

1 Introduction: The Meaning of Murambi

The stench of death reached us long before we arrived at the summit of Murambi hill. The odor was surprisingly sweet but cloying and syrupy, and it hung in the air like a thick fog. The day was April 7, 1996, two years exactly since the beginning of a genocide that killed an estimated 80 percent of Rwanda's minority Tutsi population. In April 1994, several thousand Tutsi who had sought refuge from the violence in an unfinished school complex here were instead slaughtered. Now, two years later, a crowd was once again gathering at Murambi, but this time there were no militia groups or death squads. Instead, the president was there, along with the prime minister, most of the cabinet, and much of Rwanda's expatriate community. The elite of Rwanda had come to Murambi this day two years after the genocide to commemorate the hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians who were killed in Rwanda from April to July 1994.

Murambi is a tall hill just northwest of the capital of Gikongoro, long Rwanda's poorest province. In this mountainous area now part of Southern Province, the steep slopes of the Congo-Nile continental divide make the soil infertile and the land difficult to farm.¹ Rwanda has experienced ethnic tensions and violence since the late colonial period, and in two earlier waves of anti-Tutsi violence, in 1963 and again in 1973, Gikongoro suffered some of the country's most brutal attacks.² When ethnic tensions re-emerged in Rwanda in the early 1990s, Gikongoro's poverty, large Tutsi population, and strong ties with the former Tutsi monarchy made ethnic relations in the province particularly precarious.

¹ On social and economic conditions in Gikongoro just prior to the genocide, see Jennifer M. Olson, *Land Degradation in Gikongoro Rwanda: Problems and Possibilities in the Integration of Household Survey Data and Environmental Data*, Rwanda society environment project, working paper 5, East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1994. Olson conducted extensive research with farmers in the region in the early 1990s.

² René Lemarchand, *Rwanda and Burundi*, New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970, 223–224. Lemarchand reports that the December 1963 massacres instigated by the Gikongoro prefect killed about 5,000 Tutsi, including men, women, and children. Several people I interviewed in Gikongoro in 1996 and again in 2004 recounted this earlier violence.

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After Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana was killed in a plane crash on April 6, 1994, Gikongoro was among the first places outside the national capital, Kigali, where violence broke out. Taking cues from the new extremist Hutu ethno-nationalist regime in Kigali, government officials, military officers, and others in Gikongoro with ties to the regime organized “civil self-defense” programs to protect against a supposed internal Tutsi threat. They armed and mobilized local civilian militia to attack Tutsi and burn their homes, driving thousands to flee in search of refuge. Throughout the prefecture, officials, a few apparently seeking sincerely to protect the Tutsi, but most cynically intending to facilitate their elimination by gathering them together with false promises of sanctuary, directed displaced Tutsi to central locations such as the churches at Kibeho, Kaduha, and Cyanika. In central Gikongoro, Tutsi initially sought refuge at the Anglican cathedral at Kigeme and the Gikongoro Catholic cathedral, but around April 11, the day militias began to attack Tutsi gathered at nearby Kibeho parish, officials brought Tutsi under police escort from the cathedrals and other locations to Murambi, where a technical high school was under construction. With a remote location on a high hill and available buildings – several small classroom structures and a large administrative building were completed but not yet in use – Murambi offered an ideal location for housing and protecting the Tutsi or, as it eventually turned out, for isolating and eliminating them. Over the next week, the number of refugees increased as Tutsi who fled Kibeho and others who sought to escape along the main highway toward still peaceful Butare prefecture were stopped and redirected to Murambi.³

On April 17, 1994, civilian militia launched a first assault against those gathered at the Murambi Technical School, but the refugees repulsed them by throwing stones. The refugees successfully defended themselves from attacks for several days, even as more Tutsi continued to arrive at Murambi, fleeing massacres in other communities. By April 20, however, with some 40,000 people gathered at the school and water and food supplies depleted, conditions had become squalid, and the refugees were increasingly weak and sick. Early in the morning of April 21, several hundred militia members returned, this time backed by soldiers and gendarmes. They surrounded Murambi hill, tossed grenades and shot into the crowd, and followed up with clubs and machetes. They killed several thousand, while thousands more fled, many to nearby Cyanika

³ Details on the genocide in Gikongoro are drawn from Alison Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda*, New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999, 303–352, as well as interviews that I conducted (some for the Des Forges text) in 1996.

parish, where they were massacred a few days later. After all the Tutsi at Murambi were either killed or dispersed, government officials came to inspect the results and reward the most brutal militia groups with cattle looted from the slaughtered Tutsi. In the next few days, Gikongoro prison inmates dug mass graves where the bodies of the victims were unceremoniously dumped, and the site was abandoned as the violence moved on to Cyanika, Kaduha, and elsewhere.⁴

