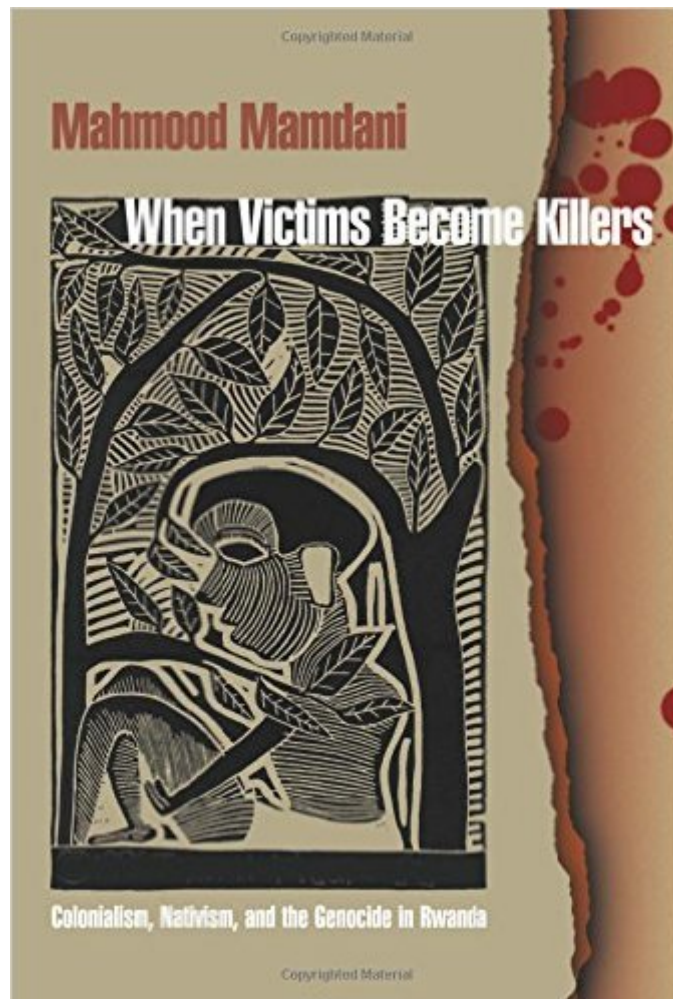


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When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, And The Genocide In Rwanda



Synopsis

"When we captured Kigali, we thought we would face criminals in the state; instead, we faced a criminal population." So a political commissar in the Rwanda Patriotic Front reflected after the 1994 massacre of as many as one million Tutsis in Rwanda. Underlying his statement is the realization that, though ordered by a minority of state functionaries, the slaughter was performed by hundreds of thousands of ordinary citizens, including even judges, human rights activists, and doctors, nurses, priests, friends, and spouses of the victims. Indeed, it is its very popularity that makes the Rwandan genocide so unthinkable. This book makes it thinkable. Rejecting easy explanations of the genocide as a mysterious evil force that was bizarrely unleashed, one of Africa's best-known intellectuals situates the tragedy in its proper context. He coaxes to the surface the historical, geographical, and political forces that made it possible for so many Hutu to turn so brutally on their neighbors. He finds answers in the nature of political identities generated during colonialism, in the failures of the nationalist revolution to transcend these identities, and in regional demographic and political currents that reach well beyond Rwanda. In so doing, Mahmood Mamdani usefully broadens understandings of citizenship and political identity in postcolonial Africa. There have been few attempts to explain the Rwandan horror, and none has succeeded so well as this one. Mamdani's analysis provides a solid foundation for future studies of the massacre. Even more important, his answers point a way out of crisis: a direction for reforming political identity in central Africa and preventing future tragedies.

