

(Oral) History of Violence: Conflicting Narratives in Post-Genocide Rwanda

Yolande Bouka, American University

Following the 1994 genocide, Rwanda deployed a series of comprehensive transitional justice projects seeking to hold criminally accountable all who participated in the violence. An investigation of former genocide detainees' journeys through the post-conflict justice system reveals divergences between how they choose to remember and relate the violence surrounding the 1994 genocide in relation to the current government's official narrative. While incongruities between the official narrative and the memories of ordinary Rwandans have been thoroughly documented in recent research, this article focuses on the form and content of released prisoners' discourses and offers an investigative window into how those who became objects, subjects, and products of the post-conflict justice system understand concepts of justice, criminal accountability and reconciliation in post-genocide Rwanda. My research took place in the fault lines of the authorized discourse on justice in Rwanda and like many other social scientists investigating post-conflict Rwanda, I relied on oral histories. As this article will demonstrate, investigating the narratives of released prisoners of the genocide and pinning them against the official narrative exposes how they interpret the causes and consequences of the episode of violence they lived through and offers an interesting vantage point from which to conceptualize and analyze criminality and victimhood during episodes of mass violence.

Following episodes of violence, post-conflict societies struggle to piece together coherent narratives about what happened. The determination of 'truth' becomes a power-laden process where competing and fragmented memories of survivors, perpetrators, witnesses, and bystanders contend for prime position alongside the often clashing narratives of politicians.¹ In the process, memorialization efforts – most often nationalized – take a variety of shapes such as memorials, museums, and annual commemorations. Nationalized commemoration works in tandem with various transitional justice mechanisms to acknowledge civilian experiences of

¹ Kevin Lewis O'Neill and Alexander Laban Hinton, "Genocide, Truth, Memory, and Representation: An Introduction," in *Genocide: Truth, Memory, and Representation*, eds. Alexander Laban Hinton and Kevin Lewis O'Neill (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 5; and Susan M. Thomson, *Whispering Truth to Power: Everyday Life and State Power in Post-Genocide Rwanda* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013).

violence.² Whether they take the form of official inquiries, truth commissions, domestic trials, or international tribunals, they usually produce historically and politically powerful legal transcripts, mostly based on oral evidence extracted from testimonies of individuals officially categorized as victims or perpetrators.

When criminal proceedings are used as national transitional justice projects, trials become performances that represent and shape participants' collective identities based on their roles and the scripts that are available to them during those trials within the language and framework of criminal law.³ The framework defined by the state determines who can be considered a survivor and who is therefore classified as an aggressor.⁴ These collective identities then influence the political and social space one can occupy in the post-conflict society and the role one can play in the official reconciliation process. However, in order to explore the basis upon which each individual defines which offenses and grievances warrant their need for reconciliation, one must access civilians' memories as voiced outside the constraints of these official structures.

This article focuses on released prisoners of the genocide and their understanding of justice, criminal accountability, and reconciliation as revealed in memories of violence that took place in Rwanda and the surrounding Great Lakes region during the 1990s. I contrast Rwanda's program of nationalized commemoration and associated legal transcript of the genocide with the personal narratives of civilians from Northern Rwanda who were at some point in their lives objects, subjects, and products of the transitional justice system. This approach, unsurprisingly, exposes clear incongruences between their memories and the official narrative. However, most interestingly this analysis disaggregates acts of violence during the war, the 1994 genocide, and the subsequent mass atrocities to expose the many layers of victimhood and perpetratorhood which characterize these various episodes of violence.

The first part of this article offers a short summary of the official narrative on violence in Rwanda during the 1990s, after which I will briefly explain the context of my research and discuss my research methods. The article will then address the relevance of interviewing released prisoners from Northern Rwanda. Then, I will explore my respondents' memories to reveal the main points of contention between the official narrative and personal experiences. Finally, I will

² Jennie E. Burnet, *Genocide Lives in Us: Women, Memory and Silence in Rwanda* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012).

³ Christiane Wilke, "Staging Violence, Staging Identities: Identity Politics in Domestic Prosecutions," in *Identities in Transition: Challenges for Transitional Justice in Divided Societies*, ed. Arthur Paige (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 118-119.

⁴ Rachel Ibreck, "The Politics of Mourning: Survivor Contributions to Memorials in Post-Genocide Rwanda," *Memory Studies* 3 (2010): 330-343.

analyze former detainees' understandings of justice and reconciliation and the prospect for social repair.

Starting Point: The Official Narrative on Violence in Rwanda and the Region

Following the civil war and the genocide in Rwanda, the victorious Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) implemented a comprehensive transitional justice program. This program sought to hold criminally accountable all who participated in the horrors of the genocide; from the highest to the lowest levels of society. The new regime was able to determine the framework and implementation of the post-conflict justice system and to focus prosecution on narrowly defined genocide crimes. This meant that crimes committed against Rwandans by the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA) during the civil war and the First Congo War (1996-1997) were largely ignored, allowing the victorious RPF to use the legal transcript to buttress its legitimacy.⁵

Unsurprisingly, many of the memories offered by ordinary Rwandans differ significantly from the official narrative.⁶ In the case of released prisoners of the genocide, their memories need to be understood within the framework of the official narrative which emerges from the legal transcript on the violence in

⁵ The RPA is the military arm of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), currently the ruling party in Rwanda. In 1998, in response to international pressure to deal with RPA massive human rights violations, the Rwandan government severely punished a handful of RPA soldiers who engaged in extrajudicial executions and excessive force. Trials were conducted away from the public in military courts. A few who were convicted were handed death sentences performed publically along with some soldiers who were summarily executed without trial. The government not only put an end to the executions, but eventually relaxed its accountability standards for members of the RPA. Moreover, in early 2008, the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda almost filled charges against four Rwandan military officers with war crimes for the 1994 executing of 15 civilians, 13 of them clergy members. The move was countered by the Rwandan government indicting those individuals and trying them domestically. The two low ranking officers confessed and were convicted to 8 years in prison, while the two high-ranking officials were acquitted. Amnesty International, *Rwanda: Fear of Executions*, 19 January 1998, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AFR47/003/1998/es>; LIPRODHOR, *Eight Years in Prison for Captains Butera and Rubeka*, 2008, <http://www.liprodhor.org/en/2008/10/rwandacrimes-de-guerre-huit-ans-de-prison-pour-les-capitaines-butera-et-rukeba-acquittement-pour-le-general-de-brigade-gumisiriza-et-le-major-ukwishaka/>.

⁶ For examples of research addressing this topic, see Susanne Buckley-Zistel, "We are Pretending Peace: Local Memory and the Absence of Social Transformation and Reconciliation in Rwanda" in *After Genocide: Transitional Justice, Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Reconciliation Rwanda and Beyond*, ed. Phil Clark and Zachary D. Kaufman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 153-171; Burnet, *Genocide Lives in Us*; Bert Ingelaere, "A la Recherche de la Vérité dans les Juridictions Gacaca au Rwanda," in *L'Afrique des Grands Lacs, Annuaire 2006-2007*, ed. Filip Reyntjens, Marysse Stefaan, and Stef Vandeginste (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2007), 41-74; Elisabeth King, "Memory Controversies in Post-Genocide Rwanda: Implications for Peacebuilding," *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 5 (2010): 293-309; and Thomson, *Whispering Truth to Power*.

