Opération Turquoise*. This humanitarian intervention—above all a public relation operation with clear political implications—later incited the larger passionate debates and criticisms in the media and in diplomatic spheres, related to serious accusations made against French officers. Although many elements proposed by the author seem founded, it must be noticed that some debates are partly settled by him with little evidence (p. 451) or a hasty reliance on the supposed personal and moral qualities of major French protagonists (p. 394) or on anonymous testimonies – a very useful material, but insufficient alone (p. 459). These limits may be easily understandable, considering the enduring lack of evidence, and the indisputable sympathy of many commentators for the RPF in previous investigations.[2]

The main interest of the book is undeniably to render the political calculations and bureaucratic routines that allowed for such asymmetrical, and sometimes contradictory, military and diplomatic commitments in the Rwandan conflict. The conclusion summarizes the factors that favored French decision-makers' miscalculation of the risks they were taking.

First, President Mitterrand and his military advisers put a high price on their credibility as suppliers of security towards friendly African regimes. Even if they renounced the goal of defeating the RPF, they authorized more or less direct engagements of their troops against the rebels in order to prevent a total military victory of the RPF and preserve the Habyarimana regime (pp. 193-199), even after the beginning of the genocide (pp. 362-374, pp. 395-403 and pp. 449-487).

Linked to this first factor, a strong and well-documented feeling of competitive pressure traditionally associated with the Anglo-Saxons (the "Fachoda syndrome") characterized the French interpretations of the events, not so much at the decisional phase but at the implementing and the monitoring ones (p. 494). The military staff on the field was permanently exposed to the interpretative frames shared by their partners of the Rwandan Armed Forces, linking ethnicity and international politics (Tutsi = minority = RPF = English-speaking Uganda = United States and United Kingdom; Hutu = majority = francophone Rwandan regime = France) (p. 234).

A third factor, the institutional apparatus of French foreign policy did not allow for counterweights to these biases. In 1990-1993, the diplomatic apparatus was dominated by individuals who were close to President Habyarimana (the Presidential adviser for African affairs, the French ambassador in Rwanda). Dissonant voices within French diplomacy were not heard, as the French President jealously defended his quasi-monopoly on foreign policy, his "*domaine réservé*". The lack of coordination between different isolated services and the tremendous weight of a few individuals and their personal networks is a well-known dysfunctional feature of the African policy in France. All this worsened during the second mandate of the President Mitterrand (pp. 235-245, p. 500).

A climate of indifference within French society and political parties towards the events in Rwanda (the German reunification, Kuwait, ex-Yugoslavia and Algeria got most attention) enabled a policy that was only authorized by a few advisers in the Elysée palace and implemented with a wide margin of interpretation and improvisation by a few military and diplomatic officials on the field (pp. 232-233, p. 497).

Lastly, at the international level, the French policy in Rwanda was concomitant with important changes in international security. France's first and prompt military response in October 1990 did not raise protests, as intervention had been common in Africa during the Cold War. Then French authorities

defended a UN take-over in Rwanda in February 1993, at a time of global enthusiasm for international peace operations. But this enthusiasm was thwarted in ex-Yugoslavia and Somalia at the very same time when UN support was most needed in Rwanda in order to implement the peace agreement and overcome sabotage by hardliners on both sides, and particularly from the organizers of the genocide.

Finally, if any "militant" conclusion was to be made from this book, it would be about France's responsibility in the Rwandan genocide: the author does refute many arguments of those who accused the French decision-makers of the time of complicity of genocide. French officials chose to permanently maintain good relations with the Rwandan regime. Some of them hoped this strategy would provide them with a lever in order to tame violence from inside. In most of the cases, it did not. It even had the opposite result, since it encouraged the organizers of the genocide to realize their criminal project. By no means does Lanotte underestimate these tragic mistakes, if not a pervasive neglect for the fate of the Rwandan Tutsis. But the overall demonstration shows that, as far as we know, this foreign policy needed no genocidal intention from part of the top decision-makers to bring about the disastrous effects it had. And in a sense, other foreign powers with different strategies (Brussels and its more careful military backing, Washington and its open indifference) did not get much better results in avoiding the genocide, although they could feel less responsible for it. The author also gives much importance to the genuine humanitarian achievements of the French *Opération Turquoise*, despite the obvious ambiguity surrounding this operation, and outlines other actors' responsibilities, notably the Rwandan Patriotic Front's. With Lanotte's book, it appears that the "innocence and guilt" dichotomy cannot easily cover the complexity of foreign powers' decision-making processes in such tragic circumstances. Understanding this complexity is a prerequisite for an accurate assessment of political responsibilities.

## NOTES

[1] Concerning the more controversial debates about France's role, see Colette Braeckman, *Rwanda. Histoire d'un génocide* (Paris: Le Chercheur Midi, 1996); Laure Coret et François-Xavier Verschave, eds., *L'horreur qui nous prend au visage. L'État français et le génocide au Rwanda. Rapport de la commission d'enquête citoyenne* (Paris: Karthala, 2005); Patrick de Saint-Exupéry, *L'inavouable. La France au Rwanda* (Paris: Les Arènes, 2004); Jean-Paul Gouteux, *Un génocide secret d'État. La France et le Rwanda 1990-1997* (Paris: Éditions Sociales, 1998); Jean-Paul Gouteux, *La nuit rwandaise. L'implication française dans le dernier génocide du siècle* (Paris: Izuba / L'Esprit frappeur, 2002); Bernard Lugan, *François Mitterrand, l'armée française et le Rwanda* (Paris: Éditions du Rocher, 2005); Pierre Péan, *Noires fureurs, blancs menteurs. Rwanda 1990-1994* (Paris: Mille et Une Nuits, 2005); Marc Vaiter, *Je n'ai pas pu les sauver tous. Kigali, Rwanda, 7 avril 1994* (Paris: Plon, 1995); François-Xavier Verschave, *Complicité de génocide ? La politique de la France au Rwanda* (Paris: La Découverte, 1994).

[2] See Johan Pottier, *Re-Imagining Rwanda. Conflict, Survival and Disinformation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), particularly chapter two.

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