Two years exactly after the beginning of the 1994 genocide, a huge crowd gathered at Murambi to commemorate the terrible slaughter that Rwanda experienced. Despite the rainy weather, several hundred people had turned out, and cars lined the mud roads leading to the abandoned school-turned-memorial site. A new government was now in place in Rwanda, a government installed by the largely Tutsi former rebel movement, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), that drove out the genocidal government and put a stop to the genocide in July 1994.⁵ The government had declared an annual week of remembrance of the genocide, with a national day of commemoration, which this year was being held at Murambi. Government ministers, UN employees, international diplomats, prominent Rwandan citizens, foreign visitors, journalists, and others had come to Murambi to show their respects at the official annual ceremony commemorating the 1994 genocide. As the director of the office of Human Rights Watch (HRW) and the International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH) in Rwanda, I attended the ceremony with a few American and Rwandan colleagues. We parked our pick-up far down the hill and hiked some distance up the muddy road. The day was fittingly dark and gray, and we could smell the strange odor of decomposing bodies even before we reached the crowd gathered at the site.

A large field stood at the top of the hill, with the two-story main building at one end where the official ceremony would take place. To the side of this building was a small memorial garden, where victims' bodies were to be given a proper burial after the commemoration. As part of the national program of recovery, the bodies of Tutsi killed in the genocide were being disinterred around the country and reburied with appropriate ceremonies in marked graves. One mass grave for victims of the genocide had already been completed at Murambi,

⁴ Specifics on Murambi come from interviews in Gikongoro, Kaduha, and Butare in 1995, 1996, 2001, and 2004, and from the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, *The Prosecutor vs. Aloys Simba*, Case No. ICTR-01-76-T, Judgement and Sentence, Arusha, December 13, 2005.

⁵ In this text, I do not make a distinction between the Rwandan Patriotic Front and the Rwandan Patriotic Army. Technically, the former is a political movement while the latter is its armed wing, but in practice the two have always been closely interconnected and their personnel overlap.

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covered with cement and surrounded by blooming flowers; another large hole had been dug beside it, where more bodies would be interred following the day's commemoration. At Murambi, the bodies of victims had been unearthed for reburial, and for this day of commemoration, the bodies had been laid out in the classroom buildings, a short distance down the hill from the main building. As the crowds waited for the commemoration ceremonies to begin, people walked down the hill to view the bodies of the victims and bear witness to the crimes committed in this place.⁶

My colleagues and I joined the line filing past the narrow cement classroom buildings. Inside each of the rooms, bodies were laid out, covered with powdered lime to preserve them. Even so, the stench of decaying flesh was still so strong that most people covered their noses and mouths as they passed. The display of bodies was meant to resemble one of the other memorial sites in the country, like the Catholic parish of Nyamata, where bodies had been left as they had fallen when the swift RPF advance drove out the local population before they could dispose of the evidence of their crimes. But here at Murambi the bodies were laid out carefully on display, each room with a theme serving a didactic purpose. The ghostly lime-covered bodies, skeletons with mummified skin and bits of cloth clinging to them, were laid side by side in tightly packed rows. In one room were bodies with visible machete scars, in another bodies missing feet or hands, apparently amputated, and in yet another, piles of flesh-less bones. One room held the small corpses of children and another held bodies with remnants of dresses that showed the victims were women. One woman was laid out with her legs spread wide and a stick inserted between them to demonstrate how Tutsi women were brutally raped during the genocide.

The sight of the bodies and bones was shocking and horrific. Yet as someone with a deep connection to Rwanda, someone who had lost friends in the genocide, I was also deeply troubled by the very fact that the bodies were being placed on display, that they were being laid out in a fashion calculated to shock observers. In Rwandan tradition, the proper treatment of the body of the deceased is important, as it represents the connection between the living and the dead. Rwandans have traditionally been buried on their own land or, for chiefs, on the land of clients, representing their physical link to the land. Although some cemeteries did exist in Rwanda prior to the genocide, few families buried their dead in these communal graves, preferring a more intimate and immediate connection

⁶ Fieldnotes on visit to Murambi, April 7, 1996.

to the dead.⁷ In the aftermath of the genocide, when so many people had been lost and their bodies disposed of carelessly in rivers and lakes, pit latrines, and hastily dug mass graves, the fact that identifying each body and returning it to its family might not be possible was understandable. Yet the public exhibition of the bodies at Murambi seemed particularly offensive, insensitive to the families of those killed. The use of bodies to manufacture a scene of horror and provoke a reaction seemed to contradict the intent of remembering the genocide and honoring the dead.

