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Two decades later: Understanding the French response to the Rwandan genocide

Eglantine Staunton

Two decades later, the Rwandan genocide has been broadly analysed and to a certain extent, so has the French response to the genocide. Nevertheless, even though the literature covers extensively how the French executive responded to the genocide, it remains confusing when it comes to explaining why it responded in such a controversial way since two – somewhat contradictory – accounts have been put forward. In order to address this lack of clarity, the article analyses these main accounts and concludes that they both present key weaknesses that prevent us from fully understanding France's controversial response. Building on Prunier's testimony, this article suggests a third explanation by arguing that the 'Fashoda syndrome' had a strong influence on President Mitterrand and should be taken into account more consistently, not only when studying the French response in Rwanda, but also Mitterrand's foreign policy in Africa more generally.

Keywords: Rwanda, France, genocide, foreign policy, Fashoda syndrome

Introduction

In 1994, the world – already shaken up by images from Cambodia, Somalia and Former Yugoslavia – discovered the scale and intensity of the atrocities of the Rwandan genocide. Twenty years on, the literature available offers key insights to understand the factors and actors that made this tragedy possible. They include, among others, the colonial heritage (Krosiak 2007, 21-22), the lack of political will of the international community to act rapidly (Jamison 2011, 371), a difficult international context with the failures of previous United Nations (UN) interventions (Wheeler 2000, 216), a lack of leadership from the UN Secretary General (Jones 2007, 160), and poor communication between the UN Secretariat and the Security Council (Keating 2004, 501-503). Considering the strong ties between the French

and the génocidaire regime and the controversial French response (in particular, Opération Turquoise), the role played by France also became a factor put forward to explain the genocide. Consequently, key publications have analysed the ties between the French executive¹ and the génocidaires, along with France's response to the atrocities (see for instance Des Forges (1999), Melvern (2000), Krosiak (2007) and McNulty (1996, 2000)).

Nevertheless, even though the existing literature has extensively described and evaluated the French response, it has failed to provide a clear explanation as to why the executive responded to the genocide in such a controversial way by mainly promoting two different – if not contradictory – accounts of France's response. The first, which was mainly put forward by the French executive over the years and is still predominant in France despite international research, consists in arguing that the French executive misunderstood the actors and the nature of the conflict, and therefore overstepped in its cooperation with the génocidaire regime (see in particular Quilès 1998). On the other hand, the majority of the academic literature, especially the Anglo-Saxon one, argues that the controversial French response was part of France's neo-colonial policy in Africa (see for instance Renou 2002; Gregory 2000). The goal of this article is to analyse and test each account in order to better understand the factors and actors that led the French executive to respond in such a controversial way to the largest mass atrocities committed since World War II.

After studying France's response to the genocide, the article evaluates the traditional accounts that have predominantly been put forward by the existing literature. First, it analyses and critiques the idea that the French executive misunderstood the actors and the nature of the conflict as it does not explain why France kept supporting the Hutu-led regime even after the genocide had begun. Second, it explicates that although the claim that France was

undertaking neo-colonial practices in Africa presents some convincing arguments, it only offers a limited explanation of the French cooperation with the isolated génocidaire regime due to its lack of inclusion of the domestic and international contexts. This account thus leaves a central question unanswered: what about Rwanda justified having strong ties with the génocidaire regime of a small, relatively poor African state, with no colonial ties to France?

The article then promotes a third account, which argues that the executive responded in a controversial way in order to stop the influence of the ‘Anglo-Saxons’ in the region. This account was originally suggested by Prunier (1997) – the advisor to the government at the time – and has remained underused by the existing literature, probably because contradictory testimonies can be found on whether or not the syndrome played any role in the French response. Building on Prunier’s testimony, this article argues that the influence of the Fashoda syndrome should be taken into account more consistently when studying France’s role in the genocide, and also Mitterrand’s foreign policy in the continent more generally. It does so after examining the strengths of this argument and addressing its weaknesses, by clarifying the scope of the influence of the syndrome and taking into account additional evidence and testimonies from members of the executive close to Mitterrand.

France’s controversial response to the Rwandan genocide

On 6 April 1994, the Mystère Falcon aircraft carrying President Habyarimana of Rwanda and President Ntaryamira of Burundi was shot down, triggering the beginning of the genocide of between five and eight hundred thousand Tutsis and moderate Hutus in three months. Considering the stark degradation of the situation, France undertook Opération Amaryllis from 8 April to 14 April 1994. This unilateral intervention officially aimed to evacuate

French and foreign personalities from Rwanda (Quilès 1998, 265), but rapidly generated strong critiques from scholars like Kroslak (2007) for several reasons.

First, it was very limited in comparison to the means France had to stop the genocide at its early stage. Secondly, it suggested that France was aware of the tensions in Rwanda and expected a rapid degradation of the situation. As Kroslak explains,

Other critical events in Rwanda over the previous three and a half years did not cause the French government to take similar measures. It thus does not seem farfetched to argue that Paris, and others, expected a considerable worsening of the situation. (2007, 220)

Kroslak's intuition is supported by the testimonies of key advisors to the President. General Quesnot, advisor on the military cooperation with Rwanda, explained that 'the politicians, like the military, immediately understood that we were heading towards massacres beyond measure' (in Nouzille 2010, 392), while Hubert Védrine, the President's protégé, contended that 'informed of the attack [...], President Mitterrand predict[ed] the most tragic consequences' (1996, 700).

