

## STUDYING THE MICRODYNAMICS OF THE RWANDAN GENOCIDE

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*The genocide in Rwanda in 1994 stands out for the enormous number of people killed in a relatively short period of time; the mass involvement of the civilian population and the extreme and violent nature of the killings: victims were hunted down, beaten, raped and mutilated before being killed by machetes. This article describes how, within a politically explosive situation, many otherwise non-violent and law-abiding citizens became involved in genocide. It also explains how it was social interaction—rather than pure ethnic hatred—between various types of perpetrators and group dynamics, in which some fanatics managed to induce and force many others to join in, that were instrumental in the genocidal process in Rwanda.*

Keywords: Genocide, Rwanda, perpetrators, typology, groups

### *Introduction*

In the evening of 6 April 1994, President Habyarimana of Rwanda was killed instantly when his plane was hit by a missile and crashed. Radio Mille Collines, the Rwandan state-sponsored radio, immediately blamed the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) for the killing and ordered all Tutsis, a minority group within Rwanda, to be killed (Prunier 1997: 224; Des Forges 1999: 248). Within a few hours, roadblocks were erected all over Kigali by soldiers of the governmental army, the Presidential Guard and the Interahamwe, the fanatical youth group of the MRND, Habyarimana's political party (Prunier 1997: 223). Civilians were told to stay at home. It was that same night that the killings—which were to continue for three months—started, leaving around 800,000 people dead (Prunier 1997: 265).<sup>1</sup> Along with large numbers of moderate Hutus, it is estimated that 75 per cent of all Tutsis then living in Rwanda were murdered (Mann 2005: 430).

Although the Rwandan genocide is certainly not the only genocide in history, it does stand out for the enormous number of people killed in a relatively short period of time, for the mass involvement of the civilian population and for the physical nature and excessive cruelty of the killings. Victims were often not simply killed, but were hunted down, beaten, raped and mutilated before being killed by gunshots or machetes (African Rights 1995; Prunier 1997: 256; Des Forges 1999). Bellies of pregnant women were slashed open, babies and small children were smashed against walls and relatives were forced to watch how their loved ones were raped, tortured and killed. They were sometimes even forced to join in the attacks (Prunier 1997: 256). In this article, we aim to get a better understanding of why so many otherwise non-violent and law-abiding people

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<sup>1</sup>Estimates range from 500,000 (Mann 2005: 430) to between 500,000 and 800,000 (Des Forges 1999: 1, 15) and 1 million (Gourevitch 1998: 45).

became involved in such gruesome killings, contributing to a rate of 333 murders an hour during a period of 100 days. If we take the 800,000 people who have been convicted of involvement in genocide by the Rwanda Gacaca courts as a reliable estimate, that would mean that approximately 25–30 per cent of the adult population were involved in the genocide (Haveman 2008: 366–7).

Research on the Rwandan genocide so far has shown that the killings were instigated, ordered and organized from above by political authorities and that the genocide was well planned (Prunier 1997; Des Forges 1999). Although several academics have qualified the Rwandan genocide as an ethnic conflict (including Kressel 1996), we tend to agree with Straus (2006: 9) and Fujii (2009: 183) that the genocide was the result of a politicization of ethnicity rather than pure ethnic hatred. We also found, and this, too, corroborates the findings of Straus (2006: 116) and Fujii (2009: 7), that the killings took place almost uniquely in groups. We have thus come to believe that although ethnicity played a role, social interaction among hands-on perpetrators and group dynamics provide better explanations of the genocide than widespread ethnic fear and hatred. In our research, we sought to establish a better understanding of how the killer groups operated and how group dynamics caused escalation. We found that there were various layers and types of perpetrators and, in this article, we aim to show how social interaction between these various types of perpetrators shaped the genocidal process. Before we get to the core of our analysis of the killer groups and the group dynamics, we will explain the methodology we used for our research and will focus on the social and political context in which the crimes were committed.

### *Methodology*

First, we extensively studied literature on the Rwandan genocide, taking particular notice of publications focusing on the behaviour of perpetrators. Several investigative journalists and academics, such as Hatzfeld (2005), Straus (2006), Adler *et al.* (2007) and Fujii (2009), have conducted field research in Rwanda and interviewed selected groups of perpetrators, while others, such as Verwimp (2005), have conducted surveys. Many academics have provided a more general history of Rwanda in which, based on their expertise, they have given well substantiated opinions on the reasons why so many people participated in the genocide, who these people were and what their motives were (Prunier 1997; Drumbl 1998; Gourevitch 1998; Des Forges 1999; Alvarez 1999). We studied and analysed this literature in order to get a full picture of the general context (macro-perspective), the group dynamics (meso-perspective) and the individual perpetrators (micro-perspective). Although our analysis focuses on the individual perpetrators and the group dynamics, we have clearly sought to take account of the environment in which the individuals operated, as we firmly believe that this environment is instrumental in explaining their behaviour. Our analysis focuses on how the environment shaped social reality and how this affected the perpetrators.

In addition to gathering and analysing the available information in literature, we personally conducted 29 interviews with prisoners in Kigali Central Prison in April and May 2009 in order to fill some of the gaps in our knowledge. We asked the prison authorities for Interahamwe and other prisoners convicted of serious crimes (category I and category II) who would be prepared to talk to us and who had confessed at least partially to their crimes. All selected prisoners were from Kigali and had either been

convicted or charged with genocide crimes, and many of them had already been in prison for several years. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted for about one hour. During the interviews, we were assisted by an interpreter who translated from Kinyarwanda into English. In the interviews, we focused on the group dynamics in order to get a better understanding of how the groups operated. Existing literature formed the basis of our research and was used to construct the interviews. In the interviews, we aimed to establish whether we would find similar outcomes to those in other research and also to fill some of the gaps we found in the literature on group processes.

