

# “Rwanda, the Truth About Operation Turquoise: When the Archives Speak”

A Book Review

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*In France, it is difficult to speak about certain subjects without unleashing the guard dogs of correct thought and dominant ideology. The sensitive dossiers are well-known: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the civil-global war in Syria, and the Rwandan genocides. Even to speak of “genocides” in the plural is to take a serious risk, as the guardians of the temple have erected the singular as a totem of their religion: from April 7, 1994 until July 17, 1994, the “evil” Hutu massacred the “gentle” Tutsi. Definitively, the morality of it is always this simple.*

And from then on: spread the word, as there is nothing more to comprehend because it is a matter of feeling, believing in and celebrating the Rwandan dictator as a benefactor of humanity. The case is closed.

In a succession of sleight-of-hand tricks that turned the Rwandan tragedy into a veritable historic fraud, the French military’s Operation Turquoise deserves particular attention because it has been the object of fantasy, disinformation and deceitful propaganda.

On June 22, 1994, the United Nations Security Council mandated in Resolution 929 the deployment of a multinational force, under the command of French forces in Zaire (Congo) and Rwanda, for the protection of thousands of endangered refugees.

However, for over twenty years, journalists, staff of NGO’s, researchers and, above all, **the Rwandan regime, have accused France of having participated in the preparation, if not the execution of, genocide. How was such a phantasmagoria imposed to the point that it became an undisputed and ideologically dominant truth?**

## Ten Years of Research

To respond to this question, this book by Charles Onana reports on more than ten years of research in the archives of the French Security Council, the executive branch, the Ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs, and the American administration of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, as well as numerous first-hand witnesses’ accounts. **His book methodically deconstructs one of the greatest ideological frauds of contemporary history.** It illustrates that the present rulers of Rwanda impeded intervention by the UN for over two months, knowingly encouraging massacres instead of acting to stop them, in order to gain unshared power and then move on to the conquest of Zaire—with the support of Uganda, the United States, Great Britain, and, to a lesser degree, Belgium.

Born on February 18, 1964, Charles Onana is no dilettante on this subject. With a doctorate

in political science, this French-Cameroonian researcher has become known for several studies made in collaboration with our friend Pierre Péan (deceased in the summer of 2019) on Africa and the Great Lakes region, Palestine, and other armed conflicts. His milestone was his pioneering work on African sharpshooters of the French military during WWII. He managed the Pan-African Organization of Independent Journalists, for which he led an inquiry into the assassination of Norbert Zongo, a journalist from Burkina Faso. He has authored over twenty works, among them: *The Tutsi Killers at the Heart of the Congolese Tragedy* (2009), *Al-Bashir and Darfour: The Couter-Inquiry* (2010), *Cote d'Ivoire: the Coup d'Etat* (2011), *Europe, Crimes and Censure in the Congo* (2012), *France in the Rwandan Terror* (2014), *Palestine, the French Malaise* (2015).

**Prefaced by Colonel Luc Marchal**, former head of the blue helmets of the Kigali sector of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda [1993/10-1996/03], this first scientific study devoted to Operation Turquoise begins by presenting its sources and its methodology. After coverage of the historic and political context, Charles Onana explains how the attack of April 6, 1994—on the plane carrying the presidents of Rwanda and Burundi (Juvénal Habyarimana and Cyprien Ntaryamira)—ignited the terrible machinery: “the massacres of civilians began effectively in the capital on April 7, 1994, after the announcement of the assassination of the Rwandan head of state. They would then spread throughout the country at the initiative of armed groups against the entire Rwandan population. Yet the mode for designating victims would never be founded on a detailed and deep inquiry, but rather done in haste under the emotions of the time.”

### **The Assumption of Power**

At the time of the massacres, many journalists reported that the presidential guard and elements of FAR (*Forces Armées Rwandaise*) were committing atrocities against Tutsis and Hutus. Certainly, a few witnessed equally criminal acts committed by rebels of the RPA/RPF (Rwandan Patriotic Army/Rwandan Patriotic Front) during the same period. Among the few rare journals that were paying attention to the advance of the RPF there was *Liberation*, on May 19, 1994 (editor's note: *Liberation's* objective reporting did not last long) which evoked “bloody reprisals by the Rwandan guerrilla forces” before adding, “contrary to what they always promised, soldiers of the RPF had themselves begun to target civilian populations that had not succeeded in fleeing from the conflict.”

Charles Onana refocuses as well on this question, writing, “Far from the purely ethnic question that all journals refer to, it is rather the ‘sharing of power’ required by the Arusha Accords, or the non-sharing of power, that seems to be the heart of the problem. In other words, was the RPF disposed to share power with Hutus of the interim government at the moment it had a military advantage and preferred to fight until it could totally dominate?”