Finally, critiques of Opération Amaryllis emerged from the fact that the intervention was supposed to be impartial, but also assisted the Rwandan Government Army (Forces Armées Rwandaises – FAR). For example, Kroslak explains that 'the French used UNAMIR vehicles to move Rwandans of known extremist background to the airport, where they were flown out of the country' (2007, 224). This lack of impartiality can also be seen in the fact that the Rwandans who benefited from the evacuation were mainly Hutus and part of the Habyarimana regime or family, while the Tutsis were left behind (McGreal 2007; Saint-Exupéry 1998).

The controversy over the French response to the genocide intensified with Opération Turquoise (see Fournier (1995) for a detailed account of the intervention). On 20 June 1994, France volunteered to organise a multinational mission until UNAMIR II was operational (Mérimeé 1994). Despite the large amount of doubts and critiques coming from France, Rwanda and the international community, and considering the lack of any other volunteers to send troops and the guarantee by France that it would be a multinational humanitarian intervention (see The UN Security Council 1994a, 5-6), the Security Council authorised on 22 June 1994, an intervention for two months with the chapter VII mandate requested by France. The next day, Opération Turquoise began and so did the critiques in regards to its intent and outcomes.

First, in terms of France's intent, the timing of the operation was surprising. Mitterrand had been receiving a lot of pressure from the public opinion to intervene especially once the media began reporting that France had contributed to the training of the Rwandan Army – and therefore, of some of the génocidaires. As Gounin explains, the 'French public opinion wavered between horror and shame: the horror of a genocide of an unknown violence [...] and the shame of having allowed, or worse, participated, in such a slaughter' (2009, 46). There was therefore a need to 'downplay the negative publicity of France's support for the Habyarimana regime' (Jones 1995, 231) and in fact, Prunier argues that it became a necessity for the government to act 'in the hope of washing off any genocidal bloodspots in the baptismal waters of "humanitarian" action"' (1997, 296).

However, despite this public pressure and the fact that, as Opération Turquoise showed, France was capable of mobilising troops rapidly, Mitterrand only decided to intervene when the genocide was practically over. By the time the operation took place, the

Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF)² had indeed started fighting back and had already made real progress to the point that the génocidaires were withdrawing (Adelman 2000, 432).

In addition to the timing of the intervention, the extent of the force deployed by France also raised questions. The French executive sent a particularly heavy force for a humanitarian intervention since as Findlay points out,

France deployed from neighbouring Zaïre a force of over 3000 [and] had over 100 armoured vehicles, a battery of heavy 120-mm marine mortars, 2 light Gazelle and 8 heavy Super Puma helicopters, and air cover provided by 4 Jaguar fighter bombers, 4 Mirage ground-attack aircraft and 4 Mirages for reconnaissance. (2002, 282)

This surprisingly heavy military contribution made available by France so rapidly would have been very useful to UNAMIR II. Instead, France undertook the operation almost unilaterally since ‘as of 25 July, the troop contingent consisted of 2,555 French soldiers and [only] 339 African soldiers’ (Ladsous 1994).

The outcomes of the operation were also criticised as they were far from being only humanitarian. For instance, the humanitarian protected zone created in South-West Rwanda was used to provide refuge to some of the génocidaires, and to facilitate their escape to Zaïre. Fleitz argues that ‘approximately 1,200,000 Rwandan Hutus settled in Zaïre in July 1994 under French protection’ (2002, 156). Additionally, the French denied access to the zone to the RPF – even after they took control of the government – and also refused to turn over some Hutus to the RPF and the UN (Wheeler 2000, 234). The Mucyo Report made for the Rwandan government in 2007 goes even further in the critique of Opération Turquoise by arguing that, ‘French troops collaborated with the Interahamwe³ [...]. This cooperation was either active when the troops gave instruction to the Interahamwe to keep killing, or passive when they let the Interahamwe kill under their eyes’ (2008, 181).

Consequently, as Gounin explains, France was not only criticised for having allowed a génocidaire regime to remain in power and for having ignored the signs that suggested the planning of the genocide; it was also criticised for the nature of its response to the mass atrocities and the actions of its troops during its interventions (2009, 46).

The traditional accounts of France's response to the genocide and their limitations

Even though the controversy generated by the French response to the genocide has been widely documented over the years, the reasons why the French executive became tied to the génocidaire regime remain somewhat unclear. This can be explained by the fact that the existing literature has mainly been preoccupied with evaluating the French response rather than explaining it. However, two main accounts – rather contradictory – have been put forward by the literature. This section analyses each account and their limitations.

A misunderstanding of the actors and nature of the conflict by the French executive

The first explanation, which was mainly articulated in the 1998 Quilès report to the French National Assembly, argues that France's controversial response to the genocide can be explained by the fact that the executive, and in particular President Mitterrand, misunderstood the actors – and subsequently the nature – of the conflict between the Hutu-led regime and the RPF.

