



Synthesis Report:

GENOCIDE AND THE GREAT LAKES REGION

by Matthew J. Smith

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The
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Introduction

The Great Lakes Region (GLR) of Africa typically refers to the central and eastern African states grouped around Lake Tanganyika, Lake Kivu, Lake Albert, Lake Victoria, Lake Turkana, and Lake Nyasa (Tshiband, 2008). The countries within this region comprise Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda. For the purposes of this short section of the chapter genocide will be examined primarily in the DRC, Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda¹.

The GLR, for more than a decade (and some would argue that genocide has been ongoing for several decades), has witnessed an extreme form of xenophobia² that has claimed the lives of more than six million. According to Tshiband the scale of the genocide can be roughly broken down as follows³:

The purpose of this short piece on the GLR is not to argue the similarity between the xenophobic attacks in South Africa and the genocide that occurred in the GLR. There are some obvious and significant differences, these include:

- i. Whilst xenophobia played a crucial role in the genocide in the GLR, there were a multitude of other factors that also fuelled the violence across the region.
- ii. The duration and scale of the violence in the GLR far outweighs what happened in South Africa.

¹ Xenophobia in Kenya is discussed separately in this chapter, and the incidents of reported xenophobia in Tanzania are relatively few in comparison with the events that occurred elsewhere in the region.

² Whereas xenophobia is a term that is typically used to describe a fear or dislike of foreigners or of people significantly different from oneself, often in the context of visibly differentiated minorities. Genocide takes this fear to another level and is defined as "the systematic **killing** of substantial numbers of people on the basis of **ethnicity, religion, political opinion, social status**, or other particularity" (<http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/genocide>).

³ Tshiband, SAN (2008) *Transnational Actors and the Conflicts in The Great Lakes Region of Africa*, unpublished MA thesis, Department of Politics and International Relations, Lancaster University, p.10.

- iii. The organisation and structure of the warring parties in the GLR was very different to the piecemeal approach that characterised the violence in South Africa (in much of the conflict different groups were well organised into structured armies)
- iv. The presence of natural resources to finance and fuel the conflict within the GLR, meant that the militia in GLR were able to afford both a prolonged war and also equip themselves with sophisticated weaponry (contrast this with South Africa where weapons used in the violence were relatively crude)
- v. The involvement of nation states in the conflict in the GLR (both from within the region and from without), whereas South Africa kept it as an internal matter and reacted accordingly.

Nevertheless, there are however some key lessons that can be learnt from what occurred within the GLR, in particular lessons relating to the media and civil society, which and of direct relevance to South Africa, several of which are tabulated in Annexure A. Would rather have them as text (not in boxes/tables) in the text, summarised up front and repeated at the end.

This brief piece on the GLR begins by outlining the history of the region prior to the genocide, it then identifies key moments during the violence and then concludes with a discussion of the key lessons for South Africa that can be learnt from events in the GLR.

The tragedy unfolds

Although distinct and separate countries, the events that happened in Burundi, Rwanda, and the DRC will be shown to be interlinked, and that the common issues of land scarcity, ethnic and racial distrust, political violence, economic factors (in particular disputes over the exploitation of natural resources in the region) and the Belgian colonial legacy all contributed to the tragedy that unfolded in the GLR.

In addition, and of particular interest to those examining xenophobia in South Africa, is the issue of trans-border factors, i.e. the importance of taking into account “cross border interactions such as the flow of information, trans-boundary cultural or ethnic identities, and various linkages and networks with the capacity to mobilize as well as increase the propensity for the occurrence of conflicts”⁴. The constant movement of “others”/ internally displaced persons (IDPs) escaping the violence often contributed to unsettling the delicate socio-economic and political balance of the area they moved into, thus perpetuating yet another round of violence.

Moreover, the ability of rebels to move across the borders between the DRC, Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda as a result of the inability of the respective governments to control their territorial borders (and/ or the governments “turning a blind eye” to these movements) certainly created a series of linkages, some based on ethnic identities others on political allegiances and economic interests, which played a significant role in shaping the conflict.