The testimony of the special representative of the UN Secretary General in Rwanda was along the same lines:

“Considering that victory was within reach, the RPF proved itself to be unreceptive to having informal contact with organizers of a meeting between the parties. It insisted on the dissolution of the interim government and the presidential guard... The special representative of the UN, the secretary general of the OUA and the international community were accused of doing nothing to stop the massacres and being complicit with the interim

government. This excessive assertions led to the abandonment of the Arusha Accords by everyone targeted by the RPF, including Western diplomats.” [See translator’s note 1 about the special representative, Jacques-Roger Booh.Booh.]

The attitude of the RPF in the massacres of civilians in 1994 remains a great taboo. No one has the right to speak of it, even the dissidents of this movement. If the image of the FPR has long been one of a “sympathetic national liberation movement opposed to the Habyarimana dictatorship, its positions and behavior during the massacres finished by revealing its Machiavellian and criminal side,” write Charles Onana. He sets out as rationally as possible the Rwandan and French context at the time the decision was made to undertake Operation Turquoise—a context of political “co-existence” within the country and of hostility outside of it. Clearly, when the French Prime Minister Edouard Balladur saw what was at stake from the point of view of domestic politics, President François Mitterrand saw what was at stake geopolitically.

The author of these lines above remembers having covered the OAU summit (at the time the African Union was still called the “Organization” of African Unity) in Tunis from June 13-15, 1994. The delegation was concerned mainly with the big issue at the summit: Nelson Mandela himself was ceaselessly imploring François Mitterrand to do something to attempt to staunch the massacres that were continuing against the Rwandan refugees heading for Zaire. The former oldest prisoner in the world—then having been president of South African for one month—estimated that the needed operation by the UN would take months and that only France, with its prepositioned forces in Africa, could intervene.

### **From Genocide to Accusations Against Turquoise**

The term “genocide” was not applied at first because neither the United Nations nor the OAU, nor the Red Cross used this term. Its use, initiated with the help and support of the permanent delegation of the Czech Republic and the United States, encountered numerous opponents at the UN. It was then the close contacts undertaken by Colin Keating—ambassador for New Zealand and president of the Security Council—with the RPF which led to the first use of the term, relaying it officially within the United Nations and its technical agencies.[See translator’s note 2 below on why the term “genocide” was thought to be problematic.]

The US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, did the rest, and the United States validated, without the least reservation, and very officially, the pressing demand of the RPF to retain the term “genocide” and to qualify the massacres in Rwanda as such. This qualification was thus retained without prior examination or inquiry. Its validation would never be submitted to review by professional magistrates, nor by any international jurisdiction.

Charles Onana writes,

“The French Minister of Cooperation, Bernard Debre, would say with notable courage: two genocides had been committed, and the leading power of the world wanted that there should only be one because that suited its interests.”

Thus the foundation of an emotional ideological reconstruction was assured for the “genocides” and the attacks that were going to follow. The first accusations launched

against Operation Turquoise were not initiated by French journalists or media. It was the American press that took a position and fired the first shot. From the month of April, shortly after the attack on President Habyarimana's plane, several American newspapers blamed France. It was notably the *International Herald Tribune*, distributed in close to 180 countries around the world, that on April 14th published an article by "journalist" Frank Smyth entitled "French money is behind the over-arming of Rwanda."

From then on the parrots of the Parisian press—in a permanent state of admiration and a quasi-colonial intellectual dependence on the American press—would relay a dossier cleverly promoted by the American NGO Human Rights Watch. It was taken up in Belgium and France by a very strange and shady organization named "Survie" which was literally obsessed with "*Françafrique*." [Translator's note 3] It operated on the premise that the United States, the United Kingdom and Israel had no idea where Africa was and that only France had any influence on the continent. This organization would never cease to incriminate French authorities and Operation Turquoise.

In this "journalistic" affiliation a number of "useful idiots" would flourish—self-proclaimed prosecutors, if not obsessed neurotics, who would peddle the fraudulent narrative. Charles Onana writes, "In invoking regularly and uniquely the support, as a real presence, of France to the Rwandan regime 'before' the massacres (until 1993), and in revealing only the actions of Rwandan government troops during the long civil and international war, but not describing in parallel those of the rebels and not mentioning the origin of their arms and their support, the French press, in quasi-totality, played a role in dismissing an essential part of the reality and presenting facts in a partial or incomplete way. The treatment of information thus, from the start, was unbalanced and truncated. This asymmetry would necessarily affect the intelligibility of the conflict and have consequences for the image of all actors in the conflict."

### **Fear changed sides**

The most violent attacks on Operation Turquoise appeared in the daily *L'Humanité*, which were then relayed by *le Figaro* which pounded—from the beginning—the administration of President Mitterand and Prime Minister Balladur. In this context, *Liberation* and *L'Express* would definitively take up the role of scandalmongers, while *Le Monde*—tying up with an anti-militarism left over from 1968—would specialize in systematically denigrating the French military.

In some cases it was the officers of Operation Turquoise themselves who were copiously dragged through the mud and personally slandered, as if it was a matter of establishing a supposed continuity with the Algerian war, in order to perpetrate bad conscience and tenacious hatred toward a France that remained "colonial" in its essence. While he was chief editor of *Radio France International*, the author was able to see the power of this ideological machinery: the political commissars of the organization *Survie* called directly to editors of "Service Afrique," certain members of which were in permanent contact with the Embassy of Israel in Paris.

