

Book Review: African Rights, with photographs by Jenny Matthews. *Resisting Genocide: Bisesero, April–June 1994*

Samuel Totten

Abstract.

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Book Review

African Rights, with photographs by Jenny Matthews. *Resisting Genocide: Biseseero, April-June 1994*. London: African Rights, 1997. Pp. 110, paper. \$10.00 US.

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For the survivors of the 1994 Rwandan Genocide, what took place at Biseseero constitutes their Musa Dagh and their Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. It was there—across a range of rugged hillsides in Kibuye—that an estimated 50,000 people, primarily Tutsi, heroically attempted to resist a three-month-long onslaught of mayhem and killing by thousands of well-armed *génocidaires*.

Many of the people of Biseseero—especially those known as the Abasesero, who are renowned as fierce fighters—were not fearful of being attacked. As one survivor asserts, “Despite the fact that other Tutsi were extremely panicked, we, the Tutsis from Biseseero, were quite relaxed because we believed that no-one was capable of attacking us, due to our strength” (6). Elaborating on the same point, another survivor says,

In 1959, I was an adolescent. We made sure that we were able to defend ourselves in order to protect our cows. Nobody could find a way of either stealing our cows or burning our house. In 1969, the Tutsi massacres began again, but we managed to chase the enemy away, even though they had guns. In 1973, the killers returned. They burned two of the Abasesero houses. We were furious and took our spears and bows. The killers were afraid of us and they left us alone. The Tutsis from the other regions were killed and their houses were burnt down. The surviving Tutsis left the country but all of us, except for a few families who went to Zaire, remained in Biseseero. We later killed the thieves who had tried to kill our cows. People who saw how we managed against the slightest [incursion] believed that we were very strong men who could not be defeated by anyone. (5)

During the repeated attacks against the villages and people of Biseseero in 1994—attacks that were carried out day after day, frequently lasted all day, and often went on far into the night—the vast majority of the inhabitants of Biseseero are reported to have taken part in the resistance effort against the marauding Hutu. Off and on for three months, the people of Biseseero fought for their very lives. Many fearful Rwandans from other areas fled to Biseseero in the hope that the renowned fighting ability of the people there would be able to stave off the attacks of the *génocidaires*. Many others also flocked to the area upon hearing of the local people’s holdout. A good number of the latter also took part in the resistance effort.

While many of the victims of the 1994 Rwandan Genocide attempted to protect themselves in various ways (e.g., by hiding in the bush, asking for help from friends and neighbors, seeking sanctuary in churches where they believed they would be safe, and even fighting off their attackers), the unique character of the resistance at Biseseero was both its organized and systematic nature and its longevity.

Many of the most vicious killers were apparently ordered to descend upon Biseseero to put down the resistance. In both overseeing and carrying out the killing process, such killers fought alongside local Hutu, members of the former Rwandan

Armed Forces (FAR), and Interahamwe militias. Wealthy businessmen and “benefactors” of the extremists provided both weapons and vehicles for the onslaught of mass murder.

During the first month of the battle, according to *Resisting Genocide*, the resistance fighters held their own—despite being overwhelmingly outgunned. While the resistance fighters primarily had clubs and spears at their disposal, the ex-FAR soldiers and various Hutu extremists had pistols, rifles, grenades, and Kalashnikovs, while their lackeys (the local Hutus) used machetes and *massues* (nail-studded clubs). The resistance fighters also fought under the most trying of circumstances, including bitter cold, constant downpours, and a severe lack of food.

During the first half of May, the perpetrators backed off in order to regroup and to bring in additional killers and weapons. But “from 13 May onwards, refugees began dying in their tens of thousands” (3); then “there was another massacre on the 14th, principally to finish off the wounded and to hunt for survivors. More than half the refugees—between 25,000 to 30,000—are thought to have died in these two attacks alone. By late June, only about 3,000 emaciated people were still alive” (3).

