

A reply to correspondence on the Rwandan genocide

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Below we publish a reply to emails from Professor Peter Erlinder, a defence attorney at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), and Mr Christopher Black, an international criminal lawyer, objecting to the World Socialist Web Site's coverage of Rwanda and the United Nations tribunal. Their letters can be found [here](#).

The World Socialist Web Site has received two letters strenuously objecting to our line on the genocide that took place in Rwanda in 1994, when hundreds of thousands of Rwandans identified as Tutsis were killed by Hutu militias.

Our correspondents are Professor Peter Erlinder of William Mitchell College of Law, who has been a defence attorney at the United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) since 2003, and Mr. Christopher Black, who is an international criminal lawyer based in Toronto. Mr. Black is the lead counsel for the ICTR. He was also vice-chair of the International Committee to Defend Slobodan Milosevic, who died while on trial at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) at The Hague. He advised the legal team of Vojislav Seslj of the Serbian Radical Party, who is currently on trial at the ICTY.

Professor Erlinder and Mr Black responded to an article in which WSWS writer Linda Slattery reported on the conviction of Théoneste Bagosora at the ICTR for war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity (See "Rwanda: Perpetrators of genocide jailed").

Both correspondents deny that genocide took place in Rwanda. Professor Erlinder refers to "the Rwandan Tragedy ... some call genocide." Mr. Black refers to "the myth of genocide."

Mr. Black denies any French involvement in events in Rwanda, which he describes as a "fantastic story," maintaining that "The French had nothing to do with the 'genocide.'" There was, he states, no ethnic problem in Rwanda before 1990. The killings that took place in 1994, he claims, were the result of an offensive by the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), who "attacked across the country massacring hundreds of thousands of Hutus and any Tutsis who were seen as non-reliable."

Mr. Black stresses that the United States was backing the RPF (which became the government in Rwanda after 1994) and accuses the WSWS of "propagating the imperialist lies which have been used to cover up the real role of the US" and of "acting like US government parrots."

Mr. Black claims that prior to 1994 Rwanda was "a semi-socialist country considered a model for Africa." The WSWS, he claims, has been "duped into damning the socialists while supporting the imperialists."

We would like to deal with these issues by examining the role of the United Nations, the imperialist powers and the issue of ethnic divisions in Rwanda, before going on to examine some of the evidence for genocide and, finally, dealing with the nature of the pre-1994 Rwandan state.

Imperialism and the UN courts

The allegations that Erlinder and Black make against the WSWS are entirely unfounded. It has consistently sought to expose the role of US imperialism in Rwanda and elsewhere in Africa, as we have done throughout the world. But that does not mean that we deny the role of other lesser imperialist powers.

We have made it clear in numerous articles that the ICTR and the ICTY are courts that have no legitimacy. The tribunals are presided over by imperialist powers that were complicit in the crimes they claim to be trying in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. What is defined as a war crime, and who should be held to account for it, is entirely dependent on the geopolitical and economic interests of the major Western powers.

In the case of Rwanda we have repeatedly pointed to the role of the US government in backing the RPF and of the United Nations in allowing the massacre to take place. In an article on March 23, 2000,[1] Linda Slattery raised the issue of possible US involvement in the shooting down of the plane carrying the presidents of Rwanda and Burundi, the event that triggered the genocide. Discussing the election of Paul Kagame, the leader of the RPF, with 95 percent of the vote in 2003, the WSWS explained that Kagame "obtained military and strategic training in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas in the US." [2] We explained that he came to power with support from the US, UK and US-backed Ugandan forces. We have never given support to the Kagame government or its backers.

"Hundreds of thousands of Hutus fled the country;" the article continued, "many were tracked down and slaughtered by RPF forces. The extent of RPF massacres remains a hotly contested topic—estimates range between 'several thousand' to 30,000 or even 200,000 killed—but Kagame himself has acknowledged that RPF officials 'committed violations of international humanitarian law.'"