According to this account, there was a double misunderstanding of the actors of the conflict. First, the French President is said to have misjudged the nature of the Habyarimana regime by underestimating its 'authoritarian, ethnical and racist character' (Quilès 1998,

358). The Quilès report argues that Mitterrand believed that Habyarimana had legitimacy to rule since he 'represented at Kigali an ethnic group which accounted for 80% of the population' (Mitterrand in Quilès 1998, 358). Additionally, Habyarimana's legitimacy is said to have been reinforced in the eyes of the French executive when, following Mitterrand's announcement in June 1990 that French aid would be dependent on democratisation, the Rwandan leader promised on 5 July 1990 that he would open up Rwanda to multi-party rule (Krosiak 2007, 3, 33, 36).

Glaser and Smith argue that France was not the only power to have been convinced by the Rwandan regime's willingness to reform: Belgium, Switzerland, and Germany had all agreed to increase their cooperation with Rwanda after it appeared prepared to overcome a violent history in order to promote development (Glaser and Smith 2005, 142-143; Smith 2005, 76). Similarly, Deguine and Smith argue that France was not the only power to be 'blind' to the génocidaire character of the Hutu-led regime in light of the diplomatic efforts undertaken by Habyarimana (2011, 131).

In addition to arguing that Mitterrand misjudged the Rwandan regime, this account claims that the French president also misinterpreted the nature of the RPF by seeing it as a foreign group threatening the interests of Rwanda, rather than a legitimate domestic group fighting for the Tutsis' right to come back. For instance, in October 1990, when the RPF attacked Northern Rwanda from Uganda, Mitterrand argued that the attack had been perpetrated by a foreign group rather than by a minority fighting for its rights (Prunier 1997, 106). As the consequence of this two-fold misunderstanding of the main actors of the conflict, this account argues that in contrast to the majority of the international community,

Mitterrand presented the conflict between the RPF and the Rwandan army as an international rather than a domestic conflict.

Even though these claims can be seen as an attempt by the French executive and its supporters to cover up France's ties to a génocidaire regime, this account still has significant traction in France. This is facilitated by several factors. First, a large majority of the population remains considerably unaware of the extent of the French involvement in the Rwandan genocide as it is not studied at school or university and when it is, the role played by France is often largely undermined. Similarly, biased accounts keep being put forward in the mainstream media. For instance, Colonel Jacques Hogard still maintained in 2014 in *Le Figaro* – one of the mainstream French newspapers – that ‘the real guilty party is not France, but Kagame’⁴ (2014).

Furthermore, Mitterrand is known for having treated foreign affairs and more specifically the Franco-African relations as a ‘*domaine réservé*’:⁵ he handled almost exclusively – with the advice of his son Jean-Christophe⁶ – the relations with the continent and in particular the Franco-Rwandan one. Consequently, for someone unaware of the real extent of the French role in the Rwandan genocide, it would not seem farfetched that Mitterrand's misconception of the actors of the conflict led France to respond inappropriately.

More importantly, the traction of this account back in France can also partly be explained by the fact that the claim that Mitterrand misjudged the actors and the nature of the conflict allows the understanding of some of the aspects of the Franco-Rwandan relationship between 1990 and 1994. First, it explains the increased cooperation between the French and

the Hutu-led regimes throughout the beginning of the 1990s. For instance, when the RPF attacked Northern Rwanda from Uganda in October 1990 (Ramsbotham and Woodhouse 2009, 209-210), France sent a military force (Force Noroît), composed of armed paratroopers and marines (Quilès 1998, 128) and played a central role in the victory of the Rwandan army, which would otherwise have been ‘incapable of undertaking its missions’ (Glaser and Smith 2005, 142). The intervention was justified by arguing that the French support aimed to help a legitimate leader remain in power.

As the conflict between the RPF and the Habyarimana’s regime did not stop after October 1990, President Mitterrand continued to support the Rwandan regime by retaining French troops in Rwanda, increasing its military assistance, and exporting weapons to the regime (Quilès 1998, 44-61, 77-87, 135-39, 357). In particular, the modification made on 26 August 1992 to the original 1975 military agreement, extended the cooperation of the two countries from the police to the Rwandan armed forces (Quilès 1998, 29). As a consequence, ‘French personnel were directly responsible, through arming and training, for the exponential growth of the Rwandan Government Army (Forces Armées Rwandaises – FAR), which swelled from 5,200-strong in 1990 to 35,000 in 1993’ (McNulty 2000, 110). Similarly, in 1993, Mitterrand authorised the sending of six hundreds new troops in the north of Kigali to help Habyarimana stop the RPF’s offensive of 8 February 1993 and to bring the RPF back to the negotiation table (Jones 2007, 143). This reinforcement of French assistance was key to the defeat of the RPF and was once again justified by claiming that this assistance aimed to support a democratic leader protect its country from an international threat.

