

Comments on:

Filip Reyntjens' review of "Intent to Deceive" by Linda Melvern

by Jos van Oijen, 19 November 2021

General comments: Those who are familiar with the subjects of Rwanda and the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi will have observed that Filip Reyntjens is not a big fan of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), the ruling party of Rwanda. They will also be aware that his resentment over being barred from this African country since March 1995 has gradually turned into an obsession that still defines his work on Rwanda today. In the Reyntjens universe, there are only two kinds of people: 1) the ones that support his radical opposition against the RPF, and 2) everyone else.

Because this binary worldview excludes a middle ground, Reyntjens accuses hundreds of scholars, journalists, diplomats, politicians, human rights activists, genocide survivors, and others of being willing allies, groupies even, of the RPF. At a conference in 2017, Reyntjens targeted everyone who had openly criticized the BBC documentary "Rwanda's Untold Story", a journal article by one of his protégés, or his booklet "Le génocide des Tutsi au Rwanda".¹ Earlier this year, he expanded his list of suspects to include 170 experts who criticized a British university for inviting the controversial author Judi Rever as a subject matter expert.²

The main concern of these critics was the revival of revisionist ideas that can be traced back to the Hutu Power propaganda of the 1990s. In Reyntjens' parallel universe, however, where everything revolves around being pro or anti-RPF, such critiques translate into "activities of a network supporting the RPF". Is there any useful information to substantiate Reyntjens' conspiracy theory? If there is, it's not very convincing because the single most cited piece of evidence is a special award that Linda Melvern received in 2017:

Their support is much appreciated by the regime: on 18 November 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" ("Kagame confers" 2017). One of the individuals honoured was British journalist and author Linda Melvern who was a signatory of the first two

¹ The conference paper, "The RPF's information and communication strategy", was published two years later in the book: Thomson, Allan (ed.), "Media and mass atrocity: the Rwanda genocide and beyond", Canada 2019. ISBN 9781928096757

² Ancel, Guillaume et al, "Open letter against giving Judi Rever a platform at the University of Cambridge", April 2021. <https://openletter294551678.wordpress.com/cambridge-university/>

*initiatives in support of the RPF mentioned below.*³

Melvern in turn criticizes Reyntjens in her book for promoting controversial authors like Judi Rever. Rever peddles the double genocide theory and is supported by notorious genocide deniers like Christopher Black, Peter Erlinder, Barrie Collins, Peter Verlinden, and Robin Philpot.⁴ Philpot recently paid homage to Colonel Theoneste Bagosora, one of the main organizers of the genocide, and called him a hero who deserved to be honoured by the Rwandan people.⁵

This history didn’t bode well for Reyntjens’ appreciation of Melvern’s book. Predictably, Reyntjens conflates it with opinions he ascribes to the RPF. Let’s have a look.

FR: Rwanda is a contentious and polarised subject.

Comment: This opening remark is ironic because Filip Reyntjens has been the major force behind the polarization for decades.

FR: While recognizing the country’s economic achievements, much of the scholarship is highly critical of its political governance.

Comment: Melvern’s book is about genocide denial, not about political governance.

FR: But there are also staunch defenders of the ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), and journalist and author Linda Melvern is one of them.

Comment: Labeling Melvern a ‘staunch RPF defender’ is a simple but effective distraction from the actual content of the book and part of his strategy to frame it as politically motivated. Reyntjens will use that suggestion as a straw man fallacy throughout his review.

FR: In 2017, she and eight others received the Igihango National Order of Outstanding Friendship medal from President Kagame ‘in recognition of their exemplary service to the nation in various capacities’.

Comment: Reyntjens highlights this fact to confirm his overall RPF conspiracy but he forgets to include an explanation of what the medal represents and why Melvern was honoured with it. His obsession with Paul Kagame and the RPF has blinded him from

³ “Media and Mass Atrocities”, p. 191

⁴ Melvern, Linda, “Intent to Deceive: Denying the Genocide Against the Tutsi”, London 2020, p. 178. ISBN-13: 978-1-78873-330-4. Page numbers refer to the epub version.

