

## RADIO PROPAGANDA AND GENOCIDE

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### AN INTRODUCTION

Most of us from North America and Europe are too young to remember the early years of radio broadcasting and the first impact of radio on our societies, but Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian Noble Prize-winning author, accused of treason by General Sani Abacha's military government, vividly remembers his initiation to radio. It took place early in the Second World War, just after the British colonial government had extended electricity to Soyinka's home town of Abeokuta and long after the introduction to Nigeria of the wind-up gramophone. Soyinka recalls in *Akè*, a memoir of his childhood, that radio, unlike the gramophone,

could not be made to speak or sing at any time of the day. It began its monologue early in the morning, first playing 'God Save the King.' The box went silent some time in the afternoon, resumed late afternoon, then, around ten or eleven in the evening, sang 'God Save the King' once more and went to sleep. Because the box spoke incessantly and appeared to have no interest in a response, it soon earned the name [in Yoruba] *As'oromagb'esi* [that is, "One who speaks without expecting a reply."] At certain set hours [,Soyinka continues], the box delivered THE NEWS. The News soon became an object of worship . . . . When the hour approached, something happened to . . . [the men of the family and their male neighbors]. It did not matter what they were doing, they rushed to our house to hear the Oracle.

Lest we assume that sophisticated Nigerians believed every word they heard on the radio, keep in mind the rhyme that appeared among the Yoruba of Soyinka's home region soon after electricity and the radio were introduced. It went as follows:

Elektiriki ina oba  
Umbrella el'eko  
As'oromagb'esi, iro oyinbo

which meant,

Electricity, government light  
Umbrella, for the Lagos elite  
Rediffusion [radio], white man's lies.

### THE CASE OF RWANDA

The terms of the definition of genocide contained in Article II of the United Nations' Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948) are clearly fulfilled in the case of Rwanda. From April to July 1994, hundreds of thousands of Tutsi were killed "with intent to destroy, in whole . . .," an "ethnic . . . group, as such . . .," the Tutsi of Rwanda. A great deal is already known about this case. It was a small circle around Madame Agathe Habyarimana, the widow of President Juvenal Habyarimana of Rwanda, popularly known as the *Akazu*, or the Little House, which perceived the power sharing provisions of the Arusha Accords of 1993 as fatal to its ambition to cling to power and resolved to annihilate Rwanda's entire Tutsi population. It also sought to kill all Hutu in Rwanda who advocated human rights or displayed sympathy for the plight of the Tutsi. President Habyarimana's perceived weakness made him expendable in the eyes of his in-laws and their associates. In the good old days, he had encouraged the dissemination of hate propaganda against Hutu human rights advocates and the Tutsi, but he had also signed the Arusha Accords, and thus betrayed his lack of determination. With hindsight, it is now clear that the assassination of Burundi's democratically elected Hutu president, Melchior Ndadaye, in

October 1993, probably tipped the balance within the Akazu in favor of a genocide directed against the Tutsi.

The Rwandan media, encouraged by the Akazu, played a major role in inciting genocide by convincing many Hutu that they themselves would soon become the victims of a genocide mounted by the Tutsi. The largely Tutsi Rwanda Patriotic Front's invasion of Rwanda from Uganda in October 1990 played into the hands of this campaign. While newspapers and magazines spread the message in urban areas among the small proportion of the population that was highly literate, the Akazu skillfully employed radio broadcasting to sow hatred and distrust among the much larger rural population, as well as the unemployed youth of Kigali. When they were finally signed, the Arusha Accords barred Government-owned Radio Rwanda from inciting hatred, so hard-liners from Madame Habaryimana's circle created Radio RTLM (Radio-télévision libre des mille collines), a private station of their own. RTLM whipped up fear and ethnic hatred more effectively than Radio Rwanda ever had, using dynamic, innovative programming which introduced to Rwanda's airways for the first time a unique cocktail of the liveliest African music and informal talk radio, blended with culturally-coded attacks on Tutsi and their defenders. Enormously popular and widely heard thanks to its special access to the facilities of Radio Rwanda, Radio RTLM severely damaged the bonds of solidarity between Hutu and Tutsi, people who lived and farmed together as neighbors on almost every one of Rwanda's thousands of hills. When the genocide began, its exhortations to Hutu peasants and militias—to go to work, to kill the snakes in the grass, to reach above the door and take down the useful tools, and to shift the focal points of the killing to new regions as the genocide advanced throughout the country—were highly effective in neutralizing Hutu by-standers, as well as mobilizing and maneuvering killers.

