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THE RWANDAN PATRIOTIC FRONT'S INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

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"A NEW WAY OF DOING THINGS"

From the beginning of the civil war, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF)¹ realized that battles are fought in the media as much as, if not more than, on the ground. The RPF was well prepared and, because it managed public opinion in a very professional manner, succeeded with surprising ease in having a simple, dual message penetrate the international media. On the one hand, the RPF invasion from Uganda in 1990 sought to rid Rwanda of a corrupt, regionalist, discriminatory and totalitarian regime; on the other, the RPF was going to put into place democracy, harmony between ethnic groups and regions, social justice and a healthy and rigorous management of public affairs. The RPF portrayed itself as a liberation movement, the "good guys." This was achieved by using efficient diaspora networks, creating relays in international media and political circles and using the right discourse.

¹ The RPF is the rebel movement that invaded Rwanda in October 1990 and is now the country's ruling party.

Information and communication management is an important political weapon the RPF used to protect its continued hold on power. Through it, they have developed a coherent and comprehensive narrative on the past, present and future of the country and its citizens. Tightly policing this “truth” is an essential ingredient of the RPF’s political strategy. Indeed, the regime considers knowledge production to be an aspect of its (international) sovereignty (Fisher 2015). RPF leader and Rwandan President Paul Kagame once stated: “We used communication and information warfare better than anyone. We have found a new way of doing things” (Gowing 1998, 4). This “new way” has proven very effective. This chapter addresses six pillars on which the RPF’s information and communication strategy rests.

DENIAL

Johan Pottier (2002, 55) notes that Kagame’s information strategy was “built around denial.” Often, it actually amounted to shameless lying, as on Rwanda’s involvement in and plunder of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), its human rights record, electoral fraud and political assassinations at home and abroad. Some examples among many serve to illustrate this point. A practice of systematic denial started right after the RPF took power. Faced with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) consultant Robert Gersony’s findings of massive killings of civilians by the RPF, in early October 1994, President Pasteur Bizimungu issued a flat and virulent denial, and accused the United Nations of having “commanded a biased and hasty inquiry, with the sole aim of damaging the image of the government of national union.” Then vice president Kagame lashed out at the UNHCR with a warning to “beware of foreigners who preach ethnic divisions” (Lorch 1994b). In January 1997, when Belgium stated publicly what everyone knew — namely, that thousands of Rwandan soldiers were deployed in Zaire (as the DRC was then known) — presidential adviser Claude Dusaidi reacted, saying “I believe that Belgium has gone senile.... It looks like they don’t know where the borders are, nor do they distinguish between Zairians and Rwandans” (Agence France-Presse [AFP] 1997). Many more denials were aggressively issued, but they sounded very hollow after Kagame himself unveiled the public secret in an interview with *The Washington Post* after the end of the first Congo war (Pomfret 1997). Although more than 20,000 Rwandan troops were again deployed in the DRC from 1998, Kigali denied any involvement. Rwanda once more took the risk of destabilizing North Kivu in the spring of 2012. Several reports (Human Rights Watch [HRW] 2012; UN Security Council [UNSC] 2012)

showed that Rwanda supplied weapons, ammunition and recruits to a new rebel movement, the M23. The reports documented direct Rwanda Defence Force interventions into Congolese territory to reinforce M23, as well as support to other mutinous and secessionist politicians in eastern DRC. Rwanda again flatly denied the charges, but no one, even its closest allies, believed them.

On November 30, 2011, Charles Ingabire, editor of the Uganda-based online publication *Inyenyeri News*, which was very critical of the Kagame regime, was shot and killed in a Kampala neighbourhood. He had been attacked two months earlier and received telephone death threats warning him to stop writing articles critical of the Rwandan government. There were strong indications that Rwandan operatives were involved, but Kagame rejected the allegations, claiming that Rwandan authorities had unearthed evidence showing that Ingabire had stolen money from an organization helping orphans that he had headed before fleeing to Uganda. "We have many cases like this in Rwanda of people committing crimes and claiming political persecution," Kagame said (AFP 2011).