⁵ Philpot Robin, “Le pied à Papineau CVKL: Hommage à feu Théoneste Bagosora”, podcast 28 September 2021. <https://soundcloud.com/le-pied-a-papineau/le-pied-a-papineau-ckvl-hommage-a-feu-theoneste-bagosora>

all other realities besides his one-size-fits-all “RPF defender”-explanation.

However, Rwanda is bigger than just Reyntjens and his nemesis Paul Kagame. Millions of people in Rwanda and the rest of the world appreciate the careful and respectful reporting that characterizes Melvern’s work, a quality that is consistently lacking in Reyntjens’ own publications.

If Reyntjens thought it necessary to mention the award at all, he should have contacted Melvern, asked her why she accepted the medal and included her explanation in his review to inform the readers about her sentiments on this issue. Or he could just have watched the ceremony and provided a respectful and fair summary.⁶

FR: There are two major and obvious truths in this book: that a genocide was committed against the Rwandan Tutsi in 1994 and that some, including of course those who committed it, deny that this crime happened. This book was not necessary to tell these truths, because only a fringe opinion denies either.

Comment: One of the reasons why Reyntjens downplays the fact that genocide denial has been gaining traction in the mainstream media in recent years, is that it’s partially his own doing.⁷ Melvern criticizes him for it in her book, mentioning him more than thirty times in this respect. Reyntjens should disclose this and address her points of critique, rather than taking revenge with a scathing article that’s disguised as a professional, detached review.

FR: However, Melvern sees ‘a pernicious campaign that exists to undermine the established facts’, ‘phoney science given credence’, and ‘contempt for factual evidence’ (p. 1).

Comment: Melvern explains ‘a pernicious campaign’ as follows:

The pernicious influence of Hutu Power lives on in rumour, stereotype, lies and propaganda. The movement’s campaign of genocide denial has confused many, recruited some, and shielded others. With the use of seemingly sound research methods, the génocidaires pose a threat, especially to those who might not be aware of the historical facts. The pain caused to survivors is incalculable because the purpose is to destroy truth and memory – the final stage of the genocide process.⁸

So, what Melvern is really saying is that extremist propaganda from the 1990s has

⁶ Igihango National Order of Friendship medals | Kigali, 18 November 2017.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C-3fVjooTkQ>

⁷ See note 4

⁸ “Intent to Deceive”, p. 15

survived and penetrated the mainstream media because the new generation of journalists and academics don't recognize it as such. This undesirable development makes Melvern's book a timely and necessary contribution to the literature.

FR: What she claims are false readings are readings that differ from those that she and the RPF advocate.

Comment: Melvern discusses Hutu Power propaganda and recycled versions of it, which is of course very different from her own reading of events:

This book tells the story of the denial campaign waged by the Hutu Power movement and designed to knowingly deceive public opinion. With contempt for factual evidence the perpetrators of this genocide have tried to alter the story, diminishing the death toll, claiming the killing was in self-defence, and blaming the victims.⁹

FR: In reality, she shows that the past 30 years' history of Rwanda remains contested, including in academia, and that there is no generally accepted version of many events discussed in 'Intent to Deceive'.

Comment: Melvern writes about “the basic facts of the genocide of the Tutsi”, not about this or that “version”. The basic facts are not contested.

FR: When there are diverging positions on issues like the planning of the genocide, the number of victims, the perpetrators of the attack against President Habyarimana's plane that sparked the resumption of the civil war and the killings, the RPF's human rights record, and victors' justice at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), each time Melvern attempts to prove the RPF's version and discredit opposing ones.

