

THE MEDIA AND THE RWANDA GENOCIDE

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Pluto  Press
LONDON • ANN ARBOR, MI

Fountain Publishers
KAMPALA, UGANDA

International Development Research Centre
OTTAWA • CAIRO • DAKAR • MONTEVIDEO • NAIROBI • NEW DELHI • SINGAPORE

Exhibit 467:

Genocide Through a Camera Lens

Nick Hughes

To be a journalist in Rwanda in April of 1994 was to have a window on Auschwitz. Yet, there are precious few records of the genocide as it took place. There are pictures of rotting bodies around churches, but few images of the killing itself. What I know is that on three different occasions, killing was filmed by a Reuters camera operator, an unknown Rwandan camera operator and me. Killing surrounded each of us, and we were only able to record briefly. From the top of a building called the French School, I filmed across a valley to record a street that was being cleared of Tutsi. These images are among the only known pictures of the genocide and they are shocking. In a sense, they are the only reminders that this event really happened. If only there had been more such images.

As a journalist and cameraman, I was in Rwanda in the first few days after the genocide began on 6 April. Years later, I agreed to testify before the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda in the trial of George Rutaganda. The tribunal wanted to use my footage as evidence and asked me to testify. What follows is my description of that footage. As I told the tribunal, in the first few days after 6 April, we knew that there was killing going on. We could see bodies in the streets. I also knew that there was a resumption of hostilities, as I had passed through Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) territory when they declared that they were marching on Kigali.

* * *

The war had started again with ferocity. But what we didn't know was the sheer scale and how organized the systematic killing of Tutsi civilians was. When we began to see the number of bodies increase and the way in which people were being killed, the nature of the killing began to sink in, but usually in recollection, not at the moment when we were witnessing events. I recall looking back on an event, four or five days later, and thinking to myself, 'Now hold on, what I have just filmed is not a normal event. I haven't seen that anywhere else.' I knew that whenever there was hostility in Rwanda, civilians got killed. There had been ethnic killing many times before. You expect that in Rwanda. But the events we were witnessing in April 1994 made us begin to realize there was

something more this time – there was the magnitude of the killing. It was not so sporadic. We noticed gangs roaming the streets looking for somebody to kill, in a systematic way.

On the day I shot the footage of people being killed, I was in a building of the French School, in central Kigali. Belgian paratroopers were there, which made it a relatively secure place from which to observe. The soldiers had a rocket launcher in the top room of the school, a building that extends up the side of the valley and overlooks another road going up the other side. Through the sights on the rocket launcher, the soldiers could see people being killed on the other side of the valley. I was told about this and went up to look and, indeed, there were bodies on the other side of the road. I set up my camera in the room next door to where the soldiers were located. At this point I was a bit short of charged batteries and tapes for my camera, so I wanted to be careful about what I was filming. Looking across the valley, I could see groups of people walking up and down the dirt road and I could see piles of bodies.

At one point, I turned my camera away to look at other activity on the road. By the time I panned back to the first spot, two or three men had been brought out and killed. You can see that on the footage. You can see them still being beaten. What is notable is that they weren't killed instantly; they were slowly beaten to death, tortured. When I focused my camera that second time, I could see two women among one pile of bodies. There must have been about eight bodies by then and a group of men on the other side of the road, investigating something.

Both women were kneeling. One was begging, arms outstretched. Nonchalantly, the killers would come over and beat the men who were dying in front of these two women, then stroll away.

Most of the men were carrying something in their right hand – a machete or club of some sort. Then I could see a child walking down the road with a club, coming up to the other side of the group. At the top of the road at a T-junction, people were going about their business, not paying attention.

I saw quite clearly another woman who apparently lived next door; she was very much at home. She put her head around the door to see what was happening to her neighbour – to watch her neighbours being murdered in the street.

The woman on the ground pleaded for about 20 minutes. I could not film the whole thing because I was concerned about my batteries and tape. She pleaded the entire time, pleaded for her life. At one point a little boy walked past and a man strolled into a house nearby. He had one hand in his pocket and was just wandering in. He had probably known this woman all her life.

Then a pickup truck drove down the road, with about three men in the back. No one questioned them or impeded their progress. The driver paused the vehicle by the begging woman. They weren't fleeing the city. One was in uniform. They were checking that the killing was going ahead.

Finally, a man came across the street and hit one woman on the head with such a force that he broke the stick he was using. She fell back. She put her arm up to ward off the blow, and he must have broken it. The second blow hit her on the side of her head and neck. I could see her head jerk away.