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Customer Reviews

This new book by Mahmood Mamdani, one of the world's most respected Africa scholars, stands a good chance of replacing Gérard Prunier's "The Rwanda Crisis" as the standard English-language introduction to Rwanda and its genocide. Mamdani's highly-readable account focuses on the political construction of Hutu and Tutsi as racial/ethnic identities, tracing the tale from the pre-colonial era, through Belgium's administration of the country, to the 1959 Revolution and subsequent attempts to develop an overarching sense of Rwandan nationhood. These attempts were cut short by the rise of Hutu Power in the early 1990s, culminating in the horrific outbreak of mass killing in April 1994. The advantage of Mamdani's book is that it offers "history from below," arguing that the racialized hostility between Hutu and Tutsi helps to account for the extraordinary (perhaps unprecedented) degree of popular involvement in the 1994 killing campaign. He also stresses the regional context of the Rwandan civil war and genocide, with separate chapters on Uganda and Congo/Zaire. The book is rich in theoretical insights but never ponderous or pretentious. A "must" for any student of Rwanda or modern African politics more generally (see also Mamdani's award-winning 1996 book "Citizen and Subject," which fleshes out some of the theoretical frameworks used in "When Victims Become Killers").

The Rwandan genocide was a horrible affair of unequal proportions. I have always wondered though how a whole population can commit such horrendous acts against fellow countrymen/women en masse, as was reported. Surely there must've been something that must've been brewing all along; there must've been an underlying "cause". Despeakable it maybe I wanted to know what in Rwanda's history could've given rise to this. I have read Phillip Gourevitch's "We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will be Killed With Our Families: Stories from Rwanda", although a good book, is mostly a narrative and I was still left with the unfinished business of why? why? why?. This book filled the void for me. With a historical background of precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial sociopolitical Rwanda, the author provides an amazingly rich analysis of the Rwandan state leading to what happened in 1994. It has given me the picture I needed to see, to begin to address the issues of why did this awful thing took place. It's a must read to anyone interested in Rwanda and what went on there.

Respected scholar Mahmood Mamdani offers his take on the causes of the Rwandan attempted genocide of the Tutsis and how Rwanda ought to handle the aftermath. A longtime denizen of the ivory tower, Mamdani is not writing for general audiences here: his prose is denser than a

nineteenth century Supreme Court opinion and often makes finer distinctions. There is a certain amount of this that is inevitable -- Mamdani is writing, at least partially, in response to people who have given facile explanations for the genocide (e.g. "the Hutus hated the Tutsis"), and his entirely justified reply is that it's not that simple. Mamdani makes a fascinating and very persuasive case for the exact historical causes of this particular genocide that differentiates it from other genocides of history -- colonialistic influence combining with pan-African political forces that pit nationalistic concerns against ethnic and political ones. That said, and with full awareness that I don't have the talent to do what I'm asking Mamdani to do, I'd like to say that his argument would have gone over a lot better if he'd been better at phrasing it. His academic language was very difficult to penetrate, even by a well-intentioned postgraduate-educated guy like me. I got to thinking towards the end that he was getting a bonus every time he added "-ize" to a noun to make it a verb. Mamdani's message that a lot of complicated problems combined to create the genocide -- from which it follows that people peddling simple, easy answers haven't been paying enough attention or are pandering to their audiences -- is important. I hope it is given deep consideration by the grad students who are best equipped with time and incentive to understand his prose, and I hope one of them figures out what I cannot: how to phrase his message in such a way that a lay audience will be willing to hear it.

A great book that is doing justice to the people that were rudely touched by the genocide. History plays a great part in influencing and explaining particular events that happen in the present but many people forget and view the event as inexplicable. Those who forget to ask the 'why' question are always liable to repeat the blunders of history since they never learn from its ugly mistakes. Prof. Mamdani is trying to undo this mistake. Many, especially in the west from their self righteous pedestal, look at the Rwandan genocide and judge. Mamdani goes behind the scenes of history to dig out the 'why' of this ugliest of human ventures. Drawing heavily on Franz Fanon, he casts a wide net covering the whole Great Lakes Region and Colonialism through the cold war, to tell us that the victims of injustice can only be free if they kill the oppressor. To become human they must deny life to the oppressor. The irony is, to overcome the monster of injustice, you must surpass its monstrosity, leading to the cycle of violence. Americans who read this book will come to understand better the whyness of 9/11; the Europeans will understand Hitler and Africans will grasp the whyness of so many coup d'etats, and finally an insight that is long overdue will dawn on us all and we will see the light. We will understand that without justice in the world those who work for peace labor but in vain. A must read book for serious peacemakers.

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