Comment: Reyntjens has a habit of mixing up facts and opinions, his own opinions that is. His binary worldview dictates that readings of events that differ from his own, must, by default, be the RPF's version. However, he doesn't explain what “the RPF's version” entails exactly, or how it differs from the scholarly consensus.

FR: She does so by being selective in the use of sources, the quality of which are often poor. Sources that are relevant but do not suit the narrative are ignored.

Comment: More tendentious remarks. Reyntjens does not specify which sources he means, why those sources are low quality, or which relevant sources Melvern has

⁹ “Intent to Deceive”, p. 12

ignored.

FR: A number of important affirmations are not even sourced at all (e.g. the stockpiling of machetes, p. 34; a ‘secret meeting’ of the BBC trustees, p. 123).

Comment: This is not true. The stockpiling of machetes is detailed on p. 77 where Melvern discusses the investigation of Pierre Galand and Michel Chossudovsky (the paper trail). Melvern references their book, several testimonies at the ICTR, her own interview with Galand and one by Renaud Duterme. The secret BBC meeting is mentioned in the report of the BBC's Ethical Standards Committee which is easy to locate.¹⁰

FR: Melvern’s bias is also conveyed in her wording: RPF abuse is ‘alleged’, ‘claimed’, or ‘based on rumours’, while those debunking these allegations ‘are convinced’ and base their view on ‘a tide of overwhelmingly contrary evidence (p. 184)’.

Comment: There's no bias here because Reyntjens misrepresents the text again. His examples are taken from Melvern’s discussion of the Gersony report. Her comments are true, like this one:

[Gersony’s] claims came only in uncorroborated verbal testimony and ran counter to a tide of overwhelmingly contrary evidence.¹¹

Robert Gersony was a UNHCR consultant who spent 3 to 4 weeks in Rwanda and three neighbouring countries in the aftermath of the genocide.¹² He was sent there to assess the security situation but spent his short stay collecting stories from passersby, people he met along the road and in refugee camps. They told of human rights abuses but unfortunately, Gersony did not verify their stories in the field when he had the chance.

Melvorn provides a comprehensive account of all the efforts made by others to verify Gersony’s stories. All things considered, “overwhelming contrary evidence” is a correct statement with regards to the claim of a second genocide, but Melvern confirms that the stories were exaggerated, not that they were completely baseless.

FR: This confirmation bias naturally has an impact on the presentation of facts, some of which are demonstrably false.

¹⁰ BBC Trust, “Editorial Standards Findings. Appeals to the Trust and other editorial issues considered by the Editorial Standards Committee, September, 8 October & 21 October 2015, issued December 2015”. http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/appeals/esc_bulletins/2015/oct.pdf

¹¹ “Intent to Deceive”, p. 177

¹² See Kaplan, Robert. “The Good American: The Epic Life of Bob Gersony, the US Government’s Greatest Humanitarian”, New York 2021. ISBN 9780525512301. To Kaplan, Gersony stated that his field trip in Rwanda started on 10 August 1994. He and his team made excursions to Zaire and Burundi, and on 30 August to Tanzania where they stayed for several days before returning to Kigali.

Comment: Thus far, Reyntjens has shown no sign of a confirmation bias in Melvern’s book.

FR: Just a few examples may serve to illustrate this. Melvern writes that Belgian journalist Colette Braeckman was in Kigali on 6 April 1994 (p. 44), which allowed her to witness a crucial fact first-hand. However, Braeckman was in Brussels at the time.

Comment: This is not a confirmation bias but a simple error. Reyntjens’ suggestive “crucial fact” isn’t even about the RPF but about the French embassy accusing Belgians of killing President Habyarimana. Melvern describes it like this:

Braeckman ... heard that the wife of one of the three French crew members on the presidential Falcon jet who telephoned the French embassy for information was told that Belgians were responsible for the attack on the plane.¹³

Braeckman confirmed the story in 1997 during a Senate hearing in Brussels, saying she heard it from the person who had phoned the French embassy.¹⁴ But they met in Belgium, and the RPF had nothing to do with it, so Reyntjens’ insinuations about Melvern’s error make no sense.

