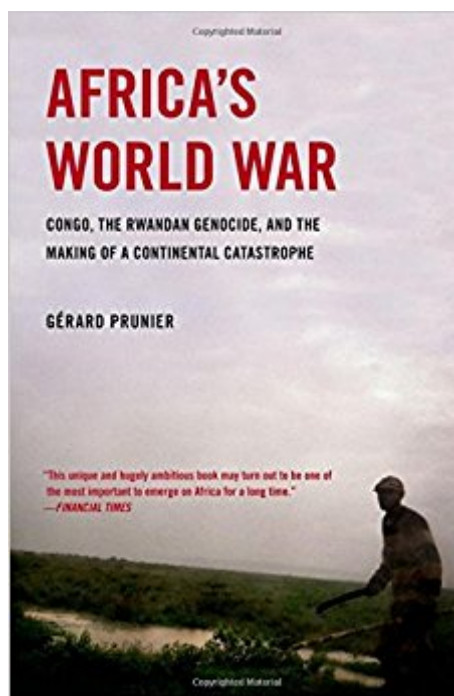




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# Africa's World War: Congo, The Rwandan Genocide, And The Making Of A Continental Catastrophe



## Synopsis

The Rwandan genocide sparked a horrific bloodbath that swept across sub-Saharan Africa, ultimately leading to the deaths of some four million people. In this extraordinary history of the recent wars in Central Africa, Gerard Prunier offers a gripping account of how one grisly episode laid the groundwork for a sweeping and disastrous upheaval. Prunier vividly describes the grisly aftermath of the Rwandan genocide, when some two million refugees--a third of Rwanda's population--fled to exile in Zaire in 1996. The new Rwandan regime then crossed into Zaire and attacked the refugees, slaughtering upwards of 400,000 people. The Rwandan forces then turned on Zaire's despotic President Mobutu and, with the help of a number of allied African countries, overthrew him. But as Prunier shows, the collapse of the Mobutu regime and the ascension of the corrupt and erratic Laurent-Désiré Kabila created a power vacuum that drew Rwanda, Uganda, Angola, Zimbabwe, Sudan, and other African nations into an extended and chaotic war. The heart of the book documents how the whole core of the African continent became engulfed in an intractable and bloody conflict after 1998, a devastating war that only wound down following the assassination of Kabila in 2001. Prunier not only captures all this in his riveting narrative, but he also indicts the international community for its utter lack of interest in what was then the largest conflict in the world. Praise for the hardcover: "The most ambitious of several remarkable new books that reexamine the extraordinary tragedy of Congo and Central Africa since the Rwandan genocide of 1994."--New York Review of Books "One of the first books to lay bare the complex dynamic between Rwanda and Congo that has been driving this disaster."--Jeffrey Gettleman, New York Times Book Review "Lucid, meticulously researched and incisive, Prunier's will likely become the standard account of this under-reported tragedy."--Publishers Weekly

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## Customer Reviews

The bloodiest modern conflict you've never heard of gets a searching appraisal in this exhaustive history. Africanist Prunier (*The Rwanda Crisis*) follows the 1996–2002 war in the Democratic Republic of Congo through many bewildering twists and turns. Sparked by a Rwandan army incursion to clear out Hutu-dominated refugee camps on the border between the two countries, the conflict dragged in the armies of eight surrounding countries and an alphabet soup of Congolese guerrilla movements and tribal militias; millions died in the fighting and attendant massacres, starvation and disease. Prunier discerns many layers to the upheaval; a conventional struggle for political control of what had been called Zaire, it was also a multisided act of piracy aimed at looting the country's mineral wealth, an outbreak of generations-long ethnic hatreds and a ghastly symptom of Africa's ongoing crisis of weak and illegitimate governments. The author carefully untangles these complexities while offering unsparing assessments of the participants, including a vigorous indictment of Rwanda's Tutsi leaders for using the 1994 genocide as an excuse for their own atrocities. Lucid, meticulously researched and incisive, Prunier's will likely become the standard account of this under-reported tragedy. (Dec.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"Mr. Prunier points out, the genocide in Rwanda acted as an incendiary bomb, setting fire to disputes that go back generations...Help(s) disentangle the fiendishly complicated histories of national and tribal identities, real and invented."--*The Economist*"This unique and hugely ambitious book may turn out to be one of the most important to emerge on Africa for a long time."--*Financial Times*"Lucid, meticulously researched and incisive, Prunier's will likely become the standard account of this under-reported tragedy."--*Publishers Weekly*"Africa's World War is the most ambitious of several remarkable new books that reexamine the extraordinary tragedy of Congo and Central Africa since the Rwandan genocide of 1994."--*New York Review of Books* "The book is remarkable not just because Gérard Prunier, who has spent his life studying African conflicts, is able to call on every academic discipline required to comprehend this gigantic disaster, but also because he was an eyewitness to much of it himself, and frequently has telling details to offer about

the behaviour and motivation of key individuals. He writes, moreover, with a verve, sophistication and wit equalled, in my experience, only by fellow French intellectual Régis Debray."--The Sunday Times, UK"Runier is immensely knowledgeable and passionate about his subject.... [He sorts] out some of the strands of an immensely complicated and enormously devastating conflict, and for that we are surely in his debt."--Books & Culture"Africa's World War is one of the first books to lay bare the complex dynamic between Rwanda and Congo that has been driving this disaster."--Jeffrey Gettleman, New York Times Book Review"War correspondents also love Prunier's work: Howard French, who covered Congo during the 1990s for the New York Times, recently placed Africa's World War on a list of books he thought President Obama should be reading."--The Nation"One of the most remarkable qualities of this remarkable book is Prunier's ability to combine cool analysis and scholarly dispassion without losing sight of its horror... This is a profound book, and, to use an old-fashioned word, a noble one."--David Rieff, author of *Swimming in a Sea of Death: A Son's Memoir*

