



## Lessons from French Military Interventions in Africa

Nathaniel Powell\*

April 6th of this year marked the 20th anniversary of the beginning of the Rwandan Genocide. Over the course of three months, from April to July 1994, some 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were massacred by a state apparatus and collaborating population led by Hutu extremists. One of the more contentious aspects of the genocide lies in the question of foreign intervention. Former US President Bill Clinton has said that one of his greatest regrets is that he did not intervene to stop the killings. Indeed, as the genocide began, the UN massively reduced the number of troops in its peacekeeping force already present in Rwanda. However, one country did intervene, and was present at various stages in the process leading up to the genocide itself. That country was France.

This article will examine Rwanda and several other cases in order to elucidate broader aspects of French military interventionism in Africa. These questions have renewed relevance since France continues to play an important role in African security questions, over five decades after most of its colonies gained independence. This includes major military operations in Mali and the Central African Republic launched in 2013 and which continue today. French interventionism has been governed, in part, by a recurring logic. In numerous cases, this logic has entailed similar consequences in the countries involved. The Rwandan genocide represents a very extreme example of these consequences. Nonetheless, the deeper structural processes which both lay behind French military activism and its outcomes in Rwanda have had many parallels in other contexts where France has intervened.

### France and the Rwandan Genocide

France's role in the Rwandan genocide has been extremely controversial. In the days leading up to the 20th anniversary commemoration ceremonies, Rwandan President Paul Kagame repeated previous accusations of French complicity in aiding and abetting the *génocidaire* regime. According to Kagame, French forces and government officials played important roles in the "political preparation" and "participation in [...] the execution of the genocide."<sup>i</sup>

French government officials have repeatedly denied that French troops had anything to do with the genocide. However, the initial 1990 invasion of Rwanda by the Tutsi-dominated



## Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°7 | November 2014

Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) triggered a substantial French military response in support of the Hutu-dominated regime of Juvénal Habyarimana. This intervention, codenamed *Opération Noroît*, principally focused on logistical, intelligence, and training assistance, but also occasionally took the form of active participation by French advisors in the fighting.<sup>ii</sup>

*Noroît* was motivated by fears held by French President, François Mitterrand, his closest advisors, and French diplomats on the ground, that the RPF invasion represented a foreign threat to a friendly regime. Failure to demonstrate resolve in the defense of a close ally against an external danger threatened to sap the credibility of French commitments to other allied African regimes. Indeed, while not “foreign,” the RPF was led by serving or former Tutsi army officers of the Ugandan Army who played important roles in bringing Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni to power in 1986 and held high-level posts in his government. These Tutsis were from communities of hundreds of thousands of people who had fled Rwanda following its 1959-1962 “social revolution” and subsequent massacres in the 1970s. French officials, egged on by Habyarimana’s propaganda, saw this as a foreign invasion of Francophone Rwanda by “Anglophone” Tutsis, as Uganda was a former British colony and seen as traditionally within the British sphere of influence. This sparked a bizarre paranoia within French policymaking circles which interpreted the Rwandan civil war through the prism of a 19th century imperial rivalry between Britain and France (despite the fact that Rwanda was a former Belgian territory).<sup>iii</sup>

The Rwandan government’s official propaganda substantially affected French thinking about the crisis in other ways as well. Habyarimana’s regime represented itself as the authentic and “democratic” representative of the Rwandan Hutu majority which had managed to supplant the ruling Tutsi elites and monarchy during the “social revolution” and the decolonization process. According to this logic, the RPF invasion represented an attempt to reverse the gains made by the oppressed Hutu majority by a clique representing a formerly dominant minority of the population. Hence, providing support to the regime in Kigali constituted, in French eyes, a defense of the will and rights of the democratic majority.<sup>iv</sup>

One should note that French officials did not unconditionally support Habyarimana’s single party state. Throughout the period of *Noroît*, French authorities continually pressured Habyarimana, somewhat successfully, to liberalize his regime and move towards peace negotiations. However, like in many other such cases, French pressure to liberalize was counterbalanced by promises to protect the regime, which discouraged more meaningful reform.<sup>v</sup>