FR: Contrary to Melvern’s claim that the classifications of Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa during colonial days was based on the measuring of ‘height, the length of the nose, the shape of the eyes and so on’ (p. 67), it was done by self-identification.

Comment: Reyntjens presents his own opinion on this topic as an established fact but there’s no scholarly consensus. Mahmood Mamdani has explained the ongoing debate in his book “When Victims become Killers”. He concluded that Tharcisse Gatwa is probably right in claiming that several criteria were used, including physical measurements and wealth.¹⁵ Others, like Petra Vervust, have argued that the information used to determine ethnicity in the 1930s may have been mixed with other data gathered for tax purposes around the same time. Different administrators appear to have used different methods and even the year when the identity cards were introduced is disputed.¹⁶ Again, this is not evidence of a confirmation bias or a demonstrably false fact.

¹³ “Intent to Deceive”, pp. 50-51

¹⁴ Commission spéciale Rwanda, “Audition de Mme Braeckman”, Senat de Belgique. 21 March 1997, p. 15 <https://francegenocidetutsi.org/SenatBelgiqueAudition21mars1997DelhotteBraeckman.pdf>

¹⁵ Mamdani, Mahmood, “When Victims become Killers, Colonialism, Nativism and the Genocide in Rwanda”, 2002, p. 99. ISBN 0-691-10280-5

¹⁶ Vervust, Petra, “The Relative Importance of ethnicity, Class and Race in Colonial Rwanda”. Journal of Belgian History 2012, 4, p. 103

FR: The interim government was not ‘put together in the French embassy’ (p. 86), but at the Rwandan Defence Ministry.

Comment: This, again, is not a single solution issue. Melvern relies on information from the French ambassador, Jean-Michel Marlaud. Several ministers visited his embassy on 8 April 1994 to discuss the formation of the new government:

The latter then held a meeting during which they set three guidelines: to replace ministers or officials who had died or disappeared, to try to regain control of the presidential guard with a view to stopping the massacres and, finally, to reaffirm their commitment to the Arusha Accords. They nevertheless refused to appoint Mr Faustin Twagiramunugu as Prime Minister to replace Ms Agathe Uwilingiyimana.

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Marlaud was informed about the appointment of the interim government that evening. It’s not unreasonable to assume that the formation of the interim government started at the French embassy and was finalized at the Defense Ministry, under the chairmanship of Colonel Bagosora, later that day.

Again, not evidence of a confirmation bias or a demonstrably false fact.

FR: Melvern mentions ‘literally hundreds of pieces of available evidence demonstrating that a conspiracy to eliminate the Tutsi was in place’ (p. 159). However, unfortunately there was not much of a paper trail, which is why the ICTR held that the conspiracy charge ‘was not supported by sufficiently reliable evidence’ in a judgment quoted by Melvern herself (p. 91).

Comment: Reyntjens’ remark is misleading because the ICTR reached its verdict based on the evidence presented to it. Melvern explains that a lot of the evidence was not used by the prosecution. This includes the paper trail investigated by Galand and Chossudovsky (see above) and information collected by foreign intelligence agencies, including a Belgian unit in Rwanda.

More serious is Reyntjens’ omission of facts that influenced the quality of the evidence in court, such as the long duration of the trial. Some of the witnesses’ memories had faded after all those years or had been affected by information from other sources in the meantime. This rendered their testimonies useless.

A typical example is well-known to Reyntjens: In 1994 Luc Marchal shared information with Romeo Dallaire, with Reyntjens himself, and a year later with an investigating

¹⁷ My translation. See the audition of Marlaud during the 1998 French parliamentary inquiry, referenced by Melvern on p. 216, and downloadable here: <https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/11/dossiers/rwanda/telechar/telechar.asp>

judge in Belgium, that during a conversation on 4 April 1994 Bagosora had told him that...