In addition to explaining the increased military cooperation with Rwanda in the beginning of the 1990s, the claim that Mitterrand misunderstood the conflict allows to make

sense of France's response to the genocide. It argues that when France intervened in 1994, it was only to 'pursue the "Arusha Idea"⁷ by other means' (Quilès 1998, 325; see also Védrine 2001 in Deguine and Smith 2011, 130-131). As the Quilès report explains,

By aiming to stabilise half of the Rwandan territory, on which the exercise of an authority would have been re-established, Opération Turquoise did not attempt to restart the offensive of the FAR against the RPF, but aimed to preserve a situation in which the conditions of the negotiation of a cease-fire followed by a political negotiation would remain. (1998, 324-325)

In other words, this account argues that one of the main goals of Opération Turquoise was to make sure that the Hutu regime would be represented in the new government even though the RPF was defeating them on the ground. As Glaser and Smith explain, this decision was based on key 'analytical mistakes' (2005, 144) among which were a misunderstanding of the 'murderous potential of the division between Hutus and Tutsis' and the idea that 'the power-sharing planed in the Arusha Peace Agreement signed in August 1993 was a realist democratic solution' (2005, 145).

Nevertheless, while this account offers elements of answer to understand the Franco-Rwandan relations, it presents strong weaknesses, which at the very least, question its validity. First, even the Quilès report inquires why the French executive did not rethink its perception of the Hutu-led regime and its cooperation, 'considering the weak progress registered in terms of democratisation' (Quilès 1998, 360). Despite Habyarimana's promise in 1990, there was indeed a considerable lack of reforms undertaken between 1990 and 1994.

Additionally, it seems surprising that Mitterrand truly believed that the RPF was a foreign invader from Uganda rather than an ethnic group of Rwanda: if it really was the case, why did Habyarimana ask France for help in October 1990 rather than going to the United

Nations, which clearly condemns the violation of sovereignty in its Charter? This decision is even more surprising considering that when Habyrimana discovered the attack, he was already in New York – home of the UN headquarters – to attend a UN Children's Emergency Fund's conference (Prunier 1997, 100).

Finally, and most importantly, this interpretation of France's response does not help us explain why France continued to support the Hutu regime even after the genocide had been confirmed. The United Nations was reluctant to recognise that a genocide was taking place in Rwanda considering that it would require the international community to respond. Nevertheless, by June 1994, the fact that a genocide was being perpetrated was largely admitted, as illustrated by the use of the term by the French representative to the UN in his declaration to the UN Security Council on 22 June 1994 (The UN Security Council 1994a).⁸ Nevertheless, the next day Opération Turquoise began and some of the génocidaires received assistance.

The old habits of France in Africa

A second account, more commonly suggested in the academic literature, argues that the French response was consistent with France's old habits in Africa. It claims that the French support of regimes, even dictatorial ones, was not uncommon in the region as long as these regimes represented an interest for France – in particular, an economic one. For instance, Renou explains that it was not unusual for France to sign military agreements with Francophone states: he counted 'eight defence agreements and 24 military technical assistance agreements' signed between France and Francophone states between 1960 and 1993 (2002, 10). These strong Franco-African ties often led to personalised relationships between the African and the French leaders and to the development of strong réseaux

(‘networks of contacts between French and African officials, businessmen and intelligence operatives’) (Cumming 2013, 26).

Cumming explains that this cooperation with African states can be explained by the fact that Francophone Africa was important politically – ‘as a source both of prestige [...] and of electoral strength (150,000 French people living in Africa have the right to register for elections to the Senate)’; strategically – ‘as an area which is rich in raw materials’; culturally – ‘as the only part of the world that is still within Paris’ means for linguistic assimilation’; and economically – ‘French companies, backed by powerful business lobbies in Paris, have substantial trade and investment’ (1995, 396). In other words, Francophone Africa allowed France to remain ‘more than a middle-sized European state’ (Gregory 2000, 436).

The claim that France’s cooperation with the Habyarimana regime was business as usual for the French executive allows to understand the strong ties between France and the Habyarimana regime. Considering that the Rwandan President was pro-French, the Franco-Rwandan ties became stronger when the Hutu leader arrived in power on 5 July 1973, as illustrated by the signature on 18 July 1975 of a pact on military technical assistance (Gregory 2000, 439). The progressive military, diplomatic, economic and social support of the Hutu regime by France under Mitterrand’s presidency helped the Hutus stay in power until 1994. Therefore, when the anti-French RPF threatened to take over Rwanda, France intervened militarily at several occasions such as in 1990 and 1993 (see the previous section), to make sure that the pro-French regime would remain in power.

Additionally, this account argues that the French intervened so late in the genocide, concentrated its action in the South West, and helped thousands of génocidaires to escape to

protect its interest. When it became clear that the Hutus would not rule Rwanda, ‘the mission was to maintain what was left of French influence by securing the power base of those Hutu refugees who were fleeing from the victorious RPF’ (Wheeler 2000, 233).

Even though this account presents convincing arguments to explain the French support of the Hutu-led regime over time, it has two main weaknesses. First, it is limited by the fact that Rwanda should actually have represented a limited interest for France as it had limited natural resources and did not share a colonial past with France. As the Quilès report explains, ‘this little African state, enclave, overpopulated and without resources, did not really justify the level of attention it received.’ (1998, 30).