Rwanda during the 1990s. Indeed, many of the points of incongruence between the official narrative and my respondents' oral histories, as they related to my research, dealt with the roles and intent of perpetrators of violence – accused *génocidaires*⁷ and the RPA alike – during the Rwandan civil war, the genocide, and the First Congo War. As in all criminal proceedings, determining the motives and *mens rea* (criminal intent) of the violence plays an important part in assigning criminal guilt to actors and in deciding who should be subject to the jurisdiction of transitional justice programs. In post-genocide Rwanda, the current regime bases its official narrative on “just war theory”⁸ to assert that RPA troops, aside from a few unauthorized cases, consistently used force within the bounds of international humanitarian law and accepted norms of rules of engagement. The RPA absolves its members of most criminal responsibility by offering a liberation narrative in which RPA forces are the heroes of the New Rwanda. This liberation narrative privileges the “1994 genocide of the Tutsi” as the single episode of violence that impacted Rwandans in the 1990s and imposes on most Hutu males the label of *génocidaires*.⁹

The RPF's liberation discourse begins with the argument that the genocide was the consequence of hatred of the ethnic Tutsi minority by the Hutu majority, introduced by the Belgians during the colonial period.¹⁰ The narrative suggests that, following the end of Belgian colonialism, isolated individuals associated with the Hutu Power independence movement initiated a genocidal project against Rwanda's Tutsi minority population, starting with the violence of 1959 and culminating in the genocide of 1994.¹¹ In this narrative, the 1959 Hutu Revolution

⁷ Term used to refer to: 1) individuals convicted of genocide crimes in a court of law (legal definition); and, 2) individuals perceived to have participated in the genocide whether or not it has been proven in court (social definition).

⁸ “Just war theory” is a set of philosophical principles that guide whether the use of force is justified (*jus ad bellum*) and if, during a war, combatants behave according to accepted customary norms (*jus in bello*).

⁹ While I argue the importance of examining stories of victimhood throughout three major episodes of violence of the decade, being the civil war, the genocide, and the First Congo War, I recognize that the genocide stands alone in its planning, brutality, and devastation.

¹⁰ National Unity and Reconciliation Commission, *Rwanda Reconciliation Barometer* (Kigali: Government of Rwanda, 2010),

http://www.nurc.gov.rw/index.php?id=70&eID=dam_frontend_push&docID=11; Republic of Rwanda, *Rwanda, Report on the Reflection Meetings Held in the Office of the President of the Republic from May 1998 to March 1999* (Kigali: Office of the President of the Republic, 1999).

¹¹ Johan Pottier, *Re-Imagining Rwanda: Conflict, Survival and Disinformation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge University Press: New York, 2002), 123; and Nigel Eltringham, *Accounting for Horror Post-genocide Debates in Rwanda* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 36. The 1959 Hutu Revolution consists of the events surrounding the overthrow of the Tutsi monarchy and the takeover of political power by the Hutu intelligentsia. During the process, many Tutsi elite tied to power and the monarchy were attacked, while most ordinary Tutsi commoners were left alone. See René Lemarchand, *Rwanda and Burundi* (New York, Praeger Publishers, 1970); Catharine M.

is recast as the beginning of a series of ethnic pogroms that continued until the 1994 genocide.¹² It suggests, therefore, that this colonial legacy caused Rwandan society to fracture along ethnic lines, leading Hutu to harbor a deep hatred for Tutsi and to participate in genocidal violence under Hutu presidents Grégoire Kayibanda (1962-1973) and Juvénal Habyarimana (1973-1994).¹³ According to the official narrative, ethnic hatred was the motive behind the mass participation of Hutu in the 1994 genocide. In the end, this discursive strategy suggests that the RPA felt compelled to fight the Habyarimana leadership and FAR forces in the name of all Rwandans, after decades of citizenship rights' violations, political oppression, and genocidal killings against the Tutsi at the hand of successive Hutu regimes.

Additionally, despite government official renunciation of identity politics, the official discourse on violence in Rwanda offers a binary conceptualization of violence which collectively defines Tutsi as victims and Hutu as perpetrators. The current RPF's conceptualization of the genocide rightfully emphasizes Tutsi victimhood but ignores Hutu who were killed during the genocide and other episodes of violence during the same period. By associating victimhood with Tutsi ethnicity, the narrative also implicitly identifies the Hutu majority as *génocidaires* and does not acknowledge the possibility of their victimhood during the violence of the 1990s.¹⁴ Doing so would force the RPF to acknowledge the brutality RPA forces perpetrated against Rwandans, mostly Hutu, during the civil war and the genocide. As a result, references to the civil war are muted and replaced by an emphasis on the genocide, relegating to the background acts of violence that were not directly related to the strict and narrow RPF definition of genocide.¹⁵ By arguing that the war was an "armed struggle" to liberate all

Newbury, *The Cohesion of Oppression: Clientship and Ethnicity in Rwanda: 1860-1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); and Filip Reyntjens, *Pouvoir et Droit au Rwanda: Droit Public et Evolution Politique: 1916-1973* (Tervuren: Musee Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, 1985).

¹² Jean-Pierre Chrétien, *The Great Lakes of Africa: Two Thousand Years of History*, trans. Scott Straus (New York: Zone Books, 2003); and Jean Baptiste Kayigamba, "Without Justice, No Reconciliation: Survivor's Experience of Genocide," in *After Genocide: Transitional Justice, Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Reconciliation in Rwanda and Beyond*, ed. Phil Clark and Zachary D. Kaufman (Columbia University Press: New York, 2009), 33-42.

¹³ Nigel Eltringham and Saskia van Hoyweghen, "Power and Identity in Post-Genocide Rwanda," in *Politics of Identity and Economics of Conflict in the Great Lakes Region*, ed. Ruddy Doom and Jan Gorus (Brussels: VUB University Press, 2000), 226. Killings of Tutsi under the Habyarimana regime did not start until the 1990 invasion by the RPA.

¹⁴ Susan Thomson, "Re-education for Reconciliation: Participant Observations on Ingando," in *Reconstructing Rwanda: State Building and Human Rights after Mass Violence*, ed. Scott Straus and Lars Waldorf (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 378; and Eltringham and van Hoyweghen, *Power and Identity*, 226.

¹⁵ In the early years following genocide, the RPF-sponsored narrative offered a great deal of nuance in its analysis of the genocide. Indeed, there seems to have been, at the very beginning of

Rwandans, the regime is able to sanitize the RPA's role in violence against Rwandans during the first half of the 1990s and hail RPA troops as heroes of the liberation.

Finally, the regime uses the same liberation discourse to explain its repatriation of Hutu refugees from Eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in the post-genocide period in 1996.¹⁶ The RPF argues that the repatriation of these refugees was part of their ongoing efforts to reduce the risks of a resurgence of genocidal violence being orchestrated by Hutu extremists who sought refuge in the eastern DRC. As insurgents attempted to regroup and launch attacks from the refugee camps, the RPF argues that it had no choice but to use violence to secure its borders and ensure long-term political stability in Rwanda.¹⁷ Moreover, the regime furthers its liberation discourse by pointing to its concerns over the "safe return" of refugees to Rwanda. The regime claims that the majority of refugees wanted to return to Rwanda, but that militiamen and former government officials were preventing them from doing so.¹⁸ By framing the refugee crisis in DRC as a "refugee-hostages" problem, the regime created a situation in which it became their responsibility to once again liberate Rwandans from the remnants of the old genocidal regime.¹⁹ Once liberated from the militiamen and former government officials, refugees would presumably feel free to return to Rwanda.

the post-genocide era, a willingness from the RPF leadership to address the political undertones of the genocide. The leadership openly addressed the political motivations behind Hutu Power and the government-sponsored killings of 1994, including the elimination of Hutu opponents and other Hutu victims. Later, however, these nuances would disappear from the official discourse and the government would shift from talking about the 1994 "*itsembatsemba n'itsembabwoko*" (genocide and massacres) to only referring to the "*jenocide yakorewe abatutsi*" (genocide of the Tutsi). Amendment of 13/8/2008 of the Constitution of the Republic of Rwanda of 4 June 2003.

¹⁶ Following the genocide, two million Hutu, fearing retaliation at the hands of the RPF, fled Rwanda and settled in refugee camps in the Kivu region of DRC. The refugees were mostly civilians Hutus, most of who had not participated in the genocide. Among the refugees there were also members of genocide militias, of the Rwandan Armed Forces, and of the Habyarimana regime and local authority figures who had been actively involved in the genocide.

