

National Unity and Reconciliation in the Rwandan Army since 1994

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Introduction

From Cote d'Ivoire and Mali to Belgium and India, many national armies are faced with the problem of ethnic, religious or linguistic divisions. Even armies that boast great professionalism and efficacy may fail to uphold the ideal of national unity, a crucial factor in the stable development of modern societies. I hope that my research can shed light on this under-examined theme: the pivotal, unifying role that national armies can play in post-conflict societies. Understanding the unity and reconciliation process in the Rwandan army can strengthen our efforts to fight against genocide—and not only in Rwanda, but also globally.

Over the course of three months, up to 1 million Tutsi¹ were exterminated in Rwanda, following the coup of a Hutu extremist regime on April 6th 1994. Extremist militias (known as the *Interahamwe*), the Presidential Guard, the Armed Forces of Rwanda (FAR), and ordinary citizens all participated in this state-sponsored genocide. By mid-July, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and its armed branch, the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA), had won the Rwandan Civil War, successfully putting an end to the killings. The FAR was the Hutu army, while the RPA was originally dominated by the Tutsi.

How to reconstruct a national army when one part of the army participated in the genocide and the other part stopped it? What were the most influential ideas, values and processes that have guided the reconstruction of the Rwandan army since 1994?

Through my field research, I have attempted to answer these questions. I conclude that the reconstruction of Rwanda's post-genocide army was shaped by three pivotal forces: a historical one,

¹ as well as politically moderate Hutu

a political one (domestic), and an international one. Thus, it was guided not only by domestic factors, but also by international dynamics. Firstly, the reconstruction of Rwanda's army is rooted in the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF)'s historical tradition at peace-building through national unity and reconciliation. Secondly, it was actualized through the post-genocide government's agenda of nation-building since 1994. Finally, Rwanda's participation in the Congolese conflict (1996-1997 and 1998-2003) profoundly facilitated the reconstruction of the Rwandan army in the post-genocide years.

Research Methods and Challenges

To collect data in Rwanda, I explored documents in the Library Services of Rwanda, the Rwandan Parliament Library, and in National Unity and Reconciliation Commission. Moreover, I interviewed several Rwandan academics, journalists, and "average" Rwandans (through my network of academics and journalists, I was able to conduct a convenient sample). The "average" Rwandans I interviewed either had personal or familial background in the army, or had particular knowledge of Rwanda's army, Rwanda's post-genocide reconstruction, and Rwanda's participation in the Congolese conflict.

During my time doing research in Rwanda, I faced several challenges. Conducting research on the Rwandan army is, without a doubt, a challenging task. Indeed, the Rwandan army is an extremely opaque, secretive organization. Thus, I was unable to secure interviews with military personnel, and it was strictly impossible to access military archives. However, I was able to collect reliable data from people with special knowledge and/or experience of the Rwandan military. Next time I conduct research on Rwanda's army, I will seek a recommendation letter from the U.S. Pentagon before leaving!

I. The RPF legacy

The reconstruction of Rwanda's post-genocide army is first and foremost rooted in the RPF's historical commitment to peace-building through national unity and reconciliation. In fact, the RPF upheld the ideal of national unity long before it reached power after the genocide in 1994. The RPF was formed in 1987 by a group of Rwandan Tutsi refugees who had lived in exile in Uganda for decades, unable to return to Rwanda due to the oppressive nature of the pre-genocide Hutu regime. The first point of the RPF's political programme was the "Consolidation of National

Unity.”² According to Tom Ndahiro, a prominent genocide scholar in Rwanda, “the RPA was the army of the RPF, so the original character of RPA was the same as that of the RPF. Pursuing national unity was its target and its doctrine.”³ In fact, even during the civil war it fought against the FAR from 1990-1994, the RPA recruited many Hutu soldiers from inside Rwanda. In 1991, the RPA attacked the Ruhengeri prison and liberated notable Hutu political prisoners such as Captain Muvunanyambo and Commander Biseruka. They then became members of the RPF struggle and helped the RPA recruit an important number of Hutu fighters.⁴ One of my informants who identified himself as “Banyamulenge”⁵ and whose two brothers fought in the RPA, told me “there had always been Hutu in the RPA.”⁶ Committed to national unity since its founding, the RPF sought to create an all-inclusive national army. Including Hutu in its ranks during the civil war, the RPA was the embryo of what was to become the all-inclusive army of post-genocide Rwanda. According to Tom Ndahiro, “in 1992, the military doctrine of the previous army, the FAR, was based on ethnic sectarianism and racism. The FAR said that the enemies of country were the Tutsi—those inside and outside the country. This led to genocide. To undo what the FAR thought and did, the RPF/A had to maintain a commitment to defeat that ideology.”⁷