Additionally, this account fails to take into account the context of the French intervention, and in particular the efforts made by the French executive since the end of the 1980s to promote human rights and humanitarian intervention throughout the world. Between the beginning of President Mitterrand’s presidency in 1981 and the Rwandan genocide in 1994, France became increasingly committed to the promotion of human rights and a duty of humanitarian assistance, often referred to in France as the *devoir d’ingérence*.⁹ It was a priority of President Mitterrand who declared as early as 1981, ‘in international law, the non-assistance to populations in danger is not a crime yet. But it is a moral and political failure that has already cost too many lives and too much harm to too many abandoned populations’ (Mitterrand 1981). After respectively opening and closing the national debate on the *devoir d’ingérence* organized in Paris by Bernard Kouchner and Professor Mario Bettati¹⁰ (Mitterrand 1987; Chirac 1987), Mitterrand and his Prime Minister Chirac invited the local norm entrepreneurs to be part of the executive. Kouchner was appointed Secretary of State for Humanitarian Action in 1988, which he remained for four years before becoming Minister

of Public Health and Humanitarian Action from 1992 to 1993, while Bettati became the legal adviser of Kouchner (Bettati 2014). This marked the beginning of France's international efforts to promote the emergence of a international right to intervene to protect endangered populations.

Kouchner and the rest of the executive began drafting and promoting key resolutions at the UN. These efforts led to the adoption of Resolutions A/RES/43/131 and A/RES/45/100 on Humanitarian assistance to victims of natural disaster and similar emergency situations by the General Assembly in 1988 and 1990, and S/RES/688 on Iraq by the UN Security Council in 1991.¹¹ These resolutions constituted the first steps in the recognition of the need of a right, if not a duty, to humanitarian assistance by helping the UN Security Council broaden and legitimise its competence in preventing and responding to humanitarian crises. Consequently, Gareth Evans explains that,

The French physician Bernard Kouchner [...] did not invent the concept of, or even the expression, 'humanitarian intervention'. [...] But what Kouchner did do was give it a new lease of life by inventing and popularizing the expression '*droit d'ingérence*,' [...] which had real resonance in the new circumstances of the post-cold war world. [...] In the recurring debates of the 1990s, the banner call from those demanding forceful action in the face of catastrophe was invariably, echoing Kouchner, 'the right of humanitarian intervention,' the right to intervene. In making the response to mass atrocities the single most debated foreign policy issue of the decade, rather than one that could comfortably be ignored by policymakers, his contribution was outstanding. (2008, 32)

In addition to this diplomatic support, France became heavily involved militarily for humanitarian purpose by participating – and sometimes leading – UN peacekeeping missions with strong humanitarian components. It participated in ten of the seventeen UN operations created between 1990 and 1994, and was one of the top three troop contributors to UN peace operations.¹² It is interesting to note that France did not limit its participation to Africa, which

was seen as France's zone of influence during the Cold War. Rather, between 1991 and 1994, France intervened worldwide with a particularly strong involvement in Cambodia, Somalia and Former Yugoslavia.

It is important to emphasise that this strong commitment to humanitarian intervention was essential for the French executive as it allowed the promotion of France's rank. It helped France prove that it was 'capable to assume the political, military, financial, and human costs' of the interventions (Tardy 1999, 80) in what it perceived to be a changing world order. With the end of the Cold War, France indeed felt pressured to justify its permanent seat at the UN Security Council (Guillot 1994, 34) as in contrast to the Cold War, it was no longer enough for France to impose itself as a 'third way' between the United States and the Soviet Union. Additionally, the executive wanted France to be a key European leader and counted on this status to promote its influence and power in the world. However, it feared that Germany's reunification and subsequent empowerment was a potential obstacle to France's European status (Macleod 1997, 247). Consequently, a lot relied on France's status of key actor of humanitarian assistance and this account does not explain why the French executive was willing to endanger its project 'of disseminating a universal Republican message' (Cumming 2013, 27) and the interests associated to protect the génocidaire regime of a relatively poor small African state, which was not even an old colony.

Additionally, this claim fails to take into account the changing context in Francophone Africa at the time since at the beginning of the 1990s, a process of democratization had begun. Schmidt explains that, 'with the end of the Cold War, France could afford to cut many of [the ties it had with unsavoury dictators], and the emergence of popular pro-democratic movements across Francophone Africa made severing them a

necessity' (2013). Therefore, if France was trying to strengthen its image and interest in the region in order to keep its neo-colonial policy, it had an interest in supporting democratic efforts rather than to appear as the collaborator of génocidaires. Mitterrand seemed aware of this shift since at the 1990 Franco-African Summit in La Baule, he made French aid dependant of democratisation efforts (Mitterrand 1990). As Cumming explains, the executive was willing to enforce this measure since it 'suspended development aid to Zaïre in October 1991 and Togo in February 1993 for their refusal to undertake reforms, and withheld 30 m francs worth of subsidies from Bénin until it had shown clear signs of its commitment to democracy' (1995, 390).