¹⁷ Paul Kagame, "Rwanda: President Kagame's Inaugural Speech: Highlights," *BBC News*, 22 April 2000, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/723090.stm>; Paul Kagame, "Q&A with Rwanda's Paul Kagame: Is Peace With Congo Near," *CNN International*, 2 February 2001, www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic; and Paul Kagame, "Rwanda; President Paul Kagame's Interview With Jeune Afrique," *Africa News*, 26 March 2009, www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic.

¹⁸ Paul Kagame, "Interview by Jim Clancy/ Culprits' Tales of Genocide in Rwanda Horrify," *CNN News*, 9 August 1994, www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic.

¹⁹ Filip Reyntjens, *The Great African War: Congo and Regional Geopolitics, 1996-2006* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 83.

The RPF's official narrative on the genocide and the First Congo War²⁰ is a mythico-history with a clear moral hierarchy of actors.²¹ By framing the discourse about its involvement in the violence in the region around its role as "liberator," the RPF defines the roles and motivations of actors according to ethnic identity, with Hutu as aggressors and Tutsi as victims. Moreover, it casts the events as a struggle between the oppressive dictatorship of Habyarimana and the "refugee warriors"²² who sacrificed their lives to free all Rwandans. Indeed, by shying away from the term "civil war," and public discussion of the War in Congo, the regime removes the connotation of power struggle and the implication that the invasions were acts of aggression. The regime, armed with a moral justification for the struggle is placed on the right side of a "just war," thereby eliminating the need to hold its troops accountable for their violations of humanitarian and international law.

Research Context and Methods

My research investigated the use of transitional justice in Rwanda as a tool of mythmaking and identity transformation in power politics among elites. I focused on released prisoners of the Rwandan genocide and analyzed their experiences during the war and their journeys in the transitional justice system. The investigation dissected and traced the webs of social power in the government's transitional justice project and evaluated their impacts on social interactions at the micro level. I identified and analyzed how knowledge and power flow through transitional justice mechanisms and influence the official narrative of violence in

²⁰ The First Congo War took place between August 1996 and May 1997, when the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire (AFDL) and foreign forces including Rwanda, Uganda, Angola, and Burundi invaded Zaire and overthrew long-term dictator Mobutu Sese Seko. The war left hundreds of thousands dead. During the conflict, the RPA forcibly repatriated approximately a million of Hutu refugees resulting in the death of about 200,000 mostly Hutu civilians. For in depth analysis of the First Congo War, see Reyntjens, *The Great African War*; and Gerard Prunier, *Africa's World War: Congo, the Rwandan Genocide, and the Making of a Continental Catastrophe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²¹ Liisa H. Malkki uses the term "mythico history" in her study of the narratives of Burundian refugees in a camp in Tanzania. She uses the term to refer to discourse of those refugees who would reinterpret their ethnic group's past in clear moral terms. What made their discourse mythico-histories was not that their narratives were either true or false but that their recasting of history was done "with the ordering and reordering of social and political categories, with the defining of self in distinction to other, with good and evil." See Liisa H. Malkki, *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994), 55.

²² Term borrowed from Aristide Zolberg, Astri Suhrke, and Sergio Aguayo, *Escape from Violence: Conflict and the Refugee Crisis in the Developing World* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1989), 275.

Rwanda. I found that as they journeyed through the legal system, former detainees were forced to take on simplistic and unitary identities which highlighted their assumed criminality, and eschewed their victimhood and the other identities that, following their release, continued to define them, affecting their identity, citizenship rights, and potential for reconciliation.²³

The findings of my dissertation research, on which I relied for this article, are based on four months of ethnographic fieldwork and thematic interviews of 66 released prisoners, some found guilty and others exonerated by the justice system. My respondents were from the District of Rulindo, in the Northern Province. Most interviews were conducted in Kinyarwanda with the help of an interpreter. In the few cases where respondents were comfortable speaking French, I conducted the interviews without an interpreter. Subjects were selected according to purposive sampling and snowball sampling methods. We first selected respondents from a list of released prisoners made available by a local organization working exclusively with this segment of the population. Because the lists were often incomplete or outdated, we would then ask respondents to refer us to relatives, friends, or neighbors who had also been accused of and incarcerated for genocide-related crimes. The coordinator of the organization I worked with was my research facilitator and was key in gaining access to participants and, most importantly and when possible, their trust.

I used thematic interviews to capture snapshots of respondents' life histories from the start of the civil war in 1990 until the summer of 2008, when the field work was conducted. I focused on what respondents chose to describe as the defining moments in their lives within that timeframe. Those defining moments varied from one respondent to another but our conversations allowed me to see which events they decided not to talk about or avoided. I then asked them questions about their lives, relationships and perceptions of the sociopolitical climate prior to the genocide. I inquired if, how, and when they perceived a change in the way Hutu and Tutsi interacted with each other. We explored their experiences during the war, the genocide, and their experiences in the refugee camps in the DRC, if they had fled the country following the genocide. We also discussed their journeys through the criminal justice system and their perceptions of the different mechanisms in place to adjudicate genocide crimes. We then talked about their return home and the challenges they faced in trying to reintegrate into their communities. From this information, I was able to draw a picture of their life experiences since the civil war.

²³ Yolande Bouka, "In the Shadow of Prison: Power, Identity, and Transitional Justice in Post-Genocide Rwanda." (PhD diss., American University, 2013).

Interviewing Former Detainees from Northern Rwanda

My interviews focused on released prisoners of the genocide, or individuals who, at one point or another, were accused and imprisoned under suspicion of having committed genocide crimes in 1994. As research subjects, they were not studied as “perpetrators” of the genocide. While many of them did indeed, commit crimes during the genocide – from stealing wooden doors of Tutsi houses to killing – the distinction is crucial to understand since many people who were accused of genocide crimes were not in fact *génocidaires*. Some of my respondents were arrested based on accurate facts about their involvement in the genocide, while others were incarcerated based of erroneous or malicious accusations of genocide crimes. Moreover, a number of those released prisoners were arrested because, at the time of the genocide, there were young Hutu males and fit the profile of a *génocidaire*. In the end, my respondents were released, some having been found guilty or innocent, while others were never tried.²⁴ What distinguished them as my research subjects is not necessarily the crimes many of them have committed but their legal journey.

A number of factors make investigating the memories of released prisoners from Northern Rwanda compelling. First, there is a lack of significant literature focusing on northern experiences of the genocide. The north experienced the civil war that began in 1990 between RPA and Rwandan government forces in unique ways. Civilians were often victims and/or witnesses of RPA attacks launched from Uganda, and of retaliation massacres against Tutsi by the Habyarimana regime. The surrounding communes sheltered wave after wave of internally displaced people (IDPs) fleeing the intense fighting in the

²⁴ It should be noted that a “guilty” or “innocent” verdict does not necessarily capture the level of responsibility of an accused. Indeed, a prisoner’s confession (or protestation of innocence) should not always be taken at face value. Some prisoners realizing that a confession could get them released, confessed to lesser crimes or crimes they did not commit in order to secure release for time already served (Personal Comm.). Moreover, being acquitted legally did not always signify that one was innocent. It may very well have been that all witnesses to the crimes were either dead or no longer in the country; that victims had negotiated their silence in exchange for financial compensation (particularly for families in dire financial situation); or that members of the community had agreed not to testify. It could also have meant that someone had engaged in the “*kugura umusozi*” or the purchase of a hill, which implies that someone had assumed alone the responsibility of a crime committed with others, and those left behind were to take charge of the financial needs of the confessor’s family. See Penal Reform International, *Rapport de Monitoring et de Recherche sur le Gacaca: Les Témoignages et la Preuve devant les Juridictions Gacaca*. 2008, <http://www.penalreform.org/files/rep-2008-gacaca11testimonyandproof-fr.pdf>. For an analysis of discursive strategies of released prisoners of the genocide, see Yolande Bouka, “*Nacibazo*, No Problem: Journeying Beneath the Official Discourse of Post-Genocide Rwanda” in *Emotional and Ethical Challenges for Field Research in Africa The Story Behind the Findings*, eds. Susan Thomson, An Ansoms and Jude Murison (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

north. Communities welcoming those refugees often heard stories of RPA forces killing civilians and rumors of Tutsi “accomplices” facilitating the attacks. By 1993, the RPA was able to secure a portion of territory in the northern part of the country and cease-fire was brokered – albeit often violated – creating a *zone tampon* or demilitarized zone (DMZ) close to the Ugandan border.

