"Rwanda Classified," A Journalistic Failure?

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Paul Kagame – July 2024 © X – @rpfinkotanyi

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Who can dispute the importance of the mission undertaken by Forbidden Stories, an international network of journalists committed to pursuing the investigations of other reporters who have been silenced? However lofty this mission may be, it cannot dispense with the requirements of knowledge, which are concerned with an investigation's independence and the objectivity of its analysis,

the quality of sources and their critique, and the contextualization of facts and their accurate characterization.

The network's latest feat, on "the hidden side of Kagame's regime" in Rwanda, mobilized 50 journalists from 17 international media outlets with glowing reputations in 11 countries. The dossier comprised eight episodes that received a week of sustained press and media coverage, with carefully crafted editorial content in *Le Monde* (France), Radio France, *Le Soir* (Belgium), *The Guardian* (UK), *Der Spiegel* (Germany), *NRC* (Netherlands), and *Haaretz* (Israel).

At issue is a small country in Africa's Great Lakes region that was destroyed in 1994 by a genocide perpetrated against the Tutsi minority, was resuscitated by the victors who defeated the Hutu genocidaires, and has since been subjected to a regime that the "Rwanda Classified" dossier presents as particularly dictatorial, in the hands of a leader, Paul Kagame, who is poised to begin a fourth presidential term. The election results, heralded as crushing, apparently reflect this rarely equaled power, which Forbidden Stories sets out to reveal.

Many high-intensity opinion and communication offensives have been aimed at Kagame, first when he was commander of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) army starting in October 1990, then vice-president of the postgenocide government after 1994, and finally president of his country. It is true that Paul Kagame has managed to incite the West's hatred by telling off Africa's former colonial powers, starting with France, whose past authorities he accused of complicity in the Tutsi genocide, right up to Emmanuel Macron's May 27, 2021 speech in Kigali.

An organized and planned Genocide

The "enemization" of the Rwandan regime and its strongman has been going on since the turning point of October 1990, when General-President Habyarimana's extremist regime, allied with France and Belgium, found itself threatened by the RPF's military offensives. Following the genocide and the genocidal regime's defeat, the new Rwandan authorities and Paul Kagame in particular were hit by this "enemization," fueled by networks nostalgic for Belgian and subsequently French control over Rwanda, and by the extremist diasporas that have emerged from the RPF's flattening of Hutu Power in the summer of 1994.

Firmly established in the DRC, Belgium, and France, these networks and diasporas point to Paul Kagame as the main instigator of the attack on President Habyarimana's

plane on April 6, 1994, and thereby responsible for the Tutsi genocide as part of his bid for power, and they make him the Demiurge of an instrumentalization of the fight against genocide denial to silence and put an end to all opposition.

His proclaimed guilt absolves of all responsibility those who were heavily involved in supporting Habyarimana's regime through objective or material aid, and disregards all the findings of historical research, which have shown that the 1994 genocide was prepared and planned, like all genocides, and that it was preceded by multiple massacres and genocidal acts against Tutsis, during starting with La Toussaint rwandaise (Bloody All-Saint Day) in 1959.

Also, Forbidden Stories' announcement raised great expectations of access to solid, authenticated facts, an opportunity at long last to escape these propaganda trials. Unfortunately, "Rwanda Classified" has repeated the shortcomings of previous indictments, to the extent that we can only wonder whether it was an accident, or even a journalistic failure.

A demanding knowledge exercise

The factual origin of the "Rwanda Classified" dossier lies in Rwandan journalist John William Ntwali's investigation, which was brutally interrupted by his death. For the investigative media consortium, this death is linked to murky circumstances that lend cre-

dence to the assassination theory. Ntwali died in a traffic accident in January 2023, at a time when he was claiming to be in danger. At three o'clock in the morning, in a dark street, a car hit the motorcycle on which he was a passenger. The driver of the car at fault was convicted of manslaughter.

As exposed by "Rwanda Classified," the theory of a political assassination is strengthened in the light of other "assassination attempts and suspicious deaths to intimidation and the use of surveillance technologies [by the Rwandan authorities] even against members of the ruling party." The consortium intends to "[reveal] how the Rwandan government sets about silencing critics at home and abroad."

