

History, Horror and Healing—The historical background and aftermath to the Rwandan Civil War of 1994

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'The history of Africa is the history of the world'
Early Twentieth Century Aphorism. (anonymous)

'Life can only be understood backwards;
but it must be lived forwards'
Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855)

History has a habit of calling in her debts. Such it has proved in the last decade of the twentieth century, in central Africa. In 1994, a genocidal civil war of unprecedented ferocity erupted in Rwanda. It was similar in antecedents to other civil wars of the late twentieth century; but the Rwandese experienced death and personal wounding from inter-tribal and internecine hand-to-hand killing on a scale perhaps not seen in recorded history.

Australia had had a military involvement in central Africa a century prior to the Rwandan emergency. On 12 February 1885 the *Sydney Morning Herald* published an appeal to help the British Army in the Sudan, after Gordon's death in Khartoum;¹ and the New South Wales

1. Strickland E. 'Appeal for help in the Soudan', *SMH*, 12 February 1885.

Ambulance Corps was dispatched to Suakin on the Red Sea.² This four-month expedition was to be the forerunner of other State-based military medical units;³ and has been interpreted by students of the history of medicine as the forerunner of the Royal Australian Army Medical Corps.⁴ One hundred years later, the Defence Health Service Branch of the Australian Defence Force sent another emergency contingent to central Africa, as part of the United Nations' response to the civil war in Rwanda.⁵

The documentation of recent history, especially by those with on-the-spot experience, is important in providing further data for historians who will follow. Contemporary medical events of great moment are shaped by the historical legacy which precedes them; and an analysis of relatively recent events needs also review the influences which led to their genesis and outcome. Thus an historical analysis of the Rwandan war—a brief review of its circumstances, and a description of its aftermath—is of interest to historians of today; and, through their descriptions and analyses, for policy-makers of the future. In an understanding of its genesis and discussions about the future prevention of such wars, lies the hope for continued international peace.

Central Africa—background

Central Africa, particularly that of the equatorial countries of Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, Zaire and Mozambique, is a rich and fertile area of great faunal and floral diversity. In the high parts, particularly those of Rwanda (2500 metres) since time immemorial the dense equatorial forest ruled over all. In it lived the Pygmy Peoples—the Twa—a small, stocky and resilient group who hunted in the forests and whose crafts extended to basketry and pottery—the latter craft pursued today. Perhaps fifteen hundred years ago, from the sub-Saharan region of Africa, moved south and east a robust group of agrarian folk, the Hutu. They moved into the areas of present day Rwanda and Burundi, clearing the forests and tilling the soil. They were, and are still today,

2. Brogdan, Stanley, *The Sudan Contingent*. Melbourne, The Hawthorn Press, 1943, p. 8.

3. Pearn, J. H., 'Nationhood and the Australian Army Medical Corps', in *Arms and Aesculapius*. Brisbane, Amphion Press, 1996, pp. 141—8.

4. Gurner, J., 'The Sudan: Staff Corps to NSW AMC', in *The Origins of the Royal Australian Army Medical Corps*, Melbourne, The Hawthorn Press, 1970., pp. 23—8.

5. Pearn, J. H., 'War—its trauma and aftermath', in *Reflections of Rwanda*, Brisbane, The Amphion Press, 1995, pp. 7—30.

skilled subsistence farmers, exploiting the bi-annual equatorial rainfall and the rich soil to produce with great efficiency a mass of tropical foods.

More than five centuries ago, a third race of immigrants—the Tutsi, a nilotic people⁶—moved southwards from the Nile delta, bringing their traditional skills of cattle management with them. They brought also their traditions of two millennia of hereditary kingship. They spoke a different language, a variety of Watutsi. They brought also their aristocratic mien and a concept of pharaohanoic destiny which led to their rulership of the areas of central Africa. The three peoples lived in uneasy concord, nevertheless each with a deep spirituality. They worshipped their common god, Imana, and the animistic spirits who dwelt in the forests and the farms, in the streams and in the trees.

The region of central, equatorial Africa is of great historical importance. It is here that humankind, *Homo erectus*, *Homo habilis*, and *Homo sapiens*, first emerged. Here also is the source of the Nile, giver of life to all the African peoples in the north east of the continent.