On the tenth anniversary of the genocide in 2004, the WSWS explained the role of both the US in backing the RPF takeover and France in supporting the government before 1994 and the Hutu chauvinists. Linda Slattery wrote that "there can be no doubt that France and the US were the real powerbrokers in determining that nearly a million people would die." [3]

Our record on the Rwandan genocide reflects a thoroughly principled position based on socialist internationalism. It is consistent with our reporting of the role of the various imperialist powers elsewhere in Africa. We have written extensively on US aggression in the Horn of Africa, on German involvement in the Democratic Republic of Congo, on the British invasion of Sierra Leone, on imperialist designs on Zimbabwe and the hypocrisy of Tony Blair's aid plans for Africa.

France's role in the genocide

Professor Erlinder refers to “French and other continental neo-colonial interests” in Africa, but he considers they were displaced by the US and UK 30 years ago. This is not the case. France retains considerable interests in Africa—it has occupying military forces in Ivory Coast, the Central Africa Republic and Chad, it has military bases in Gabon, Djibouti and Senegal. It maintains strong economic interests in Africa, obtaining its uranium from Niger for example.

Mr. Black apparently does not accept any French responsibility for the situation in Rwanda, citing the pro-French UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali. Mr. Black’s assertion that the French had been driven out of Rwanda, “forced out by the RPF during the Arusha Accords negotiations in 1993,” is nonsense. The French historian Gerard Prunier reports in his book *The Rwanda Crisis* that whilst RPF atrocities against civilians did take place in February 1993, they were hyped up in the French media and “Three hundred new troops were rushed to Rwanda and a massive quantity of ammunition was sent for the FAR [army of the Rwandan regime] artillery” [4]. There is no factual basis for Mr Black’s claim that the RPF murdered over 40,000 people in two weeks.

France later withdrew most of these troops to the Central Africa Republic, but only after a ceasefire was agreed and it was assumed that the Habyarimana regime was safe. French President Mitterrand regarded Habyarimana as his personal friend. Even then Prunier notes, “Between forty and seventy French military advisers did stay discretely behind after the December 1993 withdrawal of French forces to help the FAR in case of need.” [5]

In fact, France had given full support to the government throughout, sending troops after the first and disastrous RPF invasion in 1990, massively increasing the supply of arms, training the elite presidential guard and financing an expansion of the army from 9,000 troops in 1991 to 28,000 in 1992. With French support an estimated \$100 million—diverted from an IMF Structural Adjustment Program—was spent on arms, a huge amount for such a tiny country.

In the early days of the genocide (April 9) French paratroopers in “Operation Amaryllis” evacuated dignitaries of the Habyarimana regime, including the president’s wife and the Hutu extremists in her coterie. Tutsis trying to escape were murdered in front of French soldiers. In June, President Mitterrand organized “Operation Turquoise,” under UN auspices, ostensibly to protect the population, but with the intention of protecting the “interim government” of Hutu extremists which was organizing a mass Hutu exodus into the Congo. As the scale of the atrocities became apparent, the French had to abandon their plans and allow the RPF to take over. French soldiers involved in “Operation Turquoise” felt that their own government had deceived them. They were told that only Hutus were being killed. One commented, “We have not a single wounded Hutu here, just massacred Tutsi.” [6]

Given this background, to state that the French had nothing to do with the 1994 genocide is absurd. As we stressed in the article, Bagosora was a creature of the French and it would be naïve in the extreme to believe that his involvement in the genocide was not known to French intelligence officers.

Having stressed the French involvement, we are by no means minimizing US involvement. We have explained in our articles that the reason that the US insisted that UN peacekeeping troops were withdrawn in 1994, despite UN commander Romeo Dallaire’s request to intervene, was because it wanted to give the RPF a clear field to drive out the pro-French regime.

Both Erlinder and Black make much of US interventions to stop the ICTR prosecuting the Kagame regime for massacres it carried out, or for its alleged role in the shooting down of the plane carrying President Habyarimana just before the genocide. No doubt the US has protected the current Rwandan regime in both the UN and the ICTR. But this cannot be extended to an all-embracing conspiracy theory in which evidence is

distorted or denied.

Colonialism and ethnic divisions in Rwanda

According to Mr. Black, Rwanda had no ethnic problems prior to 1990. He maintains that ethnic issues were only created by the RPF invasion of 1990 that “massacred tens of thousands of Hutus.”