In our analysis, we also relied heavily on general literature and knowledge on genocide and other forms of mass violence and its causes, as well as relying on literature and academic expertise on perpetrators of genocide and other forms of collective violence and on general socio-psychological and criminological literature on group processes, group dynamics and group crime. We relied particularly heavily on the work of Mark Warr (2002), who concluded that crime was a social event and we sought to investigate the extent to which the Rwandan genocide, too, was a social event. We aimed to get a better understanding of the micro-dynamics of the genocidal processes and to see whether there were parallels between the social dynamics within the Rwandan killer groups and those within ordinary delinquent groups.

In analysing the group processes, we used the theoretical model developed by the first author (Smeulders 2008) in which different types of perpetrators of international crimes have been identified. The typology of perpetrators is a theoretical model that has been developed by studying and analysing biographies, autobiographies, memoirs, interviews, trial statements and letters and by comparing this information with all other material available on perpetrators of international crimes. In that way, several hundreds of perpetrators have been studied. Not only did this study produce a much clearer view on how perpetrators perceive the world around them (Smeulders 1996), but it also showed that most perpetrators who commit their crimes within a period of collective violence are ordinary people without mental deficiencies, a criminal record or a violent past. Further analysis has shown that under certain extreme circumstances, ordinary people can gradually transform into perpetrators of international crimes (Smeulders 2004). Analysis of these documents, however, also revealed that there were both striking similarities and striking differences in the reasons why people participated in periods of collective violence and committed international crimes. By carefully studying, analysing and pinpointing the similarities and differences, we were able to group perpetrators into distinguishable types. Ten types of perpetrators emerged from this analysis: the criminal mastermind (defined as the supreme authority), the fanatic (driven by hate and resentment), the sadist (driven by a pleasure to induce pain), the criminal (who was already involved in serious crime), the professional (who has gone through extremely coercive military training in which he was trained to become a torturer or killer), the devoted warrior (driven by a sincere belief in the ideology and the need to obey and conform to an authority), the careerist (driven by careerism), the profiteer (driven by pure self-interest or material gain), the compromised perpetrator (driven by fear) and the conformist and follower (who follow the flow) (see Smeulders 2008 for a more detailed description of the various types and the underlying methodology). In this study, we examined whether this model would fit the Rwandan case and sought to establish the extent to which this model would be a useful analytical tool that would give us better insight into the social interaction and social dynamics of the genocidal process.

As our analysis was partially based on the interviews we conducted, the question arises as to whether the stories the perpetrators told us were reliable. There are some major limitations to the reliability of these findings; the main one is that the interviewees responded to questions about their activities and the situation in Rwanda 15 years ago. Their memories might have been affected by time, trauma and the stories of their fellow prisoners. Second, memories are always interpretations of the truth rather than necessarily the truth itself and thus represent a psychological reality. Since we were, from the outset, aware of these limitations, we consistently compared our findings with other research and concluded that there are several reasons why, overall, we consider the interviews and quotes we used nevertheless to be fairly reliable. First, what the interviewees told us perfectly matched the general picture that emerged from studying the Rwandan genocide. Second, the stories from the interviewees, who were all interviewed individually, showed clear and coinciding patterns, not only within our group of interviewees, but also with the findings of other academics who interviewed perpetrators. Third, the stories from the Rwandan perpetrators seemed logical and made sense. What they told us not only matched the general picture emerging from studies conducted of perpetrators of international crimes in other countries, but also made sense when we took general socio-psychological findings from research into obedience, conformism and group behaviour into account. As the picture we gained became increasingly clear, we felt in a good position to judge when interviewees told us extremely unlikely stories or even outright lies. Cases of the latter occurred, incidentally, and, in these cases, we decided to disregard the statements and interviews as unreliable. Most interviewees, however, seemed to be telling the truth. As our questions focused on group processes rather than personal wrongdoings, most interviewees felt free to talk openly and honestly about what they had experienced and witnessed. In order to increase the reliability, we deliberately selected perpetrators who had already at least partially admitted guilt, most of whom had already been convicted and to whom we could talk freely without having to endure the presence of guards. In addition, we emphasized that we were not lawyers but academics and guaranteed them anonymity from the start of the interview.

In the following sections, we focus first on the political context in which the crimes were committed and how and by whom the genocide was planned. We then examine the killer groups and discuss how they were formed and what kind of people joined these groups. Next, we explain how group processes and dynamics led all these different types of perpetrators to act in unison and how violence could ultimately escalate to such extreme forms.

### *The Context of War and Violence*

While Rwandan society consists of three ethnic groups—Hutus (84 per cent), Tutsis (15 per cent) and Twa (1 per cent)—academics have concluded that the distinction between the groups has socio-economic rather than purely ethnic roots (Des Forges 1999: 32; Straus 2006: 20; Fujii 2009: 56). People could, for example, change from being a Hutu to being a Tutsi or vice versa (Straus 2006: 20; Fujii 2009: 60), and intermarriage between Hutus and Tutsis was not uncommon. Since the end of Belgian colonial rule, however, Rwanda's history has been marked by politically motivated ethnic discrimination and repression, which, in the years before 1973, sometimes escalated into mass killings. From 1973 onwards, the country was ruled by Habyarimana, a Hutu and the leader of the MRND. Under his regime,

too, ethnicity was used as a means of discrimination and for preventing Tutsis from gaining political power. In 1990, a few years before the genocide, the RPF (a Tutsi rebel group) invaded the country and triggered a civil war that challenged Hutu power. Peace talks in Arusha subsequently resulted in a truce and Habyarimana seemed willing to share power. This led extremists within the MRND to turn their backs on their political leader. The Hutu Ten Commandments are a good example of the racist propaganda that these extremists spread through newspapers and radio broadcasts. The situation became tenser by the day, and the killing of Habyarimana was the ultimate trigger in an already explosive situation. Immediately after the plane crash, the authorities caused extreme polarization by declaring that all Tutsis and those who were aligned with them had to be killed, as they were responsible for the death of the president. The authorities used discriminatory and racist rhetoric as a tool to polarize society and took advantage of the huge potential for public resentment. The new distinction was not between Tutsis and Hutus, but between 'real' Hutus (read: extremists) and all others (read: Tutsis and moderate Hutus) (see Figure 1). From the very start, it was clear that there was no middle ground. This two-fold distinction was underlined by the killing of moderate Hutus at the start of the genocide. All those who did not participate were considered enemies (Des Forges 1999: 526–8), and their lives were in danger.

