

The Past as Prologue Again

by [Theodore Dalrymple](#) (July 2021)



Genocide No. 1, Daphne Odjig, 1971

The past has always interested me much more than the future, though I cannot say exactly why this should be. Temperament, I suppose. But now I cannot disguise from myself that, in any case, I have a much longer personal past to think about than I have a personal future to look forward to. I do not live in the past, exactly, but I do delight to dwell on it.

I was therefore pleased recently to find a book, *La Traversée*, *The Crossing*, by Patrick de Saint-Exupéry, that took me back to one of the most important experiences of my life, the crossing of Africa by public transport. The author followed precisely the route through Rwanda and the Congo that I had taken thirty-five years before (when the Congo was called, at the insistence of its then dictator, Marshal Mobutu Sese Seko, Zaire). It was no tourist route even in those days of relative peace.

The purpose of Saint-Exupéry's journey was not only much more hazardous, but also much more serious than my own. I was idly curious, rather like the naughty boy in Keats' poem:

There was a naughty boy
And a naughty boy was he,
He ran away to Scotland
The people for to see—

But Saint-Exupéry, unlike me, was making a serious enquiry.

The reason for the difference between our two journeys was that genocide of the Tutsis in 1994, when something like 800,000 people were killed in 100 days, perhaps the most rapid genocide in history, took place between them. In the mid-1980s I had been impressed by the comparative orderliness of Rwanda, a tiny country that lived mainly by agriculture and pastoralism, notwithstanding the density of its population (women at that time gave birth on average to nine children). It was a one-party state, a dictatorship, the president being a general, Juvénal Habyarimana, who had been elected with 99.7 per cent of the votes cast; every Rwandan citizen was, from birth and *ex officio*, a member of his single party, the MRND, the *Mouvement révolutionnaire national pour le développement* (the National Revolutionary Movement for Development), to which, years later under international pressure, the word Democracy was added, so that it became the National

Revolutionary Movement for Democracy and Development. But the roads were well-maintained, neatness and cleanliness were general, and the buses ran to schedule. Eight years after my visit, the genocide too was very well-organised and efficient. I had, of course, no premonition of such a catastrophe, though I knew that all was not well between the Hutu and the Tutsi, and that there was no reason why intermittent massacres should not recur both in Burundi (a mirror-image of Rwanda) and Rwanda.

The author of the book, a journalist, was present in Rwanda at the time of the genocide. François Mitterand, then the French president, is reputed to have said to his colleagues that 'in those countries there, a genocide is not too important.' At any rate, the French government certainly supported the genocidal government right to the end, and then put it about that there had been two genocides, the first of Tutsi by Hutu and the second of Hutu by Tutsi, as if the second (which allegedly followed the first) would in some way exonerate the French government retrospectively for what was at best a terrible error of judgment, and at worst a complicity with a deep evil.

The second genocide, that of the Hutu by the Tutsis, was supposed to have occurred when hundreds of thousands, perhaps up to a couple of million, Hutu fled into neighbouring Zaire just after the overthrow of the Hutu government by the Tutsi rebel movement led by the present President of Rwanda, Paul Kagame. In this huge mass of people it was impossible to distinguish between those who had directed or taken part in the genocide, those who had been frightened by the rumours of Tutsi revenge on the Hutu, and those who were forced at gunpoint to flee by the erstwhile genocidal government and its armed forces, who herded the population into exile with it and controlled it by terror.

Suddenly, the perpetrators became the victims, or the supposed victims. The world was horrified to see refugee camps

containing hundreds of thousands of Rwandans on the Congolese side of the Rwandan-Congolese border living in deplorable deprivation (it is said that 30,000 died in a cholera epidemic) and sent quantities of aid, of which the perpetrators took control and used to plan and finance their armed return to overthrow the new government that had just overthrown theirs. Eventually, the new government, exasperated by the situation, drove most of the refugees in the camps back into Rwanda, as the only way of putting an end to the threat of a return by the former government and army, but about 200,000 of the refugees, including the hard-core perpetrators, fled further into the Congo, where—according to the story of the second genocide—they were exterminated by the Rwandan forces.

Saint-Exupéry's journey was intended to find evidence of this second genocide (or rather, murder on a mass scale—for it is inconceivable that the Tutsi, who are only about 15 per cent of the Rwandan population, could have conceived of exterminating 85 per cent of the population, though it should be remembered that in Burundi in the early 1970s, a Tutsi government did kill all the Hutu who had been to secondary school, between 100,000 and 200,000, a targeted mass-killing obviously intended to prevent the Hutu from ever being able to challenge the Tutsi government). The journalist clearly disbelieved the French government's claim that there had been a second genocide or mass murder, but in an honest fashion went in search of evidence that something like it had taken place, in order to refute, in good scientific fashion, his own belief. Such a number of people cannot have been killed, after all, without anyone having seen anything, albeit that the Congo is so vast that it is not possible to search every square foot of it. On the other hand, much of it is impenetrable and uninhabitable (as well as uninhabited), so that, fleeing Goma, there was only one direction in which they could have gone. It was the route I took thirty-five years ago and Saint-Exupéry took now.