This flies in the face of the historical evidence. Colonial governments whipped up tribal divisions throughout Africa so that they could hold power by a divide-and-rule strategy. Belgium developed intense tribal divisions between the Hutus and the Tutsis of Rwanda and neighbouring Burundi despite the fact that they spoke a common language, had a shared culture and frequently intermarried. Key posts were given to the Tutsis, with the result that a rivalry was produced between the two groups that continued after independence.

In 1962 the unstable Hutu regime used an anti-Tutsi campaign to help maintain its rule, in which at least 10,000 Tutsis were killed and tens of thousands fled into exile. In 1973 President Juvenal Habyarimana took power after a coup and imposed an authoritarian one-party regime dominated by Hutus.

From the 1970s onwards a quota system was imposed in which 9 percent of jobs went to Tutsis, even where they had a much larger presence. Many more Tutsis fled the country. This situation continued until the 1990s when the regime was once again increasingly unstable.

Like most African countries, Rwanda accepted World Bank and IMF policies in the 1980s and was plunged into deeper poverty as a consequence. Its export earnings declined by 50 percent between 1987 and 1991 and the adoption of a free-market reliance on cash crops—introduced by the Habyarimana regime—was disastrous as Professor Michel Chossudovsky has explained, which was the background to the resurfacing of ethnic politics [7]. It was convenient for the Hutu extremists in the Rwandan elite to blame the RPF, but the real reason for the instability of the regime and the return to openly tribalist politics was the desperate economic situation.

The suggestion that the RPF murdered tens of thousands of Hutus in 1990 has no basis in historical facts. After the RPF, a small force of 2,500, suffered heavy casualties they had to retreat back to Uganda. Prunier explains how the Habyarimana regime organized a fake assault on the capital, Kigali, claiming they were under attack and requested French support. Nearly 10,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were arrested by the government and held in appalling conditions with beatings and rape commonplace. At the same time, several hundred Tutsis were massacred by government forces [8].

A well documented genocide

Both Black and Erlinder claim that the 1994 genocide as it is widely understood—the mass murder of Tutsis and Hutu moderates organized by Hutu extremists in the Habyarimana regime—did not happen. They maintain that any killing that took place was the work of the RPF. We have no brief for the RPF, but, as we have already said, the genocide is well documented.

Survivors, aid workers and UN soldiers report that anyone perceived to be an ethnic Tutsi was butchered by highly organised Hutu killing squads throughout the whole of Rwanda. The approximate figure of 800,000 Tutsis killed was put forward by Prunier on a careful analysis of census

figures from before the event and survivors in refugee camps afterwards [9]. It was not made up by the RPF as Black has claimed. It has been said, with some justification, that more people were killed more quickly than in any other mass killing in recorded history, including in Nazi Germany. This could not have been achieved without a great deal of planning.

Details of who was responsible for the killings were given in reports by Human Rights Watch and Africa Rights. Prunier gives a list of 10 individuals of various political persuasions who gave testimonies, together with French soldiers and officials from UNHCR, ICRC and other NGOs [10]. How the killings were planned in advance was given in many testimonies to the press—Prunier lists eight sources [11].

There were also eyewitness reports by journalists such as Scott Petersen for the UK *Daily Telegraph*, now Moscow bureau chief for the *Christian Science Monitor* [12] and Lindsey Hilsum for the BBC World Service, now international editor for UK *Channel Four News*.

Professor Erlinder makes much of the ICTR finding Bagosora not guilty of conspiracy or planning to commit genocide. However Prunier writes that Bagosora was responsible for the coordination of the sections of the military, the unofficial militias such as the notorious Interahamwe, and the local officials who carried out the killings [13]. The reason the ICTR did not probe further was because, as our article explained, it did not want to bring out the role of France.

Erlinder and Black's other claims may be summarised as follows:

1. Black claims that the plane containing President Juvenal Habyarimana and the President of Burundi was shot down by the Belgians, the US and the RPF with the connivance of UN General Dallaire—rather than by Bagosora and the Hutu extremists. The accusation of RPF involvement is the subject of a court case by the French government against the Rwandan leaders. That involvement in shooting down the plane implies involvement in the genocide is, however, a non sequitur—it may rather be the case, as we stated in our article, that it was a trigger for the events of the genocide but was not carried out by the Hutu extremists. However, the immediacy with which the genocide plan was carried out would clearly imply some prior knowledge of the assassination by Bagosora and Co., possibly through intelligence sources.