Instead, *Noroît* helped to stop the RPF from taking Kigali, the Rwandan capital, and prevented the regime from collapsing. The resulting stalemate forced Habyarimana and the RPF to sign the August 1993 Arusha Accords which would have integrated the RPF into a new transitional government.<sup>vi</sup> Hutu-supremacist hardliners in the regime saw Arusha as an existential threat to their hold on power. In response, they expanded and reinforced the parastatal and paramilitary structures that they had begun to create following the RPF’s invasion. These structures, including the infamous *Interahamwe* militia and the Hutu



N°7 | November 2014

extremist radio station, *Radio-Television Libre des Milles Collines*, formed a tightly organized “state within a state,” which played a primordial role in organizing and implementing the genocide. The paramilitary structures also included the notorious Presidential Guard, which benefited from French military advisors in the first years of the civil war.<sup>vii</sup>

On April 6 1994, the plane carrying Habyarimana was shot down with a surface-to-air missile, probably by Hutu extremists worried that the Rwandan President was making too many concessions. Habyarimana’s death served as a trigger for the implementation of pre-planned massacres targeting Tutsis and moderate Hutus. In the hours and days following the assassination, Hutu-extremists had taken over the state and launched a genocide of the Rwandan Tutsi. This process lasted until July 1994 when the RPF captured Kigali, defeated the government army, and drove the *génocidaires* out of the country.<sup>viii</sup>

Thus, while not participating in the organization of the genocide as Paul Kagame has claimed, French soldiers and policymakers played a crucial, albeit partially unwitting, role in creating the political conditions in which the genocide occurred. *Noroît* prevented an early RPF victory and, in so doing, prolonged the civil war. In hindsight, it seems probable that had France not intervened on Habyarimana’s behalf, his regime would have collapsed, and the genocide would not have occurred.

### The Recurring Logic of French Interventions in Africa

The French role in the Rwandan Civil War shares a number of traits with other instances of French intervention on the continent. These have often been characterized by similar aims, and were motivated by similar fears. Since 1960, French military interventions and aid in countries such as Gabon, Chad, Zaire, Mauritania, the Central African Republic, Côte d’Ivoire, and Mali have also exhibited these characteristics.

The majority of major French military interventions in Africa since independence have been in defense of a sitting regime or political order. This was often justified on the grounds of ensuring stability or protecting French citizens, often both at the same time. While usually not simple pretexts, these justifications were wielded to rationalize the defense of allied regimes whose defeat in a civil war, uprising, or foreign invasion would hurt French credibility as a protector of its former colonies and allied Francophone states. Perceived threats to credibility and, thus, loss of influence, played a major structuring role in French military activism in Africa from the 1960s until the 1990s and beyond.

French support for Zaire’s dictator, Mobutu Sese Seko epitomized this logic. In 1977 and 1978, rebels based in neighboring Angola invaded southern Zaire and threatened the country’s vital mining centers as well as Mobutu’s regime.<sup>ix</sup> In 1977, French officials took control of Zairian military planning and its logistics chain, trained and supplied Zairian units, and organized the transport of 1,500 Moroccan troops to repel the invasion. In 1978, French forces intervened directly with paratroopers in the mining





## Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°7 | November 2014

town of Kolwezi, ostensibly to protect European citizens threatened by a rebel occupation. In both instances, French actions helped to protect Mobutu's regime.

The mechanisms which lay behind these interventions and their consequences were the same as those which drove French military involvement elsewhere. First, French policymakers feared that the rebel invasions were supported and directed by the Soviet Union and Cuba, the latter of which had a substantial military presence in Angola.<sup>x</sup> Though, these fears were based on false premises, French policymakers were manipulated by Mobutu's propaganda in such a way that their intelligence gathering effectively reinforced their own ideological views.<sup>xi</sup> Second, like French involvement elsewhere, the interventions were driven in part by fears that failure to prop up an ally would have devastating consequences for French credibility among friendly African regimes. This gave allied African elites a great deal of influence in shaping French decision-making. Third, and most importantly, as a consequence the French interventions allowed Mobutu to buck calls for reform and to consolidate his own dictatorship.<sup>xii</sup>