A final example is both recent and tragic. In July 2017, HRW issued a report on extrajudicial executions in northwestern Rwanda (HRW 2017a). It showed that dozens of suspected petty offenders were summarily executed between July 2016 and March 2017. The report contained names and photographs of victims, the identity of responsible state agents and a precise description of the events. Justice Minister Johnston Busingye immediately reacted on Twitter, stating that the report "is clearly fake. They [HRW] have been duped, yet again, wilfully." Foreign Minister Louise Mushikiwabo claimed that the report "has names of people purportedly killed by security forces, yet they are alive and well" (Mugisha 2017). On October 13, the (governmental) National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR) dismissed the HRW findings, claiming that seven of the alleged victims were alive, 10 died of natural causes or accidents and 10 were unknown to local authorities of the administrative entities mentioned in the report (NCHR 2017). HRW responded on November 1 with evidence of manipulation by the NCHR. For instance, the NCHR produced a different person at its news conference, with the same name, but from a different sector and almost 30 years older than the person who was killed. The NCHR also presented a woman who said a person allegedly killed was her husband and that he was living in Belgium. However, the man said to be in Belgium is a different person. The man killed in March was a fisherman who never had a passport. Numerous family members of victims told HRW that local authorities had interrogated,

threatened or even detained them since the publication of the July report. Authorities attempted to coerce some family members to provide a false account of what happened to their relatives. HRW also documented threats to local communities where the killings took place (HRW 2017b). A France 24 investigation, aired on October 31, also found numerous discrepancies in the NCHR report and corroborated the circumstances surrounding four of the summary executions documented by HRW. This practice of denial can be linked to a broader feature of Rwandan culture. Pottier notes that for people caught red-handed, whether petty thieves or political leaders, Rwandans can only feel contempt (Pottier 2002, 155). This explains why the regime, just like ordinary Rwandans, never admits any wrongdoing, even if the evidence flies in the face.

CLOSING OFF THE CONFLICT SCENE

The technique of closing off the conflict scene was first used by the RPF and the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA) in Rwanda before, during and after the genocide. A reporter noted in 1994 that “journalists are required to travel with armed escorts in rebel-controlled territory and are closely monitored” (Lorch 1994a). This was also the experience of an international commission of inquiry (the International Commission of Investigation on Human Rights Violations in Rwanda since October 1, 1990 [ICHRVR]), which visited the RPF-held area in early 1993 (ICHRVR 1993, 70). Amnesty International noted that “the RPA closely monitored and controlled movements of foreigners in areas under its control... This ensured that... very limited information about abuses by the RPA could be gathered or made public by independent observers” (Amnesty International 1994). Even during the months the RPF was just establishing its control, it was remarkably successful in restricting access by foreigners to areas where it was “cleaning up”: “The RPF established close control over foreigners working or travelling in areas under its authority. Information and liaison officers worked hard at shaping the ideas of outsiders while persons employed by foreigners were ordered to report on their activities and conversations. Ordinarily journalists and aid workers were allowed to travel in RPF territory only in the company of officially designated ‘guides’ who sought to ensure that they travel just to approved areas, usually via the main roads. The RPF closed whole regions to UNAMIR [the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda] and other foreign observers for weeks at a time” (Des Forges 1999, 723).

This practice continued during the campaign of refugee extermination in Zaire/DRC. Indeed, Kagame confirmed that "the aim was to let them (the NGOs [non-governmental organizations] and the press) continue their work, but deny them what would be dangerous to us" (Gowing 1998, 15). As early as November 1996, humanitarian agencies were denied access to the area around Goma, declared a military zone. A similar decision was taken in Bukavu, where access was made impossible beyond a 30-km radius around the town; even within that radius, freedom of movement was severely restricted. Similar strategies were used in April 1997 to the south of Kisangani. When grave massacres were committed there by RPA "search and destroy" units, Biaro and later Kasese were made no-go areas. Next, when the humanitarian agencies were allowed in, the surviving refugees were herded to Ubundu, which was in turn declared inaccessible. In a number of places, humanitarian organizations located the whereabouts of refugee groups in need of assistance and made them leave the bush. The area would then be declared a military zone with prohibited access. When the humanitarian agencies were allowed back in, the refugees had disappeared.