Consequently, even though this account presents strong arguments, by not taking into account the changes in France's foreign policy and by not addressing the changing context in Francophone Africa at the time, it fails to explain a central question: what was so important about Rwanda that it could justify undermining France's diplomatic efforts and the strategic interests associated to keep its allies in a small African state, which did not have many natural resources or a colonial past with France?

Making sense of the French executive's response to the Rwandan genocide: The Fashoda syndrome

The answer to this central question lies in a last account, which remains widely overlooked by the existing literature. This account promotes the importance of the Fashoda syndrome, and more precisely, its influence on the French executive. The syndrome can be defined as 'the French complex concerning British/US influence in the African continent' (Krosiak 2007, 111) and takes its name from the French humiliation created by the Fashoda incident in 1898, when the French and British colonial expeditions met in Fashoda (today Kodok in

Sudan). The French were trying to go from Dakar to Djibouti, and the British from Cairo to Cape Town. After an ultimatum from the British and a tense diplomatic crisis, France withdrew without gaining any major concessions from the British. This incident is remembered and taught as a moment of great humiliation in French history.

As Chafer and Cumming explain, the Anglo-French rivalry was ‘a feature of the colonial period’ (2010, 1130). For instance, Cumming emphasises the tensions that emerged between France and the United-Kingdom (UK) over the decolonisation of the Congo in the 1960s, and which led France to take unprecedented measures to attempt to defeat the Anglo-Saxons (2011, 550). This fear of the British influence in Africa extended to the Americans in the 1960s when an ‘intense rivalry between Kennedy and Charles de Gaulle’ developed (Muehlenbeck 2012, 155). For instance, Muehlenbeck explains that Gabon was at the origin of strong Franco-American tensions when ‘despite French entrenchment, [it] became one of the five countries targeted by the Kennedy administration for vigorous Franco-American competition. This was mainly due to the country’s natural resources, particularly its uranium’ (2012, 173).

This Anglo-French rivalry remained strong during the early post-Cold war era. In particular, tensions were high between the UK and France in the early 1990s:

While the UK and France both increased support to the poorest African countries (cancelling some debt, untying some aid and targeting some assistance), they did not cooperate on poverty reduction. Britain remained primarily concerned with promoting neo-liberal reform while France continued to provide hard loans and to allocate a fifth of its aid to promoting French cultural concerns. The two countries also began competing more openly for energy resources, consultancy work and other commercial

contracts in each other's African sphere of influence (Cumming and Chafer 2011, 2443).

The role played by the syndrome in the French response to the Rwandan genocide was originally suggested by Gérard Prunier – a key adviser of the executive at the time – in his testimony *The Rwandan crisis: History of a genocide* (1997). Even though the goal of his book was not specifically to explain the causes of the French response, the influence of the Fashoda syndrome emerged from his work (see in particular Prunier 1997, 102-107). According to Prunier, it 'is the main reason – and practically the only one – why Paris intervened so quickly and so deeply in the growing Rwandese crisis' (1997, 105).

After analysing the strengths of the claim and addressing its weaknesses by clarifying the scope of the influence of the syndrome, and taking into account additional evidence and testimonies from members of the executive close to Mitterrand, this article builds on Prunier's research and argues that the key to understanding the controversial French response to the genocide lies in taking into account the influence played by this ideational factor on President Mitterrand. This syndrome is the key to filling the gaps left by the two previous claims.

The first strength of this account lies in the fact that it allows us to make sense of the French interest in Rwanda despite its lack of considerable natural resources. The Franco-Rwandan relationship goes back to the 1960s, when General De Gaulle supported the independence process of Rwanda from Belgium and its membership to the United Nations (Quilès 1998, 31). On 20 October 1962, the two states signed a friendship and cooperation pact before signing on 4 December 1962, three economic, cultural and technical agreements

(Quilès 1998, 18-19). By 1969, a plan to help Rwanda's development was defined, and a Help and Cooperation Mission was created in Kigali, therefore making the French presence in the country 'stable and permanent' (Quilès 1998, 19).

As admitted in the Quilès report, France's interest for the country can be explained by its specific position in the Francophone zone (1998, 30-32). Even though Rwanda did not have many resources, or at least not enough to justify a strong support from France, it was at the frontier of the Francophone zone and it was a neighbouring state of Zaïre – a country very rich in natural resources – which France was highly interested in, but that was also being coveted by the Americans. Consequently, it can be argued that,

the presence of France in Rwanda [consisted] in a double need to defend, on the one hand, what some people have called "the linguistic Maginot line",¹³ and on the other hand, the need to face the Anglo-Saxon influence, and therefore, Rwanda '[constituted] a privileged place of observation of the changes occurring in the region. (Quilès 1998, 31-32)

Secondly, this account explains why the French President was willing to support an undemocratic leader, while accepting to see the RPF as a foreign threat rather than an ethnic group of Rwanda. This decision was made as early as 1990 when the RPF undertook its first attack. Prunier argues that considering that the RPF came from Uganda, Paris saw the 1990 attack as 'a typical test-case – an obvious "Anglo-Saxon" plot to destabilise one of "ours", and one we needed to stop right away if we did not want to see a dangerous spread of the disease' (1997, 106). Mitterrand having declared in 1990 that France would not intervene in the domestic affairs of African states (in Quilès 1998, 34-35), describing the RPF as an external threat allowed the executive to fight the Tutsi-led group and to make it a common Franco-Rwandan enemy. Fighting the RPF thus also became 'a way of fighting it out with the

“Anglo-Saxon” enemy by proxy, without the need for a major war’ (Prunier 1997, 111), and Prunier suggests that ‘this is how Paris found itself backing an ailing dictatorship in a tiny distant country producing only bananas and a declining coffee crop without even asking for political reform as a price for its support’ (1997, 107).