The most lasting example of this logic is Chad, where in 1969-1972, 1978-1980, 1983-1984, and 1986 to the present, French forces have deployed in support of sitting regimes against rebel efforts to overthrow them. These interventions have often come as a result of pressure from allied African leaders linked to fears that failure to act would undermine French credibility in Africa. In all cases the French presence helped to ensure that the regimes in the Chadian capital, N'Djamena, felt little incentive to make the kinds of concessions and internal reforms necessary to address the fundamental causes of the country's conflicts. Instead, successive regimes either used French support to consolidate their control and increase their levels of repression, or, as in 1979, collapsed from internal fighting, thus prolonging and intensifying the existing civil war.<sup>xiii</sup> Most notably, in 1983/84 and again in 1986, French military interventions aimed at protecting the regime of Chadian dictator, Hissène Habré, allowed him to increase his control over the country. His regime became one of the most murderous in recent African history. Human Rights Watch has estimated that some 40,000 people were killed and 200,000 more tortured under his rule, earning Habré the sobriquet of "Africa's Pinochet."<sup>xiv</sup> France's 1986 intervention, *Opération Épervier*, continues to this day, and intervened in 2006 and 2008 to protect Chadian President Idriss Déby against rebel attacks on N'Djamena from Sudan.

Nonetheless, French interventions have *not* meant blind loyalty to individual African protégés, but rather stable political orders. Indeed, this loyalty has often depended upon the extent to which client regimes helped to maintain French prestige and credibility. In 1975 Chadian President François Tombablaye's excesses led to a bloody coup d'état and his replacement by a military junta. His difficult relationship with his erstwhile French protectors helped to ensure that they did nothing to stop his overthrow. Similarly, fifteen years later, French forces in Chad stood by as Idriss Déby overthrew Hissène Habré in 1990. Habré's ruthless rule, his defeat of Libya, and the end of the Cold War meant that he had outlasted his usefulness as a French ally. For French policymakers, leaders that discredited themselves and/or maintained consistently difficult relations with French authorities could lose favor in Paris. This was



## Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°7 | November 2014

particularly the case if they had already lost the support of other Francophone African rulers. The most important criteria for French policymakers was that regimes maintain a generally friendly, though not necessarily enthusiastic, relationship with Paris, and that they could reliably ensure stability.

Thus, this meant that on occasion French officials could stand by as their clients were overthrown, or even instigate this process themselves as in the case of the Central African Empire's Jean-Bedel Bokassa in 1979. What they could not accept was a violent overthrow by forces supposedly supported by hostile countries such as Muammar Gaddafi's Libya or regimes aligned with the Eastern bloc. In the post-Cold War era these outside forces have variously been conceived of as "Anglo-Saxon" imperialism or, most recently, groups motivated by Islamist ideologies.

Today, French forces are actively engaged in Mali and the Central African Republic. The mission in Mali, until recently baptized *Opération Serval*, has avoided the mistakes made in Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, and Rwanda, where French deployments served as an interposition force between government and rebel-held territories. In these cases, French interventions had helped to create de facto territorial partitions which perhaps significantly prolonged the fighting and hindered peace efforts. In Mali, the 2013 French intervention aimed to reconquer the entire country's territory from the Islamist rebellion which had captured the country's north.<sup>xv</sup> However, despite a clear military victory French involvement in Mali has strengthened regime elements whose past practices helped to amplify the regional, economic, and political imbalances which facilitated rebel successes.

In 2012 these successes led to a coup by disaffected elements of the Malian army. Despite the authoritarian and uncertain nature of the coup's leadership, it enjoyed substantial sympathy, if not support, among much of Bamako's civil society. This is because many Malians felt alienated and frustrated by the corruption and misgovernance of an increasingly entrenched elite during the presidency of Amadou Toumani Touré.<sup>xvi</sup> While France's January 2013 intervention cut short an attempt by the coup leaders to subvert the transitional government in a second coup, it also contributed to restoring the position of the political elite which had profited under Touré. Though it has liberated Malian territory from Islamist rebels, the French intervention has negatively contributed to the liberation of Malian political space.<sup>xvii</sup> With a recent upsurge in clashes between Malian army units and Touareg rebels in the country's north,<sup>xviii</sup> combined with faltering political dialogue, the underlying causes of rebellion and instability remain largely unaddressed.