A final violent episode that needs to be mentioned is the brutal anti-insurgency operation in the northwest from 1997 to 1999. In October 1997, the RPA killed thousands of civilians hiding in natural caves in Nyakinama, but the UN Human Rights Field Operation for Rwanda was denied access to the site. The absence on the ground of impartial international observers was achieved by the intimidation and even killing of foreigners, which led them to leave these areas. On January 19, 1997, three Spanish workers of *Médicos del mundo* who had witnessed a massacre were killed by the RPA. Other foreigners who were killed include five priests from Canada, Spain and Croatia, and a Belgian school director, all suspected of informing international opinion after witnessing killings.

EXPLOITING THE "GENOCIDE CREDIT"

The regime astutely maintains and exploits the "genocide credit" to escape condemnation. The constant reference to the genocide serves several purposes: justifying Tutsi dominance (without saying so), keeping alive the fear of Hutu revenge,² maintaining the support of many Tutsi and keeping the international

2 Indeed, referring to "Tutsi Power," Mahmood Mamdani (2001, 271) noted that not only the genocide of the past but also preventing one in the future was part of the RPF's argument: "The moral certainty about preventing another genocide imparts a moral justification to the pursuit of power with impunity."

community at bay. It became a powerful ideological weapon that allowed the RPF to acquire and maintain victim status and to enjoy impunity for its own crimes. Pottier observed that “those who represent the victims of genocide are not to be challenged” (Pottier 2002, 176).

A few examples among many illustrate this strategy. During discussions about the deployment of UNAMIR, three weeks into the genocide, the RPF opposed it, stating, among other things, that “the international community was forewarned but did not find it possible or necessary to take any measures to prevent (the) massacres....It has...fallen upon us to rescue many Rwandans from (the) atrocities....The international community stood by and helplessly watched while hundreds of thousands of innocent citizens perished” (RPF 1994). A report by Amnesty International on the human toll of the Rwandan occupation of eastern DRC (Amnesty International 2001), was called “an insupportable insult to the memory of more than a million victims of the 1994 genocide” (Government of Rwanda 2001). In a widely reported speech at the genocide commemoration on April 7, 2007, Kagame reprimanded religious faiths, local associations and the international community, which “needs to confess and plead guilty.” Kagame said that some members of the international community, and not just the usual culprit, France, “have played an important role in the genocide.”

When a report discussed in the UN Security Council (UNSC 2008) documented Rwanda’s continuing support for the DRC rebel group National Congress for the Defence of the People, the government spokesperson claimed that the report was “a continuous ploy by powerful countries to disregard the truth when it comes to Rwanda (and) to hide their guilt after they abandoned Rwandans during the genocide” (Government of Rwanda 2010). Attacking French and Spanish judges who had indicted Rwandan officials, Kagame said they “are nothing but vagabonds (and) the games (they) play are a mockery of the one million people who were killed during the genocide” (*The New Times* 2008). Before the “Mapping Report” on crimes committed by the Rwandan army in the DRC came out, the government attempted to prevent its publication by all means. It stated that “it is immoral and unacceptable that the United Nations, an organization that failed outright to prevent genocide in Rwanda and the subsequent refugee crisis...now accuses the army that stopped the genocide of committing atrocities in the Democratic Republic of Congo” (Government of Rwanda 2010).

This strategy of blaming others has proved very efficient. A diplomat interviewed by *Le Monde* in New York acknowledged that “any action

undertaken against the regime in Kigali is always perceived as offering moral support to those guilty of genocide; it is true that the Rwandan regime is benefiting from this ambivalence, and we know it" (Cornu 1996). The regime also knew. Long-time Kagame cabinet minister Patrick Mazimhaka stated that "we were (diplomatically) stronger because nobody could argue against us," while a US diplomat (Duke 1998) admitted that "the Americans were terribly manipulated by this government and now we are almost held hostage by it." A donor representative quoted by Eugenie Zorbas (2011, 108) remarked that there is "an element of 'we know better' and 'you have no moral authority.' And it is hard to disagree with them." However, a panel put in place by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) was not fooled. It concluded that the RPF:

...are masters of shrewd communication strategies. RPF leaders have long understood that they begin with the benefit of the doubt, based on a combination of guilt and sympathy from the world at large. Guilt for failing to prevent the genocide and sympathy for the RPF as the government of the victims help explain why the international community, bolstered by like-minded journalists and NGOs, has often been ready to believe the RPF version that most human rights violations have been perpetrated by the genocidaires...[C]ritics of the government are simply dismissed as genocide sympathisers — a technique that puts a chill on legitimate dissent. (OAU 2000)

