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### The Rwandan Genocide: How to Tell the Story from the Eyes of a Third Party

“Still, at its heart, the Rwandan story is the story of the failure of humanity to heed a call for help from an endangered people. The international community, of which the UN is only a symbol, failed to move beyond self-interest for the sake of Rwanda”, says Lieutenant-General Romeo Dallaire (516). As the commander of a United Nations group of peacekeepers in Rwanda, Dallaire found himself in the middle of one of the most serious crimes against humanity, yet unable to do anything about it. *Shake Hands with the Devil: The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda* brought a new perspective on the Rwandan genocide, that of a third-party witness. Using specific story-telling techniques, Dallaire’s account is a carefully selected chronicle of the genocide to illuminate the responsibility of the United Nations (UN) and the global community.

The Rwandan genocide has the history of being one of the most efficient massacres ever to have been done: 1,174,000 people murdered in 100 days (“A genocide that could have been avoided”). That is an equivalence of 10,000 every day, 400 every hour and 7 every minute. It was an attempt by the Hutu government and its people against the minority group Tutsi. The low-tech massacres happened at a terrifying speed in broad daylight in 1994, the time by which we assumed humans would have risen above their own self-importance and ignorance. What happened proved us wrong. While an entire ethnic group was being exterminated, the world chose to look on. As Dallaire remarks himself, “[h]ow the international community, through an

inept UN mandate and what can only be described as indifference, self-interest and racism, aided and abetted these crimes against humanity” (Dallaire 5).

This massacre took its root from the complicated history of Rwanda and the dynamics between the two peoples: Tutsi and Hutu. They used to live peacefully together: “Hutus and Tutsis spoke the same language, followed the same religion, intermarried, and lived intermingled, without territorial distinctions, on the same hills, sharing the same social and political culture in small chiefdoms” (Gourevitch 47). The difference between Tutsi and Hutu is unlikely to be a racial but rather a class or caste one. This stemmed from the labor distribution between Hutu and Tutsi. Because Tutsi herded the cattle and Hutu farmed the land, Tutsi was believed to be the superior group. Generations of Tutsi chiefs and the European colonials further accentuated this distinction. The 1960s was a decade of much violence and political unrest. Hutu overturned the Tutsi regime and set up its own dictatorial government. Many Tutsi fled to neighboring countries. Those in Uganda founded the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), a militarized refugee organization, and prepared for invading Rwanda. The invasion began in 1990, marking the outbreak of the Rwandan civil war. The Habyarimana’s government exploited the fear and confusion of people to promote Hutu Power, an anti-Tutsi agenda. Hutu hardliners carried out small campaigns to segregate and kill Tutsis throughout the country. In 1993, the RPF and the Hutu government signed a peace agreement, the Arusha Accords, marking a temporary ceasefire between the two groups.

On April 6 1994, Rwandan President Habyarimana was killed while travelling on a plane over Kigali, prompting the large scale killing of Tutsis all over the country. The peace agreement was broken. Hutus were commanded to murder their fellow Tutsi neighbors, co-workers, friends and even family members. An escort group of 10 Belgian troops provided for Prime Minister

Agathe Uwilingiyimana, who was next in line for presidency after Habyarimana, was attacked. Uwilingiyimana was killed. The 10 Belgians were taken away, tortured, and murdered. The genocidaires used mostly machetes; they did the killing mostly by hand. Until the RPF liberated Kigali on July 4, over the course of 100 days, an estimated number of 1,174,000 people were killed. It displaced hundreds of thousands of Tutsis and caused two million Hutu to flee to refugee camp after the genocide. Other consequences include famine, HIV epidemic, and parentless children, etc. Post-genocide Rwanda was in critical conditions (“A genocide that could have been avoided”).

Romeo Dallaire’s account gave a different perspective into the story, that of the commander of United Nations Assistance for Rwanda (UNAMIR) . In October 1993, UNAMIR, a group of UN peacekeepers, came to Rwanda to oversee the implementation of the Arusha Accords. Through an informant, Dallaire learned about the planned genocide and the many arms caches located in Kigali. Hutu hardliners had been composing lists of Tutsis and Tutsi-affiliated Hutus to eliminate. Upon receiving the tip, Dallaire requested that the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) allow them to raid the arms caches, but was turned down (142-6). The response he got from the DPKO concluded with: “UNAMIR’s role ... should be limited to a monitoring function”. UNAMIR was strictly a chapter-six peacekeeping mission, with minimal use of violence as an intervention method. As Dallaire claimed in his book, “they were tying my hands” (167). UNAMIR’s presence at Rwanda was essentially a failure, lacking in various different aspects: troops, the ability to act promptly and respond with force, and Rwandan people’s trust.