### Conclusion

Since 1960, the majority of major French military interventions or military support has aimed at protecting states and regimes whose unbalanced institutional structures were strongly bounded by path dependencies originating in colonial rule and its often troubled aftermath. This has meant that French actions aiming to promote stability



## Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°7 | November 2014

exacerbated mechanisms which sometimes generated highly destructive instability in the long term.

In essence, short-sighted and ideologically-informed strategic mindsets have consistently driven French military activism since the 1960s. First, major French interventions have usually come as a response to threats against their clients or allies. These threats are usually interpreted through the logic of meta-narratives such as Cold War-related fears of communism, post-imperial rivalry, or Islamism. Secondly, the perceived need to show resolve in the face of such threats to maintain credibility with Francophone African allies has played an important role in motivating interventions. This has often come after entreaties by African allies for decisive French action. Thirdly, and linked to this, French interventionism has more often than not resulted from “pull” factors, as African elites closely tied to France have played crucial roles in influencing French aims and the character of French engagement. Rather than French actors exerting overwhelming influence on their African protégés, the reality is frequently the opposite.<sup>xix</sup> In some cases, as with Mobutu’s Zaire or Haybarimana’s Rwanda, French policymakers even internalized the propaganda of client regimes.

Whatever the merits of French reasoning, their major military interventions have generally had negative long-term impacts. First, French interventions on behalf of beleaguered regimes have often provided serious disincentives to reform those aspects of governance which often helped to cause the crises in the first place. This was the case in Gabon in 1964, Chad in 1969, 1978, 1983, and 1986, Zaire in 1977 and 1978, Mauritania in 1977 and 1978, Rwanda in 1990-1993, Côte d’Ivoire in 2002, and probably Mali today. Secondly, such interventions rarely lead to more inclusive governing arrangements. Instead, they have often helped to stifle whatever “loyal” opposition exists within regimes as hardliners benefit from the changing balance of power in the regime’s favor which French intervention provided. This was the case in Gabon in 1964, Chad in 1969, 1983, 1986, 2008, and the French dominated European intervention in 2009, Zaire in 1977 and 1978, Rwanda in 1990-1993, and Mali in 2013.

This is not meant as an argument against any military involvement under any circumstances. Indeed, the current French mission in the CAR has certainly saved lives and, in any case, cannot have made matters worse than they already were. However, the closely-related French collaboration with Chad at a broader regional level is worrying as its regime has benefited from French protection. Security policies which only serve to reinforce local state repressive capacities in the name of fighting terrorism contain the seeds of their own destruction and lasting war. Today’s policymakers, both within and outside of France, should heed these lessons.

\* PhD, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva





N°7 | November 2014

François Soudan, Interview with Paul Kagame, *Jeune Afrique*, 15.04.2014, found at: <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/JA2778p020.xml1/rwanda-genocide-tutsi-hutu-interview-paul-kagame-je-ne-conseille-a-personne-de-se-meler-des-affaires-interieures-du-rwanda.html> (accessed on 10.07.2014)

<sup>i</sup> Jean-Baptiste Naudet et Christophe Boltanski, « La France a-t-elle mené une guerre secrète au Rwanda ? » *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 06.04.2014, found at: <http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/monde/20140404.OBS2776/la-france-a-t-elle-menee-une-guerre-secrete-au-rwanda.html> (accessed on 1.08.2014).

<sup>ii</sup> Asteris C. Huliaris. "The 'Anglosaxon Conspiracy': French Perceptions of the Great Lakes Crisis," *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 36, 4, 1998, For an example of this, see: "Verbatim de la reunion tenue le mercredi 23 janvier à 18h00 au Palais de l'Elysée," 23.01.1991 in *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 461*, Document 8, found at: <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB461/> (accessed on 10.07.2014).