DESIGNING THE "TRUTH"

The monopoly on "truth" that the regime successfully gained extended not just to Rwanda's visions and analyses of current affairs — for instance, its democratic credentials, human rights record and involvement in the DRC — but to history generally. In summary, this official history claims that pre-colonial Rwanda had been for centuries a unified, harmonious and peaceful society. And that, inspired by the so-called "Hamitic Hypothesis" (Sanders 1969), ethnicity was introduced by the Belgian administration and the Catholic Church in the context of a divide and rule policy, which they did in an artificial fashion, by basing ethnic identity on the possession of cattle. The RPF put an end to the genocide that resulted from divisive politics, and

restored peace and harmony.³ This narrative is coherent and articulated in a systematic fashion. Pottier notes “the pervasiveness and power of clustered narratives that simplify reality to make the post-genocide government of Rwanda and its practices intelligible, rational and legitimate in the eyes of the world” (Pottier 2002, 47).

However, a leading historian of Rwanda, Jan Vansina (2004, 197-98), finds “a whole set of false propositions and assertions” in this narrative. “The linguistic and cultural unity of the country today did not exist in the seventeenth century and Rwanda is not a ‘natural’ nation....Rwanda really became a nation in the twentieth century” (ibid., 198). He furthermore asserts, “Formerly, neither abundance nor order flourished in the country and it is false to think that everyone was happy with their station in life and all lived in peace under the shepherd’s staff of wise kings” (ibid.).

Zinaida Miller (2007, 46) also finds that “the problem...is that the narrative is — from a scholarly perspective — inaccurate....The effects of these particularized versions are both to suppress discussion in the population and to perform a certain narrative for the internationals who involve themselves with Rwanda.”

The RPF strictly polices its truth. During a scholarly debate in Kigali in 2004 about the nature of the genocide, one foreign academic expert mentioned the value of different “truths.” A high-ranking official in the audience immediately demanded the floor to insist: “There is only one truth and we know it” (HRW 2008, 36). This was also made clear by Kagame: “Those who have divergent interpretations of how and why the genocide occurred are revisionists and/or proponents of the theory of double genocide. This, as we know, is another phase of genocide” (Kagame 2008, xxii). The stated aim of an “international conference” held in Kigali in July 2008 was “on the one hand, to observe the failure of the human and social sciences that have led to genocide, on the other, the resourcing of the human and social sciences thanks to the efforts of the Rwandans.” The meeting called for “a new methodology, a new literature, a new history” (Rwanda News Agency/Agence Rwandaise d’Information [RNA/ARI] 2008a; emphasis added).

The problem with the official truth is that it doesn’t go with the grain. A wealth of field research data shows that alternative narratives circulate, but they are

3 This presentation is found in many official statements and documents. For a summary of the government’s reading of history, see Susanne Buckley-Zistel (2009, 33-38).

confined to the hidden transcript that silently, and in a sense subversively, challenges the regime's public transcript (Scott 1992).⁴ This creates a situation "in which competing singular versions of history — the RPF metanarrative and the counter-narrative — effectively continue the conflict through discursive means" (McLean Hilker 2011, 327). Relegating this counter-narrative to the private domain may render it invisible, but does not make it disappear. To the contrary, research on political values of ordinary Hutu found public policy risks contributing to the very dangers the regime claims to combat (Chakravarty 2014). There is considerable anecdotal evidence that many Rwandan Hutu, in the privacy of their homes, in conversations with people they trust ("their own"), and in expressions of everyday resistance (Thomson 2013), develop a mythico-history that is miles apart from the RPF's meta-history (Eltringham 2004, 147–79). Both histories are factually erroneous, and no bridge is built to unite them.

The legacy of genocide has created a powerful rhetorical weapon for the RPF, giving it "a right to remake Rwanda" (Straus and Waldorf 2011, 13), including its history. The RPF views alternative historical interpretations as challenges to its legitimacy and its politics. Its version is protected against challenges by laws on divisionism and genocide ideology, judicial prosecution and political repression.

