

BRINGING THE GENOCIDE HOME

THE RWANDA GENOCIDE, BELGIAN BLUE HELMETS AND BELGIAN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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I. Introduction

On April 6th, 1994, the aircraft of the Rwandan president, Juvénal Habyarimana, and his Burundian counterpart, Cyprien Ntaryamira, was shot down.¹ The killing of the president provoked large-scale massacres throughout the country, claiming the lives of approximately eight hundred thousand to one million Rwandans. Most of the victims were Tutsi, although moderate Hutu were also targeted.² This genocide lasted around one hundred days, until the military victory of the rebels of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) in the beginning of July.³ However, widespread violence still continued in the months and even years after the genocide.⁴ Until this day, “Rwanda 1994” is used as a metaphor for a situation in which one deems an international intervention necessary.⁵ It is seen as the foremost case of failure in conflict management. As Touken Piiparinen wrote: “Rwanda of 1994 was the ground zero of UN conflict management and perhaps humanity as a whole.”⁶ Central to this failure was the assassination of ten Belgian blue helmets on April 7th, 1994, causing the withdrawal of the Belgian contingent and eventually the entire peacekeeping mission.⁷

In this article, I explore how the memory of the Belgian blue helmets shaped Belgian politics and international relations with Rwanda, and how in turn this memory was shaped by Belgian politics from 1994 to 2004. In doing so, this article contributes to the academic literature on the role of collective memories of violence in international relations. Contributing the Belgian-Rwandan case to this body of literature aims at furthering insight into how violent pasts continue to shape international relations. Indeed, following previous research on how the Rwandan government uses the genocide memory as a powerful tool in its international relations, I will focus on the collective memory of the Belgian blue helmets

¹ Thierry Cruvellier, *Court of Remorse: Inside the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda*, trans. Chari Voss (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), xii.

² Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), 7.

³ Filip Reyntjens, ‘Rwanda, Ten Years on: From Genocide to Dictatorship’, *African Affairs* 103, no. 411 (2004): 177–8.

⁴ David Mwambari, ‘Leadership Emergence in Post-Genocide Rwanda: The Role of Peacebuilding in Rwanda’, *Leadership and Developing Societies* 2, no. 1 (2018): 89.

⁵ Harald Müller and Jonas Wolff, ‘The Dual Use of an Historical Event: “Rwanda 1994”, the Justification and Critique of Liberal Interventionism’, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 8, no. 4 (2014): 281.

⁶ Touko Piiparinen, *The Transformation of UN Conflict Management: Producing Images of Genocide from Rwanda to Darfur and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 2009), n.n.

⁷ Gérard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 1998), 234; African Rights (Organization), ed., *Rwanda: Death, Despair, and Defiance* (London: African Rights, 1995), 1111–14; ‘Belgen Met Blitz-Actie Weggehaald Uit Rwanda’, *Het Belang Van Limburg*, 20 April 1994, <https://academic.gopress.be/Public/index.php?page=archive-article&issueDate=1994-04-20&articleOriginalId=hetsbelangvanlimburgrug2394820041994-00000&q=rwanda>; Koen Vidal, *Stukken van de Waarheid: De Rwandese Genocide En de Belgische Politiek* (Antwerp: Hadewijch, 1998), 93–95.

and its role in Belgian international relations.⁸ Although the main focus of this article will be on Belgium's international relations, I will also explore the role of memory for domestic politics, since these are very much dependent on each other. As I will explain below, during the period under study the events in Rwanda triggered a "nationalisation of international politics and the internationalisation of national politics."⁹ The Belgian-Rwandan case is particularly interesting for this research because it is positioned on the intersection of a shared violent past and a shared colonial past. This had a significant influence on the way in which the memory of the blue helmets was addressed. There are also two main reasons why I chose to look at the period from 1994 to 2004. First of all, this period comprises the most important developments in Belgium with regards to the genocide: from the withdrawal in 1994, over the Rwanda Commission of 1997 to the apologies offered by Guy Verhofstadt in 2000 and 2004, which form a natural endpoint of the period under study. Secondly, as I will explain later, in 2004 Karel De Gucht was appointed as Minister of Foreign Affairs, replacing Louis Michel and ending his initiatives of "ethical diplomacy" and increased engagement with Rwanda.