As the commemoration ceremony began, the crowds of Rwandan and international visitors gathered in the main building, overflowing into the surrounding yard. With a backdrop of bodies and bones, the politicians who spoke in the commemoration event invoked the genocide, the need to never forget, the shame this genocide brings not only to the Rwandan perpetrators but also to the international community that actively supported the genocidal government as the RPF was fighting to bring the genocide to an end. This massacre site and this commemoration, I realized, allowed the government installed by the RPF to promote a crucial political message: the genocide was so horrible that it justified any actions that the new government had to take to maintain security. The bodies of genocide victims were being used to make a political point.

Whatever reservations I had, the macabre display at Murambi seems to have served a valuable purpose. While most of the churches and schools where Rwanda's Tutsi were slaughtered in 1994 have been scrubbed clean and returned to their original purposes, Murambi is one of only a few massacre sites that the post-genocide government decided to preserve as an official national memorial to the genocide. Along with the Catholic churches at Nyarubuye, Nyamata, and Ntarama in southeast Rwanda, where the bodies of slaughtered Tutsi were initially left as they were found by troops of the advancing RPF; Bisesero, the hill above the shores of Lake Kivu where Tutsi maintained a long and valiant resistance against the genocidal militias; the museum built with funding from the UK-based Aegis Trust, the Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre, where victims of the genocide in Kigali have been buried, Murambi has come to represent the Rwandan genocide. The bones on display at Murambi are presented as evidence of the horrible tragedy that Rwanda experienced, and they have become iconic symbols of the genocide. In fact, a novel set at Murambi by Senegalese writer Boubacar Boris Diop, part of an African

⁷ Gerard van't Spijker, *Les usages funéraires et la mission de l'Église: une étude anthropologique et théologique des rites funéraires au Rwanda*, Kampen: Uitgeversmaatschappij J.H. Kok, 1990, 51–128; Jennie Burnet, *Genocide Lives in Us: Women, Memory, and Silence in Rwanda*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012.

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artists project to commemorate the genocide, is called *Murambi: the Book of Bones*.⁸ The Aegis Trust, which has taken responsibility for preserving the site and developing programming, writes on their website, “Survivors returning to the site preserved some of the bodies in lime; these remain visible today, a stark memorial and warning to the world.”⁹ Murambi has become an obligatory stop for visitors to Rwanda, whether international aid workers or tourists who drop by Murambi on their way to see the monkeys of Nyungwe Forest.¹⁰

I returned to Murambi in November 2001, over five years after my initial visit, as part of my research for this book. Since my research program worked in cooperation with the National University of Rwanda, a guide from the public relations office at the university was sent to host me and another colleague on our visit to Murambi. Like most of those in official positions in post-genocide Rwanda, Susan had not been in Rwanda at the time of the genocide, but she lectured us on the genocide nevertheless. She told us that, “The genocide happened because there are so many ignorant, illiterate people who could easily be misled.”¹¹ She went on to claim that children had learned bigotry, because in schools Hutu and Tutsi students had been segregated into separate classrooms – something that was factually untrue.¹² Arriving at the site, we were met by a man who reported that he was one of only four survivors of the massacre. He had a bullet scar in his skull, across his forehead. He told us that five to six thousand people were killed at Murambi. As he led us down to the classroom buildings, I asked about the bodies that had been on display in 1996. Our guide told us that they had indeed been placed in the mass grave as promised, but that other mass graves had been unearthed around Gikongoro and the bodies had been brought here to replace those previously interred, so cadavers were still on exhibit.¹³ In fact, there were now several additional classrooms with bodies on display. Perhaps

⁸ Boubacar Boris Diop, *Murambi: The Book of Bones*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006. On the project, “‘Rwanda’: écrire par devoir de mémoire”, see Odile Cazenave and Patricia Célérier, *Contemporary Francophone African Writers and the Burden of Commitment*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011, especially Chapter 2.

⁹ www.aegis.tv/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=218&Itemid=222, accessed on June 26, 2006.

¹⁰ An internet search for Murambi turns up mentions of the site on the itinerary of numerous tourist junkets to Rwanda.

¹¹ Fieldnotes, November 13, 2001, Murambi, Gikongoro.