The findings of the 50 colleagues involved in this very lengthy investigation paint a picture of one of the most dangerous terror regimes in the world, and at any rate the most threatening in Africa. This "truth" would be admissible if the information provided included the revelations that are necessary to validate the analysis. But this is not the case. Often old and based on supposition and semantic slippage rather than demonstration, it refers to sources that are for the most part highly biased, presented without being situated or contextualized, even though they comprise the stock in trade of conspiracy networks and genocide deniers.

Being accustomed to scientific work and independent investigation, we cannot simply allow a dossier that discredits the standards we set in the exercise of knowledge to circulate without reacting. That confirmed genocide deniers such as Charles Onana and Judi

Rever should rank as serious informants for Forbidden Stories' 17 media partners, that the contestation of their thesis should become incriminating evidence against the Kigali regime, that an alleged genocidaire such as Charles Ndereyehe should be allowed to present himself as a victim, that the dossier's final interview is transformed into a promotional operation for "human rights activist Paul Rusesabagina, portrayed as a hero in the movie Hotel Rwanda," when nothing could be more inaccurate, demonstrate the manipulation to which "Rwanda Classified" has lent itself.

We want to believe this in good faith. Nevertheless, it was inconceivable that we should remain silent and fail to examine what appears, at the very least, to have been a highly regrettable journalistic accident. Forbidden Stories' other investigations are not being called into question. But it must be said that "Rwanda Classified" is far removed from the requisites of the quest for truth.

Biased information, biased data? Biased Narratives?

Regarding the investigation's starting point, there is currently no indication that John Williams Ntwali was murdered, nor that there was any motive for his murder. He wrote for *The Chronicles*, an Englishlanguage digital newspaper, and contributed to a YouTube channel in Kinyarwanda. Until his death, and the suspicion that he had been assassinated by the regime, his fame hardly

extended beyond Rwanda's borders. Forbidden Stories provides no information on the investigations he may have carried out and their threatening nature for Kigali.

Hence the need for the consortium to mobilize data that are both dated and approximative, giving them the character of irrefutable proof when they remain at the level of old suppositions and accusations. These data essentially reproduce known information: for example, Rwanda's use of Pegasus spyware from 2017 to 2021 had already been revealed by the same journalists' collective, and was the subject of several publications in 2021, a documentary film, and a book, widely relayed by consortium members.

In the Pegasus affair, Paul Kagame's opponents and even members of his party, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), were allegedly spied upon thanks to this Israeli software marketed by the company NSO. Among them are former Justice Minister Tharcisse Karugarama and opposition politician Diane Rwigara. The latter, daughter of former RPF financier Assinapol Rwigara, who was killed in 2015 in a car accident when his Mercedes collided head-on with a truck, has never ceased denouncing an "assassination," though there is no evidence to support this theory. A presidential candidate in 2017, she claims to have been intimidated and subjected to judicial pressure. She was acquitted by the Rwandan courts in 2018, and on May 8, 2024, she announced that she would run for president again in the upcoming elections.

Forbidden Stories also relies on the testimony of Carine Kanimba, Paul Rusesabagina's adopted daughter, who was also spied

on by Pegasus. Her father is presented as a "human rights activist." His heroic story is said to have inspired the film Hotel Rwanda, which recounts the rescue of several hundred Tutsis who took refuge in the former Hôtel des Mille Collines in Kigali, owned in 1994 by the Belgian airline Sabena.

However, according to genocide researchers and, above all, genocide survivors who passed through Hôtel des Mille Collines, this story is not only embellished, but largely untrue. The hotel's former manager, Rusesabagina, did not act out of humanism, but rather took advantage of the situation to extort refugees, as evidenced by a fax sent at the time. Far from being a humanist and a righteous man, he would appear to be a modern-day Thénardier who then became an opposition politician. In 2017, he established a political party, the Rwandan Movement for Democratic Change (Mouvement rwandais pour le changement démocratique, MRCD), whose armed wing, the National Liberation Forces (Forces de libération nationale, FLN), is most famous for machine-gunning a minibus transporting civilians in Nyungwe Forest in December 2018 (death toll: 9). Arrested in 2020 after being entrapped by Rwandan services, he was incarcerated, tried, sentenced, and then pardoned in 2023 and now resides in Texas.

Another angle of attack chosen by the investigators concerns Kivu, a region in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo that borders Rwanda. Kigali is accused of expansionist aims and of destabilizing the area in order to plunder the DRC's minerals. So much so that tensions with Kinshasa have risen dangerously over the past two years, and on

a visit to the border town of Goma last December, Congolese President Felix Tshisekedi threatened "to put an end to Kagame's regime."