The civil war and Rwanda’s north-south political divide were key factors in determining how the genocide then took shape following Habaryimana’s assassination on 6 April 1994. The RPA presence meant that less genocidal violence occurred in northern Rwanda, while in southern Rwanda the genocide progressed rapidly. Given the intensity of the killings in the south, a significant amount of the research generated on the 1994 genocide and post-conflict Rwanda has been conducted south of the capital.²⁵ Moreover, many organizations, research centers, and educational institutions are based in Butare, south of Kigali. By focusing mostly on southern towns, what Kalyvas calls “partisan bias” of the study of violence has contributed to an imbalance in the representation of genocide and post-genocide experiences, ignoring the significant discrepancies in narratives between different actors across regions.²⁶

The people I interviewed along the Kigali-Ruhengeri road in northern Rwanda spent years pinned between the RPA and the Rwandan government forces controlled areas. Unlike Southerners, they experienced frequent episodes of intense violence and rumors of war for years prior to the genocide. By interviewing these northern respondents, I hoped to gather narratives that would contain important details relating to aspects of the recent history of violence in Rwanda that may have been excluded from the official discourse and the academic literature. Their unique positions offered alternative interpretations of the genocide, largely informed by their lived experiences of the civil war. It is no wonder then, that when exploring issues of post-conflict justice in Rwanda, I found that former genocide detainees also sought justice for crimes they had experienced, witnessed, or heard about that did not exist in the official narrative of post-genocide Rwanda’s transitional justice program. Their experiences gave them a position from which to contest, albeit in private, the very definition and application of the concept of criminality and justice with interjections such as: “They committed crimes too!”²⁷

²⁵ See Burnet, *Genocide Lives in Us*; Thomson, *Whispering Truth to Power*; Philip Verwimp, “Development and Genocide in Rwanda: A Political Economy Analysis of Power and Farmers under the Habyarimana Regime.” (PhD diss., Catholic University of Leuven, 2003).

²⁶ Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2006), Kindle Edition.

²⁷ Indeed such speech contracting the official discourse with regards to criminality during the violence of the 1990s can be construed as genocide ideology which is criminalized in Rwanda. The law has been criticized by human rights groups as an attempt to suppress political opposition. Amnesty International, *Safer to Stay Silent: The Chilling Effect of Rwanda’s Laws on ‘Genocide*

Talking with other released prisoners would have most likely given me similar narratives of lives in refugee camps and life in prison. However, the way Northerners' stories are told offer a unique backdrop to the genocide, particularly when contextualized according to their civil war experiences between 1990 and 1994. While such an approach is not representative of the whole country – each region, each town, and each hill experienced this violence differently – it does open an investigative window into those individual and collective memories that challenge the official discourse, albeit behind the scenes.

Released Prisoners Remembering Violence

But it is not everyone that has left the country [to find refuge in Congo] has committed genocide. It is true that the genocide took place. But even those who came from outside and are now the authorities of the country, they too have killed our own, right? They take the liberty to say that the others have committed a sin, but that they did not. (Cyprien)²⁸

Released prisoners of the genocide and their families offer memories that challenge the simplicity of the RPF's official narrative. While avoiding discussing the specific aspects of their guilt, a number of my respondents shared why they participated in the genocide and suggested that hate was not the main motivation behind their role in the killings. Others explained how they succeeded in saving or at least tried to save Tutsi, or how they had been victimized by the Hutu militias alongside their Tutsi compatriots. Moreover, as most of my respondents lived in Northern Rwanda during the war, they had witnessed the hostilities between the RPA and Rwandan Armed Forces (FAR). The memories of released prisoners focused on the intentionality and criminality of many of the violent acts committed by the RPA soldiers against Hutu civilians, thereby tarnishing the "hero" label applied to RPA forces in the official discourse, while attempting to diminish or justify their own criminal responsibility for the 1994 genocide. Finally, respondents who were in refugee camps in Eastern Congo in 1996 and 1997 contradict many aspects to the official liberation and "benevolent repatriation" narrative. The next few paragraphs will present how former detainees remember the different episodes of violence in the region.

Ideology' and 'Sectarianism,' 31 August 2010, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AFR47/005/2010>.

²⁸ The names of all respondents have been changed to protect their anonymity. Cyprien is a 50 farmer who was acquitted of collaborating with the FAR soldiers during the genocide.

Inambara (The War)

When former detainees from the north shared their memories about the genocide, they did so within the context of the civil war. While many in Rwanda first experienced violence in 1994, most of my respondents framed the genocide as an episode of violence related to the 1990 RPA invasion and subsequent civil war. “Tutsi refugees” who came from “outside the country” attacked Rwanda.²⁹ As the majority of my respondents lived relatively close to the demilitarized zone between the RPA and FAR forces in the northern part of the country, they remembered the RPA as the invading force which destabilized the region. The war was often cited as the catalyst for the changes in social relations between the Hutu and the Tutsi. Thus, the war initiated by the RPF was not a “liberation struggle.”³⁰ In particular, the people I met in the countryside referred to it as *inambara*, a war. The country had not been liberated but taken by “those who came from outside.”

While RPA guerilla campaigns were mostly aimed at FAR forces, they also caused significant harm to civilians in the north throughout the duration of the war, before the genocide, and in the rest of the country as the military confrontation with FAR continued. In Northern Rwanda, many Hutu, not enchanted by the idea of being “liberated” by the RPA, left their homes.³¹ As the RPA continued to make advances and captured more and more territory, the number of IDPs increased. By 1993, nearly one million Rwandans had been displaced.³²

Respondents often shared their memories of displacement. Vincent, a farmer, was in his early twenties at the time of the genocide. He is one of the respondents who confessed to participating in the genocide as he claimed that soldiers and many IDPs forced local farmers to kill their Tutsi neighbors. He lived not too far from Tumba and recounted how rumors of the October 1990 RPA attacks spread like wildfire.³³ While he did not witness the initial attacks, in the

²⁹ For an analysis of the origins of the RPF and the role of Ugandan politics of indigeneity in the RPF’s invasion, see Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

³⁰ During my fieldwork, I was informed by a shopkeeper that he would be closed on 4 July due to the national holiday. He told me that he understood why the holiday was important for “them” but he did not feel the need to close shop. He explained that he did not feel like he had been liberated by the government in power.

³¹ Gérard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis: History of Genocide* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 135-136.

³² Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, 187

³³ Tumba is a town in the Rulindo District which was very close to the demilitarized zone. Residents of the area were often caught in the crossfire between RPA and FAR forces. According to respondents’ accounts, RPA soldiers used to strategically position themselves and shoot their weapons from the top of the mountain in Tumba.

following years, his family and he were forced to flee as confrontations between the RPA and FAR intensified and drew close enough that bullets were flying above their heads. They left their field, homes, and other possessions and found refuge with relatives, or informal settlements further south. Starving, he and his neighbors occasionally returned to their fields to gather some provisions. However, not everyone returned to the camp alive: “The unlucky ones ran into the *Inkotanyi*³⁴ and lost their lives that way.”