The shooting down of President Habaryimana's airplane as it descended for a landing at Kigali airport on 6 April 1994 signaled the beginning of Rwanda's genocide. By July, Hutu soldiers, police officers, and militia members, frequently aided by ordinary men, women, and children, had killed approximately 1,000,000 of their Tutsi neighbors in several well managed and centrally coordinated waves of mass murder. The dead constituted about 85 percent of the Tutsi who lived in Rwanda on 6 April 1994 or roughly 11 percent of Rwanda's entire population.

Throughout history, from ancient times to the present, perpetrators of genocide have displayed four different motives, alone or in combination: (1) to eliminate a real or potential threat; (2) to spread terror among real or potential enemies; (3) to acquire economic wealth; or (4) to implement a belief, a theory, or an ideology. While all of these motives were present in Rwanda, the most important was the Akazu's desire to implement its ideology of Hutu racial superiority, an ideology whose roots can be traced back to the so-called Democratic Revolution of 1959. 1959 was the year in which the Belgian colonial administration abandoned its Tutsi allies in favor of the far more numerous Hutu. 1959 was also the year which saw an inversion of the dominant racial myths promulgated in Rwanda during the colonial era. The Tutsi myth held that they were immigrant rulers, racially distinct from the Hutu, and naturally superior to them. In its inverted, post-colonial form, the Hutu myth argued that all Tutsi were their oppressors and that all Hutu were liberators. In this way, the Tutsi were demonized as a race, rather than a class, and the oppression of the Tutsi under the new Hutu regime was justified. Government-issued identity cards labeling the bearer as Hutu or Tutsi, discriminatory racial quotas for school admissions and government jobs, broadcasting of patriotic songs during the celebration of national holidays boasting of the killing of Tutsi, and the little known practice of having high school teachers point out each year the Tutsi students in their classes all contributed to the transformation of the Tutsi from a class into a "race" in the years from 1959 to 1994.

Economic factors played an important motivating role within Rwanda's Hutu political elite. As Rwanda's coffee and tin industries declined, access to foreign aid through control of the government became the elite's major source of income. Among rural Rwandans, other economic factors entered into the equation. Rwanda has one of the highest population densities among all of the world's agricultural nations. Land holdings are tiny and barely able to support rapidly growing families. The order to kill was made at the highest political level, but one important reason why so many Hutu farmers joined in the killing was that it opened the way to acquisition of their Tutsi neighbors' homes, fields and goods. Killing their neighbors was made more palatable for many Hutu by the propaganda warnings of an impending Tutsi genocide directed against the Hutu disseminated by the radio and the press. Radio propaganda served the function of legitimizing the killing neighbor by neighbor.

Rwanda's prisons are filled several times over with the 130,000 persons accused of participating in the genocide, but these prisoners represent only the tip of the iceberg. The aberration of mass participation in a genocide, of Hutu men, women, and children killing their Tutsi neighbors and relatives, including the children born in mixed marriages, is best explained by three key factors: the Rwandan government's successful propaganda campaign prior to the genocide accusing Tutsi of preparing a genocide against Hutu; the tradition of tight social control and obedience to central political authority whose roots lie deep in Rwanda's pre-colonial and colonial history; and the element of greed in an overcrowded agrarian society. The ultimate responsibility for mass participation in the killing rests not with the naive and often illiterate farmers, but with the Akazu and its accomplices at the top of the Rwandan political pyramid, the leaders who gave the orders and controlled the chain of command that made their subjects kill their neighbors. There is no doubt today that—despite the valiant efforts of many Hutu to save the lives of their Tutsi neighbors—the government succeeded in making killers out of many Rwandans.

#### INCITING GENOCIDE AGAINST THE ARMENIANS AND THE JEWS

The extensive use of the media in Rwanda to prepare the soil for a genocide is unprecedented in a Third World country. The low literacy rate in Turkey at the time of the Armenian genocide precluded use of the press and magazines to reach more than a small number of intellectuals. The telegraph was used effectively to coordinate the genocide, but radio broadcasting was barely in its infancy in 1915. Instrumental to demonizing the Armenians was the use of more traditional instruments of shaping public opinion and raising the political temperature. Vahagan Dadrian, an historian of the Armenian genocide, cites the importance of the sermons of Muslim mullahs and the messages of the government and the Committee for Union and Progress spread by town criers, which were sprinkled with code words such as traitors, saboteurs, spies, conspirators, and infidels. Promoters of the massacre of the Armenians also disseminated falsely labeled photographs of rifles and other weapons to persuade Turks that their Armenian neighbors were storing up arms for use in plots to slaughter them.