In 1996, Rwanda secured the return of some 700,000 Hutu civilians from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). They had been held hostage there by remnant forces of the genocide (ex-FAR and *Interahamwe*), which had fled Rwanda in July 1994 following the RPF/A victory. The repatriation and resettlement of civilians “was an important step in the conflict management process in post-genocide Rwanda.”⁸ In fact, as Ndahiro told me, “the repatriation of refugees in 1996 eventually led to the repatriation of the former army.”⁹ In 1997, the Rwandan government created the Rwanda Demobilization and Reintegration Commission (RDRC), an institution designed to encourage soldiers of Rwandan origin causing insecurity to Rwanda to demobilize and repatriate. The RDRC contributes to the reconstruction of the Rwandan army by advancing “unity and

² Rutazibwa, in Vandeginste and Huyse 2005: 121

³ Personal interview with Tom Ndahiro

⁴ Rusagara 2009: 177

⁵ The Banyamulenge are population of ethnic Tutsi that live in the South Kivu province of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) since the 19th century, when they emigrated from Rwanda. The question of their national allegiance is complex. There are many Banyamulenge that live in Rwanda today, but the majority still live in Congo.

⁶ Personal Interview with “Banyamulenge”

⁷ Personal interview with Tom Ndahiro

⁸ Rusagara 2009: 197

⁹ Personal interview with Tom Ndahiro

reconciliation among former soldiers from different backgrounds”¹⁰ (notably ex-FAR and RPA). In fact, this institution inherited from the RPF the values of national unity and solidarity as well as the pledge to welcome home Rwandan refugees from throughout the region. According to “H.,” a man whose family had been among the Tutsi refugees in Uganda that returned after the genocide, “the RPA mainly drew its recruits from Rwandan refugee populations, whether they were from Uganda, Congo, Burundi, or Tanzania.”¹¹ Indeed, the RDRC mission is in line with the RPF’s commitment to nation-building and peace-building through fighting the problem of Rwandan refugees.¹²

The negotiated end to the Rwandan Civil War (Arusha Accords) mandated “the reconstruction of a government and national army that would peacefully represent both the Hutu and Tutsi tribes.”¹³ The accords were broken and the genocide was carried out in 1994, but the RPF maintained its commitment to reconstruct an all-inclusive national army, devoid of ethnic division.

II. The post-genocide nation building project

The reconstruction of the Rwandan army was, without a doubt, guided by the government’s post-genocide policy of nation building. Since its creation on July 19th, 1994, the “Government of National Unity”¹⁴ had sought to create a climate of internal cohesion by fighting ethnic sectarianism. According to the logic of nation building, “a country cannot survive without destroying ideology of ethnic sectarianism & divisionism,”¹⁵ Tom Ndahiro told me. Promoting national unity had always been a key pillar of the post-genocide government’s domestic agenda.¹⁶ The mission of the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission, established in 1999, was to strengthen unity, reconciliation, social cohesion, and good governance.¹⁷ Reforming the army was embedded in this overarching goal of national unity. Indeed, the objective of the government was to make the RPA even more inclusive. More than 15,000 ex-FAR members (from all military ranks) were reintegrated in the new national army by 2001.¹⁸ In fact, the Rwanda Demobilization and Reintegration Commission

¹⁰ “Interview of Brig Gen. John Peter Bagabo, RDRC Commissioner,” *DemobRwanda*, RDRC Special Magazine, No 2, December 2012, Republic of Rwanda - Rwanda Demobilization and Reintegration Commission, p.7

¹¹ Personal interview with “H.”