While there has been extensive research on the Rwandan genocide, and even on Belgian politics and the Rwandan genocide, no studies have taken the memory of the blue helmets as a point of departure and considered its central role in Belgian politics or international relations in the broad sense. Specifically, I explore how the memorialisation of the blue helmets shaped and was shaped by Belgian politics on three levels: that of domestic politics and leadership, that of the bilateral international relations with Rwanda, and that of international relations in general. However, in addition, I argue that because of the central role of this memory in Belgian politics, the actual memory of the Rwandan genocide is obscured and certain colonial frameworks are reproduced, in which the Belgian casualties overshadow the sufferings of the Rwandans in Belgian memorialisation. I argue that the Belgian-Rwandan relations are still obstructed by the unprocessed memories of both the genocide and the colonial period. Finally, I end with emphasising that these unprocessed pasts preclude a much-needed open and critical debate. Here, it is important to note that by taking the memory of the blue helmets as a point of departure, I intend to expose this colonial framework. It is not my intention to reproduce this framework. The deaths of the Belgian soldiers had a significant impact and were a tragedy in their own right, but in the context of the Rwandan genocide it is important to acknowledge the many other victims, in

⁸ David Mwambari, 'Emergence of Post-Genocide Collective Memory in Rwanda's International Relations', 2019, 2-4.

⁹ Own translation, taken from one of the interviews. The Dutch expression was "de verbinnenlandsing van de buitenlandpolitiek en de verbuitenlandsing van de binnenlandpolitiek".

the first place the hundreds of thousands of Rwandans, both Tutsi and (moderate) Hutu, and furthermore all the other victims, including twelve Belgian civilians.

To make this argument, I have conducted a research using a phenomenological approach based on interviews complemented with other sources. In the first section of this article, I will elaborate on my methodology. In the second section, I will give an overview of the most important insights from the literature, starting with a short historical overview of Belgian-Rwandan relations, followed by a historicisation of Belgium's treatment of its colonial past, followed by a theoretical discussion of the literature on collective memory of violence in international relations. Thereafter, in the third section I present the findings of my research, taken from the interviews and other qualitative research. Here, I try to let the source material speak for itself and refrain – where possible – from adding my own interpretations. Then, in the fourth section I discuss the significance of my findings for Belgian politics and international relations, in which I will make my argument. Finally, I end with a few tentative conclusions and implications of this research.

II. Methodology

This research was conducted using a phenomenological approach. In this article, I use it to examine how the memory of the Belgian blue helmets shaped and was shaped by Belgian politics and international relations by examining how the influence of this memory and the way it has been treated was perceived by different actors who were in a way implicated in this story. Starks and Trinidad explain how the phenomenological approach allows us to focus on the experiences of the involved actors and to explore how these experiences relate to certain assumptions that surround the subject under study. They say: “Phenomenology contributes to deeper understanding of lived experiences by exposing taken-for-granted assumptions about these ways of knowing.”¹⁰ By adding another dimension of interpretation to this approach, Lester argues, it can be used to challenge and to inform current action and policy.¹¹ Indeed, with this research I aim to explore how past policy and action dealt with the collective memory of violence, thereby contributing to a larger debate on how to deal with these memories in the present.

To collect these “lived experiences”, I first and foremost conducted interviews with people from very diverse backgrounds. These interviews were taken in Dutch, French and English. In total, I conducted eleven semi-structured one-on-one interviews with open-

¹⁰ Helene Starks and Susan Trinidad, ‘Choose Your Method: A Comparison of Phenomenology, Discourse Analysis, and Grounded Theory’, *Qualitative Health Research* 17, no. 10 (2008): 1373.

¹¹ Stan Lester, ‘An Introduction to Phenomenological Research’ (Stan Lester Developments, 1999), 1, <http://www.sld.demon.co.uk/resmethy.pdf>.

ended questions. There are two reasons for this rather limited amount of testimonies. Firstly, as this article is written in the context of a master's thesis, the conducted research was rather limited in scope and timeframe. Moreover, several of the people I contacted very understandably were not able to free up time for an interview. Secondly, phenomenological studies usually work with a smaller data set. As Starks and Trinidad argue, these studies are concerned with experiences, and given that each person's detailed account of their experience provides us with a rich source of information, rich data sets do not necessarily require large samples: "typical sample sizes for phenomenological studies range from 1 to 10 persons."¹² Nevertheless, the subject of this research is so complex and nuanced, and involves so many different actors with different perspectives, that including more testimonies is highly recommended. Therefore, this article tries to constitute a starting point for further research by already uncovering the core elements of the debate.

For the sake of protecting the respondents, the interviews remain anonymous. The first group of people I interviewed are researchers, both academics and journalists. I approached these interviews as "expert interviews", since researchers are, as Gläser and Laudel argued, "experts in the field."¹³ In the earlier stages of this research, these interviews helped to advance my research process in two ways. First of all, they functioned as a very useful "exploratory tool". Bogner and Menz explain how "exploratory interviews help to structure the area under investigation and to generate hypotheses."¹⁴ Secondly, these expert interviews were the starting point of a steady process of "snowballing", by pointing me to other potential interviewees, as well as often facilitating the establishing of contact.¹⁵ In later stages of this research, the interviews increasingly took the form of what Bogner and Menz called the "theory-generating" expert interview, as these conversations helped me reflect on how to synthesise the findings and discuss their significance.¹⁶ Still, in both forms, it is important to note that while expert interviews are a quick method with "good practical value", one should be mindful that using the information obtained through expert interviews uncritically will not lead to valid results.¹⁷ Indeed, an expert is not necessarily more neutral

¹² Starks and Trinidad, 'Choose Your Method: A Comparison of Phenomenology, Discourse Analysis, and Grounded Theory', 1374–5.