In the industrial world, Nazi Germany pioneered the use of newspapers and radio broadcasts to promote genocide. Although the actual mass murder of the Jewish people was never directly mentioned in official German government propaganda, Joseph Goebbels prepared the way by instructing German editors to abandon every last shred of "bourgeois sentimental attitudes" towards Jews and to impress on the public that the destruction of the Jews would not be a loss to mankind, but just as useful to society as capital punishment for criminals. It was left to a private individual, Julius Streicher, an old Nazi and one-time Gauleiter of Franconia, to issue public calls for the murder of the Jewish people in his weekly, *Der Stürmer*. Streicher labeled Jews as germs and pests, not human beings, evil doers, as disseminators of diseases who must be destroyed in the interest of mankind. As the Judgement of the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg reminds us,

it was not only in Germany that this defendant advocated his doctrines. As early as 1938 he began to call for the annihilation of the Jewish race . . . extermination "root and branch" was preached . . . Other articles urged that only when world Jewry had been annihilated would the Jewish problem have been solved . . . (p.132)

*Der Stürmer* reached a circulation in 1935 of 600,000 copies.

In Rwanda, newspapers rarely printed more than 3,000 copies of an issue and they circulated mainly in Kigali, where they sold for high prices that further limited their readership. With 400,000 to 500,000 AM/FM/shortwave radio receivers in homes and offices, and seven FM radio relay transmitters providing regular radio service to most of the country, Radio Rwanda and the privately-owned Radio RTLM were the major means of disseminating hate propaganda and provocative false news among the mass of Rwanda's people. During the genocide of 1994, Rwanda's radio network was also used to coordinate the movement of police, army, and militia units.

In this short essay, I want to focus on the roles of the perpetrator's mass media. I also want to outline some possible counter-measures.

#### FUNCTIONS OF THE MASS MEDIA IN INCITING GENOCIDE

The mass media have three major functions in genocide: demonizing the intended victims; undermining support for the victims among members of the dominant group; and encouraging mass participation and acquiescence in the genocide. As Norman Cohn shows in *Europe's Inner Demons*, ruling groups in the pre-modern era exploited three major accusations to demonize real or imagined groups that they intended to destroy: cannibalism; sexual license, including orgies and incest; and heresy. In the modern era, perpetrators have up-dated their stock of accusations to integrate themes drawn from nationalism and pseudo-scientific race theories. They allege that the very survival of the perpetrator's group is at risk and that the victim group is conspiring to destroy it by recourse to treason, conspiracy with national rivals, and racial pollution through sexual intercourse.

Modern communication theories emphasize that media audiences filter messages aimed at them through a complex network of individual and group identities and critical apparatuses. The media tells us not what to think, but how to think, proposing categories which influence how we organize and interpret the information we acquire. Ultimately, the media influence the agendas we set. But whether one subscribes to the social construction of reality perspective or media system dependency theory, many communications theorists are coming to recognize that five circumstances of particular interest to us facilitate maximum penetration of the audience and give extra potency to the media's message:

- (1) the introduction of a new medium of communication, such as radio;
- (2) the use of a completely new style of communication;
- (3) the wide-spread perception that a crisis exists;
- (4) a public with little knowledge of the situation from other sources of information, and
- (5) a deep-seated habit of obeying authority among the target audience.

All of these circumstances pertain to the promulgation of the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 and many of them are found in other cases of genocide and genocidal killings, as well.

Radio has been one of the great forces for social and political mobilization in the twentieth century. The Bolsheviks were among the first to exploit its potential for overt indoctrination of the masses, but it was Joseph Goebbels who brought its use to perfection. Goebbels subsidized the production and distribution by German manufacturers of millions of cheap radios for German homes and ordered the installation of loudspeakers to broadcast Nazi radio news bulletins and speeches in factories and public places, where listeners were observed by so-called radio wardens. Goebbels' first cheap receivers were deliberately designed to have a limited range, so that foreign broadcasts could not be heard, a point emphasized by David Welch in his study of politics and propaganda in the Third Reich. Welch tells us that by the beginning of the Second World War, over 70 per cent of all German households owned a radio receiver and that this was the highest percentage anywhere in the world. According to the German historian Peter Reichel, when the Nazis came to power in 1933, four million German homes possessed radio receivers. In 1938, their numbers had risen to nine million, and in 1942 there were 16 million.

In Rwanda, radios and batteries to power them were too expensive for most peasants to afford until the 1980s, when the Rwandan government obtained foreign aid for the purchase and distribution of radios, arguing that they were necessary to promote the dissemination of modern farming technology. The radios were then given away during election campaigns. The manner through which radios were distributed in Rwanda is a subject that has received little attention from scholars and warrants further research. The Rwandan government, like Germany's under the Nazis, invested heavily in powerful radio transmitters and repeater facilities to blanket the country with radio broadcasts. Mobile radio broadcasting facilities were purchased overseas by the Rwandan perpetrators and used very effectively after the RPF expelled the Akazu from Kigali.