ELIMINATING OR INTIMIDATING DISSENTING VOICES

Critical voices both inside and outside the country were aggressively tackled. Domestically, the political opposition, civil society and independent media were soon eliminated as autonomous forces. What little was left of the political opposition disappeared in 2003 in what Amnesty International called a "government-orchestrated crackdown on the political opposition" with the help of the concept of "divisionism...vague terminology used by the government to disenfranchise the political opposition in an election year" (Amnesty International 2003). HRW arrived at the same conclusion, which it substantiated in detail (HRW 2003). On April 15, 2003, Parliament recommended the banning of the opposition party Republican Democratic Movement (MDR). The government did not play hard to get; on May 16, "the Council of Ministers, having studied the conclusions of Parliament on the case of the MDR, approves these conclusions and confirms the banning of

⁴ Brandon Finn (2017) has recently shown the gap between the two transcripts among urban youth in Kigali.

the MDR because of its divisionism, and requests the competent authorities to give effect to this decision in accordance with the law.”⁵

Since the second half of the 1990s, human rights defenders, advocates of rural development and NGOs generally were threatened by arrests, “disappearances” and intimidation.⁶ In 1998, two leaders of the human rights associations Collectif des ligues et associations de défense des droits de l’homme (CLADHO, a human rights umbrella organization created in 1993) and of the Ligue rwandaise pour la promotion et la défense des droits de l’homme (Liprodhor) went into exile, while the chair of another human rights group (the Rwandan Association for the Defense of the Rights of the Person and of Public Liberties), André Sibomana, died of an illness that might have been cured had he been allowed to seek treatment abroad, but he was prevented from leaving the country. In addition to direct persecution, the secret services infiltrated civil society groups; “such tactics have largely succeeded in breaking up the Rwandan local NGO network.”⁷ The final assault on civil society came in 2004. At the end of June, parliament sent a list of a dozen Liprodhor cadres to the government with the request that they be arrested and prosecuted; in early July most of the Liprodhor leadership fled to Uganda and Burundi. This was the end of Liprodhor as an autonomous organization, something the government openly welcomed. In a September 18 declaration, it noted “that Liprodhor has separated itself from those among its members corroded by the ideology of genocide (and that) the General Assembly of Liprodhor, during its meeting of 11 September 2004, has asked forgiveness to the people and government of Rwanda for the bad behaviour of some of its representatives and members” (Government of Rwanda 2004). This satisfaction was understandable, as most new members of the board of Liprodhor were now RPF faithful. Rather than banning it, the RPF took over and thus neutralized Liprodhor.⁸

The media underwent the same fate as the political opposition and civil society.⁹ In 2006, Amnesty International cited a list of about 40 journalists

5 See RNA/ARI 2003. At the time of this decision, the prime minister and the minister of the Interior were members of the MDR.

6 A survey of these practices can be found in *Front Line Rwanda* (Front Line 2005). The report highlights the persecution of human rights defenders, rural defenders, independent journalists and NGOs.

7 See ICG (2001, 20). This tactic of infiltration was widely used from the very beginning of RPF rule. The ICG noted that from July 1994, RPF cadres “applied to work in UN agencies, local and foreign NGOs and key businesses to monitor attitudes towards the government and general activities” (ibid., 7).

8 The destruction of Liprodhor is extensively discussed in *Front Line Rwanda* (Front Line 2005, 45–56).

9 An excellent survey of the fate of the media under RPF rule can be found in Waldorf 2007. Also see a chapter on “Silencing Independent Journalists” in *Front Line Rwanda* (Front Line 2005, 67–81).

who were “arbitrarily detained, unjustly judged, forced to flee the country, ‘disappeared’ or assassinated” since the RPF came to power (Amnesty International 2006). In a section titled “An atrophied and muzzled press,” the International Crisis Group (ICG) noted that “since 1998, each stage in the concentration of power seems to have been accompanied by additional restrictions on the subjects the press could cover” (ICG 2002).