¹² *DemobRwanda*, RDRC Special Magazine, No 2, December 2012, Republic of Rwanda - Rwanda Demobilization and Reintegration Commission, p.20

¹³ “A Soldier’s Duty,” in *New Times*, September 16-18th 2002, No. 351, p. 27

¹⁴ Official name

¹⁵ Personal interview with Tom Ndahiro

¹⁶ *Training Manual on Conflict Management*, Republic of Rwanda - National Unity and Reconciliation Commission, Kigali, February 2006, p. 1

¹⁷ *National Unity and Reconciliation Commission 2012-2013 Action Plan*, National Unity and Reconciliation Commission – Republic of Rwanda, Kigali, July 2012-June 2013, p.3

¹⁸ *Rwanda 1994-2001: the Rebirth of a Nation*, Point de Vue, Publi-Information, 2001, p. vi

(RDRC) was one of the central institutions aimed at managing diverse ethnicities and creating national solidarity.¹⁹

The reform of the army culminated in its name change in 2002. Rwanda underwent many changes in the period 1999-2003. A new national anthem and a new flag were introduced, and in 2003, a new constitution was passed. In May 2002, the Rwandan Parliament passed the Law 19/2002 that changed the name of the national army from Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA) to Rwandan Defence Force (RDF). This change happened amidst the new nationalistic dynamic experienced by the country. Indeed, “the Rwandan government did not want the country to be divided along ethnic lines like it was before. It searched for different ways of promoting unity and reconciliation, and the reform of the army was one of them. It wanted to create an army that was even more inclusive, at least by name, than the RPF/A ‘Inkotanyi’. The government thought this would contribute to solidifying the unity of nation.”²⁰

According to Ndahiro, the name change of the army was only symptomatic of the many changes that were happening in Rwanda: “it was not a fundamental change of character. A lot of reform in the army had been done before the name change. The first demobilization (and reintegration) happened as early as 1994. The spirit came first, and then the name change.”²¹ In fact, the Rwandan government especially changed the name of the army to make explicit the military’s commitment to national unity and solidarity. Rusagara writes that “the RPF realized that, since the military was an instrument of violence that was monopolized by the state, it also had a higher social responsibility in facilitating social cohesion.”²² Hence, the reconstruction of Rwanda’s post-genocide army was undoubtedly shaped by the Rwandan government’s desire to promote domestic cohesion and peace through nation building.

III. The Congolese conflict

Rwanda’s participation in the Congolese conflict decisively shaped the reconstruction of the Rwandan army. Indeed, as the RPA fought armed groups of Rwandan refugees that upheld the divisive, sectarian ideology that the Rwandan government was attempting to eliminate domestically, it paved the way for the demobilization, repatriation, and reintegration of thousands of extremist

¹⁹ *Democracy and Good Political Governance N 1*, accessed through the National Unity & Reconciliation Commission, 2003-2010 p.12

²⁰ Personal interview with “Banyamulenge”

²¹ Personal interview with Tom Ndahiro

²² Rusagara 2009: 194

fighters. The Congolese conflict pitted the RPA against the Army for the Liberation of Rwanda (ALIR) and subsequently the Forces Democratiques pour la Liberation du Rwanda (FDLR). These rebel groups had emerged from the ruins of the FAR and the *Interahamwe*, the defeated elements of the Rwandan Civil War which the RPA had sent into exile in the Congo following its victory in July 1994. Fighting against elements that advocated for extremist ideology, the Rwandan army experienced an increase in national unity and solidarity. According to Tom Ndahiro, the Rwandan army was “fighting not just guns, but with ideas.”²³ Indeed, “an army is cemented by a doctrine. If the army believes in racism, the army will fight for a racist cause; if the army is against racism, it tries to eliminate racist ideology.”²⁴ In fact, unity in the army was not merely along ethnic lines (Hutu-Tutsi); it was especially solidarity about ideology, a united fight against old ideas that led Rwanda to genocide.²⁵ In fact, the RPA had always included Hutu in its ranks, so its challenge was not simply an ethnic one; it was ideological one, a fight against extremism. Thus, as Hutu and Tutsi soldiers in the RPA fought for a common cause in the Congo, they became further united by the ideal of an undivided Rwanda upheld by the Rwandan government and army.