*...the Arusha Accord was going to lead nowhere, except to disaster, and that the only course of action would be to exterminate all Tutsi.*¹⁸

But after ten years, at Bagosora’s trial, Marchal wasn’t sure about the exact words of that conversation anymore. Other witnesses had similar memory failures. The witnesses of Bagosora’s “apocalypse” statement couldn’t agree on the right date, which resulted in the dismissal of their evidence.¹⁹

Melvern’s book is not a judicial inquiry, however. She’s allowed to look at all historical sources she can find. That’s not a confirmation bias or demonstrably false.

FR: The 1978 constitution ‘had institutionalised the quota system in society, whereby a certain percentage of Tutsi had places in higher education and state employment’ (p. 187). This is indeed sometimes claimed in Kigali, but had Melvern consulted the constitution, she would have noticed that there was no explicit or implicit mention of quotas. The only reference to ethnicity was in a provision outlawing discrimination, among other things, on ethnic grounds.

Comment: This is the only example where Reyntjens has a point. Melvern has made a mistake here. However, as a law professor, he must have been aware that the quota system was being implemented in laws around that time, if not in the constitution. By failing to come out and explain the whole story, his argument sounds a bit like: ‘wir haben es nicht gewusst’.

FR: In reality, Melvern’s book is illustrative of the difficulties facing Rwanda studies. A conversation on facts and their interpretation becomes impossible when false accusations are levelled against participants, for instance, by branding them as genocide deniers, merely because they have a different reading of events.

Comment: Reyntjens misleads the readers again. The deniers that Melvern writes about are not ordinary people with different opinions. They range from Colonel Bagosora to Christopher Black. In his zeal to take Linda Melvern down, Reyntjens seems to send the message that the Bagosoras and the Blacks of this world, and the gullible people that recycle their myths, are genuine participants in a discussion about the genocide.

¹⁸ International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, “The Prosecutor v. Théoneste Bagosora et al., Case No. ICTR-98-41-T”, Arusha 2008, par. 343

¹⁹ Id. par. 211-222

FR: Throughout the book, several scholars and other writers, including the author of this review, are accused of denial, although they unambiguously acknowledge the historical fact that the Rwandan Tutsi have been the victims of genocide.

Comment: This is not true. Melvern doesn’t accuse Reyntjens of denying the genocide against the Tutsi. She does argue, however, that Reyntjens is instrumental in the distribution of denialist rhetoric such as the double genocide theory, by promoting authors like Judi Rever.

FR: At the end of this critical review...

Comment: A review can only be critical if it’s based on facts. Facts do not play a significant role in Reyntjens’ article.

FR: ... useful contributions must also be mentioned. Indeed, the book is not only well written, but it offers interesting and at times novel insights into a number of events, in particular the way in which the UN Security Council treated the Rwanda situation, the tactics and policies developed by the genocidal interim government, and the functioning of the ICTR.

Comment: Such elements make up the major part of the book. But since Reyntjens is so preoccupied with his discrediting of Melvern, we don’t learn about the actual content of the book.

FR: But ‘Intent to Deceive’ must be read with great caution, and this book is unlikely to settle the many controversies surrounding the past three decades of Rwandan history.

Comment: Reyntjens cautioning us about books that successfully debunk his cherished theories has become a tradition.²⁰

²⁰ See for instance: Reyntjens, Filip, “The RPF did it”, Antwerp 2020. Because Reyntjens is a law professor without any technical expertise, his discussion of the French forensic investigation into the assassination of President Habyarimana contains many embarrassing errors, some of which I discuss in detail in two blogposts on the ROAPE: <https://roape.net/2021/09/07/michela-wrongs-remake-of-rwandas-untold-story/> and: <https://roape.net/2021/10/14/real-and-imagined-facts-in-rwandan-history/>