<sup>v</sup> See Jean-Pierre Bat. *Le syndrome Foccart: La politique française en Afrique, de 1959 à nos jours*. [Paris]: Gallimard, 2012, p. 590; and Alison Des Forges. "Leave None to Tell the Story": *Genocide in Rwanda*. New York: Human Rights Watch, p. 503.

For an example of complaints by French officials about this, see "Note pour le Président de la République" from Defense Minister Pierre Joxe to François Mitterrand, 16.02.1993, in *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 461*, Document 16, found at: <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB461/> (accessed on 10.07.2014).

<sup>i</sup> See: *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 469*, found at: <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB469/> (accessed on 10.07.2014).

<sup>ii</sup> Helen M. Hintjens, "Explaining the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda," *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 37, 2, 1999, pp. 267-268; and Bat. *Le syndrome Foccart*, 592.

<sup>iii</sup> It should be noted that a subsequent French intervention, mandated by UN resolution 929 on June 22, *Opération Turquoise*, aimed at creating a "Safe Humanitarian Zone" and to stop the massacres while a larger UN force began to deploy. Unfortunately, while certainly saving thousands of lives, the French forces did nothing to stop many of the ringleaders of the genocide who fled through the French zone towards neighboring Zaïre. See: Des Forges. *Leave None to Tell the Story*, 510-520.

<sup>x</sup> For a good background discussion of these conflicts, see: Miles Larmer. "Local Conflicts in a Transnational War: The Katangese Gendarmes and the Shaba Wars of 1977-78". *Cold War History*. 13, no. 1, 2013.

See: Nathaniel Kinsey Powell. "La France, les Etats-Unis et la Force interafricaine au Zaïre (1978-1979)," *Relations internationales*, 2012/2 (n. 150).

<sup>i</sup> For a discussion of the misguided fears of Soviet and Cuban involvement, see: Piero Gleijeses. "Truth or Credibility: Castro, Carter, and the Invasions of Shaba". *The International History Review*. 18, no. 1: 70, 1996.



## Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°7 | November 2014

<sup>ii</sup> For a good account by a former IMF official of how Western support for Mobutu allowed him to do this, see: Erwin Blumenthal, "Zaire: rapport sur sa crédibilité financière internationale," *La Revue Nouvelle*, 77:11 Nov 1982.

<sup>iii</sup> For a good analysis of the Chadian Civil War and French intervention during this timeframe, see: Robert Buijtenhuijs. *Le Frolinat et Les révoltes populaires du Tchad 1965-1976*. The Hague: Mouton, 1978, and *Le Frolinat et Les guerres civiles du Tchad: 1977-1984*. Paris, France: Karthala, 1987 ; as well as Sam C. Nolutshungu. *Limits of Anarchy: Intervention and State Formation in Chad*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996.

<sup>iv</sup> See Anne Penketh. "Africa's Pinochet' Faces Extradition and Trial for Crimes Against Humanity," *Human Rights Watch*, 30.09.2005, found at: <http://www.hrw.org/fr/news/2005/09/29/africas-pinochet-faces-extradition-and-trial-crimes-against-humanity> (accessed on 11.07.2014).

<sup>v</sup> Roland Marchal. "Briefing: Military (Mis)Adventures in Mali". *African Affairs: the Journal of the Royal African Society*. 112, no. 448, 2013, pp. 4-5.

<sup>vi</sup> See: Jean-Louis Sagot-Duvaurox, "Quelques traits du Mali en crise," in Michel Joly, and Bertrand Badie. *La guerre au Mali: comprendre la crise au Sahel et au Sahara, enjeux et zones d'ombre*. Paris: la Découverte, 2013, pp. 91-105.

<sup>vii</sup> ICG, "Sécuriser, dialoguer," 16-20.

<sup>viii</sup> « "Nord-Mali : combats meurtriers à Kidal, le MNLA affirme contrôler la ville," *France 24*, 21.05.2014, found at: (accessed on 11.07.2014).

<sup>ix</sup> For a thorough treatment of this phenomenon, see: Jean-François Bayart. 2000. "Africa in the World: a History of Extraversion" *African Affairs: the Journal of the Royal African Society*. 99, no. 395.