The first hours and days after the plane crash were marked by tremendous terror and fear. The interviewees consistently told us that Rwanda changed overnight. The authorities ordered people to stay at home, roadblocks were erected and Radio Mille Collines continuously broadcast hate messages. False rumours were spread that the Tutsis were planning a genocide against the Hutus. Our interviewees said that they were scared of the violence, the war and of what was coming:

I was living near the airport at the time of the plane crash, and I heard on radio RTL M that Tutsis had killed the president and that they were the enemy and had to be killed. The killings started the next morning. No one could go to work, life had changed totally. People started to kill instead of going to work. (Prisoner D)

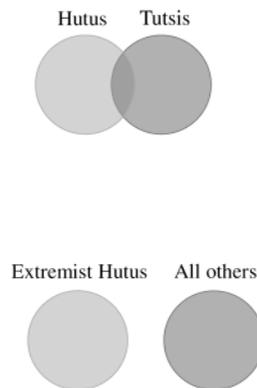


FIG. 1 From a mixed to a polarized society.

Rwanda before and during the genocide: a polarized society in which each person had to choose sides. The diagram symbolizes how the two groups (Hutu and Tutsi) were to some extent distinguishable, but also had a certain overlap. Once the genocide started, the groups became completely separated and two new identities emerged, with the distinction no longer being between Hutus and Tutsis, but between 'real' Hutus (read: extremists) and everyone else.

The morning after the plane crash, life changed completely. Everything was different. It was forbidden to go to work. Before the plane crash, the war was isolated, but after the crash there was the feeling that the whole country was under attack. The whole country was afraid and so was I. (Prisoner F)

So many people were afraid. They were already afraid before the crash, but it became more concrete after the crash. Fear of what? War. We did not know politics. We were afraid of war and the impact it would have on us. (Prisoner X)

Many people were known to have been killed during these very first days and nights, and everyone who lived in Kigali, must have witnessed at least some kind of violence right from the start. Almost all our interviewees told us that they saw how Tutsis were hunted down and murdered and how moderate Hutus and other political opponents of the regime were also killed. The atmosphere in the country was terrifying:

Seeing people killing other people with machetes. That was really shocking. (Prisoner I)

### *Carefully planned genocide*

The killings started so soon after the plane crash and were so well organized that there is little doubt that the genocide was carefully planned well in advance. The planners and instigators were a small and tight group of people who had authority and to whom others listened. Many of the most notorious members of this group have been tried or are still under investigation by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR). They had been part of the social and economic elite and were driven by a desire to gain or retain power or other personal and material gain and were ruthless in pursuing this desire (Prunier 1997: 241). Although there are a few exceptions of particularly active and sadistic *bourgmestres* (Prunier 1997: 246), the political elite did not, as a rule, get physically involved in the genocide; they 'merely' instigated, ordered or facilitated the genocide rather than doing the killing themselves. They organized and trained the Interahamwe and other militias, ordered thousands of machetes in advance, compiled lists of people to be attacked and made sure they controlled Radio Mille Collines.

TABLE 1 *Types of perpetrators and their roles*

Role	Positions and functions of perpetrators	Main motive	Type of perpetrator
Planners and instigators	Political power-holders	Political power	Criminal mastermind
	Political rhetorists/media	Hate, resentment	Fanatics
	High-ranking officials within government and military	Careerism	Careerists
Leaders	Leaders of militarized organizations	Hate, resentment	Fanatics
	Soldiers and policemen	Sincere believe in ideology and professional duty	Devoted warrior
Joiners	Ordinary citizens	Material gain	Fanatics
	Moderate Hutus and Hutus affiliated to targeted group	Personal profit, aggression, sadism	Devoted warriors
		Urge to belong/fear of punishment	Profiteers
		Protect family/friends and fear of violence	Criminals and sadists
			Followers/conformists
			Compromised perpetrators

Immediately after the plane crash, they left no time for reflection, but blamed the Tutsis right away and thus provided both motive and incentive to kill. By ordering all Tutsis to be killed, they also created not only the opportunity to kill, but also the opportunity to use force against anyone who did not want to join in the killings. Although it is not known how many of these people premeditated the genocide, it is clear that, with a very few exceptions, the authorities supported and incited the genocide once it started. If we use the typology developed by the first author, we can identify the power-hungry and ruthless criminal masterminds (such as Theoneste Bagosora), the fanatics driven by hate and resentment (such as Hassan Ngeze) and the careerists (the high-ranking governmental and military authorities who either did not dare to speak out or saw the genocide as a chance to advance their careers) (see Table 1 for an overview). Together, these individuals played a crucial role in setting the scene in which so many others committed genocide and even came to believe that killing their fellow human beings was the right thing to do.

### *Killer Groups*

In the following section, we discuss how the killer groups were formed and why people joined these groups. In doing so, we need to distinguish between the 6,000–7,000 people, mainly Interahamwe, who responded to the first call (Des Forges 1999: 201) and the others who joined later. We also compare the Rwandan killer groups to groups of ordinary delinquents.