In effect, the other great trait of the mythology of the "singular" Rwandan genocide consisted of comparing it—*stricto sensu*—to the holocaust of WWII. Even if in the study of history comparison seldom rhymes with reason, there was suddenly a surge of all the water carriers of the Israeli cause, even launching defamation suits against free thinkers who disagreed with the dominant view. One must not forget also that in the context of a dreadful

intellectual terrorism, inviting the investigator Pierre Péan had become a cause for termination!

It is some of the persons in this study—and the author of the book reviewed here is one of them—to whom we are indebted for a gradual re-establishment of the truth, notably concerning Operation Turquoise. At the time, the author reported on Swiss television (TSR), on many occasions, about the much decried Operation Turquoise. Based on his first-hand experience, he told how French soldiers assisted refugees, bringing them medical care, water and food; how in Goa, Congo, they had buried victims of cholera in order to stop the spread of the epidemic, how they had saved thousands of refugees who would have certainly died otherwise.

In paying homage to these soldiers—most of them very young, and who were then the face of France—I could not help but recall the words of Nelson Mandela to François Mitterrand: “Do something!”

Yes, this book by Charles Onana is “definitive” because, illuminated by undisputable multiple sources and testimonies, not only does he restore the historical truth (without closing the field to further research) but he also makes fear and indignation change sides. This book leads to an inescapable conclusion: from the common soldier to the highest military and political officials, Operation Turquoise saved—yes, saved!—thousands of lives. From the common soldier to those with the highest responsibility, this overseas deployment of French armed forces deserves our respect and admiration.

### **A question of honor**

And if fear has thus changed sides and made it possible today to finally give much deserved honor to all the men and women of Operation Turquoise, it is also because its commander—General Jean-Claude Lafourcade—battled relentlessly to defend the honor of the mission accomplished.

When he was named as the head of the operation in June 1994, he was a brigade general of the 11th parachute division in Toulouse. Named as commander of the Legion of Honor in 2000, he would be successively deputy chief of staff of ground forces, chief commander of the armed forces of New Caledonia, then commander of ground forces (CFAT) in Lille.

How could such a man, supposedly so tarnished, have had such a career path? Yet Jean-Claude Lafourcade would also preside over the France-Turquoise Association which fought step by step against all the calumnies hurled against the actions of our country in Rwanda. Ignored by the Parisian press, his book *Operation Turquoise-Rwanda 1994*, written with journalist Guillaume Riffaud, cleared the way. In January 2016, General Lafourcade was a witness (*témoignage assisté*) [Translator’s note 4] in a judicial inquiry pertaining (*information judiciaire*) to “complicity in genocide and crimes against humanity” that targeted French military personnel. These procedures all failed abruptly, not interfering with his ability to pursue the fight necessary to re-establish “honor” during a time when there was so little of it.

Other honorable men should be mentioned here: Admiral Marin Gillier, whose career was distinguished by an assignment in the Special Forces, in particular with the French Combat Swimmers.

His knowledge of Arabic led him to counter-terrorism activities and the fight against radical Islamic fighters. Duties at the Ministry of Defense led him to work in establishing rule of law in different national and international formats. Out of uniform, he took on several private duties: *l'association Nazaréens au Cœur* (NauC) which welcomed families having fled Iraq and Syria after the rise of Dae'ch [ISIS] there. Another was Night of the Handicapped, a gathering in public places, once a year, for passersby, organizations and institutions involved with vulnerable and handicapped people to share a moment of conviviality and brotherhood.

On this horizon line of restored honor, a third musketeer stands out among many others: Colonel Jacques Hogard, who was a commander of the Foreign Legion at the time Operation Turquoise. In 2005, his testimony about his participation—*Tears of Honor: Sixty Days in the Torment of Rwanda*—was published by Hugo. It asserts that the person responsible for the attack of April 6, 1994, which killed the Rwandan and Burundian presidents, was indeed Paul Kagame. He accuses American Secretary of State Madeleine Albright of having delayed the deployment of an international force to end the massacres. On May 13, 2009, with a number of other former officers of the French Army that served in Rwanda between 1990 and 1994, he was distinguished with a decree from the President of the Republic and promoted to officer of the Legion of Honor. He is appreciated for other books revealing other truths such as: *Europe Died in Pristina: War in Kosovo* (1999, 2014).

It is in such good company that Charles Onana concludes his book, writing,

“Even in the present day, French political leaders, almost apathetic and resigned, are always little inclined to effectively and courageously defend their soldiers, in particular those of Operation Turquoise in the face of endless ignominious and defamatory accusations, a situation that would be totally unimaginable in the United States if it were a matter concerning American soldiers.”

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*This was originally published on [Lit by Imagination](#), translated by Dennis Riches.*

### **Note**

1. Jacques-Roger Booh Booh, Special representative of the UN Secretary General, Chief of UNAMIR (United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda) during the genocide

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