In the run-up to the 2010 presidential election, two of the three remaining independent newspapers, *Umuseso* and *Umuwugizi*, were suspended by the High Media Council, thus preventing them from covering the campaign and the polls. The director of *Umuwugizi*, Jean-Bosco Gasasira, fled the country for Uganda after having received repeated death threats; he was followed by his *Umuseso* colleague, Didas Gasana. At the end of June, the co-director of *Umuwugizi*, Jean-Léonard Rugambage, was murdered in Kigali on the very day his newspaper's website (whose access was blocked inside Rwanda) published a story about the regime's “hit squads” operating in South Africa. The government pretended that Rugambage was the victim of an act of vengeance, but his colleague Gasasira stated that “the Rwandan intelligence services were on a killing spree...with the knowledge of President Paul Kagame himself” (Howden 2010). In July, two journalists of *Umurabyo* were arrested, accused of “insurrection, publishing material insulting for the President, incitement to public disorder, ethnic divisionism, and the promotion of genocide ideology” (Tumwebaze 2010). They were sentenced to 17 and seven years imprisonment respectively in February 2011. The situation has not improved since, and Rwanda is ranked 159th out of a total of 180 countries in the 2017 World Press Freedom Index of Reporters without Borders.

Externally, the regime reacts to criticism formulated by outside sources with intimidating contempt. Not a single expression of concern was accepted, nor did the RPF engage in dialogue with critical voices. Instead, it vehemently denounced them, accused them of acting in bad faith, practised character assassination and systematically avoided debate. This heavy-handed approach was applied to all: journalists, academics, international civil society, the United Nations, the OAU and bilateral partners and human rights organizations. A few examples illustrate this point. A report issued in 2000 by HRW (2000a) was described as “very mean-spirited, grossly prejudiced and shallowly researched,” and the organization was accused of “consciously waging a war of lies and defamation against the Rwandan government of national unity.” The report was called a “patent and shameless attempt to interfere in the internal politics of Rwanda and an immoral attempt to enhance the political agendas of certain opponents.” Barely a month later, another HRW report

accusing the Rwandan army of massacring civilians and practising rape at a large scale in the DRC (HRW 2000b) was said to be “malicious, baseless and biased” by the government spokesperson Joseph Bideri. He wrote, “These are not human rights reports, but just political documents.... These documents are authored by one Dr Alison Des Forges who wants to slander the Rwandan government in the face of the donor community” (Bideri 2000). Almost a decade later, Des Forges, HRW senior adviser for Africa, was declared *persona non grata*. Without addressing the substance of a report by the ICG (2002), the government accused the organization of waging an “anti-Rwanda misinformation campaign” and claimed that two of its researchers were working as “agents of the French government, whose hostile position towards Rwanda has never been a secret” (AFP 2002).

Critical voices from academia were also treated with contempt. A document signed by some 50 Rwanda researchers worldwide who advocated the prosecution of RPF suspects before the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda provoked an angry reaction. The authors were “an alliance of strange bed fellows found in the western academia, those who have worked for the previous Genocide regime, including known negationists of the Genocide against the Tutsi” (Tumwebaze 2009). Canadian academic Susan Thomson (2011, 331), who was told that her research was “against national unity and reconciliation” and “not the kind of research the government needed,” had her passport confiscated and was sent to an *ingando* “re-education camp.” Several scholars have described the difficulties and even the anguish that accompanies field research in Rwanda. Larissa Begley (2009) tells about pervasive control and threats by officials and about how fear became a recurring theme throughout her research, for both herself and her participants and translators. Marc Sommers (2012, 41-42) recounts how the experience of another researcher, whose assistants were detained and who was given 24 hours to leave the country, had an impact on his own work. The need to be careful extended to the writing of his initial draft: “I had internalized the restrictive environment within which I had carried out the field research in Rwanda.... I wrote the draft anticipating government criticism.” More surprisingly, other foreign researchers and international agency officials did not criticize the Rwandan government for having shut down the previous research effort. The fault lay with the researcher who “had done things that researchers cannot do in Rwanda.” To a large extent, the regime’s aggressive way of reacting to research seen as threatening has paid off, as many in academia were intimidated enough to either keep silent, tone down criticism or abandon Rwanda studies.