¹³ Jochen Gläser and Grit Laudel, 'On Interviewing "Good" and "Bad" Experts', in *Interviewing Experts*, ed. Alexander Bogner, Beate Littig, and Wolfgang Menz (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 119.

¹⁴ Alexander Bogner and Wolfgang Menz, 'The Theory-Generating Expert Interview: Epistemological Interest, Forms of Knowledge, Interaction', in *Interviewing Experts*, ed. Alexander Bogner, Beate Littig, and Wolfgang Menz (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 46.

¹⁵ Alexander Bogner, Beate Littig, and Wolfgang Menz, 'Introduction: Expert Interviews – An Introduction to a New Methodological Debate', in *Interviewing Experts*, ed. Alexander Bogner, Beate Littig, and Wolfgang Menz (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 2.

¹⁶ Bogner and Menz, 'The Theory-Generating Expert Interview: Epistemological Interest, Forms of Knowledge, Interaction', 47–8.

¹⁷ Michael Meuser and Ulrike Nagel, 'The Expert Interview and Changes in Knowledge Production', in *Interviewing Experts*, ed. Alexander Bogner, Beate Littig, and Wolfgang Menz (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan,

than another actor. That is why, in analysing the interviews with different experts, particular attention should be paid to contradictory information.¹⁸

Besides the researchers, another group of people I interviewed are political actors.¹⁹ Firstly, I interviewed diplomats and former diplomats that were employed in the Rwandan embassy during the period under study. Of course, considering their professional and emotional involvement in the subject of this research, their testimonies were also not neutral and had to be contextualised accordingly. Second, I interviewed politicians who were active at the time of the Dehaene or the Verhofstadt governments. Again, in analysing these interviews, attention must be paid to the perspective and the background of the specific respondents, as they were very actively involved at the decision-making level at the time. Besides researchers, diplomats and politicians, I also spoke with other diverse actors. These were a Belgian peacekeeper that served in UNAMIR, Rwandans in the diaspora and a family member of one of the deceased Belgian blue helmets. What I try to emphasise in this paragraph is that because every respondent is in a way a stakeholder in this research, no interview can be seen as neutral, and that all accounts – even my own – is inevitably biased by one's positionality and perspective.

To complement these interviews, this research is also based upon an examination of a variety of other primary sources. The biggest challenge here was that the Belgian diplomatic archives only disclose documents after thirty years, which means that the documents concerning the period under study were still classified. Indirectly, they are discussed in the 1997 report of the *Parliamentary commission of inquiry regarding the events in Rwanda*, a commission of inquiry in the Belgian Senate that was granted exceptional access to these documents. However, as I will return to later, this report cannot be seen as a simple substitute for these documents. Again, this is a specific representation that is shaped both consciously and unconsciously by the actors involved. Besides this report, I used autobiographical books by policy makers, diplomats and peacekeepers who served in UNAMIR, as well as Belgian newspaper articles. Finally, I also visited the VRT-archives to watch the five-part documentary *Terug naar Rwanda [Back to Rwanda]*, a

2009), 17; Jochen Kleres, 'Emotional Expertise: Emotions and the Expert Interview', in *Methods of Exploring Emotions*, by Helena Flam and Jochen Kleres (New York: Routledge, 2015), 90–6.

¹⁸ Kleres, 'Emotional Expertise: Emotions and the Expert Interview', 96–7.

¹⁹ In a way, all of the conducted interviews can be seen as expert interviews. Meuser and Nagel conceptualise an expert as someone with privileged knowledge of the field under study. Especially when we also consider Kleres's addition of emotional knowledge to this concept, every respondent could be seen as an expert. However, in this article it is not my intention to go into detail on the question of who constitutes an expert, and the interviews other respondents were rather considered as interviews with principal involved actors. For more on this, see Meuser and Nagel, 'The Expert Interview and Changes in Knowledge Production'; Kleres, 'Emotional Expertise: Emotions and the Expert Interview'.

Flemish documentary depicting the stories of different people that were somehow involved in the genocide.

Before I present the findings from these primary sources, I will provide an overview of the scientific debates and the vast body of literature this article builds on.