The authors report that in the end, only 1,000 of the roughly 50,000 people who gathered and fought in Bisesero survived. The authors also note that despite the fact that all Tutsi men throughout Rwanda were targeted for extermination, most of the survivors of Bisesero were men. This was because, in the end, both women and children were easily run down and murdered, while the few male survivors were more able to elude the killers.

Resisting Genocide: Bisesero, April–June 1994 is comprised of ten chapters: “The Exodus to Bisesero”; “April 1994: Fighting Back”; “The Fighting Intensifies”; “The Onslaught of 13 May”; “Despair and Danger, 14 May”; “The Relentless Slaughter”; “June 1994: Nearing the End”; “A Moment of Hope: The Arrival of French Soldiers”; “The Principal Organizers of the Genocide in Bisesero”; and “The Survivors: Living with the Legacy of Bisesero.” It concludes with “A Preliminary Census of the Victims” (82–110), which includes thousands of individuals’ names, each with age, sex, occupation, and marital status. The book does not include a glossary of key terms, a chronology of the genocide, or a map of Rwanda highlighting Bisesero and its environs. These are minor quibbles, but the addition of these three components would have strengthened what is already a valuable book.

The book also includes fifty-one photographs illustrating individual survivors, various locations where the fighting took place in Bisesero, and the remains of the dead (mounds of skulls and bones of the victims of the genocide). The most striking photographs of the survivors are those that show their scars from the machete wounds they suffered.

The story of the resistance at Bisesero is told through two complementary formats: a succinct but highly informative narrative and excerpts from powerful and equally informative survivor testimonies that are interspersed throughout the narrative. The survivors’ words fill in, expound upon, clarify, and ultimately add invaluable personal insights to the narrative. As one might imagine, some of the incidents, events, and scenes described by the survivors are horrific. Two such examples will suffice here:

We could see bodies on the hills. There were people who were almost dead and babies feeding from the breasts of their dead mothers. . . . My daughters were killed. . . . We didn’t have any hoes to dig a grave, so we just put them on the grass. (40)

My clothes were torn and my feet were swollen. I had nothing to eat. I drank the water [in the stream] despite the fact that I saw my own family members in the water. I couldn't do anything about it. (48)

The information gleaned from survivors' accounts is not limited to such horrors, however; indeed, it addresses a host of critical issues, including the fact that "the educated Tutsi were the first to be hunted down" (6); the systematic confiscation of weapons from the Tutsi by various local officials; the ongoing distribution of weapons by various businessmen, some from as far away as Kigali; the rumors afloat among Hutus that the Tutsi intended "to exterminate the Hutus" (9); the fact that some Tutsi girls and women took part in the actual hand-to-hand combat; the involvement of Hutu women and children in terrorizing Tutsis by blowing whistles and shouting *tubatsembatsembe* ("eliminate them all"); the involvement of some Twa in the murder of the Tutsis; the fact that some Tutsi fighters discovered, on the dead bodies of Hutus, written directives signed by extremist Hutu leaders specifying the need to "annihilate the Bisesero Tutsis" (30, 31); and the Tutsi tactic of "mingling" during their battles with Hutus, which one survivor explains as follows:

The Kinyarwanda expression *Mwivunge sha* [literally, "go and merge"] basically describes the tactics of mixing with the assassins as they approach, thus removing their ability to shoot at us; this then allows us to use machetes just as they do. (17)

As one reads the text, accompanied by the first-person testimony, one is likely to consider how the outcome at Bisesero would have been radically different had the international community either blocked access to Bisesero, thus preventing outsiders (ex-FAR and militia) from entering the area, or provided the Tutsis with adequate weapons (pistols, rifles, and automatic weapons, along with ammunition) to repel the attacks. Of course, we will never know whether such actions would, in the end, have altered the outcome; what we do know is how the international community unconscionably failed to act in a timely or effective manner in the face of one of the most blatant genocides perpetrated in the twentieth century.