The repatriation of tens of thousands of ex-combatants from the Congo since 1997 was, without a doubt, an accelerating catalyst for the reconstruction of Rwanda’s army. In fact, “Rwanda had a strategy: sensitize FDLR fighters and return them to Rwanda. This was a real strategy, an intentional one.”²⁶ According to the New Times Rwanda, “intense sensitization is usually done before combatants are demobilized and integrated into civilian life.”²⁷ The fact that the RDRC was created in 1997 demonstrates that repatriation was indeed a pivotal objective during the war. Rwanda’s fighting objective in the Congo was not simply to eliminate the negative forces from Congo, but rather to dissuade them to keep fighting and encourage them to disarm and repatriate. More than 75,000 ex-combatants have been repatriated and reintegrated since the beginning of the RDRC program in 1997.²⁸ In 2003, Maj. Gen. Paul Rwarakabije, former FLDR commander, returned to Rwanda and subsequently became Commissioner for Rwanda Correctional Services. Other ex-FAR, ALIR, and FDLR high officers who returned to Rwanda include Maj. Gen. Jerome Ngendahimana (deputy chief of staff of the RDF reserve force), Maj. Filipino Hitimana, Col.

²³ Personal interview with Tom Ndahiro

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Personal Interview with “Banyamulenge”

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ “Over 19000 to be demobilized,” *The New Times*, September 30-October 2 2002, No. 355, p. 3

²⁸ *DemobRwanda*, RDRC Special Magazine, No 2, December 2012, Republic of Rwanda - Rwanda Demobilization and Reintegration Commission, p.3

Karegeya, and Col. Kanimba. As ex-combatants and leaders from different armed groups end up collaborating in the Rwandan army, national identity, unity, and solidarity are undoubtedly reinforced. Longman recognizes that Hutu “presence in the ranks of the military clearly does present the RPF with an opportunity” to “integrate them into their cause.”²⁹ “Banyamulenge” told me there were two reasons for this demobilization and reintegration strategy: “the genocide dispersed a lot of Rwandans in the region, and the government genuinely wanted Rwandans to return.” Also, “when enemies are repatriated and reintegrated in Rwanda, there is less risk to the security of the country. It is a better alternative than to indefinitely continue waging war.”³⁰ In fact, the Rwandan government has preferred to deal with its enemies within its territory rather than outside, because if combatants were not demobilized and repatriated, they would continue to cause insecurity. Thanks to good governance and the efficiency of the RDRC commission, the Rwandan government knows it can successfully manage demobilized soldiers within its territory and prevent them from causing internal insecurity.³¹ According to prominent Rwandan journalist Albert Rudatsimburwa, “whoever was ready to leave behind genocide ideology was openly welcomed back to the motherland. Anyone else who preferred to remain in the bush hoping to invade Rwanda would be dealt with by any means if necessary.” Moreover, he told me:

In post-genocide Rwanda, nothing close or leaning towards genocide or its denial would be tolerated, yet society had to find a way to compensate and assist both sides [Hutu and Tutsi] to renew the social pact of living together. If this was true for the Rwandans, it was so for every Rwandan wherever he was. The Congo wars have been handled in the same logic³²

The RDF strives to “restore peace and security”³³ through unity and reconciliation. As demobilization and reintegration have been crucial instruments in the pursuit of military reconciliation, they have undoubtedly guided the reconstruction of Rwanda’s post-genocide army. Indeed, “forming an inclusive national army out of the Armed Forces of Rwanda (FAR) and the Rwanda Patriotic Army (RPA)” went “hand-in-hand with demobilization.”³⁴ As Rusagara writes, “the RDF today not only ensures security for all, but provides a model of national unity and

²⁹ Longman in Clark 2002: 136

³⁰ Personal Interview with “Banyamulenge”

³¹ *DemobRwanda*, RDRC Special Magazine, No 2, December 2012, Republic of Rwanda - Rwanda Demobilization and Reintegration Commission, p.8

³² Personal Interview with Albert Rudatsimburwa

³³ *DemobRwanda*, RDRC Special Magazine, No 2, December 2012, Republic of Rwanda - Rwanda Demobilization and Reintegration Commission, p.7

³⁴ *Ibid*, p.4

integration.”³⁵ Thus, the demobilization and reintegration strategy was in fact an integral part of the effort to reconstruct the national army.