III. Insights from the literature

In this section, I will provide the necessary context in which the collected data will be interpreted. First, I start with a short historical overview of Belgian-Rwandan relations. This overview focuses on the period under study: it only mentions those elements of the colonial and pre-genocide eras that are referred to in bilateral relations after the genocide. I want to make clear that I do not mean to downplay the importance of these periods. It is important to note that the history of Belgium-Rwanda relations is a lot more nuanced and complex than the scope of this section allows to discuss. Secondly, I historicise Belgian foreign policy with regards to Rwanda in the broader context of Belgium's dealings with its colonial past. Thirdly, I present some of the more salient and relevant features taken from the body of literature on the collective memory of violence in international relations.

(1) Belgian-Rwandan relations: an overview

In Belgian-Rwandan relations, the colonial past is still often invoked, not in the least by Rwandan president Paul Kagame, as contributing to one of the root causes of the genocide.²⁰ Indeed, as Walser Smith states: “the conflict between Hutus and Tutsis had its deepest roots in the imperialist policies of Belgian rule.”²¹ Despite the ongoing debate on the origin and nature of the distinction between Hutu and Tutsi in precolonial Rwanda, there is a general consensus that the colonial administration pursued a policy of “ethnogenesis”: “a politically-motivated creation of ethnic identities based on socially-constituted categories of the pre-colonial past.”²² Moreover, this “ethnogenesis” was accompanied by a policy of favouritism, privileging the Tutsi elites. After the Second World War, as pressure for

²⁰ Sara Vandekerckhove and Koen Vidal, ‘Kagame Haalt Uit: “België Voerde ons mee naar Genocide”’, *De Morgen*, 8 April 2014, <https://www.demorgen.be/gs-bf23a423>; “België Voerde Ons Mee Naar Genocide”, *De Morgen*, 8 April 2014, <https://academic.gopress.be/Public/index.php?page=archive-article&issueDate=2014-04-08&articleOriginalId=de-morgenpersgroepdmo312064918042014-00000&q=rwanda%20herdenking>.

²¹ Helmut Walser Smith, ed., *The Holocaust and Other Genocides: History, Representation, Ethics* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002), 202.

²² Tor Sellström et al., ‘Synthesis Report’, *The International Response to Conflict and Genocide: Lessons from the Rwanda Experience* (Odense: Steering Committee of the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda, 1996), 13; Alain Destexhe, *Rwanda: Essai Sur Le Génocide* (Brussels: Éditions Complexe, 1994), 57–65.

democratisation grew both from the UN and from a new Hutu counter-elite Belgian support shifted from the Tutsi to the Hutu, supporting the Hutu in taking power in 1959 and establishing what would later be called the two “Hutu-republics”, led by presidents Grégoire Kayibanda and Juvénal Habyarimana.²³ During their rule, Belgian support remained strong as Rwanda was internationally praised for its developmental achievements.²⁴ However, after 1988 political stability deteriorated and on October 1st 1990 the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) invaded Rwanda, starting a civil war in which both sides committed human rights violations.²⁵ Consequently, Belgium ended its military support to Rwanda.²⁶ This decision was seen by many supporters of the Rwandan regime as a betrayal and played a significant role in the emergence of an anti-Belgian climate that would eventually lead to the murder of the Belgian blue helmets.²⁷ Nevertheless, Belgium became one of the countries to push for peace negotiations, which led to the signing of the Arusha Peace Agreement on August 4th 1993.²⁸

To ensure a peaceful transition, the Arusha agreement called for an international peacekeeping force, the UN Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR).²⁹ However, the UNAMIR mission was inherently unfit for the reality in Rwanda. Voting immediately after the failure in Somalia, the UN Security Council was reluctant to send peacekeepers to Rwanda and only agreed upon a small and cheap peacekeeping mission with a Chapter VI peacekeeping mandate.³⁰ Being the best trained and equipped contingent, the Belgian blue helmets were seen as the “backbone” of the mission. As the genocide unfolded, UNAMIR was forced to be a passive bystander, not able to do anything to stop the killings due to their

²³ Linda Melvern, *A People Betrayed: The Role of the West in Rwanda's Genocide* (London: Zed Books, 2000), 11–14; Scott Straus, *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power, and War in Rwanda* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 181; Benjamin A. Valentino, *Final Solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide in the Twentieth Century*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (New York: Cornell University Press, 2004), 178–79.

²⁴ Rachel Hayman, ‘Abandoned Orphan, Wayward Child: The United Kingdom and Belgium in Rwanda since 1994’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 4, no. 2 (1 July 2010): 341–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2010.487344>; Jean-Claude Willame, *L'ONU Au Rwanda 1993-1995: La Communauté Internationale à l'Épreuve d'un Génocide*. (Paris: Maisonneuve Larose, 1996), 108–4; Peter Uvin, *Aiding Violence: The Development Enterprise in Rwanda* (West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, 1998), 42–46.