Into this domain came Europeans, seeking the source of the Nile and seeking to map the 'dark continent'. Some milestones of their explorations include:

- 1770 The Scottish explorer James Bruce penetrated to Ethiopia and further southwards.
- 1852-6 Dr David Livingstone, the Scottish doctor-explorer journeyed to the present day Zimbabwe. Under the patronage of the British Royal Geographical Society (the successor to The African Association) he journeyed in the region of the Zambesi River 1865-1871.
- 1857 Sir Richard Burton (1821-1890), from Devon, made two unsuccessful expeditions to discover the source of the White Nile (in 1855 and in 1857-8). This era also saw the explorations and discoveries of John Speke, who was the first to discover Lake Tanganyika in 1857.
- 1862 John Speke, with a Scot, James Grant, mapped the site of the Ripon Falls in present day Uganda. He discovered the source of the Nile in Lake Victoria Nyanza. Subsequently, the Welsh explorer, Henry Morton Stanley, circumnavigated Lake Victoria.

6. 'Nilotic'—of the Nile.

Subsequently, German explorers penetrated the interior and from the 1880s established a strong German sphere of influence in the region of present-day Rwanda, Burundi and Mozambique. They called the territory, German East Africa. As recently as 1920, the region was still marked on British school children's atlases as 'suitable for colonization'.

During the First World War, Belgium assumed control of present day Rwanda and from 1922 administered the country under a League of Nations Mandate. Independence was finally granted in 1962 and since that time Rwanda has been an independent Republic, ruled by a President with a democratically elected parliament.

Western influence brought with it the concepts of democracy, and these concepts were perhaps one influence to upset the hitherto relatively stable social order. Although the ruling class, the Tutsis, had been in the minority (only 15 per cent of the population), all tribal groups had accepted their hereditary lien to rule. With western concepts of democracy developing from the first decade of the twentieth century, tensions gradually increased. The three tribal groups—Twa, Hutu and Tutsi—came to regard each other with increasing contempt and suspicion. Such tensions were exacerbated by colonial classifications and the superimposition of colonial influence. The first of the twentieth-century civil wars broke out in 1959 and again in 1962. Thousands fled to neighbouring countries and remained exiles, hoping always to return. In 1990, civil war broke out again but was again suppressed.

The Civil War of 1994

On 6th April 1994, a surface-to-air missile hit the aircraft carrying both the Hutu President of Rwanda (Mr Habyarimana) and the President of Burundi. The plane crashed near Kigali Airport. There were no survivors. This assassination triggered a genocidal civil war, on a scale unknown in the previous half century, anywhere in the world.

The refugees, from the 1962 and 1990 civil disruptions, decamped in Uganda, Zaire and Burundi. They formed a guerrilla army in exile, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). In Rwanda itself, at least three of the major political parties had developed powerful militias of their own. Known collectively as the Interhamwe, these forces became potentially self-contained, with extensive command networks throughout the country. The assassination of the President triggered several days of fierce fighting and much killing among the militia Interhamwe groups. This quickly escalated into a wave of inter-ethnic violence, the extent of which had not been seen since the Holocaust of

the Second World War. Within days, the militia units collectively instigated and led widespread massacres of civilians. The victims included hundreds of thousands of women and children. The Tutsi were the initial targets, but in the orgy of destruction those with even moderate sympathies or even relative passivity, irrespective of age or sex, were cut down. The two armies—the government-based Rwandan Government Army (RGA) and the rebel RPF (Rwandan Patriotic Front)—fought a large number of independent engagements, with massive loss of life and limb on both sides. Kigali, the capital, fell on the 8th July, 1994 and the population fled. Survivors reached refugee camps in Zaire, Uganda, Burundi and Tanzania. The victorious, previously guerrilla and rebel army (the RPF) declared a ceasefire on the 19th July, 1994. A power-sharing government was established and the Rwandan Patriotic Army (the renamed former RPF) evolved from being a guerrilla army in exile to the nation's standing army, and became the legitimate arm of the new government in power. Between half a million and one million Rwandese, a disproportionate percentage of whom were Tutsi and Twa, were massacred.