⁴ Tshiband, 2008:20.

Space does not permit a detailed exploration of the complex factors that shaped what occurred in the GLR. Instead what follows is a brief sketch of key moments in the tragedy, beginning with the events that led up to the Rwandan genocide in the early 1990s.

Rwanda

“ Rwanda’s history is not that of two discreet and different groups, the Hutu and Tutsi, but of diverse Kinyarwanda speaking peoples and kingdoms assimilated into a single state.”⁵

The roots of the 1990 genocide in Rwanda can be traced to pre-colonial days when the area now known as Rwanda was largely populated by Tutsi cattle-herders, Hutu pastoralists and Twas hunter-gatherers. The distinctions between these groups were hardened during colonial times, when Belgian and German colonizers typically used Tutsi to supervise Hutu labourers⁶.

By the late 1950s this artificial reorganization of Rwandan society by the colonizers promoted such resentment amongst the majority of the population (primarily Hutus) that many Tutsi were driven out of Rwanda (1959 – 1961) into the Congo, Burundi and Uganda, and the Tutsi monarchy/elite was replaced by a Belgian backed Hutu elite⁷. Not only did this bring about a significant shift in political power, but traditional land ownership patterns were fundamentally changed as the Tutsi monarchy’s hold on the land was severely weakened.

The period from the early 1960s to 1990 were characterised by Tutsi exiles in Uganda attempting to regain political control in Rwanda through a series of attacks, the Rwandan government instigating counter attacks against the “rebels”, and the Tutsi government in Burundi oppressing Hutu who resided in Burundi and thus leading to thousands of Hutu fleeing Burundi and seeking refuge in Rwanda⁸. Nevertheless, for much of this period the Rwandan political economy was relatively stable and ethnic violence was significantly diminished.

Issues came to a head when coffee and tea prices collapsed in the late 1980s, accentuated by crippling initiatives imposed by the IMF and the World Bank. The resulting inflation, land shortages and increased unemployment fostered a strong sense of discontent amongst many within Rwanda. The fragile situation within Rwanda was further weakened when in October 1990, Tutsis from Southern Uganda (primarily the Rwandan Patriotic Front - RPF) swept across the border into Rwanda, and whilst they found little popular support in Rwanda, for President Habyarimana the invaders were a lifeline. He skilfully manipulated popular opinion away from domestic economic issues to focussing on ‘the foreign invaders’.

⁵ ACTIONAID, 1996: 17.

⁶ Colonial policy included the infamous clause that Tutsis were “born to be chiefs”. Prior to this the nature of the clan system across the region typically allowed Hutu, Tutsi and Twa to all be members of the same clan. Moreover, intermarriage between these groups was relatively common and it is also worth noting that a Hutu with a large herd of cattle could join the Tutsi elite, and conversely an impoverished Tutsi, without cattle, could join a Hutu group (Tshiband, 2008).

⁷ This shift in support by Belgium was primarily due to pressure from other European colonizers, as decolonization gathered speed throughout Africa, and probably also a belated attempt to redress past injustices (Eriksson, 1996).

⁸ In 1972 the Burundi government massacred many Hutu, who fled Burundi and subsequently helped to inflame ethnic tensions in Rwanda and joining in on attacks on the Tutsi in Rwanda.

This unleashed a series of violent anti-Tutsi incidents for the next 3 ½ years⁹. Tensions between those residing in Rwanda and those who had come in from outside Rwanda's borders were further heightened with the assassination of President Habyarimana and the President of Burundi on 6 April 1994¹⁰. Exactly who killed the President and why has never been established, but its effect was both immediate and devastating.

The presidential guard immediately initiated **a campaign of retribution**, and within hours recruits were despatched across the country **to massacre Tutsis and moderate Hutus**¹¹.

The role of the media, particularly private radio stations, played a critical role in inciting ethnic hatred and violence amongst a population that has high rates of illiteracy. Moreover, the almost complete absence of the international community, and the failure of international peace-keeping bodies such as the United Nations, for much of the genocide also provided ideal conditions for the ethnic hatred to foster.