#### *Formation of the first killer groups in Rwanda*

Our research has shown that the killer groups within Rwanda were not formed at random or spontaneously, but, instead, at the initiative of fanatical groups, such as the Interahamwe, who then immediately took the lead. The Interahamwe had started out as a youth group of the MRND that organized meetings at which they sang and danced and were given food and drink. Since 1992, however, they had received military training, been provided with guns and taught how to use them (Straus 2006: 26) and were thus prepared for the upcoming violence:

The Interahamwe already prepared before the genocide started; they had meetings and training sessions together and so they knew each other before the genocide. During the genocide they went along house-by-house to do the killings. (Prisoner B)

The Interahamwe had already been trained to use weapons and they had been given weapons. After that night, the interim president and prime minister told people that they had to kill Tutsis. (Prisoner A)

Unfortunately, there is still relatively little known about the socio-economic backgrounds of members of the Interahamwe, but, according to Prunier (1997: 231), members of the Interahamwe and other extremist groups were recruited from the poor and unemployed. It is important to keep in mind, however, that many young people joined the Interahamwe without knowing that the political power-holders were going to use them as the executioners of their genocidal politics. The two high-ranking MRND members we spoke to admitted that they could foresee the genocide, but the rank-and-file members of the Interahamwe we interviewed all said that they had not foreseen it. According to

*Des Forges* (1999: 11), however, many of the early Interahamwe recruits were young men who had nothing to lose and a lot to gain; they were offered incentives such as food, drink and cash, and so it was relatively easy to radicalize them. It is likely that some of them had witnessed combat during the civil war, had experienced extreme hardship and so already had a strong sense of grievance and entitlement, but this is not known for certain. Although we interviewed quite a number of Interahamwe, we interviewed too few to make any general comments on their background, and no other academics have been able to make any substantiated claims on this point. The difficulty is that many Interahamwe fled to neighbouring countries at the end of the genocide. What is known about the Interahamwe is that continual political propaganda and harsh training, in combination with the promise of the fields of Tutsi victims (*Des Forges* 1999: 11), turned many of these youngsters into ruthless fanatics, driven by strong resentment against the privileged and rich and a fanatical zeal to set things right.

Once the signal was given to start the killings, members of the Interahamwe not only took the lead in forming the killer groups, but also took the lead within these groups by starting to kill Tutsis themselves and by inciting others to join and support them:

It was organized on all levels. Everyone had a superior and subordinates and told them what to do. Those authorities in neighbourhoods called meetings and gave orders and encouraged people. There was a member of the Interahamwe in every group. That member would lead the killing in that particular group. So the Interahamwe members were spread throughout the country to lead the killings. (Prisoner B)

The Interahamwe had clear plans. We just followed them because they knew what to do. The Interahamwe had presidents. They were the leaders. These leaders used to meet at meetings, and every group was given a leader who said: today we will do this. If you refused, you would be killed. (Prisoner ZC)

There was always someone from the Interahamwe around .... They came and said 'you have to kill or you will be killed'. Many people were killed because they resisted or hesitated. (Prisoner C)

Next to the members of the Interahamwe, other radical groups, such as the Impuzamugambi, as well as soldiers of the governmental army and the Presidential Guards, were the first to act on the orders of the political and military elite and started killing Tutsis (*Prunier* 1997: 242–3; *Des Forges* 1999: 223; *Straus* 2006: 27). Unlike the fanatical Interahamwe, groups of ordinary soldiers who took part in the killings might not have been so eager to kill and commit genocide in itself, but it was their job to protect the country against the Tutsis, who, after all, had killed their president. With the civil war still fresh in their minds and knowledge of the counter-attack by the RPF two days after the plane crash, many regular soldiers sincerely came to believe that all Tutsis were dangerous enemies. They killed because they considered it their professional duty to do so:

They said that the RPF were going to kill us, so we killed the Tutsis. (Prisoner X)

Because everyone was joining, we thought that it was a good thing to kill Tutsis. We believed in it. We thought we did a good thing. I believed in the fact that Tutsis were the enemy, the government said it. (Prisoner ZC)

Many of the soldiers believed what their leaders and superiors told them. They neither planned nor instigated the violence and killings, but willingly took part once

they were called to do so. These soldiers can be said to have committed crimes of obedience—in other words, crimes that lower-ranking perpetrators commit because they consider themselves entitled to do so by the authorities (Kelman and Hamilton 1998). Many killed not out of hatred or resentment, but simply because they were ordered to kill and had been trained to do as they were told. They believed they were doing the right thing.

*Enforced enlargement of the groups*

The day after the murder of Habyarimana, ordinary people in Kigali were assembled and ordered by the authorities and the extremists either to join the groups who were hunting Tutsis or to stand guard at roadblocks:

The strategy was to group people from one cell together because they knew everyone's ethnicity in that cell and then order the Hutus to kill the Tutsis. It was really well organized. (Prisoner A)

Standing guard at roadblocks or joining killer groups was compulsory. Authorities, soldiers and Interahamwe regularly checked whether everyone was in place. Older people had to stay at the roadblocks during the day, while young people had to guard the roadblocks at night. Others were ordered to join the killer groups. From both existing literature and our own interviews, it became clear that strong pressure was exerted. Almost all our interviewees explicitly stated that they were obliged to follow the call of 'duty' and that at least some people who refused were killed:

The Interahamwe told us to go to the roadblock. If you didn't go, you would be killed. Many people died because they did not want to go. I saw that. (Prisoner X)

The president of the Interahamwe came to the roadblock he patrolled. He used to check the list of people who had to be at the roadblock and if you were not there, you were beaten or killed. (Prisoner Q)

At the time you really had to go there: we were carrying out the orders of the authorities. .... There were some who refused. Some were killed. (Prisoner K)

However, the pressure exerted was not the same everywhere. While many interviewees testified that they had had no choice and the pressure exerted had been extreme, other people were able to avoid participation, felt little pressure or took advantage of good relationships with local authorities:

There was no pressure to participate; people who participated did so of their own accord. I was never pressurized to participate. It was easy not to participate. (Prisoner H)

I did not go to the roadblock. No one could ask me to do so because I had a relative who was the authority. He gave me a paper indicating that the people I was hiding were Hutus, but they were Tutsis . . . no one could disturb me because of my friend. (Prisoner U)

Although these examples show that there were people who could avoid participating, there is no conclusive evidence as to the numbers of people who were able to avoid participating and why they could do so. All we know is that the pressure exerted was not the same everywhere. This does not, however, alter the fact that the first and foremost

reason why people joined the killer groups was because they were ordered to do so. From our research, it also, however, became clear that the degree of willingness to participate varied and that people were driven by various other motives and reasons to join killer groups or stand guard at roadblocks. In the following section, we discuss the motives of people who joined the groups in more detail.