Here again, the biased nature of the information presented raises questions. The presence of Rwandan Defense Forces' troops in support of the M23 rebels is an open secret denied only half-heartedly by Kagame's staff. But what the Forbidden Stories investigators working on "Rwanda Classified" fail to point out is that the region has been plagued by violence for 30 years and remains captive to a complex situation over which Kinshasa has little control. M23, a Congolese militia described as "Rwandan" because it is composed of Tutsis, is just one of dozens of armed groups operating in Eastern DRC. It may be the best-equipped, but it is not the deadliest, lagging far behind the ADF, Codeco, and Nyatura.

Other groups, such as the Wazalendo, are armed by Kinshasa and carry out ethnically-motivated massacres against Tutsis, awakening the ghosts of genocide. As for the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda, FDLR), it is an organization of Hutu extremists, former genocidaires who entrenched themselves in Eastern DRC 30 years ago, when Kagame's Rwandan Patriotic Army ousted them from power, and who enjoy the complacency, if not the support, of the authorities in Kinshasa.

Contentious authors and Hate preachers

But the most problematic aspect of this series that indicts the Kagame regime is the promotion of controversial authors and lobby groups involving notorious preachers of hate, conspiracy theorists, and deniers of the Tutsi genocide.

British journalist Michela Wrong is featured in *Le Monde* and *Le Soir* as a Kagame critic. Author of *Do Not Disturb*, a book about Rwanda's assassination campaign against opponents abroad, she is regularly showcased by those who dispute the "official version" of the genocide's history and seek to shift blame away from France. For example, she reiterates the argument that the RPF refused UN intervention at the end of April 1994... which is false.

In 2021, she likened the RPF to a foreign occupying force in an anti-Kagame pamphlet, and rejecting any comparison between the Shoah and the Tutsi genocide, she spoke of a "Faustian pact" to ensure acceptance of "the official version of history" regarding the genocide.

Canadian Judi Rever is also portrayed as a victim of Kagame. Le Monde and Le Soir describe her as a journalist who conducts "research on the Rwandan regime," although they concede that her theses "are considered genocide denial by the regime and by a large number of experts on the Rwandan genocide [sic]". Radio France's investigative unit, also a partner in the "Rwanda Classified" project, presents Judi Rever as a journalist "who

has published books that are highly critical of Paul Kagame".... Her latest book, In Praise of Blood, is in fact a violent indictment of the Rwandan president. But Romain Poncet writes in Revue Esprit that it belongs "in the archives of genocide denial." "The enormity of the powers attributed to Kagame goes hand in hand with a disappearance of political contexts," writes Poncet, who is a member of Ibuka France, an association campaigning for recognition of the Tutsi genocide.

Judi Rever is a well-known genocide denier who has defended criminals convicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. For Ibuka, she embodies "the fallacious rhetoric used by the denialist nebula, a composite language mixing conceptual confusion, lack of methodological rigor, and manipulation of the facts." Even if she rejects the term "denier," she is one of the promoters of the "double genocide" thesis, regularly employing the reversal of responsibilities and making mirror accusations. For example, she believes that the attack on President Juvénal Habyarimana's plane in 1994 was carried out by Kagame. Despite this accusation having been debunked by Judge Trévidic's investigation in 2012, it is still very much alive, particularly in pro-Hutu circles in France and Belgium. The genocide itself would appear to have been nothing more than a manipulation designed to consolidate the power of one man.

Judi Rever even questions the nature of the Tutsi massacres in Bisesero. She goes so far as to accuse Kagame of being responsible, in spite of all the evidence and in defiance of historical facts.

Charles Ndereyehe, presented in an article

in Le Soir as "a dissident who was granted asylum in the Netherlands and [who] is accused of war crimes by Rwanda," explains that he was allegedly physically assaulted by three Kinyarwanda-speaking men in June 2018 while in Brussels to protest Paul Kagame's visit. It is possible, and of course reprehensible, but it is a pity that the investigators in the "Rwanda Classified" project fail to specify that Ndereyehe was one of the founders, in 1992, of the extremist CDR party (Coalition for the Defense of the Republic), whose militiamen, the "Impuzamugambi" ("those with the same goal"), rivaled the "Interahamwe" ("those who attack together") in terms of cruelty and criminal efficiency during the hundred days of the Tutsi genocide.