SPREADING THE GOOD WORD: INTERNATIONAL NETWORKS OF SYMPATHIZERS AND LOBBYISTS

The RPF finds willing allies in policing its truth. Some of them probably act in good faith, genuinely believing that the RPF is unjustly attacked and must be given some leeway in light of Rwanda's history. Three recent examples show that point.¹⁰ On October 12, 2014, 38 signatories sent a letter to the BBC's director-general to protest against the contents of the documentary "Rwanda's Untold Story," first broadcast by BBC 2 on October 1, 2014. The letter stated that the BBC had been "recklessly irresponsible" in broadcasting the film, which has "fuelled genocide denial" and "further emboldened the génocidaires." The story was actually not "untold," but commonly put forward in mainstream academia.¹¹ The signatories' rebuttal of two of the three claims they called "untenable" was based on a biased and selective reading of available evidence. The documentary did not deny the genocide, but instead strongly remembered it. Rather, the struggle was over other facets of history potentially harmful to the RPF, namely aspects of the story on which the BBC challenged the RPF's narrative on empirical grounds, and where a convincing case against the RPF could be made.

On March 15, 2017, seven signatories wrote to the editors of *Human Rights Quarterly* "to protest, in the strongest terms," the publication of an article by Luc Reydam's (2016), "for its ill-founded and intemperate attack on the human rights work of a small NGO in London, African Rights." The signatories demanded the publication of a 10-page rebuttal. African Rights had in the past toed the RPF line and exonerated it of human rights abuse, and Reydam's showed that the organization had had close links with the Rwandan regime. Clearly the aim of the signatories was to destroy Reydam's career, and they nearly succeeded.¹²

10 While much in his book is debatable, Pierre Péan (2005) offers useful insights into the activities of networks supporting the RPF in France and Belgium. Similar networks exist in the English-speaking world. Their support is much appreciated by the regime: on November 18, 2017, Kagame awarded the Igihango National Order of Outstanding Friendship medal to nine persons "in recognition of their exemplary service to the nation in various capacities" (Mwai 2017). One of the individuals honoured was British journalist and author Linda Melvern, who was a signatory of the first two initiatives in support of the RPF mentioned below.

11 A good survey can be found in Straus and Waldorf (2011). When this book appeared, the Rwandan regime launched a blog — "Remaking Rwanda: Facts and opinions on the ground" — which was short on substance, but attempted to assassinate the characters of several contributors to the volume (www.themakingrwanda.blogspot.be/).

12 Reydam insisted the rebuttal should be published along with his answer. Both appeared in the May 2018 issue of *HRQ* (Debelle et al. 2018; Reydam 2018).

A third recent example concerns this author. On September 25, 2017, a “collective” of 19 signatories published an aggressive attack (*Le Monde* 2017) on a book published six months earlier (Reyntjens 2017a). While it was claimed to trivialize and even to “indirectly deny” the genocide, the signatories were concerned first and foremost by the fact that the book challenged the RPF’s narrative on issues such as its responsibility in this tragedy, its own human rights record and its role in downing the presidential aircraft, an act that triggered the genocide. This was clearly an attempt at intimidation (Reyntjens 2017b), as was made clear by a text published a week earlier by Survie (2017), an association that systematically takes the defence of the Kigali regime, which stated that the “methods of falsehood” used in the book “*ipso facto* exclude [the author] from the field of honest and serious historiographic research.”

While in the cases mentioned above, the initiators seem to have acted on their own initiative, the Rwandan government also creates its own networks of sympathizers. At a September 2010 meeting of ambassadors accredited in European countries, it was suggested that “Friends of Rwanda” be used as “our advocates and spokespeople.” At the end of the month, the “Group of the Friends of Rwanda” was launched at the European Parliament, with Belgian member of the European Parliament and former foreign minister Louis Michel as chair. Michel has been a keen supporter of the RPF, particularly since 2003, and he was a guest of honour at the celebration of its silver jubilee in December 2012.

