



A Review of: “The Rwandan Patriotic Front” edited by Adrien Fontanellaz and Tom Cooper¹²

Gábor Sinkó³

The Rwandan Patriotic Front 1990-1994 is the second of two volumes that deal with the Ugandan and Rwandan military conflicts between the 1960s and 1990s and their effect on their neighbors. The authors, Adrien Fontanellaz, a military history researcher and author from Switzerland and Tom Cooper, an Austrian writer, analyst and investigative journalist, provide an overarching narrative of events leading to the rise of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). Despite analyzing local conditions culturally, ethnically and politically, the authors highlighted at the beginning of the volume that they do not intend to cover the ‘full spectrum’ of the conflict (p.4). Instead, their main focus is on “the military aspects of the civil war in Rwanda of 1990-1994” (p.3). Although the country has been in the international limelight (due to the 1994 genocide), the military component of the war is insufficiently researched.

The book is organized into six chapters following mainly a chronological order. It is a largely apolitical work, which is well-researched and –documented with a wide variety of primary and secondary sources, including scientific works, reputable publications and interviews (p.4). While the authors attempt to make it reader-friendly (and they mostly manage to do so by using endnotes instead of footnotes, and by having a glossary with the acronyms), I would argue that the content of the book is easier to digest for those who have a military background due to its specific vocabulary. It is not essential; however, the numerous materials and military operations listed in the volume may discourage ‘average readers’ from developing a deeper understanding of the Rwandan Civil War.

The first chapter is the introduction, and it contains some of the reasons that sowed the seeds of the Rwandan tragedy. Besides climate and geography, the readers can gain insight into the early history of the country with Rwanda first being administered by the Germans and then the Belgians. Even after independence, ties with these foreign powers were not severed, since West Germany provided training for the National Police (p.12) and Belgium sent advisors (p.11). Additionally, Rwanda entered into military cooperation with France and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, while receiving training from Lybia, Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) and the US (p.12). As correctly pointed out by the authors it was Germany and Belgium, driven by racist misconceptions in the West that cemented the Tutsis’ first-class and

¹ DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59569/jceeas.2023.3.1.196>

² Adrien Fontanellaz and Tom Cooper. *The Rwandan Patriotic Front 1990-1994*. (AFRICA@WAR 24), Helion & Company Limited: Solihull, 2015. ISBN: 978-1-910294-56-7, pp. 64 (paperback)

³ Doctoral School on Safety and Security Sciences, Óbudai University; Budapest, Hungary; sinko.gabor@stud.uni-obuda.hu

Hutus' second-class status. When Juvénal Habyarimana, a Hutu, took power in a coup d'état, he stabilized the economy and started a military build-up. However, clientelism and patronage prevalent in the army slowed down progress and increasing violence between Hutus and Tutsis resulted in the latter fleeing to neighboring states.

The second chapter is about the formation of the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA). By late 1964 the largest Tutsi exile communities were in Burundi and Uganda (p.16). Some of the people were simply stuck in another country, while others went there for work or escaped from slaughter. This section of the book details the relation of Rwandans and Ugandans. Although most of the elite Tutsis in Uganda – ‘the 59ers’ – lived in refugee camps and were often “misused as scapegoats for the worsening economic situation”, they were also “recruited into the state-security apparatus” [in Uganda] (p.16). It was known they wanted to go back to their home country and thus posed no threat. The 59ers joined the National Resistance Army (NRA) and became combat-proven and interested in politics. In the 1980s, there was growing resentment towards the Tutsis and their influence started to wane. However, by this time the RPF was ready to invade Rwanda mostly due to “a group of highly experienced officers [and the] creation of its military wing the RPA” (p.24).

The third chapter revolves around the invasion launched by the Ugandan Tutsis in October 1990. It was timed so that both the Rwandan and Ugandan presidents were away in the US. The RPA wanted to “exploit the moment of surprise and remove the government before the Rwandan Armed Forces (FAR) could even mobilise” (p.24). Although they received ammunition, weapons, training and diplomatic support from Uganda, the army's first commander, Fred Rwigyema, died on the second day of the invasion, endangering the success of the whole operation. Following his death, the RPF began to radicalize and – despite the FAR reacting quite quickly – Habyarimana decided to request help from Belgium, France and Zaire. While Brussels chose not to assist Rwanda, Paris thought the insurgents were “Ugandan proxies [waging] a frontal attack against...the French zone of influence” (p.29) and thus contributed troops. United, the foreign powers and FAR managed to counterattack and after a stalemate at Nyagatare, pushed the RPF back to Uganda, winning the first phase of the war.