¹² The number of Tutsi allowed into each school was limited by quota, and Tutsi faced discrimination and harassment, but schools were not segregated. Elisabeth King, *From Classrooms to Conflict in Rwanda*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

¹³ This account differs slightly from Claudine Vidal, “Les commémorations du génocide au Rwanda,” *Les Temps Modernes* 613, 1–46, who reports that the bodies now on display were some that had never been buried.

as a nod to the sensibilities of survivors, the new corpses were not placed on the cold cement floor, but on wooden pallets built for the purpose of exhibiting them. Yet the site remained gruesome and shocking, with bodies still organized and displayed in a calculated fashion, like a demented museum diorama.¹⁴

I found myself wondering about the purpose of this memorial site, with its contrived, grisly exhibition of bodies. The Aegis Trust description suggests that genocide survivors themselves were behind the exhibit, but my research indicated that in reality the government organized both the initial display of bodies and the subsequent location of more bodies. That survivors would ever choose to have the bodies of their families put on display is hard to believe, particularly given Rwanda's cultural attitudes toward treatment of the dead. In fact, every conversation I have had with survivors about memorial sites suggests that they find the display of bodies offensive. I had an opportunity a few months after my visit to Murambi to speak with a woman whose family was killed at Murambi, when I interviewed two Rwandan nuns in Butare, both Tutsi, one of whom had come back to Rwanda from Congo after the genocide, the other, a native of Gikongoro, who had survived the genocide in hiding in Butare. When I asked what they thought about the memorials, the nun from Gikongoro spoke with considerable pain.

"It is not good to leave the bodies like that," she said, grief visible in her eyes. "They need to find the means to bury them. We can't leave them like that."

Her colleague quickly jumped in to defend the Murambi site. "But it has another role. It helps to show those who said that there was no genocide what happened. It acts as a proof to the international community." The other nun looked on with a sorrowful expression but said nothing more.¹⁵

If Murambi is not for the survivors, who, then, is the audience for this gruesome exhibit? When we were at Murambi in 2001, I asked our guide who visited the site.

"Foreigners," he said, "and sometimes people from Kigali or Byumba," by which I understood him to mean urban people, mostly Rwanda's new elite, the returned refugees.

"Do local people come here?" I asked.

"Never local people," he said. In fact, most of the names in the guest book that he asked us to sign were foreigners – Americans, Germans, Japanese – and a few others were from Kigali.

¹⁴ Field notes on visit to Murambi, November 13, 2001.

¹⁵ Interview in Butare, June 10, 2002, in French. All translations from French to English by the author.

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Murambi stands, then, as a symbol of the genocide for the international community. As the nun from Congo told me, “It stands as a proof to the international community.” The bones are meant to demonstrate to the world that the genocide actually occurred and to remind the international community of its extraordinary moral and political failure in the face of the genocide. Murambi tells the international community that whatever faults there may be in the current regime, they are understandable, given the genocide, and they cannot compare to the horrible atrocities that the country experienced in 1994.

Yet the bones of Murambi have another audience as well: members and supporters of the current regime, the former Tutsi refugees who have returned to Rwanda and now dominate Rwandan social, political, and economic life. To the returnees, the horrific display of bodies is a reminder of the terrible atrocities committed against their people. It reassures them of their moral right to rule, and it also warns them of the consequences of allowing themselves once again to become victims. As a symbol of the genocide, Murambi is much less about remembering the past than about paving the way for a particular political agenda in the present.

But what does it mean when the proof has been falsified? There is no denying that Murambi was the site of a terrible massacre in 1994. But the Murambi memorial site shows a level of disrespect and deception that is indicative of a wider problem with efforts by the post-genocide government to confront Rwanda’s past. Rather than honestly presenting the horrors of what happened at Murambi, bodies are used for their shock effect. The fact that the bodies currently on display at Murambi did not even come from this site is not made evident. As one person familiar with the site told me, “we do not even know what these bodies are, how they died. Some of them may even be Hutu killed by the RPF.”¹⁶ The truth of the tragedy at Murambi is secondary to the need for a political symbol.

The discussion of numbers killed at Murambi is a prime example of the careless (or calculated) deception used to prove a point. Our guide at Murambi in 2001, himself a survivor of the massacre, told us that between 5,000 and 6,000 people died at Murambi. The bodies exhumed at the site for the 1996 commemoration confirmed this figure.¹⁷ Yet published estimates have been rising since a Rwandan government commission in 1995 estimated that 20,000 were killed at Murambi.¹⁸ The Aegis website for Murambi says that, “An estimated 40,000 victims perished

¹⁶ Interview in Butare, November 15, 2001.

¹⁷ Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story*, p. 16.