With the capture of Kigali by the RPF in July 1994 the Rwanda government finally collapsed and a ceasefire was declared. According to Amnesty International (1996) whilst nearly one million people were killed during the 100 days of the genocide (this included at least three-quarters of all Tutsi living in Rwanda at the time) the violence also resulted in more than 2 million people fleeing Rwanda, taking refuge in the DRC, Uganda, Tanzania and Burundi¹².

Burundi

The genocide in Burundi is inextricably linked to that which that occurred in Rwanda. It too was colonized by Belgium, after the Belgians acquired it with Rwanda from the Germans during the post- World War One period. Prior to independence in 1962 the territory was known as Ruanda – Urundi. However, despite having the same colonial master, Burundi was traditionally less stratified than Rwanda, and until the fall of King Mwambutsa in 1996 both Hutu and Tutsi were involved at a national leadership level.¹³

As a result of the ethnic violence in Rwanda in the early 1960s hundreds of thousands of Hutus fled Rwanda and moved into Burundi, which significantly altered the balance of power in the country.

⁹ Typically referred to in the literature as the Rwandan Civil War.

¹⁰ Whilst many argue this was the start of the genocide, others argue that massacres of Tutsis had already been carried out in October of 1990, January and February of 1991, March and August of 1992, January and March of 1993, and also in February of 1994. Furthermore, most commentators would argue that whilst there was no blueprint for the genocide, there were nevertheless signs of well organised attacks by both the police and the army and those organised by militia affiliated to various political parties.

¹¹ It has been estimated that the militia eventually numbered around 30,000, roughly one militia member for every 10 families in Rwanda.

¹² Prior to the genocide the population in Rwanda was estimated to be about 7 million, and about 5,7 million in Burundi (Amnesty International, 1996). Estimates of the death toll have ranged from between 500,000 to 1,000,000. Amnesty International estimates that the post the ceasefire Rwanda will be faced with supporting thousands of widows who were subjected to rape and have become HIV – positive, and about 400,000 orphans, many of whom who have become head of families.

¹³ ACTIONAID, 1996.

A number of the recent arrivals participated in the 1965 election, and helped the Hutu-led political party win an outright majority. However, King Mwambutsu's refusal to appoint a Hutu prime minister, led to many rejecting the nascent democracy and so began a violent cycle of coups and counter coups.

The brutal suppression of the first coup immediately after the elections helped foster an environment of extreme political violence, aggravated by the sharp economic inequalities in the country ¹⁴. When King Mwambuta's son Ntare V was assassinated in 1972 a reign of terror was unleashed and an estimated 150,000 Hutus were massacred, ostensibly because the Hutus were blamed for the assassination of the King.

During the 1980s and the 1990s the cycle of political violence never ended. A series of coups in the late 1980s led to thousands more Hutus being massacred in 1988, and many more fleeing into Rwanda and thus helped shape the civil war that broke out in Rwanda in 1990. Whilst the first few years of the 1990s began optimistically what with a new constitution providing for a multi-party system, the fragile democracy lasted less than a year when in October 1993 the leader of the pro-Hutu government (President Ndadaye) was assassinated by Tutsi soldiers. And so began another wave of reprisals by Ndadaye supporters and counter-reprisals by the Tutsi led army. The situation was further aggravated when the newly appointed president (Cyprien Ntaryamira) was shot down whilst flying over the Rwanda capital with the Rwanda President.

Again, **thousands are killed and thousands of IDPs flee** to neighbouring countries.

With the next decade starting the same way as the 1990s ended (coups and counter-coups) the United Nations finally took over peace keeping duties in the country from African Union troops and a peace deal was brokered by former South African President, Nelson Mandela in 2001. After many false starts the remaining active rebel group (Forces for National Liberation – FNL) finally agreed to a cease-fire in 2008 and the fragile democracy could finally begin much needed social and economic reconstruction¹⁵.

