

The Order of Genocide: Race, Power, and War in Rwanda. Scott Straus. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2006. ISBN: 10:080144489

Scott Straus' *Order of Genocide* provides one of the most compelling and thoroughly done studies of the Rwandan genocide. Strauss's view challenges the traditional explanation of the genocide as a result of ethnic hatred. Although Scott Strauss' *Order of Genocide* recognizes the role of ethnicity in the Rwandan genocide, he argues that ethnic hatred was just one facet amongst many causative elements. Ethnicity was a lower motive for many Hutu perpetrators. Of most importance was loyalty to the community and victory against the Rwandan Patriotic Front. Strauss demonstrates how war played a destabilizing role that ignited hate and culminated in genocide.

Instead of ethnicity, Straus argues that the Rwandan genocide occurred because of the events of the times. The Rwandan civil war began in April after the assassination of President Habyarimana and pitted hardliners of the Hutu regime against rebels from Rwanda Patriotic Front. The civil war provided conditions of chaos and the opportunity for genocide to occur.¹The second argument was the role of institutions in Rwanda and the depth of the state. The hardliners in the Hutu regimes had control of the state apparatus and thus convinced the ordinary Hutus that Tutsi people were the real enemies. Equally important to the institutions and the state of Rwanda was the geography of the country as Rwanda is small and densely populated, this means that there was little physical room for escape. Lastly, the genocide was enabled by existing ethnic tension in the Rwandan society.² However, Hutus did not kill Tutsis because they

¹ Scott Straus. *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power, and War in Rwanda* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2006) pg. 7

² Ibid, pg 9

hated them, they killed them because they considered them enemies of the state as they had been instructed by the hardliners.³

The central question of Straus' research examines why the otherwise peaceful and neighborly people descended on their Tutsi neighbors with the intention of exterminating them. Straus dismisses theories that argue that the genocide was preplanned. He argues to the contrary that the genocide was attributed to regime survival, manipulation of fear, the state of war, and the opportunity that the state of war brought. Straus' finding emphasizes the understanding that the genocide emerged from "top-down instrumental decisions", but the decision to choose the genocide depended on the conditions at the local levels. For example if a prefect of a prefecture was a hardliner, there was a likelihood of intense killing of Hutus. In general, the decisions to execute the genocide "was not necessarily planned", but the undercurrents of war enabled the extremists to choose the genocide by "othering" the Tutsis as backers of Rwandan Patriotic Front by default.⁴ By the end of the book, the reader is fulfilled that Straus answered his questions comprehensively and with full backing of data and analysis.

In terms of implications for the future study of conflicts and mass murder, Straus argues that there would have been very little that the international community would have done to control the situation. He argues that it would have been a very high threshold to find evidence indicating a planned genocide. Still, he argues that the international community should take considerable measures when dominant elites in a community begin radicalizing as a result of

Scott Straus. *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power, and War in Rwanda* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2006) pg 9-12

fears from other groups so that they preserve a regime. In such circumstances, it would be important to take precautions that avoid the occurrence of mass killings.⁵

Regardless of one's opinions on Strauss' findings in *Order of Genocide*, one must agree that Straus completed an exhaustive study on social science. Straus borrows heavily from primary and secondary sources. The bulk of his work is the interview of over two hundred people involved in the killings. Straus undertakes a comparative analysis of the previous research done on mass killings, especially the Jewish Holocausts, and concludes that despite obvious differences, the Rwandan genocide of 1994 and the Jewish Holocaust of 1930-1940s shared striking similarities by the fact that ordinary men engaged in mass killing for the simple fact of obedience and personal defense without necessarily questioning the implications of their actions. In general, Straus writes that "many Rwandans became perpetrators because they feared advancing rebels and because they feared the negative consequences of disobeying."⁶

Straus does an excellent work of combining qualitative and quantitative methods of examining the Rwandan genocide. Even though his work has a great share of statistical use, he blends well with narration done in simple writing that is accessible to both academics and the regular people. However, Straus' *Order of Genocide* cannot be used as a general book for the study of genocides because the conditions that were present in Rwanda were unique to the country. Still, Straus does not examine the Rwandan genocide as an exception- and admits that human faults, war and fear are common aspects of chaotic environments that could lead to mass

⁵ Ibid,241

⁶Ibid, pg 10

violence- not necessarily genocide in other areas. Straus writes that “genocide is about extraordinary human violence, and violence of character and a level that is rare.”⁷

Whereas Straus’ book offers an insightful reexamination of the growing scholarly work on what caused the Rwandan genocide, Straus is not excused for inconsistencies particularly in terms of the number of the people that died in the genocide. Unlike most scholars, Straus lists the bare minimum of the number of Tutsis that died (500,000)⁸, attempts to weigh in on the argument that the Rwandan Patriotic Front shot down the plane in April 1994 and therefore started the genocide. Also interesting is a subtle bias that emerges particularly from the self-interaction with the perpetrators and Straus’ belief in their reenacting of their thought process. Because of this challenge, Straus fails to differentiate between the beliefs of the convicted perpetrators and the existence of other realities.

Notwithstanding Straus’ flaws, *Order of Genocide* is critical to the study of the question why the genocide happened. Most importantly, it gives a rather rare voice of the perpetrators in the discourse. The existing body of knowledge on the Rwandan genocide is pervaded by the ethnic factor as a prime causative factor. While this literature is fundamental in providing facts about the actual crimes, it is silent on the Hutu stories and the internal dynamics of the events. The silence on the Hutu stories is not indicative of the absence of the Hutu’s version of events. To provide an anti-thesis for the existing knowledge, Straus’ book provides perhaps one of the most comprehensive studies that explain why the genocide occurred and, as such, gives voice to the disdained and intellectually crucified perpetrators. Perhaps this book is not enough to

⁷ Scott Straus. *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power, and War in Rwanda* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2006) pg.2

⁸ *Ibid.* pg.1

examine the complexities of the events in Rwanda in the month of April 1994. Still, it attempts to examine versions of that tragic event that have been disdained.

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