²⁵ Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, 67–74; 90–2.

²⁶ Christopher Charles Taylor, *Sacrifice as Terror: The Rwandan Genocide of 1994* (Oxford: Berg, 1999), 4.

²⁷ African Rights (Organization), *Rwanda*, 1111–14.

²⁸ Organization of African Unity, *Rwanda: The Preventable Genocide* (Addis Ababa: IPEP, 2000), n.n.

²⁹ Vidal, *Stukken van de Waarheid*, 35–37.

³⁰ Melvern, *A People Betrayed*, 74–80. For this “compromise littered with limitations”, Belgium was the first country the UN asked to offer troops, in part because of its traditional relationship with Rwanda, but especially because both the RPF and the Rwandan government specifically asked for the Belgian participation.

limited mandate and equipment.³¹ To no avail, the Belgian government and embassy in Kigali repeatedly asked for reinforcements or a stronger mandate.³²

On April 7th, the shortcomings of UNAMIR became especially apparent when ten Belgian peacekeepers tasked with protecting Prime Minister Uwilingiyimana were killed.³³ Ultimately, this sealed the fate of UNAMIR: after the news of the death of the blue helmets reached Belgium, the Belgian government led by Prime Minister Jean-Luc Dehaene announced it would withdraw the Belgian contingent.³⁴ Moreover, it set up an extensive lobbying campaign to persuade the members of the UN Security Council to withdraw the entire UNAMIR mission, seeking to share the moral responsibility for the consequences of this withdrawal. Eventually, Belgium's attempt to withdraw UNAMIR was successful as the UN Security Council decided to retreat most of the peacekeeping force, leaving behind only a token presence of two hundred and seventy blue helmets. Because of this withdrawal, Rwanda was abandoned by the international community and the perpetrators were strengthened to carry on with the genocide in full impunity.³⁵

With the retreat of the Belgian UNAMIR contingent, the historical role Belgium played in the region came to a symbolic end.³⁶ What followed was “a period of relative disengagement”, in which Belgian foreign policy with regards to Rwanda was labelled as “African ownership”, which in reality translated to a “Africa for the Africans”-approach.³⁷ This approach was mainly advocated by Erik Derycke, who was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1995.³⁸ Despite the relatively quick re-establishment of diplomatic ties with the new RPF government in Rwanda, Belgian-Rwandan relations were marked by mutual distrust during the first years after the genocide, as Belgium did not believe that the RPF government would bring stability in the region, and the Rwandan government in turn

³¹ In his autobiography, Belgian UN commander Luc Marchal wrote that they felt like “the blind in the land of the deaf.” Luc Marchal, *Aan de Poorten van de Rwandese Hel: Getuigenis van Een Peacekeeper* (Leuven: Van Halewyck, 2001), 141–43.

³² Melvern, *A People Betrayed*, 82–108.

³³ These were Corporals Bruno Bassine, Alain Debatty, Christophe Dupont, Stéphane Lhoir, Bruno Meaux, Louis Plescia, Christophe Renwa et Marc Uyttebroeck, First Sergeant Yannick Leroy and Lieutenant Thierry Lotin.

³⁴ Patrick May, *Quatre Rwandais Aux Assises Belges: La Compétence Universelle à l'Épreuve* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001), n.n.

³⁵ Vidal, *Stukken van de Waarheid*, 93–6.

³⁶ Arthur Jay Klinghoffer, *The International Dimension of Genocide in Rwanda* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), 89–90.

³⁷ Hayman, ‘Abandoned Orphan, Wayward Child’, 346; Peter J. Schraeder, ‘Belgium, France, and the United States’, in *Security Dynamics in Africa's Great Lakes Region*, ed. Gilbert M. Khadiagala (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2006), 168–73.

³⁸ Rosoux, ‘The Two Faces of Belgium in the Congo: Perpetrator and Rescuer’, 26–8; Rik Coolsaet, ‘De Rwandese Volkenmoord En Het Belgisch Afrikabeleid van de Jaren 90’, in *België En Zijn Buitenlandse Politiek 1830-2015* (Leuven: Van Halewyck, 2014), n.n.

emphasised Belgium's responsibilities in the genocide.³⁹ Domestically, Belgian public opinion was divided and traumatised by the genocide and the subsequent deaths of the ten blue helmets.⁴⁰