People in Northern Rwanda were indeed often victims of RPA violence. Between 1990 and 1994, Hutu civilians in areas surrounding Byumba, Ngarama, and Ruhengeri, were at times summarily executed by RPA troops (Des Forges 1999, 541). People living in and around IDP camps were also not exempt from possible acts of violence from the *Inkotanyi*. Respondents shared stories of the relatives they lost during the war. While they did not always witness killings, Hutu in the north remain convinced that their relatives had fallen victim to RPA troops. Wellars, a 46-year old farmer who spent 12 years in pre-trial detention, recalled that his cousin was found murdered during the war. When asked who killed him, he answered “We think it was the soldiers, because we found his body next to their camp.” When asked to clarify which soldiers, he simply replied, “Those who just took the country.” Silas, an old bricklayer who looted dead Tutsi property during the genocide, described that, “the RPA attacks took place where my entire family was staying. So we decided to flee. We also lost our uncle. He was killed by RPA troops. They killed him along with other people in the house.” Servilien, a 37-year old prisoner awaiting trial at the time of the interview, recounted how his brother and two sisters “were killed by *Inkotanyi* as they fled the war towards Tanzania. They were in Kibungo.” Similarly, Pierre-Celestin, a 63-year old released prisoner who was cleared of genocide charges in court, shared that his sister and father were shot by the RPA during the final stages of the country’s takeover.

Stories shared by released prisoners of the genocide did not only include their own personal stories, but also incorporated the experiences of Hutu refugees they knew or had met during the 1990s. Many Rwandans residing in close proximity to areas of intense fighting fled their hills to find refuge further south, away from the RPA. IDPs from Cyeru, Butero, and Kivuye in northern Rwanda settled in camps located close to many of my respondents’ homes.³⁵ Some of those refugees came with horrible war stories. They shared stories of

³⁴ RPA soldiers. The term also refers to some of Tusti king Rwabugiri’s (1953-95) soldiers. However, Eltringham suggests that the RPF leadership may not have been aware of that fact when choosing the name. It is worth noting that the name is still officially used to refer to the RPF political party. See Eltringham, *Accounting for Horror*, 85.

³⁵ Thomas is a *génocidaire* who confessed to having participated in the attack of a neighboring Tutsi family.

indiscriminate killings of Hutu civilians at the hand of the RPA soldiers. For my respondents, these rumors of war, shared by people coming from areas close to the border, were incorporated into their own narratives of the war. “They,” the RPF forces, “those who took the country,” were killing them. Like the subjects of Malkki’s fieldwork who incorporated each other’s stories into their mythico-histories, my respondents incorporated the suffering of the people they knew as their own to add weight to their narratives of victimhood.³⁶ Former detainees did not necessarily share their experience of the war and violence in terms of the dates set by the official discourse, but expressed their memories in terms of the reality of the violence that surrounded them. Hence, many addressed the violence and abuses suffered or witnessed at the hand of RPA soldiers after the official end of the war and the genocide. For example, according to my respondents, after the RPF’s takeover of the country, some survivors encouraged soldiers to exact revenge against Hutu on their behalf. François explained, “I saw people who falsely accused people to the soldiers. The soldiers would take them and these people would simply disappear. So the soldiers would take them, here at Rulindo and would kill them. They were never seen again.” At 25 in 1994, François was arrested promptly after the genocide by those same soldiers to spend years in pre-trial detention.

Indeed, in the latter part of the civil war, as hostilities between the Habyarimana regime and the RPF escalated to genocide, other serious crimes were committed against civilians by the RPA. Scores of Hutu civilians, regardless of whether they chose to participate in massacres or attempted to flee the country, were killed by RPA soldiers. While the bulk of the RPA troops focused on stopping the genocide by targeting FAR and the *génocidaires*, some Hutu civilians were the victims of indiscriminate shooting and of summary executions.³⁷ Some killings were emotional acts of revenge at the hands of RPA soldiers who came home to find their relatives dead.³⁸ However, evidence suggests that many of those deaths were intentional and premeditated.³⁹

Many respondents shared such stories of RPA violence. For example, Jean, an electrician who was arrested and was promptly tried and released after the genocide, explained how his uncle disappeared at the hands of the RPA:

³⁶ Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, 102, 128.

³⁷ Roméo Dallaire, *Shake Hands with the Devil: The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2003), 378; Serge Desouter and Filip Reyntjens, *Rwanda: Les Violations des Droits de l’Homme par le FPR/APR: Plaidoyer pour une Enquête Approfondie*. (Antwerp: University of Antwerp, Center for the Study of the African Great Lakes Region, 1995), 15-6; Alison Liebhafsky Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda* (London and New York: Human Rights Watch, and Paris: Fédération Internationale de Ligues des Droits de l’Homme, 1999), 540-551.

³⁸ Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, 322-323.

³⁹ Des Forges, *Leave None*, 540-559.

There were a few disappearances at the beginning, because those people were never again seen... On my father's side, there is someone that was taken and we never saw him again. Others in this zone were taken at the Electrogaz station, down there, and we have never seen them since. We have looked for them in prisons, but we cannot find them.

Charles, another farmer, was arrested in a wave of mass arrests without any specific charges against him. He recalled:

Some were killed here, others were shot. Others convened to the district offices, and disappeared from the face of the earth. At the return from Congo, things went sour. No claim could be made over a disappearance, a killing... You met a soldier who could shoot you at will. Many were killed in custody. No one could claim.

Death at the hand of RPA soldiers during the war and at the beginning of the post-Habyarimana transition was one of the most powerful memories of former detainees. People they knew or people they heard about - Hutu such as they - had been killed. These deaths were not just collateral damage from the war against genocide, but were war crimes and crimes against humanity committed under the guise of civil war. According to former prisoners' narratives, intentional violation of humanitarian law was a reality of pre- and post-genocide Rwanda. For these respondents, the loss of their loved ones should be accounted for in the legal archives of the legacy of violence in Rwanda, thereby constituting an important counter-memory to the official narrative.

Genocide

The second point of the divergence between the official narrative and the memories offered by released prisoners deals with how the 1994 genocide is explained, the role that some of my respondents played, and the exclusion of Hutu as part of the victims of the genocide. First, my respondents contended that prior to the 1990s, there was no hatred between them and their Tutsi friends and neighbors. For respondents, the increasing embrace of violence in Rwanda became truly visible after the beginning of the civil war, particularly with the advent of multi-party politics in 1991. Indeed, their narrative of the genocide contextualizes the slaughter of Tutsi not only in terms of the RPA invasion, but also in terms of changes in the political landscape of Rwanda. The divisions created during the sudden emergence of multiple political parties, which took

shape along largely ethnic lines, contributed to enthusiastic killings by some participants in the genocide.⁴⁰ As the political contest became a winner-takes-all struggle, some political parties enrolled young men in their armed wings, effectively creating militias. Respondents explained that this political escalation led to violent confrontations between neighbors belonging to different political parties. People heard of grenade attacks and physical confrontations between members of different political parties. Cleophas, a released prisoner who was tried twice, first for genocide crimes and the second time for property theft, remembered:

During 1990, there were no conflicts. But it started when the political parties started to operate openly. In the meetings, the political parties started to distinguish the Hutu from the Tutsi, particularly the CDR [*Coalition pour la Défense de la République*], saying that the country belong to Hutu.⁴¹

Alfred, a young released prisoner who was sentenced to 10 years for his admitted participation in the genocide, recalled:

We lived well together. Under the former government, political parties were permitted which influenced people to show negative attitudes towards each other. What I know is that there were the MRND [*Mouvement Révolutionnaire National pour le Développement*] and the MDR [*Mouvement Démocratique Républicain*] political parties.⁴² Most Hutus were in MRND and many Tutsi were in PL [*Parti Libéral*].⁴³ A time came where things got worse and people got so excited that the government could not do anything to calm them. People did what they wanted until the war broke out; people killed each other.

For the released prisoners I interviewed, old hatreds dating back to the Kayibanda regime and the first years of Habyarimana's presidency were not a motivating factor when it came to participating in the genocide. Respondents who were in Kigali when the presidential plane was shot down argue that in the first

⁴⁰ Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*; and Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*.