¹⁴ 10% of the Burundi population control the country's cotton and coffee industries, the foundation of the Burundi economy, and it was in the main agricultural areas which much of the violence occurred again and again (ACTIONAID, 1996).

¹⁵ Burundi is one of the world's poorest countries in the world, ranked 174th out of 182 countries in the latest UNDP's human development index (HDI). (http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_BDI.html).

Democratic Republic of the Congo

The Congo (or what is today known as the DRC) was, like its neighbours Rwanda and Burundi, a Belgian colony. However, unlike Rwanda and Burundi where there was some semblance of colonial administration, the Congo was the private fiefdom of the infamous King Leopold II who literally raped and plundered the country between 1885 and 1908¹⁶.

The Congo became independent in 1960 under premier Lumumba, and became known as the DRC. It was the Mobutu regime, which on taking power in 1971 renamed it as Zaire, the name it kept until 1997 when it reverted back to the DRC.

Throughout much of the 20th century incidents of political violence were not uncommon, and certainly Mobutu's regime was arguably as brutal as that perpetrated by King Leopold II, however much of the literature argues that it was not till during and after the Rwandan genocide when the scale of the violence in the DRC accelerated dramatically¹⁷.

By late 1990 onwards hundreds of thousands of IDPs flooded into the DRC from Rwanda, including more than 50,000 ex Rwandan National Army (FAR), Hutu militias and many other groups not necessarily affiliated to any of the main warring political groups. This lethal mix of bitter adversaries spilling into a failed state which chose to support one side against the other (Mobutu's regime condoned violence against the Tutsi) not surprisingly exploded into a war that still simmers to this day.

The spark that ignited the war was provided in 1996 when the new Tutsi leadership in Rwanda supported the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo/Zaire (ADFL) in successfully overthrowing the Mobutu regime. Principal reasons for Rwandan support of the rebellion include security concerns about the presence of large numbers of ex – FAR residing in the DRC and ongoing persecution of Tutsis in the DRC. The rebellion was characterised by two chilling features: one, the common use of child soldiers; and two, the massacre of Hutu refugees in refugee camps administered by the UNHCR.

However, the removal of Mobutu simply created a power vacuum, which between 1998 – 2003 various internal and external groups unsuccessfully attempted to fill¹⁸. Although peace accords were signed in 2003 between all the major partners and international peace keeping forces moved into most of the affected areas, the conflict in the Kivu region within the DRC remains unresolved.

¹⁶ For a full account of the horror of the Belgian rule, including the draconian forced labour practices instituted by the colonizers, read Adam Hochschild's (1998). *King Leopold's Ghost*. London: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

¹⁷ Tshiband, 2008.

¹⁸ Some authors refer to this period as the *Seven Nation War* or even *The African World War* (Tshiband, 2008) as it involved 7 African states – Angola, Namibia and Zimbabwe supported the President Kabila (DRC) against attacks allegedly supported by Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda.

Civil Society Responses

The scale and level of the violence, and its duration, across the region played havoc with coordinated efforts by civil society¹⁹ to engage in a meaningful way during the genocide.

It was noted earlier that even the UN agencies, purportedly supported by peace keeping troops, were powerless to fend off attacks from rebel groups and this it is not surprising that civil society often helpless in the face of the genocide. Nevertheless, civil society did respond, but not always how one might expect civil society to respond.

On the one hand, civil society was lauded for its role both during and in the aftermath of the genocide, on the other hand it was criticised for being “highly politicised and aligned with political parties that were fighting for control over the state”²⁰. Moreover, the *Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda*²¹ in its synthesis report noted that

The performance of NGOs in providing humanitarian assistance was mixed. A number behaved professionally and compassionately and delivered high-quality care and services. But, ... other NGOs performed in an unprofessional and irresponsible manner that resulted not only in duplication and wasted resources but, in a few egregious cases, in unnecessary loss of life²².