Today, we also remember the Rwandan genocide as a complete failure of humanitarianism. The world refused to acknowledge it when it most needed attention and

support. UNAMIR could not act when they discovered the third force at play in Rwanda and its secret plan of extermination. Many first-world countries knew about the genocide, had the ability to act, and chose not to. As Dallaire wrote: “Through our indifference, squabbling, distraction and delays, we lost a great many opportunities to destabilize the genocidaires and derail the genocide” (514). The world had abandoned Rwanda, a country of no strategic value to it.

Compared to other eyewitness accounts about the Rwandan genocide, *Shake Hands with the Devil* has its own purposes. It was Dallaire’s attempt to explain his role in the event. After the genocide, as the commander, he came into much criticism for UNAMIR’s failure and was even tried for his responsibility for the massacre of the ten Belgian troops under his command. This book serves as a tool for Dallaire to rid himself of the title a “convenient scapegoat for all that had gone wrong in Rwanda” (Dallaire xii). In his account, Dallaire directly holds the UN and other first-world nations responsible for “the failure of humanity in Rwanda” (according to the title of his book). He clearly spells out: “How would they know about our role in and our passage through the Rwandan catastrophe. How would they know what we did and, especially, why we did it? Who were the others involved and what did they do or not do?” (xii). These are the main purposes of his account. What he chooses to include or leave out and his narrating style all contribute to serving these purposes.

Dallaire emphasizes the UN responsibility in the genocide by describing their inadequate preparation for the mission. He questions their decision to deploy him as the commander of UNAMIR. Dallaire lays it out very clearly that although he has a strong military background, he was in no position for leading a peacekeeping mission: “Why was I chosen to lead UNAMIR? ... I had never been in the field as a peacekeeper myself” (515). UNAMIR came up against various administrative and resource problems, ranging from lack of troops to late and ineffective orders

from the UN. The severe shortage of troops was further deteriorated by the inadequacy of resources: “I had hundreds of troops arriving, and I had no kitchens, no food and no place to billet them” (Dallaire 107). On top of all the hardships is the bureaucracy: “You had to make a request for everything you needed and then you had to wait while that request was analyzed” (Dallaire 99-100). But even with everything he needed, Dallaire could not have brought the mission to a success. He was not allowed to act. The mission was strictly within the realm of a chapter-six mission, which restricts them from using violence other than for self-defense (Dallaire 72). After several unsuccessful attempts to urge the UN to act upon the informant’s tip, “[he] got the feeling that New York now saw [him] as a loose cannon and not as an aggressive but careful force commander” (Dallaire 147). The UN effectively restricted Dallaire’s role in Rwanda to that of a bystander, one who witnessed from beginning to end the devil at force yet unable to do anything about it. With all of the difficulties UNAMIR was facing, Dallaire makes it abundantly clear that this mission was bound to be a failure and that it was the UN’s fault rather than his own.

In addition to the UN’s incapacity, Dallaire also lays out the responsibility of other first-world nations. He expresses total disappointment in their action: “These countries were the first to condemn civil violence... But when they had the opportunity to actually commit some resources to match their words, they did nothing” (Dallaire 173-4). Dallaire personally lobbied the German, French, and Belgian ambassadors for assistance with preventing the genocide, but they flatly refused. According to Dallaire, these countries had their own source of intelligence. They knew that the genocide was coming; some countries may have heard about even before Dallaire himself. But still, they chose not to act, on the grounds of national self-interest (173-4).

Complementing Dallaire's account is the display of a range of emotions before, during and after the mission. The entire book is charged with a sense of naiveté, frustration, and regret: angry at his original naiveté when first chosen for the mission, regretting what could have been done that would have prevented the genocide, and frustrated with the inactivity of the governments. Through chapter headings like "Rwanda, that's in Africa, Isn't It?" and "Check out Rwanda and You're in Charge", Dallaire demonstrated his initial ignorance and naiveté about Rwanda (28-56). It started out as pure excitement to be "deployed overseas in a peacekeeping mission" but slowly turned into veiled sarcasm: "[N]o one from the DPA would be able to replace Pedanou as mission head. By default I was to be in charge. I was still naïve enough to be pleased" (56). The first part is filled with foreboding masked with a frustrating sense of innocence.

Frustration came after naiveté and ignorance. Dallaire strongly voiced his frustration over the unpreparedness of the mission and the UN's failure to see the need for immediate intervention: "New York was already shooting my plan of action out of the water" (146). He was frustrated with the UN, with the rest of the world, and with himself. The entire text is filled with a sense of regret. At the end of the introduction, Dallaire says himself: "This book is nothing more nor less than the account of a few humans who were entrusted with the role of helping others taste the fruits of peace. Instead, we watched as the devil took control of paradise on earth and fed on the blood of the people we were supposed to protect" (7). As the person in charge of the mission, Dallaire felt the entire burden of UNAMIR's failure. The guilt is evident in his writing, even during the first few chapters. His account is filled with "if only's", alternative solutions to what had happened had the world acted differently.

