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Book Review

Rwanda 1994: A Failure of Leadership and a Preventable Genocide

Paolo Tripodi

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The tragic events of the Rwandan genocide, which took place over 103 calendar days from 7 April 1994 to 18 July 1994, led to the deaths of approximately 800 000 men, women and children. Put another way, over about three months, 7 766 people were being hacked, bludgeoned, stabbed and shot to death each day. This raises several questions. Where were the United Nations (UN) and its peacekeepers during this genocide? How could they let this happen? These questions have been asked repeatedly ever since news of the genocide became public knowledge.

Rwanda 1994: A Failure of Leadership and a Preventable Genocide by Paolo Tripodi[1] provides some answers to these complex questions by offering meticulous and tactically focused evidence on how key senior military leaders consistently and dismally failed to appreciate and properly respond to the military situation on the ground during the crucial initial hours and days of the crisis. By specifically focusing on the critical failure of leadership within United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR), Tripodi ultimately argues that the genocide could have been stopped if resolute and determined military leadership had been present. This presents a unique viewpoint on the tragic events, with earlier academic scholarship having concentrated on the political and diplomatic betrayal by the international community, rather than on the failure of military leadership.[2]

Paolo Tripodi currently serves as professor of ethics and leadership at the Lejeune Leadership Institute, Marine Corps University, Virginia, in the United States (US). He has held academic positions at the Marine Corps War College, the US Naval Academy, the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile, and the Nottingham Trent University. Tripodi, who trained as an infantry officer and received his commission with the Italian Carabinieri, successfully uses this previous military experience to pivot the analysis of his book towards a detailed examination of the key military leaders and their decisions during this genocide.

The narrative within the publication is evenly divided into two spheres, with the first four chapters dealing with the events leading up to the outbreak of the killing on 7 April 1994, and the remaining three describing the events of those fateful "one hundred days" as Rwanda descended into "hell on earth".

Tripodi begins by describing the historical setting behind the establishment of the rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) in Uganda in 1987. He explains how numerous Tutsi Rwandans had fled to Uganda in the 1950s and 1960s and how many had found employment serving in the ranks of Yoweri Museveni's rebel National Resistance Movement (NRM) and its military wing, the National Resistance Army (NRA), then fighting the Ugandan government of Milton Obote. By adopting a militaristic stance to secure refugee repatriation and democratic reforms, the armed wing of the RPF, the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA), successfully recruited battle-hardened NRA veterans into its ranks, with Museveni's pro-refugee policies further enabling open recruitment and training. This provided the RPA with a core force to invade northern Rwanda from Uganda in October 1990, an event that sparked a civil war against President Juvénal Habyarimana's Hutu regime. Initial RPA gains, however faltered after the death of Rwandan military leader Fred Rwigema, which resulted in Paul Kagame[3] assuming command, and shifting the focus of the RPA towards a guerrilla campaign. By 1992, the RPA controlled swathes of northern Rwanda, prompting the Arusha Accords peace talks in 1993 for the establishment of a power-sharing government. Habyarimana's unexpected death in a plane crash in April 1994 unleashed a wave of genocidal killings by Hutu extremists, who had never really accepted the Arusha Accords. As a result, the RPA resumed its offensive, capturing Kigali by mid-July 1994 and eventually halting the slaughter. The story ends with the establishment of a broad-based government with Pasteur Bizimungu as president and Kagame as vice-president.

Rwanda 1994 also provides readers with a detailed history of the early military careers of various RPF leaders. This forms a central theme in the book, namely a comparison between the military leadership of the Rwandans in Uganda (who proved to be gifted warriors with strong leadership skills, which saw them rise to the upper echelons of the NRA) on the one hand, and the deplorable leadership skills later displayed by both the Hutu-dominated *Forces Armées Rwandaises* (FAR) and the forces assigned to UNAMIR, on the other.

That UNAMIR was staffed by arguably some of the worst military leaders and soldiers ever to embark on a peacekeeping mission, according to *Tripodi*, is another central theme in the book. Tripodi goes to great lengths to explain that his criticism of the UNAMIR military leadership is not criticism of the soldiers themselves, but merely of their actions, or in many cases their lack of action – beginning at the very highest level of the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations in New York, who despite advice and warnings, planned and authorised an under-resourced UNAMIR mission.[4] On top of that, the UNAMIR mission commander, Canadian Brigadier General (Brig. Gen.) Roméo Dallaire,[5] supposedly spent more time playing politician than performing his military duties as force commander.[6]

Tripodi discusses one leadership failure after another. Nothing exemplifies this poor situation better than the utter confusion that existed concerning the interpretation of the "rules of engagement" of the mission, with fundamental differences existing between the politicians in New York, the civilian UN mission leadership in Kigali, and the peacekeeping soldiers on the ground. In this perplexity, the foundations for genocide were being laid.[7]

With *Rwanda 1994*, Tripodi provides an invaluable book for the development of junior officers. It explains that not only was the top leadership found lacking, but also that the actions and omissions of various other military leaders in the days leading up to and after the commencement of the killings, inhibited proper military responses to protect innocent civilians. Bangladesh Army Colonel (Col.) Nazrul Islam, for example, only reported for duty two months after the arrival of his approximately 900 soldiers. Colonel Islam turned out to be a professor from the Bangladeshi military school who would act only on written orders submitted well in advance.[8] Even Belgians, Col. Luc Marchal[9] who was responsible for the Kigali Sector,[10] Lt Col. Andre Leroy, who commanded the paratrooper battalion,[11] and Lt Col. Joseph Dewez, who commanded the Belgian Army battalion,[12] proved themselves unable to fully grasp what was happening. They were consequently incapable of making sound military decisions, especially in terms of whether to engage or not to engage the FAR, when the killings started.[13]