Charles Onana is one of the "alleged opponents of the Rwandan government" about whom the "Rwanda Classified" dossier is concerned – because they "were tagged in tweets attacking them." A self-proclaimed genocide specialist, he is considered by researchers and historians to be a particularly active genocide denier. The Forbidden Stories article notes that complaints have been filed against him in France for this offense.

However, in reference to him and "leader of the exiled FDU Inkingi Placide Kayumba," it is only mentioned that the accusations of genocide denial have been "weaponized by the trolls, who questioned the exile's motivations."

Jambo ASBL (ASBL for Association sans but lucrative, or non-profit association) and its Jambonews website are presented as "a Belgium-based media run by Rwandan exiles." In fact, they are the driving force of genocide denial in Belgium and France. Their main organizers are children of genocidaires who have remained faithful not only to their parents, but also to their ideology. Benefiting from its non-profit status, Jambo employs a few permanent staff whose main activity is to spread the virus of genocide denial on the web and social networks, with the unflagging aim of denouncing "Kagame's criminal regime" and restoring the actions of their parents when they were in power.

In an investigation published in the Belgian publication $M\acute{e}dor$ in 2022, journalist Charlotte Wirth, a member of the Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN), described how the poison of revisionism was being instilled into Belgian institutions through dozens of associations run by former dignitaries of the Habyarimana regime who had taken refuge in Europe in the wake of the genocide.

How were such organizations able to thwart the vigilance of 17 major international media outlets, and how did they manage to give credence to the above-mentioned testimonies? How did this "Rwanda Classified" dossier turn out to be so disconnected from the context that is essential to understanding Rwanda today?

Methodological failure/ Insufficient Methodology

Criticism of the Rwandan regime and its "strongman" is not taboo. However, the accusations must be solidly documented and pro-

ven, which is not the case with the Forbidden Stories dossier. It would have been far preferable to defer publication until more tangible evidence was available, or to forego it if serious sources could not be found. Ignorance of the subject means that unfounded accusations are taken for reliable information, and their authors for quality witnesses.

The methodological failure is repeated in the context of the genocide perpetrated against the Tutsi. The contributors to "Rwanda Classified" do not deny the genocide. But it disappears from their discourse, except to support the thesis of its instrumentalization in the context of the repression raging in Rwanda. In this respect, it is necessary to recall several basic facts of history in order to situate exactly what the Rwandan regime under discussion is. Five points are irreducible. It was the RPF that put an end to the genocide. It repatriated to Rwanda hundreds of thousands of Hutus whom the genocidaires had dragged to the DRC and plunged into famine and cholera. As soon as the genocide was over, the new authorities chose the path of judicial reparation rather than that of blind vindictiveness. They have advocated reconciliation, restored a country devastated as never before, and built a new nation. Finally, they must face the direct threat of the former genocidaires of 1994, who are very active in Eastern DRC, faithful to their enterprise of racial hatred, joined by extremist militias from the DRC and even by the authorities in Kinshasa, and who have continued to massacre Tutsis and Congolese Rwandophones for the last 30 years.

The regime has taken the difficult gamble

of reconciling victims and executioners, while penalizing genocide denial in a country where the impunity of killers, despite judicial action – including that of France -, is still a worrying fact. Before denouncing the genocide's instrumentalization, to which the "Rwanda Classified" seems to attach great importance, it would be fitting to observe the efforts made to promote knowledge. In particular, we should mention the significant scientific, documentary, and educational investments made, and the rapprochement between historians and specialists from Rwanda, France, Belgium, and Great Britain, which has led to increased joint research since 2021.

In short, Forbidden Stories' "Rwanda Classified" investigation is to investigative journalism what Judge Bruguière's investigation (definitively laid to rest by the 2007-2014 Trévidic-Poux inquiry, then by the Cour de Cassation in its February 15, 2022 decision) is to judicial investigation: the archetype of what not to do. In this respect, "Rwanda Classified" is so caricatural in its shortcuts, the things it leaves unsaid, and its refusal of any contextualization that it is to be hoped it will find its place in journalism schools in the future. We would like to avoid seeing in it the mark of an unconscious Eurocentrism. And yet... This unfortunate sequence harks back to the leaden years of decades gone by, made up of denial and public intimidation, as if journalistic and historical knowledge had no value in understanding the world and looking the past squarely in the face.

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