In the second half of the 1990s, Belgian political attention was aimed at the so-called "Rwanda Commission", a commission of inquiry in the Belgian Senate dedicated to Rwanda.⁴¹ In 1996, the families of the Belgian soldiers, together with certain politicians, held a petition to install a commission of inquiry.⁴² This commission was to investigate the actions of Belgium leading up to and during the genocide in Rwanda. Of course, to the Dehaene government this commission came as a burden. After years of what Patrick May called an "auto-amnesty" of "we did what we could", the shortcomings of the Dehaene government were now under close investigation.⁴³ In its final report, published in 1997, it concluded that both the Belgian government and the international community made significant mistakes in Rwanda. Nevertheless, there has never been any acknowledgment or apologies from anyone from the Dehaene government.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the commission published a series of recommendations, among which the suggestion that Belgium should no longer contribute soldiers to a UN mission in one of its former colonies.⁴⁵

After the elections of 1999, a coalition government of the liberal, socialist and green parties, led by liberal politician Guy Verhofstadt, came to power. Verhofstadt was actually a central figure in the earlier Rwanda Commission. The fact that this was the first government since 1958 that did not include the CVP was in part a result of the fact that the commission held the previous government responsible for several mistakes that were made with regards to the events in Rwanda.⁴⁶ This change of government was actually an important factor in the evolution of Belgian foreign policy and international relations with Rwanda. Since the political actors that were in power at the time of the genocide are now part of the opposition, a reassessment of Belgium's role in Rwanda became easier.⁴⁷

³⁹ Andrew Wallis, *Silent Accomplice: The Untold Story of France's Role in the Rwandan Genocide* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2006), 180; Hayman, 'Abandoned Orphan, Wayward Child', 343.

⁴⁰ Willame, *L'ONU Au Rwanda 1993-1995*, 107–22.

⁴¹ Coolsaet, 'De Rwandese Volkenmoord En Het Belgisch Afrikabeleid van de Jaren 90', n.n.

⁴² 'Optocht van Ukkel Naar Flawinne Ter Herdenking van 10 Blauwhelmen', *Belga*, 5 April 1996, <https://academic.gopress.be/Public/index.php?page=archive-article&issueDate=1996-04-05&articleOriginalId=belgabelga03355041996-00000&q=rwanda%20herdenking>.

⁴³ May, *Quatre Rwandais Aux Assises Belges*, n.n.

⁴⁴ Paul Kerstens, "'Deliver Us from Original Sin": Belgian Apologies to Rwanda and the Congo.', in *The Age of Apology: Facing Up to the Past*, ed. Mark Gibney et al. (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2008), n.n.; Marc Reynebeau, *Het Nut van Het Verleden* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2006), 236.

⁴⁵ Coolsaet, 'De Rwandese Volkenmoord En Het Belgisch Afrikabeleid van de Jaren 90', n.n.

⁴⁶ Kerstens, "'Deliver Us from Original Sin": Belgian Apologies to Rwanda and the Congo.', n.n.

⁴⁷ Valérie Rosoux, 'Passé Colonial et Politique Étrangère de La Belgique', *Studia Diplomatica* 62 (2009): n.n.; Valérie Rosoux and Laurence van Ypersele, 'The Belgian National Past: Between Commemoration and Silence', *Memory Studies* 5, no. 1 (2011): 52.

This led to a return of the Central African region as a priority in Belgium's foreign policy.⁴⁸ The renewed engagement was seen as illustrative of the personal ambitions of Minister of Foreign Affairs Louis Michel, who wanted to change the "panic diplomacy" of the Dehaene government to an "ethical diplomacy", based on human rights, which entailed a "cautious engagement" with Rwanda.⁴⁹ Another consequence of this were the apologies Verhofstadt offered on a state visit to commemorate the genocide in Kigali in 2000, and repeated them on the 10th commemoration in 2004. In doing so, Verhofstadt was the second international actor to offer public apologies to Rwanda, after US president Bill Clinton.⁵⁰ Partly as a consequence of these apologies, a memorial for the Belgian peacekeepers was inaugurated at Camp Kigali in 2004.⁵¹ Although these developments could be seen as a start of a more positive engagement with Rwanda, they have also been criticised both in Belgium and Rwanda.⁵² I shall return to a more thorough discussion of these apologies in a later section.

Despite the cautious rapprochement of Belgium towards Rwanda, relations between both countries remained tense. Regularly, the Kagame government publicly denounced Belgium's responsibilities in the genocide. Moreover, Belgium has a large Rwandan community with both supporters and critics of the Kagame government, which adds to Rwanda's distrust towards Belgium. These tensions are also reflected in the broader Belgian society, where some commentators want to build a constructive relationship with the Rwandan government, while others advocate a more critical stance towards its authoritarian style and lack of respect for human rights.⁵³ Finally, in July 2004 Karel De Gucht became the new Minister of Foreign Affairs, bringing yet another new style to Belgian foreign policy in Africa, being less pragmatic and emotional, and more critical and principled.⁵⁴

To conclude, one could say that Belgium's international relations with Rwanda were characterised by a constant shifting between more engagement or voluntarism, and a period of disengagement.⁵⁵ As I have shown in this overview, the foreign policy of Belgium with regards to the Central-African region is closely linked with the memorialisation of the

⁴⁸ Hayman, 'Abandoned Orphan, Wayward Child', 346.