However, rather than just venting about his emotions, Dallaire takes them to a new level. He matches his emotions to concrete actions, as compared to the UN's inactivity. He exhibits great effort in trying to get the UN to act on the intelligence that they received from the informant about the looming genocide: "I had to find some way of gaining an edge ... I would ..." (166). Where the international community gave up, he ventured on: "I took it upon myself to ..." (173). These efforts serve the purpose of illustrating his real role in the Rwandan genocide. All of the narrating techniques Dallaire uses helps him strike a chord with his readers. Through that, Dallaire succeeds in getting across his accusations against the UN and other developed nations for failing to take action.

Because of his role as head of UNAMIR and his affiliation with the UN, Dallaire himself has several biases. Unsuccessful appeals to other countries for additional support renders it understandable for Dallaire to emphasize the responsibility of the UN and other first-world countries for the Rwandan genocide. The Rwandan genocide, as Dallaire admitted, was the doing of the Hutu genocidaires. But he was extremely adamant about the role that the UN and other countries played in this, or rather, the role that they refused to play. Dallaire does not talk much about the relationship between the Hutu and the Tutsi victims. Therefore, his account may come across as glossing over the actual Hutu perpetrators' responsibility. Dallaire admitted responsibility for UNAMIR's failure, but reading between the lines, it was the UN and other peacekeeping nations who were at fault for the failure of humanity in Rwanda: "Let there be no doubt: the Rwandan genocide was the ultimate responsibility of those Rwandans who planned, ordered, supervised and eventually conducted it ... Next in line ... are France, the U.S. government, the UN and Belgium ..." (515). His account does not stress much on the historical

context of the Rwandan genocide and the deep-rooted aversion between the Hutus and the Tutsis, but rather on the world's responsibility to the genocide.

“Shake Hands with the Devil” revolves around the themes of humanitarianism and interventionism. Dallaire believes in a universal responsibility for any atrocity or terror around the world. This is the premise of his entire book. The world's failure to claim this responsibility results in one of the most terrible crimes against humanity, the extermination of an entire people. Dallaire was confident that the genocide could have been stopped had the world chosen to take action: “Could we have prevented the resumption of the civil war and the genocide? The short answer is yes. If ...” (514). His account concludes with the lessons the world can draw from the Rwandan genocide, to “rise above race, creed, colour, religion and national self-interest and put the good of humanity above the good of our own tribe” (Dallaire 522).

Dallaire's biases in *Shake Hands with the Devil* are evident when compared with other books of the same genre. Some examples include Philip Gourevitch's *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families*. Gourevitch was a journalist on a quest for the truth after the genocide. He is sometimes considered pro-RPF, but his book does a good job of putting the Rwandan genocide into historical context. Gil Courtemanche's *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali* is a fictional novel but also a chronicle and eyewitness report. Through the bystander Valcourt, he examines the role of bystanders in the genocide, among which is General Dallaire. Courtemanche criticized Dallaire, claiming that he was “[u]nassuming, apprehensive, ineloquent and naïve, like Canada. Meticulous, legalistic, a civil servant and exemplary bureaucrat, as virtuous as ‘le Grand Machin’ itself” (referring to the United Nations) (14). As compared to these accounts, Dallaire offers more insight into other forces at play during the genocide and the responsibility of the UN and other nations. Because of his role as the commander of the



UNAMIR and his affiliation with the UN, his account is leaning more on the side of the UN and the UNAMIR's role rather than the actual genocidaires.

It is not uncommon for eyewitnesses to use certain techniques to shape their accounts for a specific purpose. De Las Casas wrote *An Account, Much Abbreviated, of the Destruction of the Indies* as an act of remorse for fear that Spain would be punished by God for their deeds against the Indies. Mary Prince's *The History of Mary Prince* made use of religion and other aspects to appeal to the English people. In Dallaire's case, he is also using specific techniques in his account to point the finger at the UN and the rest of the world for their ignorance towards the genocide.

*Shake Hands with the Devil*, backed by a strong system of evidence and laced with emotions, is an attempt by Dallaire to illuminate the responsibility of the UN and the international community in the Rwandan genocide. With its own insights and biases, the account brought a completely different perspective on the event. *Shake Hands with the Devil* serves as an important window into the Rwandan genocide, but it is by no means the most thorough. Thus, readers of this book must keep in mind Dallaire's role and purposes in order to understand it better and also to look out for any possible biases. However, it is a good example of how an eyewitness, in this case a third-party eyewitness, can use their account to serve certain purposes.

Works Cited

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