The first stage was Goma to Kisangani (formerly Stanleyville) by road—or rather track, about 400 miles through the jungle. When I made the journey, there was no political danger—the Marshal, whose self-proclaimed title suggested that he went from victory to victory, was still in control of the country to the extent that no one threatened it—but still the journey was not easy. The laterite track was heavily rutted; I hitched a lift on the top of a loaded lorry, along with several other passengers. We made the journey at maximum speed because the rains were due, and once they started the road would become nearly impassable, taking such a truck up to a month to cover the distance. One of the hazards was that the villagers of the few villages *en route* would dig lorry-traps in the track, and then demand money to help the driver rescue his vehicle. But even at maximum speed, the journey took three days. To these difficulties, when Saint-Exupéry undertook a similar journey, had been added the presence of a plethora of bandit groups with a patina of political purpose, but whose real purpose was loot.

And then came the river journey down the Congo from Kisangani. I went all the way to Kinshasa (formerly Léopoldville), but Saint-Exupéry went only about two-thirds as far, to the city of Mbandaka (formerly Coquilhatville). From Kisangani to Kinshasa by river is in total about 1250 miles.

The passenger boat on which I made the journey (which lasted about two weeks) was well-organised by comparison with that upon which Saint-Exupéry travelled. Some faint remnant of colonial organisation remained, as if the people manning the boat had a distant memory of how things should be done.

I say boat, but in fact it was a boat that hauled two barges, so that in all there were 3000 passengers aboard. The passenger service had become highly irregular, and so there was a mad scramble for places. Sardines in a tin enjoy a *fête champêtre* by comparison. Of course, I travelled first-class, and even if liquids of uncertain provenance dripped through

the walls of my cabin, I did at least have a cabin. I ate at the captain's table, and the food was edible, though I was uncertain from what creatures the meat that I ate was derived.

For there were bales of dead monkeys for sale in Kinshasa on the boat, partly for food and partly for magical purposes. There was also a large live crocodile on the deck, suitably trussed up, the meat of its tail a delicacy presumably better kept live than rotting in the tropical heat. Every day, the owners of the crocodile would water it from buckets, as if it were a plant. And then there were huge baskets of fat white grubs, also considered a delicacy, which naturally set me thinking about the development of disgust as a social phenomenon. Within limits, nothing is delicious or disgusting but thinking makes it so, and like everyone else of my own culture I was revolted by the very idea of eating these grubs. I can eat snails with pleasure but the idea of eating slugs (supposing them to be not actually poisonous) revolts me. How very odd, when you step back and think about it!

Also odd was the fact that, despite the extremely cramped and uncomfortable conditions, to put it mildly, in which thousands made the journey, the social distinctions were peacefully maintained. I have rarely been at the apex of such a steep social pyramid, but my position was maintained without any resort to force, and at no time did I feel threatened, on the contrary, I felt completely safe, and experienced nothing but friendliness and goodwill.

Throughout the whole journey, Congolese music played, either from boom-boxes or from the public address system (which still worked). I found this music a little monotonous, as perhaps any music would be if played for hours on end; but it was infinitely preferable to my ears to rock or rap music, for it conveyed joy and love and sometimes sorrow, rather than the decerebrate rage against the world favoured in our climes.

Life for the Congolese was terribly hard. Almost

nothing was easy for them, and even the simplest things, the daily tasks to which we devote no attention because so much is laid on for us without our giving it a second thought, were difficult for them. And yet they exuded no obvious signs of bitterness or hatred of life, rather the reverse. Of course, if offered something better, easier, they would take it, and much later I was surprised by a sudden influx of Congolese migrants into the city in which I was living—a city with no historical connections to the Congo. The fact that I had journeyed from Goma to Kinshasa created a sympathy between us that might not otherwise have existed. If I had made such a journey, I must have known from what they were trying to escape, a knowledge by no means common in the new land of their refuge.

The Zaire of Mobutu was disorganised, corrupt and ridiculous, to say nothing of its brutality. I shall ever remember the approach to Kisangani on the top of the truck. Suddenly, there was a mile or two of metalled road and the driver accelerated madly. He drove straight through a military checkpoint, sending the soldiers (and also the chickens) diving for cover. 'They'll shoot us!' I said. 'No, monsieur,' said a fellow-rider, 'They have sold their ammunition a long time ago.'

It was hardly surprising, then, that Mobutu's regime collapsed like a house of cards, without a fight. In the kingdom of those without ammunition, the man with one bullet is king. But what followed Mobutu was probably even worse. Not that that is a defence of the ever-victorious Marshal, any more than a second genocide, had it happened (it didn't), would have been a justification of French policy.

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Theodore Dalrymple's latest books are [*The Terror of Existence: From Ecclesiastes to Theatre of the Absurd*](#) (with Kenneth Francis) and [@NERIconoclast](#)