¹⁸ Ibid.

on this site in 48 hours.”¹⁹ A photo-journalist who visited the site in late 2005 reports that 60,000 Tutsi sought refuge at Murambi and that 45,000 were killed.²⁰ Another website claims that “more than 50,000 people were killed” at Murambi.²¹ Never Again International, an organization that seeks to promote awareness of the Rwandan genocide, uses the corpses on display and inflated numbers to illustrate the horrors at Murambi on their website:

The stench Of corpses Covered with a crispy white preservative In positions of self defense: Hands to heads. Heads in hands. Babies. Squashed skulls. Flattened rib cages. Battering – holes, dents, damage. Teeth missing. And teeth. Lives taken. Brutally. And a Survivor. There were 4 out of 50–60 thousand. He wore a blue shirt and has a hole in his head where the bullet entered and failed to kill him. He fell to the ground and lay under the bodies of his dead family and neighbors. He moved himself to the surrounding forests where he hid for four months. He lives on. With no one he loves left. Now he lives far from Murambi but returns to the site when he needs to feel close to his family.²²

As I have found in my research and advocacy, to question these numbers or to challenge the appropriateness of placing bodies on display is quickly dismissed as an attempt to negate the seriousness of the genocide. When I said to the Director of Memorials in the Ministry of Youth and Culture, the chief government official charged with overseeing memorials, that Rwanda does not have a tradition of leaving bodies exposed, he responded vehemently, “Rwanda does not have a tradition of genocide either!”²³ There is little room for the quiet voice of a survivor that says, “It is not good to leave the bodies like that.”

The Politics of Memory and the Rwandan Genocide

The massacre at Murambi was unfortunately only one small chapter in the terrible cataclysm of violence that shook Rwanda in 1994. Beginning in 1990, the combined pressures of an economic downturn, a pro-democracy movement, and an invasion by Rwandan refugees, mostly Tutsi who had fled earlier waves of violence and were now seeking the right to return to their country of origin, disrupted Rwandan society. These pressures forced the government of long-time president

¹⁹ www.aegis.tv/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=218&Itemid=222, accessed on June 26, 2006.

²⁰ www.geoffbugbee.com, accessed on June 27, 2006.

²¹ www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0438/is_3_38/ai_n16118531/pg_22, accessed on June 27, 2006.

²² www.neveragaininternational.org/news/murambi.html, accessed on June 27, 2006.

²³ Interview in Kigali, June 2003.

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Habyarimana to offer concessions allowing an expansion of press freedom, a blossoming of civil society, and the emergence of new political parties and their inclusion in government. Over time, however, the fact that the army attacking the country was comprised mostly of members of the Tutsi ethnic group provided an opportunity for supporters of the regime to exploit popular resentment of the war. Building on a history of ethnic violence dating back to 1959, regime supporters fostered suspicion of Tutsi still living in Rwanda and portrayed themselves as defenders of majority Hutu interests. From late 1990 through 1993, extremist Hutu ethno-nationalists, acting with government support, carried out a series of massacres of Tutsi (and in a few cases moderate Hutu) in several parts of the country that helped to heighten ethnic tensions. They painted Hutu who challenged the regime as traitors to their people.²⁴

When President Habyarimana was assassinated in a plane crash on April 6, 1994, Hutu extremists used his death as justification for launching a long-planned attack on regime opponents – opposition politicians, civil society activists, journalists, intellectuals – under the guise of ethnic violence. Initially focused in the capital, the international community’s failure to condemn their actions inspired the extremists to expand their plan into the rest of the country.²⁵ While continuing to target Hutu who resisted the genocide, the organizers focused the violence more specifically on Tutsi, creating an incentive for Hutu to support, or at least acquiesce to, the violence – making ethnic solidarity the easiest route to survival. Officials and others supporting the genocide lured Tutsi to central locations, such as churches or schools, like Murambi, then trained local militia groups with backing from police or soldiers attacked the ostensible places of sanctuary, systematically slaughtering those inside, often over a period of several days. In the weeks that followed the major massacres, leaders organized the general population to work barricades and carry out “security” patrols in communities throughout the country to find Tutsi survivors and prevent their fleeing. In three months, more than 500,000 Tutsi and several thousand moderate Hutu were murdered,

²⁴ The best general sources on the genocide and its causes are Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story* and Gerard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide*, New York: Columbia, 1995. Nigel Eltringham, *Accounting for Horror: Post-Genocide Debates in Rwanda*, London: Pluto Press, 2005, challenges the use of the terms “extremist Hutu” and “moderate Hutu,” arguing that they obscure the complexities within the Hutu population. In the absence of better terms, however, I refer to Hutu who embraced an anti-Tutsi ideology as “extremists” and those who supported ethnic unity and opposed Tutsi scapegoating as “moderates.”

²⁵ The transformation of the violence into genocide is a central theme in André Guichaoua, *From War to Genocide: Criminal Politics in Rwanda 1990–1994*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015.