However, these reports on the conduct of civil society do not quantify the number of unprofessional organisations, thus it is unclear how widespread the problem was across the region. Especially as other reports on civil society in the region make no mention of this issue and have instead emphasized the ‘traditional’ role that these organisations typically play in humanitarian emergencies. During the genocide civil society typically engaged in activities such as the gathering and exchange of information (for instance, about past atrocities, potential threats and the trafficking of arms), the denouncing of abuses, and the supply of food, healthcare and accommodation. There were also

¹⁹ Space does not permit a discussion of the definition of what is meant by civil society or who is civil society in the Great Lakes Region, it is however worth noting that it is the problematic notion of citizenship that was at the heart of much of the genocide, “despite long histories of movement and integration throughout the continent, notions of who is ‘indigenous’ versus who is ‘settler’ persist and are politicized in ways that strip people of rights and make them vulnerable to violence and displacement” [Klopp, J (2004) *Civil Society and the State: Partnership for Peace in the Great Lakes Region. Proceedings of the Task Force Meeting, Nairobi Kenya, 21 – 22 June 2004*]. Thus the membership of civil society has been, and continues to be, heavily contested in the region.

²⁰ Baines EK, Thomson SM, & Wilson JZ (2004) *Summary of the Kigali Workshop on Civil Society Perspectives on the Responsibility to Protect: 10 Years after the Rwandan Genocide, 15 - 17 February, 2004*.

²¹ The review team reported to steering committee that composed of representatives from 19 OECD-member bilateral donor agencies, plus the European Union and the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) secretariat of the OECD; 9 multilateral agencies and UN units; the two components of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (ICRC and IFRC); and five international NGO organizations.

²² Eriksson 1996.

instances when civil society was called upon to reconcile differences between different IDPs and also in protecting refugees from external attacks²³.

In the aftermath civil society responded by training paralegals to document atrocities, providing counsellors/counselling services to those traumatised and brutalised by the genocide, and promoting human rights (particularly with regards to vulnerable groups in society such as women and children) within the school curriculum and also in promoting civic education more broadly²⁴. Civil Society also played an important role in negotiating the transitional government in the DRC²⁵ and in helping to facilitate the demobilization and the reintegration of former combatants into society²⁶.

Yet whilst the literature recognises “the key role that civil society actors play in threading together the social fabric, providing networking opportunities and fuelling collaborative efforts...the basic building blocks for peace” it also recognises that apart from in the DRC civil society was largely excluded from the peace talks that were held to end the genocide,²⁷. Thus regardless of how effective civil society was in providing humanitarian assistance in the region, civil society found it extremely difficult to help get involved in formal attempts to resolve the crisis. It is for this reason that there has been a very strong drive in the region since the mid-2000s to start building a ‘partnership for peace’ between civil society and the governments in the region²⁸.

Conclusion

The genocide that unfolded in the GLR came about as the result of a complex combination of factors, some of which are part of the brutal colonial legacy the region experienced (including the violation of a common heritage by the colonizers) and others were more immediate (including the intricate political, economic, social and cultural dynamics of the region).

It is also important to recognise that whilst **the genocide is often portrayed as Hutu against Tutsi, in many instances it was often a small elite group within a sub-clan who controlled and drove the violence** and thus few Hutu or Tutsi actually benefitted from the violence.

Whilst the scale, breadth and depth of the violence completely overshadows the events in South Africa, there are nevertheless seven salient lessons that can be learnt from the tragedy in the GLR. Firstly, the resolution – management approach in the GLR focussed primarily on the political and military aspects of the conflict and failed to address the economic resource aspects of the conflict.

²³ Klopp, 2004.

²⁴ Baines et al., 2004.

²⁵ Klopp, 2004,

²⁶ Bainomugisha A, & Issaka M (2004) The Role of Civil Society in Peacebuilding in the Great Lakes Region. Proceedings of a Civil Society Dialogue hosted by the International Peace Academy, New York, March 2004.

²⁷ Baines et al., 2004: 255 – 256.

²⁸ For more on this issue see for example Klopp (2004).