No one questioned why these people were there, why they were doing this. The neighbour standing in her doorway wasn't questioning what was going on, even though the woman who was struck might have been her neighbour for years. It was as if the two women who were being attacked in the street knew they were going to be killed. It was as if these people had the authority to kill them. The women knew they couldn't run away. People living on the street could have stopped them. There was no attempt to escape and no possibility of escape.

This was going on up and down the street. People were brought out of their houses and killed on the street, systematically. It was not a rampage into someone's house, to smash in the door and kill those in the front room. They were being dragged out and killed, their bodies piled outside so that they could be more easily picked up and taken away. There seems to be no question that the killers believed they had the right to be there, doing what they were doing.

It was nonchalant and it was tiring. It was work. In the space of about 100 metres, there were eleven, maybe twelve, bodies on the street.

When the truck went past, the woman was still begging for her life, crouching there in a pile of bodies. The people on the truck knew what was going on. They knew who the people on that street were. They knew what they were going to do. As they drove by, one of them gave a quick wave. There was no attempt by anybody to help the women. It was not as if they were being punished, attacked, for being a member of the opposition and given a beating. This woman was going to die. Everybody on the street knew that. They knew what was going on. There is no other explanation, but that this was systematic killing.

The organization and, above all, the nonchalance of the killers was a perfect vignette for the genocide, during which thousands were killed each day.

Eventually, someone killed the two women with severe blows. I caught that on tape, one of the only instances, I believe, of an actual killing being recorded by the media. Looking back, it is surprising that given the number of bodies we saw around the city when we travelled with military convoys, we hadn't witnessed the killing of more people. But nobody was going to kill in front of a camera if they knew it was recording. I suppose, in this instance, they didn't know they were being watched because we were across the valley.

What I saw through my camera lens was not just killing, but the systematic searching of that street. People were going from house to house. You could see them walking back and forth across the street. You could see more bodies appearing on the side of the road. I think they were probably looting the houses as well as dragging people out and killing them.

Most of the killers appeared to be 20 to 30 years old. They were obviously quite at home. This was their area and they knew where they were. A lot of people were just walking around the streets as well, mostly men. They had no uniform. They were dressed in shabby clothing, trousers and T-shirts. Almost universally, they were armed with a machete or a club or both. In some cases, you could see a stick grenade in their hand.

As I have said, we expected ethnic killing. The full gravity of what we witnessed really only sank in after we left. I remember being on a flight to Ethiopia with some journalists I was working with. We got to talking about how this killing

was not normal by Rwandan standards. I remember endlessly repeating to the other journalists and to myself, 'How can someone just go and cut the legs off a woman. How can they do that?' I remember mood swings as a result of the killing and the bodies that I had seen. The day I left, I began to realize that this was something different – the ferocity, the nonchalant killings, the systematic killings that I had seen in Kigali, the endless bodies and the way the people were killed. I remember a British journalist, my friend Catherine Bond, saying, 'There won't be any Tutsi left by the time this war is over.' That is how it was dawning on us after a week or so on the ground.

In early April, I was travelling from Kigali airport to the centre of town in the back of a small car, in the middle of a convoy of French troops. We passed a few bodies, then gangs of men waving machetes. On one side of the road, a young boy about ten years old was running through the tall grass in a field. He stopped to beg, but he wasn't pleading for his life. He turned and with both hands pointed at his younger brother who was too young to get through the long grass. He pleaded for his brother's life, but we drove on. I cannot have that moment back, to insist that the driver of our car stop, that the whole convoy should stop. Two young boys, like my two sons.

A week later, a convoy of Belgian paratroopers was going to a Catholic mission to rescue a white expatriate. The Belgian captain refused to allow me, with my camera, to ride on one of his trucks. My producer and I followed the convoy in a small saloon car, left abandoned by an expatriate evacuee. The convoy made its way through the centre of Kigali. There were a few bodies by the side of the road. The convoy turned into a heavily populated residential area and along this stretch were roadblocks every 100 metres, manned by the *Interahamwe*. The men were armed with stick grenades and they shouted, '*Vive la France*', and attempted karate kicks.

Every 20 metres, there was a line of bodies neatly laid out. In some cases, blood poured from fatal head wounds; in places, bloodstains showed where more bodies had been laid out some time before. The blood ran down the side of the road and collected in the gutter. The gutters actually flowed with blood. Between the frenzied roadblocks, the bodies and the small shops, some residents went about seemingly normal business, some walking slowly in conversation. I couldn't use my camera during that ride. I did not have the courage.

I know now that what I saw was human evil in majesty. Many of those who were there later felt a bond – a need to explain what had happened to anyone who would listen.