⁴¹ The CDR was a far-right political group that espoused Hutu Power rhetoric.

⁴² The MRND was President Habyarimana's political party, while the MDR was a predominately Hutu (from Central Rwanda) political party that was part of the opposition coalition against Habyarimana.

⁴³ The PL was a multi-ethnic political party that was part of the opposition coalition against Habyarimana.

hours of the genocide, killing seemed to take place in a very organized matter. The initial stages of the killings were not conducted with spontaneous mass popular participation, but rather through carefully orchestrated attacks in which the Presidential Guard targeted specific moderate politicians, Tutsi and Hutu alike. This account, taken in consideration with the explanation from respondents that systematic extermination of the Tutsi did not immediately start in many regions of the north for a variety of reasons, suggests that released prisoners did not believe that the participation of ordinary people was spontaneous and charged with hatred. According to Théogène, a factory worker who was a minor at the time of the genocide and who lived quite a distance from the Kigali-Ruhengeri road, killings in his area did not start until days after Habyarimana's death. The staggered way in which the genocide was implemented, its political targets in Kigali, and the hesitation by some members of the population to participate, confirms that many killings in the capital were politically motivated and further deny the assertion that the whole country was set ablaze with ethnic hatred as soon as Habyarimana's plane was shot down.

Moreover, some respondents expressed that their fear of reprisal killings perpetrated by Hutu extremists and the RPA led them to kill, in spite of their personal rejection of genocide ideology.⁴⁴ They suggested that they killed out of self-preservation.⁴⁵ Vincent claimed that: "they came and took [them] by force" to go kill Tutsi. Frederic, who was cleared of the crime he was accused of after winning his appeal, lived close to the demilitarized zone at the time and stated that, "the population was pressured by the soldiers and the *Interahamwe*"⁴⁶ to participate in the genocide. Thomas related to me that he joined a group of *génocidaires* and participated⁴⁷ in the killings of a few of his neighbors because he was afraid he would be killed if he did not participate:

In order to save our lives, we were forced to separate ourselves from the Tutsi. The Tutsi sensed it, and they got together in order

⁴⁴ Similar findings can be found in Scott Straus, *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power, and War in Rwanda* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

⁴⁵ While Straus and Fujii focus on self-preservation as a reason for participation, Weller emphasizes people's ability to commit horrible crimes depending on the circumstances in which they are. For analyses of the motivation behind individuals' participation in the genocide, see Straus, *The Order of Genocide*; and Lee Ann Fujii, *Killing Neighbors: Webs of violence in Rwanda* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009). For a discussion the "divided self" which can lead ordinary people to commit "extraordinary evil," see James Waller, *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁴⁶ *Interahamwe* are the militia created by the youth wing the ruling political party. Trained by the FAR and the Presidential Guards, they participated in pogroms against the Tutsi during the Civil War and had an active role in the killings during the genocide.

⁴⁷ I found that when respondents told me they had "participated," the meaning could range from observing to actual killing.

to flee from here. The division and the hatred started. And if you did not go with them – I mean with the soldiers and displaced people – you were taken like one of the Tutsi and killed.”

Similarly, some released prisoners have suggested that while they participated in the killings of their neighbors, they did not do so with hatred in their hearts or enthusiasm. Martin, a released prisoner who was exonerated by his neighbors’ testimonies, explained that the IDPs who had resettled in his area during the war were the ones who killed with fervor. Recall that a large number of northern Rwandans were expropriated by the RPA at the beginning of the civil war. While some reports suggest that in some parts of Rwanda, expulsions were conducted in a conflict-free manner, other accounts suggest that people were forcibly removed from their homes by RPA soldiers who proceeded to pillage and destroy property.⁴⁸ Respondents highlighted the fact that many IDPs were involved in killing and incited the population on their hills. For example, Martin recalled “those refugees from Butaro started to murder the Tutsi in 1994.” Respondents suggested that IDPs had been traumatized and angered by their displacement due to the war with the RPA and their participation in the genocide was their way to exact revenge. This aspect of the narratives again contextualizes participation in some areas due to corollaries of the civil war and the role played by RPA troops in abusing Hutu civilians.⁴⁹

Additionally, not only did *génocidaires* not all kill for the same reasons, but their level of participation differed from case to case. *Génocidaires* were involved in a wide variety of actions during the genocide, ranging from property theft, singing political songs, digging holes to bury the dead, and manning road blocks, to killing and mutilating. Frederic and Cleophas, who are brothers, were convicted of stealing their neighbor’s lumber, while Paul was convicted of refusing to hide a young Tutsi boy who was later killed during the genocide.

Finally, while the majority of the genocide victims were in fact Tutsi, it is important to recognize that the *Interahamwe* did not kill Tutsi exclusively in their genocidal pursuit. In fact, Burnet defines the genocide as the “killings, rape, torture and other acts of violence perpetrated against Tutsi, Hutu who were married to Tutsi, and Hutu opposed to the genocide by the *Interahamwe* militias, FAR soldiers, and civilians recruited to killings squads.”⁵⁰ By using this

⁴⁸ Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, 175 fn. 33; Human Rights Watch, “Arming Rwanda: The Arms Trade and Human Rights Abuses in the Rwandan War” *Human Rights Watch Arms Project 6* (1994): 13, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1994/01/01/arming-rwanda>.

⁴⁹ I am not attempting to justify the brutal killing of Tutsi during the genocide, but to contextualize, based on my respondents’ narrative, the motives behind their individual participation.

⁵⁰ Burnet, *Genocide Lives in Us*, 19.

definition, we are able to include non-Tutsi that were killed during the implementation of the genocide as “victims.”⁵¹

Released prisoners discussed the violence they suffered at the hands of *génocidaires*, who attacked Hutu following cases of mistaken identity. Jacques, a prisoner who was a local authority at the time of the genocide, lost his brother that way. He was killed because he was mistaken for being a Tutsi. Lazare, an elderly farmer who was allegedly falsely accused by his jealous brother of killing his Tutsi aunt, stated, “I was assaulted by the *Interahamwe*... They stole my cows and my entire harvest. It is my neighbors who told them that I was not a Tutsi and inquired about why I was being treated this way.” Grégoire, a released prisoner who was exonerated of the charges levied against him, was beaten, along with his mother, for hiding Tutsi in their house. Sophie, the daughter of a Tutsi mother and a Hutu father, lost her brother and sister during the genocide. They were killed in their home in Southern Rwanda when militiamen assumed they were Tutsi. They also attacked her mother, who survived her injuries. Additionally, *Interahamwe* and the *Impuzamugambi*⁵² engaged in gratuitous violence as millions of Hutu fled Rwanda towards the DRC. *Génocidaires* and ex-FAR often stole money and other property from fleeing Hutu. Deogratias noted that his daughter was killed by *Interahamwe* as they fled to the DRC. In the Congolese camps, many Hutu civilians would continue to live under the threats of hardened *génocidaires*, and would later suffer at the hand of the RPA during the forced repatriation of Rwandan refugees.

Refugee Camp Attacks and Forced Repatriation

According to the memories shared by released prisoners, the “benevolent repatriations” of refugees from the eastern DRC were in fact a complicated mix of planned armed attacks and forced repatriations. While not all the refugee camps were attacked – a few respondents told me that RPA soldiers had simply ordered them out of the camp – attacks were prevalent enough for respondents to outline their strategic timing, the tactical positions of soldiers, and the type of weapons used, often resulting in the deaths of innocent civilians. First, the timing of the attacks varied. Some camps were attacked in the morning, but many were

⁵¹ Kalyvas argues that this was not an isolated occurrence. He suggests that scholars often infer that some conflicts are strictly ethnic when in reality the evidence from the dynamics of violence may suggest otherwise. He posits that “if targets of violence are selected along lines that go beyond group attributes, then violence cannot be described as simply ethnic, class, or some similar category” (Chapter 11). This argument is illustrated in the case of the Rwandan genocide where many people were also killed based on political decisions and on individualized selection.