⁴⁹ Kerstens, "'Deliver Us from Original Sin': Belgian Apologies to Rwanda and the Congo.", n.n.

⁵⁰ Girma Negash, *Apologia Politica: States & Their Apologies by Proxy* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006), 98.

⁵¹ 'Rwanda Laakt Falen Internationale Gemeenschap', *De Tijd*, 6 April 2004, <https://academic.gopress.be/Public/index.php?page=archive-article&issueDate=2004-04-06&articleOriginalId=detijdfet212770166042004-00000&q=rwanda%20herdenking>.

⁵² Hayman, 'Abandoned Orphan, Wayward Child', 344; Kerstens, "'Deliver Us from Original Sin': Belgian Apologies to Rwanda and the Congo.", n.n.

⁵³ Hayman, 'Abandoned Orphan, Wayward Child', 344; Coolsaet, 'De Rwandese Volkenmoord En Het Belgisch Afrikabeleid van de Jaren 90', n.n.

⁵⁴ Hans Hoebeke and Koen Vlassenroot, 'Het Belgische Afrikabeleid 2006-2008', *Studia Diplomatica* 62 (2009): 125.

⁵⁵ Coolsaet, 'De Rwandese Volkenmoord En Het Belgisch Afrikabeleid van de Jaren 90', n.n.

genocide. This article aims to contribute to this existing body of literature by emphasising the centrality of the memorialisation of the blue helmets in this process, and the consequences of this centrality for Belgian-Rwandan relations. However, it is important to look at another element that characterised Belgian-Rwandan relations first: the collective memory of colonialism.

(2) Belgium and its colonial past

What separates Belgium from other members of the international community is that the historical relation between Belgium and Rwanda is also a colonial one. Despite Rwanda being a “trusteeship” instead of a colony, in practice it was governed in roughly the same way as Belgian Congo.⁵⁶ Therefore, it is important to take into account Belgium’s overall dealings with colonial memory when discussing its international relations with Rwanda.

During colonial times, all references to the colonial enterprise were aimed at a glorification of Belgium’s achievements in Africa.⁵⁷ This changed after the decolonisation, which formed “the beginning of the erosion of Belgian political ambitions” in Africa.⁵⁸ For most of the second half of the twentieth century, there was hardly any reference to Belgian colonial history in official discourse. Towards the end of the century, there was a general lack of interest in Africa among a significant part of the political elite in Belgium, who saw the colonial past as a shameful period that was best left in the past. This disinterested attitude was also reflected in the concept of “African ownership” that dominated Belgian foreign policy in the years after the genocide.⁵⁹ Another illustration of this attitude was the extent to which the genocide and in particular the murder of the Belgian blue helmets came as a shock to Belgium. Since decolonisation in Rwanda did not come with violence against the coloniser, the transition was seen as successful, and the image of Rwanda as a “model colony” was not shattered. Therefore, Paul Kerstens argues, “the genocide in Rwanda was a belated shock of decolonisation.”⁶⁰ Even stronger, Danielle de Lame states that the murder of the Belgian peacekeepers made Belgium “suddenly discover the hatred felt for them by a people whose love they had taken for granted and from whom they expected gratitude.”⁶¹

Of course, there were certain efforts of introspection afterwards, in which Belgium reconsidered the role it played in Rwanda. One could see the inquiry of the Rwanda Commission as one of the first instances of this introspection. Indeed, the recommendation

⁵⁶ Kerstens, “‘Deliver Us from Original Sin’: Belgian Apologies to Rwanda and the Congo.’, n.n.

⁵⁷ Rosoux and van Ypersele, ‘The Belgian National Past: Between Commemoration and Silence’, 50.

⁵⁸ Schraeder, ‘Belgium, France, and the United States’, 164–68.

⁵⁹ Rosoux and van Ypersele, ‘The Belgian National Past: Between Commemoration and Silence’, 51; Schraeder, ‘Belgium, France, and the United States’, 164–68.

⁶⁰ Kerstens, “‘Deliver Us from Original Sin’: Belgian Apologies to Rwanda and the Congo.’, n.n.