A further important theme throughout the book, is the low quality and unsuitability of soldiers sent to the mission. A prime example of this is found in Tripodi's description of the dismal quality of the Bangladeshi military contingent sent to Rwanda. Bangladeshi peacekeepers made up nearly 50 per cent of the force and were supposed to be responsible for several critical roles.[14] On arrival in Rwanda – with below-the-minimum requirements in terms of uniform and equipment – the first question that the detachment commander of the latter contingent asked the mission headquarters was where his soldiers could get something to eat and to drink, since they had brought no logistical supplies with them at all, despite the UN instruction that national contingents had to arrive logistically self-sufficient for at least three months.[15]

Matters only got worse from there. The Bangladeshi contingent, which was responsible for providing some key components to the mission – including an infantry battalion, an engineer company, a logistic company, and a medical platoon – took about three months to deploy. Dallaire was extremely keen to see the Bangladeshis provide, in the shortest possible time, a vital asset to UNAMIR: the Quick Reaction Force (QRF). Lt Col. De Loecker, a Belgian Army reserve officer, was ordered by the Belgian Joint Staff to take responsibility for the escorts and for the formation and direction of the QRF, but the performance of the Bangladeshi contingent was so poor that, in less than two months, it had to be reassigned lesser military roles.[16] The Bangladeshi contingent proved to be a liability rather than an asset to the mission, with its battalion commander becoming increasingly defiant in terms of the execution of any duty that went beyond the ordinary and safe.

In contrast, the Belgium paratrooper battalion, while well trained, proved to be 'belligerent and inappropriate' for the task at hand.[17] Taking an approach that closely resembled the then recently completed United States Marine Corps mission to Somalia in 1993, Operation Restore Hope, comprising Belgian paratroopers, aggressively patrolled with their weapons in their hands rather than on their shoulders as requested by the mission headquarters (in order not to frighten the local population). This type of aggressive behaviour by the Belgians caused frustration within the headquarters, as these paratroopers' inability to understand the fundamental requirements of a peace mission, combined with their perception that the mission was below their status, only led to increased tension within the mission.[18]

Rwanda 1994 is not a book to be read on a lazy afternoon. While reviewing the book, I could read maybe 20 or 30 pages at a time before I had to put it down. The images that Tripodi sketches and the events that he describes are so vivid, so compelling, yet so disturbing, it was like watching a train accident in slow motion. Consequently, I could not help but become emotionally invested while reading the book. Knowing the eventual outcome, as I assume most readers will also do, in no way lessened the blows as the narrative unfolded.

The strength of the book lies in its granular detail of the various military leadership failures, the poor decision-making while under stress, and doing so without knowing all the facts. Tripodi ultimately paints a graphic picture of how, if resolute leadership had been present, the genocide could have been prevented. The weakness of the book lies, in my opinion, in being too diplomatic towards the UN and the various leaders, both political and military, especially when the evidence shows gross incompetence and cowardice but, as Tripodi states at the beginning of the book, his aim is to consider the actions, not the people themselves.

While the author writes predominantly for his own students at the United State Marine Corps University, this book will find global enthusiasts. I strongly recommend that this book become compulsory reading for any soldier departing on a UN mission, but especially for any military leader who intends leading soldiers on such a hazardous assignment. It should also be deemed a "must-read" for all junior military officers embarking on their careers at military academies or similar institutions as the lessons in *Rwanda 1994: A Failure of Leadership and a Preventable Genocide* are beyond valuable.

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Endnotes

1 P Tripodi, *Rwanda 1994: A Failure of Leadership and a Preventable Genocide* (Virginia: Marine Corps University Press, 2025).

2 See S Power, *"A Problem from Hell": America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); AD Forges, *"Leave No One to Tell the Story": Genocide in Rwanda* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999); AJ Kuperman, *The Limits of Humanitarian Intervention: Genocide in Rwanda* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

3 Appointed initially as a major and considered a key leader within the NRA intelligence service.

4 Tripodi, *Rwanda 1994*, 13.

5 R Dallaire, *Shake Hands with the Devil* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2003).

6 Tripodi, *Rwanda 1994*, 14.

7 Tripodi, *Rwanda 1994*, 107, 116.

8 Tripodi, *Rwanda 1994*, 105.

9 Tripodi, Rwanda 1994, 288.

10 L Marchal, Rwanda: *la descente aux enfers: témoignage d'un peacekeeper, Décembre 1993–Avril 1994* [Rwanda: The Descent into Hell: Testimony of a Peacekeeper, December 1993–April 1994] (Brussels: Éditions Labor, 2001).

11 Tripodi, *Rwanda 1994*, 295.

12 Tripodi, *Rwanda 1994*, 148, 157.

13 Tripodi, *Rwanda 1994*, xi.

14 Tripodi, *Rwanda 1994*, 104.

15 Tripodi, *Rwanda 1994*, 120.

16 Tripodi, *Rwanda 1994*, 103

17 Tripodi, *Rwanda 1994*, 121.

18 Tripodi, *Rwanda 1994*, 121–122.