*Why did people join killer groups?*

The reasons why people joined killer groups were manifold. Some people were driven by ethnic hatred and joined in the genocide willingly. Others joined simply because they thought it was the right thing to do: their country was at war with the Tutsis who were considered the enemy and they wanted to join the soldiers and protect their country. These perpetrators sincerely believed that their country needed them. Alongside these ideological reasons, evidence shows that many others joined in order to gain personally or materially from the genocide (Hatzfeld 2005; Des Forges 1999: 10–11, 88):

Some of my friends became killers. What made them change was greed. To get something from the killings. Their main motivation was greed. (Prisoner Y)

According to Verwimp (2005), greed was actually the most important motivating factor. He concluded that high percentages of people joined the killings for this reason, especially among the groups of people who were in a position to benefit from the genocide. In an atmosphere of impunity and supported by the ideology of Hutu power, it was easy to acquire property by looting the houses of people who had been killed:

People who committed genocide did so because of the money Tutsis had. Normal Hutus who had no wealth went to the houses of rich Tutsis and killed the rich Tutsis. (Prisoner U)

Others meanwhile took advantage of the situation to settle scores, to indulge frustrations and aggression, to conduct criminal activities and to satisfy their drive for power and sadism. Within a period of collective violence, opportunities to commit crimes without getting caught are known to rise. It is thus very likely that ordinary delinquents, thieves and sadists gladly joined in the violent attacks on their fellow citizens. They might not have been driven by hate or resentment against Tutsis, but as long as they picked their targets carefully (read: picked Tutsis only), they could commit their crimes without getting caught. Reasons to participate could also, however, be very banal. It was a period of terror and violence, and some people joined in for no other reason than an urge to find food, shelter and safety with others:

For me, I followed the group because I knew the young men who were in the group really well. (Fujii 2009: 143)

It felt secure in the group, and that was a reason to join. (Prisoner W)

Alongside those people who joined willingly, some just followed the crowd. Fujii (2008: 584), too, concluded that some people got involved accidentally: 'Joiners did not necessarily set out to commit violence yet ended up participating in murder nonetheless. The momentum of the group led these joiners to participate in violence against Tutsis.'

They were afraid that if they did not go along, they would be rejected or laughed at. Although not a single interviewee admitted to such a fear, it nevertheless became clear that such pressure was felt by their many references to group processes and group pressure. This type of perpetrator can be categorized as followers and conformists. For them, the urge to belong to a group was the sole reason for joining the killer groups. Some group members stayed together in the evening (Hatzfeld 2005) and, in some cases, parties were organized ‘as if in celebration of the massacre’ (Prunier 1997: 248). In the new social order of Rwanda, old bonds and friendships were replaced by alliances with group members and fellow Hutus. For some, the group became the overarching motivational factor to join:

It was the group spirit. The feeling of being in a group, and belonging to a group. It was really hard to stop. In the group, everyone had the same thinking and the same goal. That gave the group spirit. (Prisoner J)

There were also people for whom fear of being punished, beaten or even killed was the reason for joining the killer groups (cf. Straus 2006: 122; Des Forges 1999: 262). Many of these people were directly threatened, while others participated before they could be threatened or in order to divert attention. One group was particularly vulnerable to such fear and threats: Hutus who had a Tutsi wife, Tutsi family members or Tutsi friends. The radical two-fold distinction between extreme Hutus on the one hand and Tutsis and moderate Hutus on the other made Hutus with special bonds with Tutsis extremely vulnerable: they had to prove that they were ‘real’ Hutus. Some were literally forced to cooperate. It became clear that at least some Hutus committed crimes or joined groups and guarded roadblocks in order to save themselves or protect their families by proving their loyalty to the extremists (Kressel 1996: 95; Straus 2006: 11):

To show them that I was not part of the enemy they forced me to go with them. (Prisoner W)

Hutus were afraid of the RPF, but often even more afraid of their fellow Hutus (Des Forges 1999: 322; Adler *et al.* 2007: 219; Fujii 2009: 120):

In the group I felt safe; going with them made me feel safe. If you did not join the group, they would go to your house and kill you. I saw people being killed for that. (Prisoner Y)

I joined a group of killers from the Interahamwe. They were already trained. I needed to go with them, otherwise I would be killed myself. (Prisoner Y)

From both literature and our interviews, it became clear that the social order changed completely during the genocide: people no longer went to work, as the new social order was to hunt and kill Tutsis. In a period in which violence was the order of the day, people became brutalized; violence not only seemed legitimized and justified, but even a duty. Simultaneously, however, the opportunities to benefit from the situation increased. About 6,000–7,000 people responded to the initial call to kill, but many more than these first killers were ultimately drawn into participating. As we have seen, there were many different reasons for joining in: hate and resentment, opportunism, the urge to gain materially or personally from the downfall of a certain group, careerism, a sincere belief that the country was in danger or simply the desire to be part of something, to belong. From the reasons we have given and identified, it appears that many of the hands-on Rwandan perpetrators fit the types of perpetrators identified by the first author in

previous research on perpetrators of collective violence, namely fanatics, devoted warriors, profiteers, criminals and sadists, compromised perpetrators and the followers and conformists who had no other reasons than merely following the flow (see Table 1 for an overview). The only types of perpetrators for whom we did not find any conclusive evidence of their existence in Rwanda were the professionals. Professionals are perpetrators who have been deliberately and coercively trained to torture or kill. Although the Interahamwe were known to have been trained in advance to commit genocide, it is not known to what extent this training was coercive enough to qualify the recruits who went through the training as professionals. Criminal masterminds and careerists are two other types of perpetrators who did not figure among the hands-on perpetrators, but who were instead planners and instigators of the genocide and thus operated on a different level.