Some of my informants told me that ex-FAR, ALIR, and FDLR members that were repatriated joined Rwanda’s army to go back and fight in Congo against the very negative elements they were once members or leaders of.³⁶ However, it has been impossible to find any official information regarding such a process of re-enlistment. In 2002, Sayinzoga, the RDRC chairman, refuted such allegations.³⁷ I have discovered that re-enlistment in Rwanda has in fact been deemed a controversial method among security circles. That is why the Rwandan government does not publicize it.³⁸ Regardless, re-enlistment of former combatants that subsequently returned to fight in Congo would have no doubt contributed to an increase in national solidarity within the Rwandan post-genocide army. “T.” told me that, through intense propaganda, ALIR and FDLR leaders in the Congo tell soldiers and their civilian dependents that every Hutu that returns to Rwanda is killed. But “when those coming back to Rwanda find that the situation is completely different, that the country is in fact peaceful, clean, and developing fast, they are energized to go back to the Congo and fight those that are kept there.”³⁹

In battling the same ideology the Rwandan government was attempting to eradicate domestically, the Rwandan army in the Congo experienced an increase in national unity and solidarity. And, as it led to a significant process of demobilization and reintegration, Rwanda’s engagement in the war moreover contributed to reconciliation within the post-genocide military. Thus, participation in the Congo war was a decisive international factor that profoundly shaped the reconstruction of Rwanda’s army.

Conclusion

The reconstruction of Rwanda’s army since 1994 has been guided by three major forces—the historical force of the RPF legacy, the domestic political force of the nation building agenda carried out by the RPF government since 1994, and the international force of the Congo war. Since its founding in Uganda in 1987, the RPF has always maintained a commitment at peace-building through national unity. Before, during, and after the genocide, the RPA, the armed branch of the

³⁵ Rusagara 2009; prologue: xx

³⁶ Personal interviews with “H.,” and “W.,” and “T.”

³⁷ “Over 19000 to be demobilized,” *The New Times*, September 30-October 2 2002, No. 355, p.3

³⁸ Personal interview with “L.”

³⁹ Personal interview with “T.”

RPF, has reflected this commitment by integrating Hutu alongside Tutsi. The reconstruction of Rwanda's army after the genocide has emerged from the RPF's political vision and from the RPA's military model. The government's project of achieving national unity and reconciliation after the genocide was no doubt crucial in shaping the reconstruction of the post-genocide Rwanda, but the Congolese conflict may have been the most decisive force, one that gave tangible results very rapidly. Indeed, engagement in the Congo war enabled the Rwandan army to bolster its fight against ethnic-sectarian ideology, cement the doctrine of national unity, and demobilize, repatriate and reintegrate tens of thousands of Rwandan soldiers that fought in various rebel groups against Rwanda.

During my research, I have also attempted to examine another international dimension of the Rwandan army—its preponderant role in international peacekeeping efforts. In the last 10 years the Rwandan army has participated in a variety of peacekeeping missions, from Africa to the Caribbean and Central Asia. The RDF has sent troops to international operations in Darfur, South Sudan, Mali, Haiti, and Nepal. It is difficult to grasp the influence of peacekeeping upon unity and reconciliation within Rwanda's army, but it has become clear to me that peacekeeping enables the RDF to project to the world Rwanda's domestic efforts at promoting peace, unity, and reconciliation. Indeed, "creating peace in other countries, the RDF reflects Rwanda's genuine mission to continue to create peace at home."⁴⁰ Thus, "going to Sudan helps Rwanda show to the world that Rwandans are reconciled."⁴¹ However, as Ndahiro told me, "peacekeeping perhaps helps foster the image of unity in the army, but that is not the intention or strategy. The Rwandan army is there because it is professional."⁴²

Rwanda's army is a fascinating one, as its efforts to promote national unity within its ranks are unprecedented. And yet, few have explored it. Moreover, the role of the Rwanda Demobilization and Reintegration Commission (RDRC) in creating unity and reconciliation in Rwanda has been under-examined. Indeed, "few have investigated and analyzed how demobilization has been handled in practice by the RDRC and the extent to which this contributed to regional peace, national unity and reconciliation."⁴³ The World Bank, for example, has lauded Rwanda's approach at demobilization and reintegration numerous times. Rwanda is also fascinating because an integral part

⁴⁰ Personal Interview with "Banyamulenge"

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Personal interview with Tom Ndahiro

⁴³ *DemobRwanda*, RDRC Special Magazine, No 2, December 2012, Republic of Rwanda - Rwanda Demobilization and Reintegration Commission, p.4

of its mission is to contribute to the socio-economic development of Rwanda. Indeed, the current Minister of Defence, James Kabarebe, recently said “the Rwanda Patriotic Army renamed RDF in May 2002 believes in and works towards being the foundation for the development of Rwanda.”⁴⁴ Rwanda today is one of the safest and fastest developing African nations. The RDF has certainly played an important role in Rwanda’s development, and I hope to explore this role in my next research project.

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