



## Book Review

Naoko Hashimoto

### REFERENCE

Yonekawa, M. (2020). *Post-Genocide Rwandan Refugees: Why They Refuse to Return Home: Myths and Realities*. Springer, 2020, pp. 136. ISBN (hard cover): 9789811067563

*Post-Genocide Rwandan Refugees* by Masako Yonekawa is a critical, poignant, and distinctive work based on the author's expertise in the field of forced migration in the region. Taking into account historical trajectories and regional geopolitics, the book argues that the involuntary repatriation of Rwandan refugees since 1996 was a de facto refoulement organized through a convergence of interests. The governments of Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Tanzania, and the United States, as well as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, all participated in the refoulement. Indeed, Yonekawa maintains that the UNHCR's invocation of the cessation clause of Rwandan refugees' status in 2017 was completely premature and jeopardized the refugees' very existence. The reasons include the precarious conditions in Rwanda and the numerous security incidents, such as the assassinations of the political opponents against President Kagame and the physical attacks against civilian refugees in Uganda,

Zambia, the DRC, and Tanzania. Readers are naturally led to question if Rwanda is truly a "successful model" in spite of the socio-economic developments facilitated by the "genocide credit" for the past two decades. The author forces us to ask for whom it has been a success, if at all.

The book makes major contributions to the current literature in its research methods, critical views of the UNHCR, and direct challenge to the legal concept of genocide. First, in its methodology, the book combines historical process-tracing since the 1950s and direct personal interviews with refugees to depict a living contemporary history. On the one hand, the historical account provides an indispensable background on what led the old-caseload Tutsi refugees to embark on an armed repatriation in 1990–1994, itself an important prelude to the 1994 genocide—and its domestic and regional aftermath. On the other hand, individual interviews with 86 Rwandan refugees in 10 countries in Africa, Europe, and North America offer indispens-

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able perspectives on how they experienced the events unfolding since 1994.

The second contribution is the author's position on the UNHCR. Yonekawa analyzes how the UNHCR's policy evolved over 20 years from facilitating voluntary repatriation to imposing returns, forcing repatriation to Rwanda mainly from neighbouring countries—tantamount to a *de facto* refoulement—and the gradual activities that followed the announcement of the cessation clause to its invocation. The cessation invocation theoretically meant that no Rwandan who left the country prior to 1998 should be recognized as a refugee in certain African countries. Yonekawa, a former UNHCR field officer in Rwanda and former UNHCR head of field office in Goma in the eastern DRC, questions the accountability of the UN refugee agency. The repatriation of refugees was a politically and economically preferred option among all major stakeholders—other than the refugees themselves. The newly formed Tutsi-led Rwandan government wanted as many refugees as possible to return in order to legitimize its authority at home and abroad; the neighbouring host governments of DRC, Tanzania, and Uganda all wanted to reduce their "burden" and to minimize the potential volatility of hosting a large number of refugees; and the major donor governments—particularly the United States—preferred a decreased number of refugees in order to justify its reduced financial aid. Amidst such an interest convergence among key actors, could Sadako Ogata, then high commissioner, still have rejected pro-repatriation pressures? This question remains contentious for those who study international relations. The United Nations is an intergovernmental entity fully dependent on financial contributions from member states, so how and to what extent

can a UN agency autonomously and independently devise its actions and policies?

The third contribution of the book is its conception of genocide. The author depicts how refugees interpreted the UNHCR announcement of the cessation clause as an official denial of their presence in the world. Worse, the UN Security Council's labelling of Hutus as *génocidaires* in 2014 made Hutus conceal their identity at the risk of fostering what Yonekawa calls "psychological insecurity." Some refugees were traumatized not only by their experience during the 1994 genocide but also by the ensuing local, national, regional, and international developments over the next 25 years, such as the continuous security incidences targeting dissidents and opinion leaders or the invocation of the cessation clause. That the Hutu population felt abandoned and betrayed by the international community could be described as a "second genocide." Yonekawa forces us to refocus our attention on the relevance and importance of the psychological component of the genocide definition outlined by Article Six of the 1998 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. Thus, the book provides an important case study to re-examine not only the viability of a pro-repatriation solution to a refugee situation but also a re-examination of genocide as a concept in international criminal law.

No piece of writing is immune to constructive criticism and Yonekawa's work is no exception. The book's limited theoretical contribution, its heavy reliance on secondary sources when discussing American political and military involvement in the Great Lakes Region, and the succinctness of the text (net 136 pages) could be interpreted as shortcomings. Interviews with American policy-makers as well as UNHCR senior staff could have enriched the discussion, although reportedly the author attempted in vain to

interview her former colleagues.

Notwithstanding these limitations, *Post-Genocide Rwandan Refugees* makes an unparalleled contribution to the literature by providing alternative views on genocide narratives, durable solutions for refugees, and the conceptualization of genocide itself.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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