This is going to be a complicated review. First, if you know nothing about the wars of central Africa over the past 15 years or so, in particular the Rwanda-related conflicts, this is an awful book to pick up and try to use as orientation. It assumes the reader already has a basic knowledge of the recent political events in about eight African nations and often launches directly into building cases against the conventionally-held wisdom, often without actually stating what the conventional wisdom is. I did my graduate thesis on the formation of an African Great Lakes rebel group, and I often had to stop reading to give my overworked brain time to process the flood of information or reread a section to make sure I understood Prunier's arguments. I can only imagine what readers who know nothing about the topic have to endure. Second, one has to decide to what degree one trusts Prunier. If this book was written by someone besides Prunier, I would probably dismiss it largely or in whole. However, Prunier is the author of 'The Rwanda Crisis,' considered a seminal early book on the genocide, and the author of 'Darfur: The Ambiguous Genocide,' also considered one of the best books of that conflict. In this recent book, Prunier recants entire storylines of 'The Rwanda Crisis' and basically says, "Fourteen years ago, I discounted information that I now believe to be credible and this is the story as I now believe it to be." So one has to decide if this is a sign that (1) Prunier has suffered some sort of mental breakdown or has perhaps been subverted by some political agenda or (2) Prunier has reexamined his sources and arguments in the light of new information, as a good historian should, to compile a more accurate portrayal. I seriously considered both as options, but decided that Alternative 2 was the most likely. You will see other reviewers who have

decided otherwise. Moving on to the next roadblock for the reader, Prunier has some rather tenuous sourcing. For example, is a single news account quoting an aid worker describing how a frightened refugee identified a particular armed group credible? Probably not. Are dozens of such thin reports credible in identifying a pattern, or can it all be attributed to enemy propaganda and the chaos of war? Prunier, in light of some of the analysis he presents early in the book, believes he can identify patterns and reports these incidents without caveat. I'm in the strange position of willing to believe his general argument, while of the opinion that any one of the incidents he uses to make that argument might in fact be false. The choice that Prunier faced is either ignoring anything that cannot be 100% confirmed to organizations with proven credibility, which almost by definition excludes all sources present at the bleeding edge of a running war in the middle of a central African jungle, or using the many fleeting news reports and interviews with people pushing their own agenda that he in fact uses to create a narrative on which he builds his analysis. Readers craving the certainty of a Western style mediatized war, in which credentialed reporters interview the public affairs officials of organized combatants, will be appalled. Others will be heartened by the intimacy that Prunier brings to the work. OK, so assuming the reader has enough background knowledge to orient themselves and is willing to entertain the idea that Prunier might be presenting an accurate-ish account, what does the reader get? Pretty much the only attempt thus far to offer a comprehensive account of the Congo wars. The parallel that springs to mind is Edward Gibbon's 'Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire,' which was heavily criticized for the many obvious mistakes, e.g. wrong dates, mis-spellings, etc. I once read a defense which, paraphrased, said only Gibbon had the breadth of knowledge to put together such a comprehensive work but, once he wrote it, people of lesser knowledge now had a stationary target against which to launch attacks. I have no doubt that this book is going to be a foundation stone of scholarship on the Congo wars for at least the next decade, with people reassembling the data Prunier has dug up into new conclusions and others disproving content. I could point out several factual errors myself, but I know that I'm completely incapable of attempting a work of the scale Prunier has produced so I won't be a boor. You can count the number of people who are capable of a work of this scale on this topic on one hand, so I'll thank Prunier for putting his neck on the chopping block and give his book five stars.

The first thing a reader will notice is the extensive list of acronyms, followed by an extended glossary and a series of maps. Do yourself a favor and bookmark them immediately and refer back often. Secondly, I found reading much easier with a big atlas with a map of Africa opened up, as frequent mentions of various capital cities are substituted for their countries, which I and most

English speakers will be largely ignorant of. All that said, the author makes a great effort at explaining an extremely complicated history with hundreds of state and non state forces all contributing for their own often changing reasons. While he tries to make it as clear as possible, it is also obvious that it is a terribly complex situation that will require tremendous diligence from any reader to keep up with. If you can stay with it, it paints a picture of central Africa that is sufficiently broad to be relevant to global understanding, but also sufficiently niche to bring much light to a very tragic portion of our shared history. As with any recent history, some points are bound to be controversial or be seen differently in time, but on the whole the author is clearly an expert, and provides a very valuable perspective on a region I unfortunately understood very very little of.

Prunier guides his reader through the Heart of Darkness explaining how a conflict in the Congo became a continental war. In terms of the number of countries involved and the number of at-risk civilians, this constituted both the greatest threat to the world's peace and security while being its greatest humanitarian crisis. Along the way, this skilled journalist documents how this was fundamentally a war between Rwanda and the Congo. The Tutsi-Hutu tribal conflict in Rwanda had been left unresolved by the genocide and flight of the vanquished into Zaire broadened the conflict. A web of inter-relationships among peoples and nations would bring in Uganda, Angola, Zimbabwe, Sudan, and other African nations. By page 201, the author writes, "Does the reader at this point want to throw in the towel and give up on the ethnopolitical complexities of the region? I would not blame him..." But the book works precisely because Prunier does not settle for facile oversimplification. The layers of the conflict matter as other nations worked out issues well beyond the Congo-Rwandan catalyst. The book concludes with a helpful assessment that shows how the brutality the West tolerated from African states is no longer found acceptable in a post Cold War world. The end is somewhat hopeful, but realistic. This is a helpful guide to a daunting to understand world crisis.

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