In a number of cases, supporters have been paid sizable amounts of money. In June 2008, the executive secretary of the National Commission for the Fight against Genocide mentioned an amount of more than US\$ 100,000 that the government owed African Rights for the drafting of a report. Money changed hands at other occasions too. The way in which one of the best Ugandan journalists, Andrew Mwenda, praised Kagame for years intrigued many, but things became clear in March 2011, when it appeared that he received a payment of US\$ 200,000 from the Rwandan government for “advertising.” The money was paid “confidentially” from a classified account. In September 2011, Mwenda was appointed a member of Kagame’s Presidential Advisory Council, a network of Rwandan and international personalities lobbying in support of the regime. In 2009, the Rwandan government agreed to a lobbying plan with the W2 Group at a cost of US\$50,000 per month. Its goals included objectives to “build a strong and sustained image campaign communicating the successes of Rwanda with key stakeholders in the political and financial elite communities...[and] offset the negative and factually incorrect information of

those parties with vested interests in mis-portraying Rwanda's advancements" (US Department of Justice 2011). With regard to the latter, "the campaign will help insure [to] negate the misinformation being pedalled by expats, NGOs and others with a vested interest in creating an image of Rwanda as a failed state." The "strategic roadmap" included objectives such as "develop a believable narrative," "establishing an influencer network," "seeding the story" and "erecting a perimeter" (to "blunt the online impact of our opposition by initiating a wall of defense debunking their accusations") (ibid.). BTP Advisers, another public relations firm, created an Internet "attack site" for the government. It targeted people who "over-criticised" when it came to "who did what in the genocide" (Newman and Wright 2011).¹³

CONCLUSION

The regime's strong performance in information and communication management may well be traceable to the intelligence background and experience of some of the RPF's military leaders, including Kagame himself. Monitoring and disseminating information is part of a strategy for both external and internal consumption. Externally, the RPF has successfully cordoned off the arena of massive human rights abuse in Rwanda and the DRC, and imposed a monopoly on the reading of history. In combination with the moral high ground achieved through the genocide credit, this has made the regime nearly unchallengeable for the international community. Domestically, the RPF has decreed that there is one single truth and devised instruments (legislation, intimidation, "re-education" and silencing alternative voices), to avoid it being challenged, at least publicly. By doing so, it has privileged the public transcript of the powerful; however, it has not, of course, eliminated the transcript of the oppressed. That story remains, but is hidden. In the privacy of their homes, in discreet conversations and in the body language that accompanies their silence, the powerless construct their truth, which may well be more radical than the RPF believes. In Rwanda, as in some other places, history is a highly political stake of the present and the future rather than a way of analyzing and understanding the past.

The so-called international community bears overwhelming responsibility for allowing the RPF to successfully deploy its communication skills. It has been a willing hostage to Kigali's spin on so many issues — on political governance

¹³ For a survey of PR firms working for the Rwandan government, see Corporate Europe Observatory (2015, 17–19).

and human rights, on massive violations of international humanitarian law, on the aggression and plunder of the DRC, on its hazardous social and economic engineering, and on the way it has injected structural violence across the country and the region.

Under these circumstances, the moment soon came when dialogue was futile, and the Rwandan showcase reached a point of no return. Peter Uvin's (2004, 116-17) judgment is severe: "In the case of post-genocide Rwanda, those who provide significant budgetary support claim to do so as part of a deliberate, and respectful strategy in which both sides dialogue to produce a long-term political and economic vision for the future....In practice, the Rwandan side gains greater power, partly because no one in annual monitoring exercise wants to rock the boat and undermine the nice setup."

The RPF's strategy has been very successful, but it has been waning in recent years. Even such "friends of Rwanda" as the United States and the United Kingdom have increasingly become critical of regime behaviour. For instance, they have condemned its support for rebel movements in the DRC and Burundi, the 2015 constitutional revision potentially allowing Kagame to stay in power until 2034, the persecution of alleged opponents, "disappearances" and torture in illegal detention centres, and electoral fraud. For example, US Acting Assistant Secretary for African Affairs Donald Yamamoto, in a recent appearance before a House subcommittee, expressed "serious concerns about weak democratic institutions, freedom of speech, and respect for human rights" and "deep disappointment with President Kagame's decision" to run for a third term. He observed that the 2017 presidential election showed "notable shortcomings," including "voting irregularities" and "concerns over the integrity of the vote-counting process." He pointed at the targeting of opposition figures and suggested that "tight restrictions remain on political opposition and critics of the ruling party." Government actions aimed "to suppress dissent, prosecute journalists and pressure human rights groups to refrain from investigating and reporting on their findings" (Yamamoto 2017). This critical reaction from a long-standing ally suggests that there are limits to the RPF's spin, and that its discourse has become increasingly unconvincing.

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