#### RADIO AS AN INSTRUMENT TO FIGHT GENOCIDE AND PROMOTE HUMAN RIGHTS

In an earlier essay, "Hate Radio in Rwanda," I emphasized that the perpetrators of genocide and gross violations of human rights have been far more effective in using radio broadcasting to pursue their lethal ends than the advocates of human rights. Since I wrote that piece, non-governmental initiatives in human rights-oriented radio broadcasting, often funded by North American and European government agencies, have become more common in Africa. The recent history of genocide suggests that these radio broadcasters have four key tasks: (1) to disseminate programs that encourage the bonds of solidarity and extend the universe of human obligation in societies threatened by gross violations of human rights; (2) to counter the lies and distortions of genocidal movements by delivering news and information that are as fair and objective as is humanly possible; (3) to make every effort to inform listeners about the dire economic and social consequences of genocide and the penalties which the international community is likely to impose on leaders who perpetrate mass murder; and (4) to warn the intended victims to flee when a genocide is imminent or just underway, while also encouraging the neighbors of the intended victims to give them refuge and assistance.

Programs to extend broadcasting that affirms human rights should be in place before a genocide has started, operated by personnel with a deep understanding of the cultures they address, and broadcasting in the languages spoken by the majority of the people. While massive outflows of refugees are the surest signs that human rights are being violated, human rights broadcasting is needed before that point is reached. Radio dramas and talk shows for adults and children have an important role to play in such efforts.

In the past, common sense suggested that when a war was underway, and both sides operated radio stations, the potential victims of a genocide would be alerted to their peril. History shows that this is not true and that human rights broadcasts may be essential to warning the victims of their danger. Little effort was made in Allied radio broadcasts during the Holocaust either to warn Jews that their lives were in danger or to rally their neighbors to assist them. And in Rwanda, the controllers of the RPF's weakly powered radio station, Radio Muhabura (Radio Beacon), apparently never called on Tutsi to flee or warned Tutsi that the killers were not respecting churches as sanctuaries, a humanitarian convention that the perpetrators in the genocidal killings of the period 1959-1962 had observed. In 1994, Tutsi who fled to churches because they recalled that they had been safe havens in the genocide of 1959 were trapped and murdered. Apparently for political reasons, RPF radio broadcasters tried to avoid discussing the ethnic and political basis of the killings, talking about the "Rwandese," and not about "Tutsi," doing everything possible to minimize the differences between "Hutu" and "Tutsi," even at the cost of Tutsi lives.

#### THE UNFULFILLED ROLE OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY IN THE FIGHT AGAINST GENOCIDE

Recent experience in Rwanda, as well as component parts of the former Yugoslavia, indicate that human rights radio broadcasting will operate most effectively if the international community undertakes a series of parallel steps: (1) shows its willingness to back up its warnings against initiating genocides through the development of the means and, when necessary,

the implementation of appropriate coercive measures; (2) follows through on threats to punish the perpetrators of genocide by renewing the mandate of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, enforcing its authority, and insuring that its work is discharged in a thorough and fully competent manner; (3) vigorously pursues prosecution of the perpetrators of past genocides and gross violations of human rights, such as the leaders of the Khmer Rouge, even when regional politics may discourage such action; (4) announces that it is monitoring and transcribing hate broadcasts for use in the future prosecution of the offenders if a genocide ensues; and (5) implements its capacity to jam or destroy transmitters broadcasting hate propaganda when genocides are imminent.

Perpetrators of genocide in the twentieth century have frequently depended on radio propaganda to encourage mass participation and acquiescence in their designs. The human rights community has known this for a very long time and the international community has recently awakened to this reality. The social, political, and economic conditions that existed in Germany in the 1930s and Rwanda in the 1990s potentiated radio broadcasting as a tool for breaking the bonds of solidarity among people and legitimating behavior that, under other circumstances, would have been considered outrageous. The direct political effects of radio did more than reinforce existing orientations. They contributed to the mobilization of millions around a new program which insisted that their former friends and neighbors were not fully human or worthy of the privileges of citizenship, or, in the extreme case, life.

#### AN EPILOGUE

And what about Wole Soyinka, the man, whom we last saw as a child, contemplating the mysteries of "the box who needed no answer." He was in Montreal in March 1997, travelling the lecture circuit to raise money for a project dear to his heart: the purchase of FM mobile stations to expand the listening audience in Nigeria of Radio Kudirat, an underground shortwave radio transmitter aimed at bringing his message of restoring democracy to millions of Nigerians. "That radio," Soyinka told a New York Times correspondent, "has been the single most effective counter against the authority of the regime. I mean, they've really been hysterical over the effect of the radio. Until that moment, they had total control of the media, apart from the underground press." (Zia Jaffrey, "The Writer in Exile as 'Opposition Diplomat,'" International Herald Tribune, 2 May 1997, p.24.) Perhaps, after all that has happened, radio can still be salvaged as a tool to promote the dignity and honor of the human race.



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