Last but not least, the Fashoda syndrome helps us understand the nature and scope of the French response to the genocide, and more specifically, the timing of Opération Turquoise, the extent of the force deployed, and the fact that France only intervened in South-West Rwanda outside of UNAMIR II. The syndrome played a central role in the timing of the French response since despite the pressure of the public opinion, Turquoise was triggered by a declaration from South African President Nelson Mandela, who explained on 13 June that the Anglo-Saxon-influenced-state was about to intervene, therefore forcing Mitterrand to react rapidly (Prunier 1997, 281). Additionally, it can be argued that France mainly intervened in the South West with surprisingly heavy military means and offered refuge to the génocidaires because, in the spirit of the Fashoda syndrome, the goal was to protect the French interests by helping the pro-French Hutus remain powerful or at the very least, guarantee their influence in the region. As Wheeler argues, ‘in the face of the success of the Ugandan-backed RPF, strategists in the African cell of the Elysée focused their attention on strengthening Francophone Zaïre’ since ‘the French policy-makers were determined to stop the triumph of the “Anglophones” in what they viewed as their part of Africa’ (2000, 233).

Even though the syndrome fills the gaps left by the traditional accounts, two key elements need to be addressed before confirming its validity. First, by using expressions such as ‘Paris’ (1997, 105, 107), Prunier is unclear about who was influenced by the syndrome. He

can appear to suggest that the entire executive was under its influence and this leads authors such as Kroslak to question the role played by the syndrome (2007, 112).

It should be clear that the syndrome predominantly influenced President Mitterrand and some of his advisers¹⁴ who were concerned by this perceived threat,¹⁵ rather than the entire executive. The narrow focus of the influence of the syndrome does not weaken the overall argument since, considering the institutional context, Mitterrand played a central – if not the central – role in the design of France’s foreign policy at the time. Following a broad interpretation of Article 52 of the 1958 French Constitution and Presidential practice throughout the Fifth Republic (1958 -) (Vie Publique 2013), the President has essentially been in charge of foreign affairs, leading foreign policy to be referred to as a *domaine réservé* (Chaban-Delmas 1959 in Chirac 1996). Therefore, even though this notion does not exist from a legal point of view as it does not appear in the Constitution, ‘the idea that defence and foreign policy belong to the *domaine réservé* still does’ (Kessler 1999, 24) and Mitterrand’s presidency was no exception: he handled almost exclusively the Franco-African relations, and in particular the Franco-Rwandan one (Amalric 2008; Saint-Exupery 1998).

The institutional framework being clarified, the influence the syndrome played on Mitterrand still needs to be confirmed in order to prove the validity of this account. The immediate challenge is that Mitterrand’s son Jean-Christophe, who was the president’s advisor on African Affairs until 1993 and who also developed strong relationships with Habyarimana (McKinnon, Charlton, and May 1996, 466), has argued that ‘the “Fashoda” feeling is outdated, [as] he maintained good relations with Cohen¹⁶ and Museveni¹⁷ even before 1990’ (Kroslak 2007, 112). Consequently, despite the strengths of this account, it remains one testimony (Prunier’s) against another (J-C Mitterrand’s). Beyond the fact that

Jean-Christophe Mitterrand's word has been questioned over the years during the several trials he faced for influence and weapon trafficking in Africa, the role the syndrome had on Mitterrand has been confirmed by key declarations of French officials. Bernard Kouchner, who is one of the few officials willing to talk about the controversial response of the executive, who was present in Rwanda, and had the chance to discuss the intervention with Mitterrand, explained in an interview with the author that the Fashoda syndrome did indeed play a role in the French response. He argued that 'big political mistakes were made [since] arrogant France wanted to fight the British because it [was] Uganda and also the Americans who trained Kagame' (Kouchner 2014, 49:30).

Additionally, the influence of the syndrome has been confirmed by several of Mitterrand's close colleagues. For instance, according to the Minister for Cooperation Bernard Debré, 'Mitterrand reckoned that the Americans had a hegemonic claim' (in Kroslak 2007, 112). Minister of Defence, Francois Léotard, also confirmed that Mitterrand 'defined the power struggle between the Anglo-Saxons and the French in this part of world' (in Kroslak 2007, 112). Even the Quilès report discussed the influence of the syndrome on Mitterrand by emphasising that his concern for the increased presence of the Anglo-Saxons was not recent in his mind. The report explains that as early as 1957 – when Mitterrand was Minister of Justice – he blamed the British for the troubles emerging from the decolonisation of France's African colonies: 'all the troubles that we have had in occidental Africa have nothing to do with a desire of independence, but with a rivalry between the French and the British blocs. It was British agents who fomented all our troubles' (in Quilès 1998, 31).