⁵² *Impuzamugambi* are the militia created by the youth wing of a Hutu extremist political party. Also trained by the FAR and the Presidential Guards, they coordinated their activities with the *Interahamwe* during the genocide.

bombarded after sundown, surprising unsuspecting refugees. The most vulnerable victims of these tactical strikes were not the militiamen and ex-FAR that the new regime argued it was targeting, but women and children who could not outrun the attacks.

The camp was attacked in the night but some chose to flee to Masisi and others chose to come back to Rwanda. Many of us died. Most of them were women and children because they were not able to run as men could (Joseph).⁵³

One night we heard gunshots and we started to flee. We went through the forest but as we were running, everywhere we turned there were gunshots, so we decided to come back in Rwanda (Nicolas).⁵⁴

At eight in the night, they attacked and we fled to the forest. I spent six days in the forest. It was a very vast forest; no one could see the sky. They followed us, shooting and killing people. Many died. Fortunately, we got into Rwanda (Charles).⁵⁵

Additionally, many released prisoners recalled the camps being shelled. They remembered bombs killing people indiscriminately. Respondents explained that RPA weapons were strategically positioned before the bombardments, illustrating the careful planning prior to the camp attacks. For example, Vincent recalled “They came, set up their weapons on top of the hill, and started throwing bombs in the camp.” Celestin, a released prisoner who was brutally tortured during his incarceration by the RPF and later exonerated of all charges, explained with emotion “When a camp is bombarded, do you think bombs will explode without taking people with them?” These accounts clearly contradict the official narrative that suggests deadly force was only used in self-defense. Conversely, it

⁵³ Joseph is an old man who claims to have been falsely accused of damaging the property. Despite his opposition to the verdict of his trial, upon his release, he came to a compensation arrangement with the victim.

⁵⁴ Nicolas is a confessed *génocidaire*. He confessed to and was convicted of killing four people during the genocide. He was sentenced to 10 years in prison but was released after his gacaca trial as he had already spent 11 years in pre-trial detention.

⁵⁵ Charles is a farmer who was arrested based on the assumption that, since he had fled to Congo immediately after the genocide, he was guilty of genocide crimes. Years into his pretrial detention, he was formally accused of killing a child. The mother eventually testified in Gacaca that Charles was not the one who had killed her child. Nevertheless, he confessed that he had been present when the child was killed and was convicted of complicity.

seems clear that deadly force was used by the RPF to force civilians back into Rwanda. As noted by Paul:

This is what caused us to come back. Bombs were thrown in the camp, so we went to Masisi. From there we found ourselves surrounded by fighters. We decided to come back to Rwanda.

Another aspect of these shared experiences that challenges the official narrative's position that deadly force was only used in self-defense is the accounts of the RPA pursuing and hunting down young men. Vincent explained that while the shelling killed civilians indiscriminately, when the RPA pursued refugees in the forests, "it was principally men who were killed. Women and girls were not touched." He further described: "The young people who were picked were taken. Later, we heard gunshots. Those who escaped those shootings, they were confronted with another group of *Inkotanyi* soldiers in front who stopped them." Documents such as the UN's DRC Mapping Exercise and reports from Médecins Sans Frontières also describe how RPA would single out young men as potential genocide suspects and execute them.⁵⁶

While the killing of civilians was widespread, RPA troops did not attempt to kill all Hutu refugees. Denis recalled "Sometimes, they killed people; another time, they let people pass." Some respondents explained that after the attacks, they encountered RPA troops in the forests who spared them but forcibly directed them towards the Rwandan border. Others explained that the only possible way out of the camps and the forest was towards Rwanda, as every other escape route was an ambush.

The RPA's soldiers attacked our camp and then we dispersed ourselves in order to save our lives. But they surrounded us and told us that anyone who chose to run toward the forest would be killed. Those who wanted to return to Rwanda would get assistance and would get back safely. This is how we came back to Rwanda (Alfred).

⁵⁶ UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Report of the Mapping Exercise Documenting the Most Serious Violations of Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law Committed within the Territory of the Democratic Republic of the Congo between March 1993 and June 2003*, August 2010, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4ca99bc22.html>; Médecins Sans Frontières, *DRC 1995: Ethnic Cleansing Rears its Head* (Geneva: MSF, 2002); and Médecins Sans Frontières, *DRC 1996: Rebel Offensive Results in Worrying Massacres* (Geneva, MSF, 2002).

After three days, a bomb was thrown where we were. There were buses and a vehicle filled with medication. We got into these vehicles and there were gunshots behind us. When we got further in front, there was no road. We had to leave everything, even our provisions. Even what the Congolese had just given us. When they started shooting us, we did not worry about our belongings. We left everything. We ran through a Zairian village. We kept going until we reached Sake, where we encountered soldiers. You'll understand that these are not the soldiers with whom we were in the camp. It was the RPF soldiers. The *Inkotanyi*. They showed us the way and they told us to keep going that this road would take us to Rwanda. When we would arrive in Goma, buses would take us to Rwanda. When we arrived to Sake, we saw ICRC and HCR⁵⁷ waiting for us. They asked us whether there were other people. We told us that there were still a lot of people behind us. A little bit later, a number of vehicles came, about 40. They told to rest. They started asking us where we were coming from in Rwanda. And they grouped us according to where we were from (Damien).⁵⁸

Scores of refugees were deliberately killed as a result of indiscriminate shelling of refugee camps, selected targeting and executions of young men.⁵⁹ Furthermore, the hunting down of refugees through the jungle resulted in thousands of people, mostly women, children and the elderly dying of starvation, disease, and exhaustion, if they were not captured and harassed or killed by FAR, AFDL,⁶⁰ and RPF soldiers.⁶¹ Estimates suggest that the attacks and forced repatriation resulted in the death of approximately 200,000 Rwandans, most of whom were Hutu.⁶²

Taken together, the memories offered by my respondents emphasized the complexity of the dynamics of violence that gripped Rwanda during the 1990s. It is interesting to note that their memories challenged the very foundation of the

⁵⁷ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

⁵⁸ Damien is a released prisoner who claims to have remained mostly indoors throughout the genocide as his father, a wise man in the community, told him not to join the mobs.

⁵⁹ UN Office, *Mapping Exercise*, 97-120; Prunier, *Africa's World War*, 145.

⁶⁰ *Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Congo-Zaïre* was a coalition of opposition groups and ethnic minorities led by Laurent Désiré Kabila that toppled then President Mobutu Sese Seko.

⁶¹ Prunier, *Africa's World War*; Marie Béatrice Umutesi, *Surviving the Slaughter: The Ordeal of a Rwandan Refugee in Congo*, trans. Julie Emerson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004); UN Office, *Mapping Exercise*.

⁶² Prunier, *Africa's World War*, 148. For a first hand accounting of the flight of Hutu refugees, see Umutesi, *Surviving the Slaughter*.

official narrative on violence in Rwanda. They offered various reasons why they participated in the genocide and how its execution varied from place to place. They highlighted the fact that they were afraid of what the militia could do to them. Their memories focused on Hutu victimhood from the war. Moreover, from my respondents' perspectives, refugee repatriation from the eastern DRC was not voluntary. They did not 'vote with their feet' – or expressed their preferences for a new RPF government by voluntarily returning to Rwanda – so much as they fled to stay alive after the attacks. Their narratives suggest that the attacks and ambushes were strategically planned by the RPA to force as many people as possible out of the camps in the DRC and back into Rwanda. Former refugees' stories of the forced repatriations are some of the most vivid memories of RPA violence. While the official narrative applauds the regime's ability to close the camps and solve the refugee crisis in a manner that preserves Rwanda's regional security, respondents' narratives argue that the cost of such a military campaign was very high in terms of Hutu lives, former combatants and civilians alike. The alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity perpetrated by RPA forces in the camps bring to light what respondents considered to be a repeated pattern of RPF aggression toward the Hutu.