2. Black insists that the whole Rwandan government was not involved in a plan to commit genocide. Neither we, nor anyone else as far as we know, have suggested that the whole coalition government were involved in the genocide. But it has been stated that a plan was organized by the Hutu extremist group around President Habyarimana's wife, which included Bagosora and various others. Black claims that Dr. Alison Desforbes of Human Rights Watch backs up his contention that there was no conspiracy to commit genocide. But in a report to the US House Subcommittee on International Operations and Human Rights in May, 1998 Dr. Desforbes made clear that she did think the genocide was planned by military and political leaders in Rwanda:[14]

She explains: "Regardless of who was responsible for the assassination of the Rwandan president, his death only served as pretext for launching a killing campaign that had been planned for some time.

"The organizers of the genocide were at the start only a small circle of military and political leaders, but they had at their command the three most important elite military units in Kigali, including the Presidential Guard, as well as several thousand militia members. Even with this advantage, it was not clear that they would succeed in mobilizing hundreds of thousands of Rwandans to kill their fellow citizens. The propaganda barrage of the previous months had prepared a large segment of the population to distrust and even hate Tutsi and moderate Hutu, but it would require considerable organizational resources to move them from these sentiments to actually taking up their weapons to kill people.

"Moderate military officers at first opposed efforts by the extremists to take power and sought support from the international community. Several leading officers contacted US, Belgian and French representatives, either

in Kigali or in foreign capitals, seeking backing against the forces of genocide, but got none. Lacking any clear foreign assistance, they failed to organize any coherent movement of opposition. When extremists saw the moderates dithering, they pushed their advantage and removed them from key posts where, with time, they might have been able to organize an effective resistance to the killing campaign.

"Once in effective control of much of the military apparatus, the organizers of the genocide used soldiers, members of the national police forces, members of the military reserves, and retired soldiers to initiate and supervise genocidal massacres throughout the country. In every major massacre investigated by Human Rights Watch, some members of the regular military sparked and directed the killings carried out by civilians. In one community after another, we found evidence that members of the armed forces had incited and indeed ordered civilians to participate in the killing campaign."

3. With the claim that the RPF were responsible for the killings that took place, Mr. Black is asserting that the genocide happened in reverse. He writes: "the western-backed Tutsi invaders of Rwanda murdered between one and a half and two million Hutus in the months between April 6 and July 4, 1994 ... a tragedy made more macabre by the Tutsi claim that their Hutu victims were really Tutsis." [15]

Black has also claimed that Major Dallaire "worked with the RPF throughout the period of his mandate in Rwanda in violation of the UN mandate," [16] so that none of his evidence can be trusted. He also claims in his letter that Linda Malvern, whose book was published by the left-wing publisher Verso, is part of the "RPF-US propaganda machine".

Apart from dubious evidence from former RPF cadre, Black makes much of the evidence presented by Robert Gersony of USAID in a report of November 1994 of RPF killings of the Hutu population. We see no reason to deny that RPF cadre committed atrocities. But the figure of 30,000 and the claim that it was deliberate policy is refuted by Prunier.[17] He points out, not unreasonably, that killing on such a scale in a very small country would surely have left a lot more evidence. Gersony's report, moreover, relates to events that took place between July and September 1994, after the RPF came to power, not April-June when the Hutu militias were killing Tutsis.

Nature of the Rwandan regime

Mr. Black describes Rwanda prior to 1994 when the RPF take-over as a "semi-socialist country considered a model for Africa."

We do not accept such a characterisation. Like most of the states in Africa after independence, Rwanda was a bourgeois nationalist regime. Its economy was mostly based on subsistence agriculture and it was run by a small and wealthy elite, subservient to and dependent on French imperialism. While some African regimes allied themselves with the Soviet Union or China and called themselves "socialist," this was not the case in Rwanda. Even those African regimes that did have close relations with the Soviet Union and China could not be defined in any way as socialist or transitional to socialism because no proletarian revolution had taken place. Power was in the hands of a section of the colonial elite and the economies of those countries remained subordinated to imperialism.