In comparison to the formation of ordinary delinquent groups, we can conclude that the formation of the Rwandan killer groups was different. It was organized top-down rather than bottom-up. It is also important to note that the killer groups were formed and the crimes committed at the initiative of the political and military leadership. The violence was instigated, ordered and condoned by the authorities rather than—as in the case of ordinary delinquent groups—committed in deviance. Furthermore, the killer groups consisted of various types of perpetrators. Some of these types, such as the fanatics, criminals, sadists and profiteers, can be readily compared with members of ordinary delinquent groups, while others would not have been involved in crime under ordinary circumstances. An example of the latter are the devoted warriors who functioned in a hierarchically structured military organization and sincerely believed that they were doing the right thing and, in addition, acted on behalf of the authorities. This type of perpetrator is not likely to figure in ordinary delinquent groups. The fact that the violence was state-sanctioned and people were ordered to join in explains why so many otherwise law-abiding citizens joined these killer groups.

### *Group Dynamics*

In this section, we discuss group dynamics, focusing on the role of the leader and the compliance and consensus mechanisms that influenced group members once they joined the killer groups, as well as comparing these mechanisms to the mechanisms operating within ordinary delinquent groups.

#### *Role of the leader*

The most fanatical perpetrators within the killer groups were the Interahamwe. They were the people who took the lead, joined by the devoted warriors, profiteers, criminals and sadists, while many others, such as the followers, conformists and compromised perpetrators, just followed. While leaders of ordinary delinquent groups are, according to Warr (2002), usually older and more experienced, the leaders of the Rwandan killer groups were trained members from militarized units. They had been trained beforehand and suddenly found themselves in positions of power, armed with weapons and virtually *carte blanche* to fulfil their mission: to kill all Tutsis and any others who were considered traitors. While ordinary delinquent groups are usually 'small, shifting, short-lived,

unorganized groups of young males' (Warr 2002), the Rwandan killer groups were well organized and larger than ordinary delinquent groups. From the interviews, it became clear that groups ranged in size from ten to sometimes as many as 100 people. The killings and looting were well organized and usually took place during 'working hours'; group members went home at night and re-assembled the next day. The leaders were usually very powerful and ruthless and took the lead in the killings themselves:

In our group of 30 people, only two people actually killed, the rest stood by and watched. (Prisoner G)

Those who did not kill were sometimes required to get rid of the bodies or looted the houses of victims. Women were sometimes involved in the killing, but, more often, they 'just' cheered on the killers, denounced Tutsis or participated in lootings (African Rights 1995; Adler *et al.* 2007: 222).

Some members were forced by fanatical leaders to prove their loyalty to the group. Probably the worst thing that could happen to both a bystander and a group member was to be accused of helping Tutsis and being a traitor. Such accusations were, however, common:

The soldier who told me to kill met me at the roadblock. They accused us of protecting cockroaches in the church. We were taken from the roadblock and the Tutsis who had been hiding in the church were taken out of the church. There were so many people we could not count them. There were a lot of us with weapons and we had to take the people at the church and kill them. The ones who did not kill were killed themselves. The only option you had was to take a machete and kill. (Prisoner Q)

Precisely because the lines between the two groups were not fixed, all Hutus who were or were alleged to be aligned with Tutsis were in the danger zone. Subsequently, almost everyone became very vulnerable to wrongful accusations:

Anyone who was not in the same party had to be killed. Whether Hutu or Tutsi that didn't matter. After the president was killed, anyone who was not in the MRND had problems. . . . They were saying we were also Tutsis—people coming from other parts of the country said we were Tutsis. Then a relative who was a soldier took me and gave me a gun to protect my family .... Another soldier came and ordered me to kill people who were in the church and I killed them. . . . I only wanted to protect my family. (Prisoner Q)

In this way, the leaders of the killer groups created an atmosphere of violence and terror and ensured that no one dared to speak out. After all the Tutsis within a particular community had been killed or had fled, the groups either became inoperable or went to neighbouring communities. The killer groups were finally dissolved when the advancing RPF army took over political power.

### *Compliance and consensus mechanisms*

Although the Rwandan killer groups were formed differently from ordinary delinquent groups, compliance and consensus mechanisms operated in the same way as they tend to do in ordinary (delinquent and non-delinquent) groups. People are social beings and conformity research has shown how susceptible people are to social influence such as peer pressure and how eager they are to show that they are good group members. Groups thus have a huge (sometimes even conditioning) effect on both the behaviour and attitudes of their members. Once within a group, members not only feel pressure,

but often also a strong inner urge to adhere and adapt to the group norm, to identify with the group and to feel good about the group and themselves. Within fanatical groups, such as the Interahamwe, the pressure to adhere to the group norm is particularly strong. Alongside the pressure to adapt, group members within Rwanda also experienced a strong psychological urge within themselves to adapt. The reason is that the very aim of the group—to kill Tutsis—will have caused many group members (even those who did not themselves kill, but merely stood by) to experience strong cognitive dissonance. However, the political authorities, as well as the propaganda that was being continuously broadcast, provided rationalizations and justifications for the violence. These served as institutionalized and readily available neutralization techniques and were embraced by members of killer groups as a means of soothing their consciences and reducing cognitive dissonance. Perpetrators who did not initially share the genocidal intent felt a psychological urge to justify and legitimize what they were doing. Within the group, members obviously supported each other in this aim and started to convince themselves and each other that they were doing the right thing (cf. Smeulers 2004). The end result was that in Rwanda, many perpetrators came to experience killing fellow human beings as nothing out of the ordinary and as something that needed to be done:

It was just my job. At that time I did not realize that it was genocide, I was just doing my job: kill the enemy [Tutsis]. Only later did I realize that it was genocide. No one pushed me, I did it willingly. I was told that the enemy had to be killed and I believed it, and I knew that they had to be killed. . . . at the time I thought I was doing a good job. (Prisoner I)

Many Rwandan perpetrators began to internalize the political and racist propaganda and the new norms and values that justified the killing of Tutsis. Many interviewees tried to explain to us that they themselves could not understand what happened during the genocide. It was, they said, all different back then. They explained how they were taught to kill and spoke about the need to defeat the enemy. Within the group, social mechanisms such as social learning and differential association were operational. The profiteers, conformists and followers who joined were taught how to kill, stand guard or apprehend people by the fanatics and devoted warriors who had usually gone through some kind of military training:

I went with the Interahamwe because with them I could sleep and eat and I could not do that without them. The man who brought me in was a friend from primary school. It was not difficult to convince me because I was already convinced by the fact that I would have food and would be protected in the group. The guy who brought me in taught me how to shoot. (Prisoner F)

If we add the direct and indirect physical threats resulting from the climate of terror and violence to the psychological fear of rejection and the urge to belong as described above, it becomes clear that the pressure to adhere to the group norm and to either physically join in the killing or stand by silently without protesting and to help the killers by burying the bodies and looting the houses of those who were killed was extremely strong. The conformity and consensus mechanisms at work not only drew many bystanders into violence; they could also transform reluctant followers and conformists into devoted warriors or fanatics. In his study on Reserve Police Battalion 101, Browning (1992) showed that people can kill and commit genocide purely because of not wanting to be laughed at or thought a coward. An Rwanda this was no different.

Rwandan killer groups resembled ordinary delinquent groups in a number of respects. They had a leader, tasks were divided and compliance and consensus mechanisms were operational. The difference, however, is that the Rwandan killer groups operated on orders of the ruling political power-holders and so could operate in an environment in which their crimes were not only condoned, but even considered legitimate and justified. The political context, the ongoing war and the group processes shaped the attitudes and behaviour of the group members and made them believe that killing Tutsis and moderate Hutus was acceptable behaviour. Without this legitimization from the political elite and without the conforming and consensus mechanisms that operated in the groups, it is unlikely that so many otherwise law-abiding people would suddenly have considered genocide to be acceptable behaviour. But, in the Rwandan context of 1994, this is exactly what they did. Those who did not accept the new social order of their own accord were pressurized or forced into doing so or even killed.

The effect that groups have on group members is not, however, always a unifying effect; group behaviour also tends to be more extreme than individual behaviour (Baron and Kerr 2003: 93 ff.). In the following subsection, we focus on the mechanisms that can lead to an extreme escalation of group violence.

#### *Collective behaviour*

Socio-psychological research has shown that groups make people feel anonymous and de-individualized and less accountable for their behaviour. Within a group, people can consequently lose their ordinary behavioural restraints. This was particularly true in Rwanda. After the plane crash, Rwanda changed overnight. Not only was the country panic-stricken and terrorized, but opportunities, motives and incentives to commit crimes rose dramatically. Ordinary checks and balances disappeared and, within the groups assigned to kill Tutsis and moderate Hutus, ordinary norms and values no longer seemed to apply. Many otherwise law-abiding citizens who had not been involved in any criminal activities prior to the genocide suddenly committed atrocious crimes. From research, it is known that within a period of collective violence, people sometimes feel completely surprised by their own aggressive impulses or the sexual satisfaction they derive from hurting others (see, e.g. Smeulers 2008, 247–8). A logical explanation would seem to be that aggressive and sexual impulses that usually stay hidden under a layer of socialization become exposed in periods in which different norms and values seem to apply and in which opportunities to rape and kill rise. Perpetrators ended up in a vicious circle in which they committed violent acts, felt the need to justify them and thus created a psychological trap for themselves that almost inevitably led to escalating commitments. Staub (1989) noted that people learn by doing and can get caught up in what he called a ‘continuum of destructiveness’.

What also happened—and this is also not uncommon in ordinary groups—is that competition emerges between group members as to who is the best member of the group, with the best member of the group being defined as the member who adheres best to the group norms and who is most successful in contributing to the main aim of the group. In the Rwandan killer groups, this meant that group members who were particularly tough and killed lots of Tutsis gained respect and an enhanced social status:

People show that they are tough in a group. It is a sort of competition. (Prisoner B)

Many people were unconvinced in the beginning. After the first time it got easier. Killing a lot of people earned more respect. They started killing each other and were drinking and doing drugs and killing a lot in the group. It was a kind of competition in the group. (Prisoner C)

The more people you killed, the more respect you gained in the group. I killed a lot of people, 400, and everyone was afraid of me. Everyone did what I asked them to do. Children, people of my own age, and older people. They listened to me because I had experience. I would teach the people in the group how to kill, and how to kill people without too much noise. I taught them how to be clever in the killings. (Prisoner J)

The young men who hung around the roadblocks were often drunk or under the influence of marijuana; they plundered, raped and even killed Hutu passers-by (Des Forges 1999: 572–3). Some said that they felt like God: they could do just as they pleased. This process gained a momentum of its own in which people transformed first from ordinary men and women into perpetrators and then into particularly cruel and vicious criminals (Des Forges 1999: 572–3; Smeulers 2004):

Before the genocide they were normal people. During the genocide they became animals. (Prisoner G)

The young ones were really thugs; they went mad in their hearts after all that killing. (Prisoner W)

They were like devils. (Prisoner ZC)

Killings were usually preceded by acts of cruelty and sadism: women were raped, men mutilated and small children thrown against walls. Once group members or whole groups cross a certain line, it is very difficult to control them and they can go berserk. Ultimately, at least some of the perpetrators became extremely bloodthirsty and started to enjoy killing:

I was really mad, I could kill all of them . . . I really wanted it in my heart. I really enjoyed the killings. (Prisoner J)

These mechanisms explain why the violence in Rwanda became more extreme as time progressed (Des Forges 1999: 572–3) and escalated into extreme cruelty. These mechanisms can equally explain how violence within ordinary delinquent groups can and sometimes does escalate. The danger of extreme escalation is, however, more prevalent in groups such as the Rwandan killer groups, who could operate freely and did not have to operate in illegality and in fear of being stopped and interfered with by the national authorities.

