

An Oral and Documentary History of the Darfur Genocide; We Cannot Forget: Interviews with Survivors of the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda

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Abstract.

Despite all the good intentions and finely wrought promises of “never again!” in the aftermath of the Holocaust, genocide remains a scourge that won’t go away. This terrible fact is supported by evidence demonstrating the large number of genocides that have occurred since the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in 1948, the best known of which took place in Cambodia, the Former Yugoslavia, and Rwanda, although there were many others. Hundreds of books have been written about the Rwandan Genocide and although far fewer have been written about the atrocities in Darfur, there are still plenty to choose from.

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Samuel Totten, ed., *An Oral and Documentary History of the Darfur Genocide*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Security International, 2011. Pp 556, cloth. \$104.95 US.

Samuel Totten and Rafiki Ubaldo, eds., *We Cannot Forget: Interviews with Survivors of the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2011. Pp 207, cloth. \$72.00 US. Paper. \$26.95 US.

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Despite all the good intentions and finely wrought promises of “never again!” in the aftermath of the Holocaust, genocide remains a scourge that won’t go away. This terrible fact is supported by evidence demonstrating the large number of genocides that have occurred since the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in 1948, the best known of which took place in Cambodia, the Former Yugoslavia, and Rwanda, although there were many others. Hundreds of books have been written about the Rwandan Genocide and although far fewer have been written about the atrocities in Darfur, there are still plenty to choose from.

While only deniers contest that what transpired in Rwanda was clearly a case of genocide, the arguments over how to classify violence in Darfur have been more complex and uncertain. Some have deemed the conflict to be ethnic cleansing or crimes against humanity, while others assert it was clearly genocide. Interestingly, while the United States government deemed it genocide, the United Nations International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur (COI) asserted that it was a case of crimes against humanity. Just as critics of the US position claim that power politics were at the heart of the decision to call Darfur genocide, critics of the COI decision claim that a different set of political interests drove the COI’s position. In addition to this ongoing geopolitical debate over the appropriateness of applying the “G” word to the Darfuri case, scholars remain entrenched on different sides of this debate.

Making a powerful case for identifying and raising awareness about genocide are two new books by Samuel Totten: *We Cannot Forget: Interviews with Survivors of the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda* (co-edited with Rafiki Ubaldo) and *An Oral and Documentary History of the Darfur Genocide*. These masterful works combine oral history with scholarly analysis and official documents to challenge naysayers’ arguments. Both collections use interview data to effectively demonstrate that the human turmoil that took place in Rwanda and Sudan was motivated by an overarching theme of genocidal *intent*, perhaps the most useful concept for distinguishing genocide from war crimes.

The interviews in *We Cannot Forget* add greatly to our understanding of events and perceptions surrounding the horrific, 100-day genocide in Rwanda, which resulted in 500,000 to 1 million deaths. As relatively few Rwandan survivor testimonies make it into this type of literature, Totten and Ubaldo address a significant lacuna. Existing testimonies tend to be from geographically limited parts of Rwanda and do not provide in-depth accounts about the survivors’ experiences before and after the genocide.¹

Though *We Cannot Forget* focuses only on the stories of the survivors and not the perpetrators, the text presents detailed interviews with a diverse pool of individuals covering events in the years leading up to, during, and following the genocide, with the

goal of demonstrating the coordinated and vicious nature of the killings. Indeed, interviewees relate how they received instructions from church leaders, community leaders, and the military to travel to certain locations where they would be “protected” after Rwandan President Habyarimana’s airplane was shot down on 6 April 1994. Such instructions were used to dupe Tutsi into gathering in large numbers so they could be slaughtered.