Contrasting Narratives

Contrasting the various narratives on the violence experienced by Rwandans during the 1990s allows for a better understanding of how different parties to the conflict understand and portray the dynamics of violence in the post-genocide period. More importantly, by using the oral histories of these varying participants, one can identify what points released prisoners of the genocide focused on – their victimhood and the RPA's role as aggressor – and what points they omit – such as at times their individual responsibility in the genocide – when discussing how they experienced the violence of the 1990s. Interview data capturing snapshots of respondents' life histories give nuance to the official narrative on violence in Rwanda and offer alternative understandings of the dynamics of violence in the region. Indeed, the testimonies of released prisoners of the genocide allow for both a more precise and a more ambiguous depiction of the events of the 1990s in Rwanda.

During my interviews and casual discussions, I did not encounter respondents denying the reality of the genocide. For many Rwandans, particularly Hutu living in the north of the country, violence impacted their daily lives as early as 1990. However, the violence they experienced during war, genocide, and Congo War, which clearly differs from the RPF's official narrative of the "1994 genocide of the Tutsi," is not part of the national discussion on violence in Rwanda, nor is it part of the national reconciliation framework. In the end, it is the

official narrative's complete omission of any serious discussion of the RPA crimes of aggression and other violations of humanitarian law that took place in the north of the country and in the eastern DRC that released prisoners of the genocide resist by addressing, behind closed doors, the relevance of the *inambara*, the genocide, and the Congo War. Those who confessed their crimes challenged the official assumption that criminal intent was the same for all those who participated in the genocide. Hatred was not always a motive for participation and the intent to destroy in whole or in part was not a part of the genocidal acts they committed.

But also relevant within the context of transitional justice is the fact that my respondents' oral histories constituted inadmissible testimony in the current post-conflict justice program. Their testimonies did not only describe acts of violence committed by RPA forces, but they begged important questions about the criminal intent of those acts of violence against an estimated 300,000 Hutu.⁶³ Indeed, the oral histories of my respondents suggest that these alternative experiences of violence surrounding the 1994 genocide as very relevant to the quest for reconciliation in post-genocide Rwanda.

Understanding released prisoners of the genocide's perspective of violence, though potentially unpopular, is essential for our understanding of suffering in Rwanda. Indeed, because most released prisoners of the genocide are stigmatized, they are not considered to be authoritative sources of information for

⁶³ In addition to the 800,000 Tutsi and "moderate" Hutu who lost their lives and comprise the number of fatalities most often offered by scholars and news media, it is estimated that 2,000 Tutsi and dozens of Hutu were killed between 1990 and 1993, during what Des Forges refers to as "rehearsals of the genocide by death squads." See Des Forges, *Leave None*, 70. See also the African Union's report, *Rwanda: The Preventable Genocide* (Addis Ababa: AU, 2000), <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4d1da8752.html>. The RPA soldiers are accused of killing between tens of thousands and 100,000 civilians, mostly Hutu during the civil war between 1990 and 1994. Moreover, during the second half of the 1990s, thousands of civilians (6,000 between January and August of 1997 alone) were killed by armed insurgents opposing the new governments, and by government forces conducting operations to eliminate infiltrators; scores of Hutu civilians were also killed in the process. This has been reported by Amnesty International in *Rwanda: Ending the Silence*, 24 September 1997, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AFR47/032/1997/en>; *Rwanda: Civilians Trapped in Armed Conflict*, 19 December 1997, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AFR47/043/1997/en>; and *Rwanda: The Hidden Violence "Disappearances" and Killings Continue*, 22 June 1998, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AFR47/023/1998>. An unknown number of Hutu prisoners were executed or tortured to death during incarceration while an estimated 11, 000 of them died between 1994 and 2001 due to deplorable prison conditions, Amnesty International, *Rwanda: The Enduring Legacy of the Genocide and War*, 5 April 2004, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AFR47/008/2004/en>; Carina Tertsakian, *Le Chateau: The Lives of Prisoners in Rwanda* (London: Arves Books, 2008). Finally, approximately 200,000 civilians, mostly innocent Hutu, are believed to have been killed during the forced repatriation of the First Congo War, see Prunier, *Africa's World War*, 148.

what happened in the Great Lakes Region in the 1990s. Whether convicted or exonerated by the justice system, their guilt is often assumed based on their arrest and imprisonment. Released prisoners are perceived as perpetrators of the genocide, regardless of whether they are found innocent or guilty. As “perpetrators” dehumanized and killed during the genocide, upon their release, they too are dehumanized and therefore considered unfit and untrustworthy members of society. Hence, released prisoners, whether convicted or not, are stigmatized and often live on the margin of citizenship. Yet, their memories of violence during the civil war, the blurred lines of the genocide, and the First Congo war called for accountability, or at least the ability to mourn their losses publically. Many respondents were very aware of their victimhood and consequent denial of justice. While the transitional justice framework emphasized the genocide as the most relevant episode of violence, released prisoners of the genocide expressed the need for justice for their loved ones and their suffering.

Finally, the narrative offered by the transitional justice framework offers limited space for national reconciliation. Because this narrative on violence is a simplistic and binary representation of the genocide, it means that the reconciliation framework offered is also limited to binary conceptualizations for reconciliation. However, according to my respondents, the dislocation of society touched Rwandans on many levels. Hence, reconciliation does not only need to take place between victims and perpetrators of the genocide, but it is also required between the RPA and its victims, and between those engaged in revenge killings and the victims’ relatives. As Catharine Newbury explains when discussing Béatrice Umutesi’s narrative⁶⁴ of survival of the DRC camp attacks, contrary to the official discourse assertions, talking about the suffering of other Rwandans “does not diminish the horror, the gravity, or the meaning of the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda in 1994.”⁶⁵ Using oral history to investigate other types of victimhood places other Rwandans’ experiences “in a larger landscape of violence.” While the regime promotes national unity and reconciliation through a variety of programs based on its official narrative of violence, discussions with released prisoners of the genocide indicated that until the State opens up spaces for inclusive discussion of victimhood during the decade of ethnic and political violence endured by Rwanda, prospects for reconciliation will remain limited.

⁶⁴ Béatrice Umutesi published one of the rare books relating her firsthand experience of surviving the various episodes of violence in Rwanda, *Surviving the Slaughter*. While her account addresses her flight from the civil war in Northern Rwanda and the genocide, it is her tale of survival of the mass killing of hundreds of thousands of Hutu refugees in Eastern Congo that distinguishes her work from other book-length accounts of violence in the Great Lakes Region.

⁶⁵ Catharine Newbury, “Suffering and Survival in Central Africa,” *African Studies Review* 48(2005): 131.

Conclusion

The discrepancies between the Rwandan government's official narrative of the 1994 genocide and the memories of former detainees of the genocide shed light on the tensions surrounding how nationalized commemoration in post-genocide Rwanda. This article explores how the use of oral history could help understand the relationship between what the RPF portrays as "the truth" about the 1994 genocide and what it chooses to criminalize, and what released prisoners consider injustices committed by the RPF and what expectations they have for justice in Rwanda. While the genocide targeted mostly Tutsi Rwandans, many Hutu Rwandans experienced or witnessed violence during the civil war, the genocide, and during the First Congo War. Their oral histories offer counter-memories to the government's official transcript on the genocide. Those dissonances highlight not only the pervasiveness of violence throughout the 1990s, but also help us to connect the various episodes of violence within the broader context of regional power struggles. Indeed, these individual and collective narratives create a more nuanced understanding of the violence in the Great Lakes region in the 1990s and problematize the official narrative of violence in Rwanda that is framing and perpetuated by the legal transcript. It forces us to reconsider the rigidity of the roles and collective identities of "victims" and "perpetrators" of state-sponsored violence and to offer a more inclusive political and social space where members of post-violence society can reconcile.