### *Conclusion*

The murder of President Habyarimana triggered an apocalypse of immediate and extreme violence, in which well trained governmental soldiers, the Presidential Guard and especially the Interahamwe played a crucial role. Habyarimana had been a popular president and his death was a shock. Violence almost immediately started in a very ordered and organized way, suggesting that the new power-holders had carefully

prepared the genocide. They literally ordered people to kill all Tutsis and thus commit genocide. The victims were dehumanized, the killings authorized and the operating procedures of the genocide routinized. Excessive violence became the accepted order of the day and people adapted to this new order. The effect of all this was that many people were drawn into the violence: some willingly, others accidentally and others by force. Because the killings were ordered by the authorities, many otherwise law-abiding citizens became involved and came to believe the propaganda that all Tutsis were enemies and that they had to protect their country. Standing guard at roadblocks and joining the killer groups was presented and experienced by many people as a duty.

The killings in Rwanda took place almost exclusively within groups, and there are both parallels and differences between ordinary delinquent groups and these Rwandan killer groups. In many ways, the Rwandan killer groups functioned just like ordinary delinquent groups do: we can distinguish leaders and followers, compliance and consensus mechanisms are operational and group behaviour tends to escalate into extreme behaviour. The crucial difference is that the Rwandan killer groups were formed top-down, the genocidal process was instigated by the political authorities and the groups operated on direct orders of these authorities. Militias had been trained well in advance, were provided with weapons and took power immediately after the plane crash. Unlike the crimes that ordinary delinquent groups commit, the Rwandan genocide was carefully planned and organized by people with political and military power (cf. Prunier 1997: 224; Des Forges 1999: 1; Straus 2006: 1; Fujii 2009: 74). A final important difference is that not only were the numbers of killer groups and the people involved much higher in Rwanda, but the composition of the Rwandan killer groups differed from the composition of ordinary delinquent groups, as, alongside ordinary criminals and delinquents, many otherwise law-abiding people also participated in the genocide.

The typology of perpetrators, as developed by the first author in previous research, and group dynamics can explain, however, why and how so many different people with so many different motives came to operate in unison. In analysing the group dynamics, we distinguished three layers of perpetrators. The first layer consisted of the political and military elite that planned and instigated the genocide, trained the Interahamwe and other militarized groups and provided both the motivation and legitimization for the killings. The perpetrators within this group can be categorized as the criminal masterminds, who were joined by a number of fanatics and careerists. The second layer of perpetrators consisted of those who formed and took the lead within the killer groups. They were the members of the fanatical groups, such as the Interahamwe and members of the governmental forces, who had been trained in advance and can be categorized as fanatics and devoted warriors. The third layer of perpetrators consisted of the people who joined the killer groups after the authorities ordered all civilians to join. The people who joined the killer groups at this stage can be distinguished according to their willingness to join the groups and the motivational detriments for doing so. They can be categorized as fanatics, devoted warriors, profiteers, criminals, sadists, conformists, followers and compromised perpetrators. Group dynamics explain how the first and second layers of perpetrators set the third layer in motion, like the concentric circles shown in Figure 2, and how the violent behaviour within the group became more and more extreme.

In conclusion, we can say that genocide—like many other forms of ordinary delinquency (cf. Warr 2002: 119)—is group behaviour. The Rwandan genocide was a

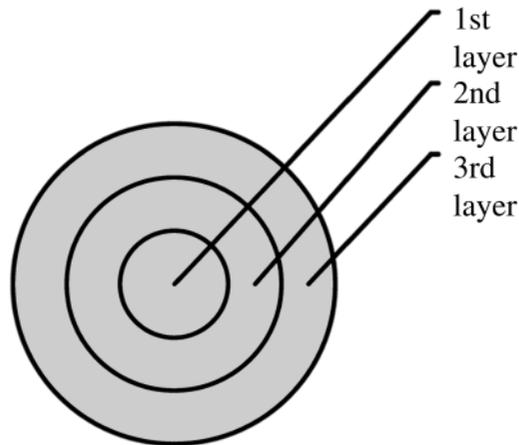


FIG. 2 Three layers of perpetrators.

Layer 1 represents the small hardcore group of planners and instigators, who initiated the violence. Layer 2 represents the larger group of perpetrators, who joined in after they received orders to kill. Layer 3 represents the largest and final group of perpetrators, who joined the killer groups at a later stage.

social event *par excellence*, as it was almost uniquely committed in groups. Social dynamics within the groups and social interaction between the various types of perpetrators identified shaped the genocidal process and caused the violence to escalate into extreme and horrendous violence in which, before being killed, the targeted group was first hunted down, chased like dogs, beaten, raped and mutilated. Once a group accepts certain norms and brutalizes, it is very difficult to control the group's momentum and prevent escalation. The major cause of both the mass participation and the extreme nature of the violence was the fact that killing Tutsis was ordered, planned and incited by the political and military authorities. Studying the Rwandan genocide has taught us that committing genocide is—at least in the eyes of the perpetrators—not as manifestly illegal as we would like it to be. The hard facts show us that when killings are sanctioned by authorities and committed in groups in which compliance and consensus mechanisms are operational, many ordinary and otherwise law-abiding people join in simply because they think or come to believe that it is the right thing to do.

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