A critique that is often made of the narrow, legalistic approach to genocide is that it forces the international community to be reactive versus proactive. This is because many international and national leaders argue that genocide can only be ascertained when clear intent is established. Thus, even when horrific violence is clearly taking place, such leaders may argue that it’s due to civil war, ethnic cleansing, or a flare up of “ancient animosities.” Totten and Ubaldo, however, point out the documented early-warning signs of the looming genocide in Rwanda that were ignored by the international community on several occasions. These included a January 1994 report by the US Central Intelligence Agency warning that if the unabated violence continued, up to 500,000 Rwandans could die. Human Rights Watch also issued numerous reports throughout the early 1990s warning the international community that something significant was afoot in Rwanda. Ultimately, the editors make it very clear that the UN decision to block an effective intervention was both conscious and unconscionable.

In the first volume of *An Oral and Documentary History of the Darfur Genocide*, Totten presents interviews with 19 victims whose communities were devastated by the scorched-earth policies and ethnic cleansing carried out by Government of Sudan (GoS) and Janjaweed forces even prior to 2003, which is when the international community began to focus its attention on the crisis. These detailed and vivid personal accounts, combined with the official documents in the second volume, which delineate the evolving stance of the international community as it lurched toward action, offer a compelling argument that GoS actions in Darfur constituted genocide.

The first of the two volumes provides a succinct and effective overview of the historical factors leading up to the conflict. Here, Totten discusses several antecedents that contributed to the genesis of mass violence, including drought and desertification; growing tension and violence between nomadic Arab herders and black African farmers; the breakdown of traditional methods of conflict resolution; the marginalization of black Africans; Arab supremacism; and a malevolent, scorched-earth counterinsurgency strategy. Throughout, Totten stresses the complexity of the situation and the fact that many Arabs in the region were in no way complicit in the killings.

Before transitioning into the interviews—19 powerful, first-person accounts collected at refugee camps in eastern Chad in 2007 and 2009, in N’djamena in December 2009, and in the Nuba Mountains in 2010—Totten goes on to summarize the numerous attempts to bring about peace and their less-than-favorable results, as well as the international community’s rather ineffective response(s). The interviews were conducted using a standardized questionnaire administered by the author and his interpreter. Questions focused on basic demographic information, the survivors’ experiences with violent encounters and their chronology, any information they could give about the perpetrators, and personal insights into the causes and ramifications of the conflicts. Interviews were arranged by locating willing participants in refugee camps, or based on recommendations from personal contacts or *umdas* (camp sheikhs). The interviewees include four females and 14 males ranging in age from 23 to 70, with 11 being members

of the Massaliet tribe, six Fur, and one Dajo, most of whom lived in western Darfur prior to being displaced.

The interviews cover a broad range of topics and events, from growing tensions over access to water and land, to an increase in the prevalence of robbery and assault, to all-out attacks on villages by GoS-affiliated men on horseback in coordination with Antonov bombers and helicopter gunships. Though it would have been helpful for the author to analyze the testimonies to highlight patterns and parallels, it is easy enough for the reader to identify recurring themes or motifs him/herself. Repeated survivor accounts, for example, confirm that the GoS and Janjaweed were clearly pursuing a scorched-earth strategy against the black Africans of Darfur; entire communities were reduced to rubble and ash; those captured were raped, murdered, or both, and any sources of subsistence were destroyed (i.e., crops consumed or uprooted and water supplies poisoned), leaving people wandering the desert to perish. Particularly disturbing are the many accounts of mass rape, both during attacks on villages and later, as girls and women were often captured collecting firewood outside displacement camps.

One account in particular, given by an elderly imam, demonstrates the resolve and determination of the perpetrators to eliminate their black countrymen. He explains that the attackers dug a large grave between his village, which had been destroyed, and the camp that people were attempting to flee toward, and then waited for weeks, killing every man and boy they could capture. After their murders, the perpetrators buried their victims in the hole. The following is a noteworthy exchange between this imam and Totten:

The women, they didn't kill, but they beat them and took what they have. [Note: At this point, Totten asks the interpreter what exactly the imam meant by "took what they have." Totten says, "Could you please ask the imam, with sensitivity, whether he is talking about their . . . material wealth or something personal?"] Yes! They beat the women and raped the young women. Many women, young women—14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, or 20—were raped, for sure. They raped others, much older, but any women 20 or under were surely raped (5).