The fourth chapter picks up the thread after the death of Rwigyema, when Paul Kagame assumed the leadership position of the RPA, leading to its re-birth. The insurgents retreated to the Virunga Mountains as it meant not being exposed to FAR attacks and were close to the Congolese, Rwandan and Ugandan borders. The RPF began recruiting and training volunteers, whose numbers had dwelt to 12,000 by 1992. Although they continuously lacked firepower, they were lucky, since “the end of the Cold War left Europe full of surplus armament, ammunition and equipment offering plenty of possibilities to buy supplies at ever lower prices” (p.34). The FAR went through a major expansion too, however, the new recruits education level and combat effectiveness were significantly reduced. The new phase of the war started in January 1991 and the RPA managed to gain foothold in Rwanda. If it hadn't been for France –



that provided ammunition, weapons, helicopters and advisors to the FAR – the RPA may have been successful earlier. Instead, a mere ceasefire was agreed on in 1992, which was far from signaling the end of the conflict.

The fifth chapter focuses on the events leading to the 1994 Rwandan Genocide. Several atrocities were committed by both Hutus and Tutsis against the civilian population; however, the latter was much more “careful” with the massacres. When the RPA mobilized all of its forces to take the fight to Kigali, France intervened again, supporting the FAR. The Arusha Peace Agreement demanded the neutral international presence of the UN that responded by establishing the United Nations Observer Mission Uganda-Rwanda (UNOMUR) and the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR). They were both destined for failure, partly due to the latter’s impotence “to force President Habyarimana into the formation of a power-sharing government” (p.45). As a result of the Rwandan Civil War, 860,000 people had to leave their homes, aggravating the problem of Internally Displaced People (IDPs). What really unleashed the apocalypse was when Habyarimana’s plane was shot down on 6 April 1994 and Hutu extremists rose to power. Various militias came into existence and started massacring thousands of Tutsis and moderate Hutus.

The sixth chapter is about the 100-days campaign, which was a planned mass murder in Rwanda occurring between April and July 1994. With the US arms embargo and France suspending deliveries, the RPF started to have the upper hand in the conflict as the RPA was better prepared for war than the FAR, which had been distracted by its involvement in the genocide. The logistics of the government forces was on the verge of collapse as a consequence of the “low quality of hastily trained recruits [that were] used to fill the ranks of units that suffered extensive losses” (p.54). The exodus of the Rwandans continued with people fleeing to Zaire (1,244,000) and Tanzania (577,000), and remedying the situation required the intervention of France (Operation Turquoise) and the US (UNAMIR II). The Rwandan Civil War is believed to have ended with the RPA’s capture of Gisenyi. However, as pointed out by the authors, due to continuous armed struggles and political repression, it can also be argued that it has never really ended.

Although the volume presents a detailed account (with the inclusion of many photographs and maps) about the realities of the Rwandan Civil War, highlighting the primary role of militaries in war fighting, it has a couple of shortcomings. One of the major problems is the abundance of grammatical and spelling mistakes that not only detract of quality but also makes the book difficult to understand. For instance, the authors write ‘Operation Silver Black’ (p.50) instead of ‘Silver Back’ and use “mortars caliber 60, 82” and such repeatedly instead of the more common “60mm /82mm mortars” (pp. 13,21,31,36,37,38,40,51). There are also several formatting errors, especially at the beginning of the chapters. Lastly, Fontanellaz and Cooper do not always include all the reasons that would be essential for readers to see the big picture as well as they make a few wrong assertions. For example, when talking about the

divisions between the Hutus and Tutsis, the role of Rwanda's occupiers is stressed (p.6) but not of the Protestant and Catholic churches. Also, UNAMIR is blamed for non-compliance with the Arusha Accords (p.45), which is simply untrue.

That being said, *The Rwandan Patriotic Front 1990-1994* provides readers an excellent opportunity to delve deeper into the yet not-so-much-explored military – and interrelated – aspects of the Rwandan Civil War. I would first and foremost recommend the book for those who are interested in the nexus of aviation and/or military history and African affairs. It is certainly interesting to read about how a minority militia could prevail over a majority government. Learning about the brutalities, chaos and tragedies characterizing Rwanda in the 1990s could be instructive for other African countries struggling with similar problems in the aftermath of the all the wars the Dark Continent has witnessed.