Consequently, building on Prunier's testimony, this article argues that the Fashoda syndrome allows the explanation of France's controversial response to the genocide. While

taking into account the context of the intervention, it explicates why France got so heavily involved with this isolated génocidaire regime, why it was willing to see the conflict differently than the rest of the international community, and why it decided to intervene militarily so late in the genocide even though the risks were high and the international community was watching.

Conclusion

This article offered clarity to a central question: why did the French executive decide to respond to the Rwandan genocide in such a controversial way? The response to this question had remained unclear as the existing literature had put forward two predominant accounts of the French executive's response that were contradictory and both had strong weaknesses. The claim that France's response to the genocide was based on a misunderstanding of the actors and the nature of the Rwandan conflict is weakened by the fact that the French executive kept supporting the Hutu regime even after the genocide had been confirmed. Similarly, the account emphasising France's neo-colonial aspirations does not allow to explain why France was willing to compromise its status and interests to support the génocidaire regime of a small, relatively poor African state, with which it did not share a colonial past.

Building on Prunier's testimony and the evidence and testimonies of key members of the executive close to Mitterrand, the article argues that the French response cannot be fully understood without taking into account the influence of the Fashoda syndrome. Even though the syndrome mainly influenced President Mitterrand and some of his advisers rather than the entire executive, the article argues that it played a central role in the design of the French foreign policy in Rwanda in light of the institutional context.

Consequently, considering that in the name of the Anglo-French rivalry, the President became willing to endanger the status and interests of France to support the génocidaire regime of a small African state, this article suggests that the influence of the Fashoda syndrome should be taken more consistently into account when studying France's response to the genocide, but also Mitterrand's foreign policy in Africa more generally. For instance, as hinted by Chafer, Cumming and Wheeler, France's relationship with Mobutu's regime in Zaïre cannot be fully understood without taking into account the influence of the Anglo-French rivalry (Chafer and Cumming 2010, 550; Wheeler 2000, 233). Even though the French executive had suspended its assistance to Zaïre in 1991 due to the lack of reforms of the Mobutu regime, it became willing to support the controversial regime in 1994 in order to maintain its influence in the region and prevent the Anglo-Saxons from becoming a significant player in this rich African state where pro-French Hutus were taking refuge.

Notes

¹ The term French executive should be understood as the French President (Mitterrand), his key advisors and the ministerial office-holders.

² The RPF is a group constituted mainly from English-speaking Tutsis as many Tutsis had to take refuge in neighbouring, English-speaking countries such as Uganda after their defeat during the Hutu-Revolution in the early 1960s.

³ Hutu militia who participated in the genocide.

⁴ Leader of the RFP and current President of Rwanda.

⁵ A 'domaine réservé' is an area of competence where the President of the French Republic can claim a particular, predominant role. Under Mitterrand, African affairs were considered as such (see Chafer (2005) and Cumming (2013)).

⁶ He was the President's advisor for African Affairs and with his father, he developed strong relationships with Habyarimana.

⁷ The Arusha Agreement was signed in June 1992 and was ‘an extremely ambitious plan that called for Tutsi-Hutu power sharing, an integrated Hutu-Tutsi army, democratic elections and a transitional government’ (Fleitz 2002, 150).

⁸ Mérimée indeed declared, ‘for two months now, the population of Rwanda has been the victim of unprecedented massacres, of such magnitude that one no longer hesitates to describe them as genocide’ (in The UN Security Council 1994a, 5).

⁹ The ‘*devoir d’ingérence*’ is often translated as duty to intervene, duty of intervention or duty to interfere. Nevertheless, since neither of these expressions captures completely the concept, the French term is used in this article.

¹⁰ Kouchner is the creator of Médecins Sans Frontières and Bettati is a distinguished international legal scholar and was the administrator of the Faculty of South-Paris at the time.

¹¹ Even though Resolution 688 only ambiguously linked a humanitarian crisis with the notion of threat to international peace and security, it constituted a key milestone in the development of the norm of humanitarian intervention by giving the opportunity to the UN Security Council to debate the idea of a duty to humanitarian assistance and the broadening of the meaning of what constitutes a threat to international peace and security (see Wheeler (2000, 144) and Bellamy (2004, 218)).

¹² France participated to UNIKOM, MINURSO, ONUSAL, UNAMIC, UNPROFOR, UNTAC, UNOSOM I, UNOSOM II, UNOMIG and UNMIH (The United Nations 1991-1994).

¹³ Line of fortification built in the 1920s-1930s at the French frontier in order to protect France from a German invasion.

¹⁴ For instance, General Quesnot explained that Kagame, the leader of the RPF was ‘the man of the Americans’ (in Nouzille 2010, 382).

¹⁵ The word ‘perceived’ is used here since the validity of the Anglo-Saxon threat has been questioned. Nevertheless, what matters here is how it influenced the design of French foreign policy.

¹⁶ US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs from 1989 to 1993.

¹⁷ President of Uganda.

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