The lesson to be learnt from the GLR experience is that resolving the immediate issues (such as disarming militia) without dealing with the deep rooted issues simply prolongs the crisis and does not diffuse the situation.

The second less to be learnt is that “humanitarian action cannot substitute for political action”²⁹. Regardless of how effective NGOs were in providing humanitarian assistance, unless the political will is there to resolve the crisis the humanitarian community is put in an untenable position and the crisis is unlikely to be resolved.

A third lesson is drawn from the finding that not all regional actors participated all the peace settlement talks, which meant not all interest groups were consulted and thus those who were excluded have refused to recognise the various signed peace agreements. The lesson here is that is essential for all actors to participate in peace talks, even those from neighbouring countries. In most instances it is a regional issue as opposed to a single country issue thus a regional response is required to ensure a more sustainable approach to the crisis.

The fourth lesson relates to the refugee camps. Refugee camps were poorly planned, inadequately implemented, and insufficiently supported thus creating devastating cholera and dysentery epidemics and unsustainable exploitation of the environment (in particular deforestation). Moreover, refugees were poorly protected from outsiders in the refugee camps. Furthermore, support to IDPs often treated them as a homogenous group and no special provision was made to provide assistance to vulnerable groups (children in particular) The lesson that can be learnt is that appropriate emergency plans need to be in place prior to events of this nature happening and adequate emergency funds need to be forthcoming to ensure the plans are implemented. This includes taking steps to minimize and mitigate the adverse impact on the environment, ensuring basic water and sanitation services, and equitable distribution of food rations and shelter. In addition, it is critical to ensure the safety and security of IDPs in the refugee camps from both within and without³⁰. It is also important to remember that IDPs are seldom homogenous groups and it is critical to determine the specific needs of different sub-groups within refugee camps, in particular the needs of children who have been orphaned as a result of the violence.

The fifth lesson relates to the role and conduct of civil society during humanitarian emergencies of this nature. It was noted above that due to the scale of the violence there was an inadequate early warning system of the displacement of the population and the dramatic increase in relief needs which was not always dealt with appropriately by civil society. The lesson that can be learnt from this is two-fold: Civil society needs to play a central role in feeding in information from on the ground into a well coordinated early warning system; and a code of conduct be developed to which civil society organisation must adhere to when assisting in complex emergencies³¹.

²⁹ Eriksson, 1996.

³⁰ This includes both empowering those running the camps to have appropriate security forces, and also ensuring that those in the camps are disarmed, that those in the camps are genuine refugees, that no militia are trained in the camps, and that no hate media is distributed in the camps (Eriksson: 1996).

³¹ This could be done through some form of self-managed regulation or by an accreditation system overseen by NGOs (Eriksson: 1996) and needs to reflect on questions such as (ACTIONAID, 1996: 14): “how do humanitarian agencies ensure that their efforts do not compound the crisis? What mechanisms are in place to ensure that humanitarian agencies...act responsibly and accountably?” and what does neutrality mean in a crisis of this nature?

Like South Africa, the GLR is also beset by local conflicts that often sprung out of economic pressures (such as land shortages, grazing rights, trading rights and so on).

The key lesson to learn from this is that there is a **need for civil society to play a central role in increasing awareness of the socio-economic issues** facing local communities.

In particular, this awareness raising could focus on women's rights to land and support the means to access these rights; economic alternatives to land/ agriculture; dispute resolution methods in order to promote peaceful reconciliation of disputes; and the skills needed by local/traditional leaders to manage a community during complex emergencies.

The final lesson that can be learnt from the GLR concerns the fact that throughout the period under discussion there were fatal flaws in the mechanisms to uphold human rights in the region. The lesson to be learnt is that appropriate and effective systems need to be in place to deal with the abuse of human rights. Such a system needs to include clearly identified steps for identifying such abuses, investigating such abuses and for prosecuting such abuses. Ensuring that civil society is sufficiently well resourced to facilitate this process (including, for example, providing para-legal services and offering other advice office services) should be central feature of such a system.