These narratives are packed with many similar accounts and are sometimes even more descriptive than that. With the wisdom of one who has visited Sudan and the Nuba Mountains on several occasions—most notably for the US State Department's Atrocities Documentation Project and then four more times on his own between 2004 and 2011—Totten takes special care to ensure that interviewees clearly differentiate between those matters that they experienced firsthand and those they heard about from others. Respondents' personal insights into the causes and ramifications of the conflicts are presented as such, and may or may not be accepted as fact, though I have found them to be among the book's most engaging elements. The author is to be praised for allowing readers to see the informants not only as sources for eyewitness accounts but also as individuals able to reflect on their own experiences and to draw meaningful conclusions themselves.

It should be noted that only about a third of respondents are women, though this is likely to be attributed to the aversion of many survivors of rape—a well-documented weapon of genocide—to sharing their experiences with a male foreigner. The interviews are also largely limited to individuals from western Darfur, something the author explains is a result of tight GoS visa restrictions put in place to prevent such information

from becoming widespread. Still, the interviews include broad and varying perspectives from eclectic backgrounds, such as farmers, teachers, engineers, and community leaders. The survivors profiled in the book include individuals with no education, some with solely an elementary-level education, and a very few with college experience.

The second volume is composed of nine official documents, all pertaining to the issue of whether or not the actions of the GoS and the Janjaweed constituted genocide. This collection traces the international community's response to Darfur from the first US-sponsored investigation of the situation, to its official declaration that genocide had occurred, to the ensuing UN and the International Criminal Court (ICC) investigations and decisions, leading ultimately to the ICC arrest warrant for Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir on charges of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes.

Totten begins the volume with the *UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*, the international community's agreed-upon definition of genocide. The two documents that follow include the insightful findings of the US Atrocities Documentation Project (the US-sponsored investigation into the crisis) and the remarks of Secretary of State Colin Powell to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 2004, declaring the GoS's actions a case of genocide.

In the fourth document, Totten presents the *Report of the International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur to the United Nations Secretary-General*, which ultimately concludes that the atrocities committed by the GoS and Janjaweed were crimes against humanity and war crimes, but not genocide. He is fair when he admits here that many scholars agreed with this finding. The author's even-handed analysis and criticisms are a key strength of the publication, which goes on to present other documents with controversial conclusions. Totten presents the *Decision on the Prosecution's Application for a Warrant of Arrest against Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir*, in which the majority of ICC judges (two of the three) rendered a decision that excluded the crime of genocide from the warrant. Alongside it is the powerful dissent of ICC Judge Anita Usacka, in which she delineates why she believed the charge of genocide should have been honored. The volume concludes with the revised arrest warrant for President al-Bashir, which charges him with three counts of genocide. To my knowledge the volume includes all the vital documents relating to the situation in Darfur and its international legal status, making it an invaluable reference tool for scholars of genocide and human rights.

Totten's work shows us that researching genocidal intent and its execution on the ground—from the “bottom up,” through repeated individual accounts—is a necessary practice for changing the scholarly, legal and political climate around genocide. Such “bottom up” accounts are valuable precisely because accurate evidence of intent in the echelons of power is often suppressed, thus not available in time to stop atrocities from happening. Totten's research and the conclusions he can draw from this research provide a valuable step forward in learning from the patterns of these horrific acts.

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Note

1. Jean Hatzfeld, *A Time for Machetes: The Rwandan Genocide—The Killers Speak* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2005); Jean Hatzfeld and Gerry Feehily, *Into the Quick of Life: The Rwandan Genocide—The Survivors Speak* (Philadelphia: Trans-Atlantic, 2005); and Robert Lyons and Scott Straus, *Intimate Enemy: Images and Voices of the Rwandan Genocide* (Brooklyn: Zone, 2006).