The outside world, initially bemused and uncomprehending of the enormity of this disaster, responded within ten weeks, to help the plight of the Rwandan people. The French sent in the Foreign Legion in an operation known as 'Operation Turquoise'. They established a Zone of Sanctuary in the southern part of the country. The United Nations sought help from the world's nations to provide an urgent Peacekeeping Force. By early August 1994, a massive military response had been mounted to provide not only physical security and food, but medical aid to replace the entire health infrastructure destroyed in the total society breakdown which was the aftermath of the civil war. By August 1994, 5700 uniformed United Nations Peacekeeping troops were in the country, a number which had grown to 7000 by May 1995. Some 160 independent charities also responded to help the stricken nation.

Australian responded rapidly and sent the Australian Medical Support Force, a deployment of 305 servicemen and women to supply sophisticated medical support needed for the uniformed United Nations soldiers; and in secondary and tertiary roles, to help the expatriate charity workers and their work. The supporting Infantry Company (to provide security) came from Townsville. Reserve support was used, in an extensive contribution from August 1994 to 1995 to aid sick and injured Rwandese themselves. The Clinic Wing of Kigali Central Hospital was rebuilt, and the Australian Medical Support Force

Hospital (the United Nations Hospital) was established therein. Tens of thousands of sick and injured Rwandans were treated in Displaced Persons Camps within Rwanda, in Refugee Camps in surrounding countries and in Clinics in cities and towns in Rwanda itself.

Healing

In the late twentieth century inter-tribal conflicts in Nigeria, Angola, Cambodia and inter-ethnic violence in the former Yugoslavia and the former USSR have become common. One analysis of history has shown that the source of such civil war has been an imposition of expatriate boundaries and social systems upon regions of the world which had hitherto evolved into areas of relative stability. An analysis of recent civil wars has shown that in bloody and genocidal civil wars there can be no true victor; and that if the world responds by offering a 'breathing space', and establishes role models of both civilised behaviour and conflict-resolution, then there is hope for future stability. This has been the role of the United Nations generally, and Australia's foreign policy in the Rwandan deployment, in particular. The analysis of history, and the perspective which it brings, will form an essential tool for policy-makers of the future.

In the healing of Rwanda, two particular themes stand out from the point of view of reducing ongoing morbidity and mortality. The first of these relates to the increasing incidence of HIV infection among the population, and particularly the high rates of infection among young adults. An inevitable aftermath of civil war in Africa has been an escalation of the HIV-positive rate. Prior to the civil war of 1994, Rwandan Health Department figures indicated that some 30 per cent of city-dwelling Rwandese had become HIV positive. With a median life expectancy, after diagnosis, of some ten years, this has the inevitable consequence that such young adults, inevitably parents (often parents of large numbers of children), will leave an increasing army of orphans in the future. In the total civil disruption that occurred after the outbreak of war in April 1994, the transmission and infection rate with HIV has inexorably increased. An analysis of history reveals that in the aftermath of any social disruption, there is a legacy of widespread disease. In this instance, HIV has replaced, in the historical perspective, the dysentery and typhus of earlier campaigns.

The second legacy which this civil war has left has been a country in which there are extensive (and unknown) unexploded military ordnance, particularly landmines. The seeding of much of Afghanistan

in the 1970s and 1980s with landmines during that country's civil war, also left a legacy of maiming of the innocent, particularly children, in the ensuing decades. So it is with Rwanda. Landmines have long been a legitimate weapon of war, but not a legitimate weapon of the ensuing peace.⁷ In this context, history shows that in the short-term what is required is an international convention to incorporate a time-expiry fuse into such ordinance, particularly landmines, such that when peace does break out—as surely it always does—the innocent will remain safe.

The history of civil war in Rwanda, like the killings that occurred in the American civil war, in that of Cambodia, in Nigeria and in Bosnia-Croatia-Serbia; and in the French Revolution and the English Civil War of 1648—all show that fighting is never more grotesque and cruel than when it is perpetrated upon one's own. An analysis of history reveals just how thin can be the veneer of civilisation. History is one tool, through its education and knowledge and awareness of the disasters of the past, by which a safer world can be ensured for the future.

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7. Pearn, J. H., 'Landmines: time for an international ban', [Editorial], *Brit. Med. J.*, 312: 990—1.