Many economically backward, repressive and impoverished states claimed to be socialist in the post-war period. Mr. Black, who is a leading member of the Canadian Communist Party, travelled with a team of American lawyers to The Democratic People's Republic of Korea in 2003 and according to the web-based NationMaster encyclopedia, "He states that the DPRK is a progressive, socialist country deserving the support of all progressive peoples around the world." [18]

The WSWWS has opposed the threats the US has made against North Korea and others that have been subject to an actual military assault, but we are not prepared to identify every regime that comes under attack as anti-imperialist or socialist. And we are certainly not prepared to give the pre-1994 Rwandan regime a clean bill of health or let French imperialism off the hook. Genuine socialist internationalism is not about glorifying whatever semi-colonial bourgeois power is under attack or of siding with one imperialist power against another. It means championing and defending the independent interests of the working class in every country and advancing a perspective of class unity in the struggle against all manifestations of imperialist militarism and colonialism.

Conclusion

In summary, we insist that the Rwandan genocide—the mass killing in 1994 of the Tutsi population organised by a Hutu extremist section of the ruling elite—did take place, and the evidence for it is irrefutable. Whilst it is the most extreme example of such an ethnically based massacre in the recent period, it is by no means the only case. Bourgeois nationalist regimes in Africa—weak, unstable and dependent on imperialism, especially when facing an economic crisis—have on many occasions whipped up ethnic and religious divisions and encouraged killings on a mass scale. One can cite Kenya, the Ivory Coast, Nigeria and many others. Alternatively national and ethnic divisions have been used to foment wars between rival regimes.

The attempt to develop viable national entities in the areas carved out of Africa by the former imperialist powers has been proved completely bankrupt, as evidenced by the frequency of such conflicts. But such an event as the Rwandan genocide cannot be treated as an event produced merely by African problems. The role of both French imperialism in its support for the ruling clique in Rwanda, American imperialism in backing Uganda and the RPF, as well as the continuing economic depredation of Africa by the Western powers as a whole through the World Bank and the IMF, were crucial in preparing the ground for this tragedy.

As attorneys, Professor Erlinder and Mr. Black have a professional responsibility to their clients. It is another matter all together when they choose to translate this into a political defence of the Hutu regime and its crimes.

The task of the WSWWS is to give an objective analysis of contemporary events and to delineate a socialist political direction for working people internationally. In this we are continuing the tradition set by Leon Trotsky. Can we suggest that as a leader of an organisation that slavishly supported all the crimes of Stalin, Mr. Black, who professes himself to be an admirer of Trotsky, should give some serious consideration to his own political direction before so stridently denouncing the WSWWS.

Notes:

1. “Suppressed report raises question of US role in Rwandan civil war”
2. “Rwandan crisis deepens as Kagame begins seven-year term”
3. “Rwanda—10 years since the genocide”
4. Gérard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis, History of a Genocide*, Hurst & Company, London, 1995, p 176. (We have cited Prunier as there can be no suggestion that he is pro-US or pro-RPF.)
5. Prunier, p. 214.
6. Martin Meredith, *The State of Africa, A History of Fifty Years of Independence*, The Free Press, 2005, p. 521.
7. “IMF-World Bank policies and the Rwandan holocaust”
8. Prunier, pp. 102-109.
9. Prunier, pp. 261-65.
10. Prunier, p. 240.

11. Prunier, p. 242.

12. Peterson recalls his experiences in *Scott Peterson, Me Against My Brother*, Routledge, New York, 2000.

13. Prunier, who was an adviser to President Mitterrand and had inside information in the period before the genocide, states that Bagasora was the “coordinator” of the genocide, p. 163.

14. <http://www.ess.uwe.ac.uk/Rwanda/Rwanda2.htm>

15. <http://globalresistance.com/letters/racism.htm>

16.

http://www.sandersresearch.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=38&Itemid=62

17. Prunier, p 323.

18. <http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Christopher-Black>



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