⁶¹ Danielle de Lame, ‘(Im)Possible Belgian Mourning for Rwanda’, *African Studies Review* 48, no. 2 (2005): 38.

not to contribute anymore to UN missions in former colonies was at least an implicit acknowledgment of the controversial role Belgium played in those countries. Nevertheless, Belgium contributed, albeit logistically, to all EU missions in the DRC.⁶² Moreover, refraining from sending troops to former colonies is in itself not actively dealing with one's colonial past, but rather a non-engagement with the countries with which one shares this past. Furthermore, Balint, Evans and McMillan have shown how, despite certainly having positive effects, the Rwanda commission failed to "acknowledge and address the structural injustice occasioned by colonial rule."⁶³ It discusses the colonial past shared between Belgium and Rwanda, but fails to connect it sufficiently to the "contemporary focus of inquiry", thereby "downplaying" the role of that past.⁶⁴

Actual change came with the establishment of the Verhofstadt government in 1999. This government "encouraged a critical acceptance of the country's colonial heritage."⁶⁵ Essential to Michel's "moral diplomacy" was the advancing of "adult relations" with former colonies based upon the acknowledgement of Belgium's colonial debt. The change of leadership was central to this attitude. As mentioned above, the Verhofstadt government replaced the Dehaene government, thereby sending the CVP into opposition for the first time since 1958. As a result, the powers that were at the time of decolonisation as well as during the genocide were no longer in charge in 1999, which made efforts of soul-searching easier. Besides these factors, there were others, such as the federalisation of Belgium, which allowed for criticism of the national past along internal political cleavages, as well as bilateral considerations with regards to the DRC. However, the scope of this paper does not allow me to go further into detail about these factors.⁶⁶

This process of addressing the colonial past came to an end in July 2004, when De Gucht was appointed as Minister of Foreign Affairs. De Gucht adopted the ambiguous attitude of acknowledging the colonial past but resisting what he called "misplaced feelings of guilt", thereby denying the contemporary consequences of colonialism. Additionally, only the period of the Congo Free State was deserving of criticism according to De Gucht, with Belgian Congo being presented as the 'golden age' of Congo. With this change in attitude, the period of soul-searching came to a provisional end, and a renewed period of relative disinterest with the colonial past began. At the end of her article *Passé Colonial et Politique Étrangère de la Belgique*, Rosoux asks four questions, of which two are specifically relevant

⁶² Rosoux, 'The Two Faces of Belgium in the Congo: Perpetrator and Rescuer', 28.

⁶³ Jennifer Balint, Julie Evans, and Nesam McMillan, 'Justice Claims in Colonial Contexts: Commissions of Inquiry in Historical Perspective', *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 42, no. 1 (2 January 2016): 85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13200968.2016.1175335>.

⁶⁴ Balint, Evans, and McMillan, 88.

⁶⁵ Rosoux and van Ypersele, 'The Belgian National Past: Between Commemoration and Silence', 51.

⁶⁶ Rosoux and van Ypersele, 51–54; Rosoux, 'Passé Colonial et Politique Étrangère de La Belgique', 4–5; Kerstens, "'Deliver Us from Original Sin': Belgian Apologies to Rwanda and the Congo.", n.n.

to this research. The first is: is the colonial past really past? Indeed, colonial knowledge systems and frames of reference continue to shape Belgian public and private lives, including the efforts made in the period between 1999 and 2004. The second question relates to this: Rosoux asks how Belgium, in the light of this unprocessed past, should respond to current challenges in international relations with her former colonies.⁶⁷ I shall return to this question later, when we discuss Belgium's position towards the human rights violations of the current Rwandan government.

(3) Collective memory of violence in international relations

Before we move on to the actual findings of this research, I discuss some insights from the literature on the role of collective memories of violence in international relations. I will do this by relating the Belgian-Rwandan case to three other cases: the collective memory of violence in Franco-Algerian relations, the memory of Srebrenica in the Netherlands and the impact of the 9/11 memory on international relations in general.

When discussing the collective memory of violence in international relations, Rosoux points to a tension between the “choice of the past”, being the use of the past by political actors, and the “weight of the past”, which in turn influences foreign policy. Here, it becomes clear that foreign policy both shapes and is shaped by collective memory. As to the uses of the past, there are many factors that determine how an actor will shape the memory, ranging from the international and national context to the identities of the partners involved and the amount of time between the past event and the use of the memory itself. With regards to the weight of the past, Rosoux remarks that official memory and lived memory are not the same, but that they influence each other. Therefore, official memory is, at least in part, limited by its resonance with lived memories.⁶⁸

The Franco-Algerian case allows us to explore some of the theoretical considerations on the collective memory of violence in international relations. Of course, there are significant differences between this case and the Belgian-Rwandan case, as the nature of the conflict was entirely different. Still, both international relations are shaped by a shared colonial past, a shared memory of violence – albeit different in nature – and an incomplete process of normalisation. As forgetting the past is not possible after a large-scaled violent conflict, Rosoux discerns approaches the involved parties can choose: they can emphasise the conflictuous element in the relationship, they can minimise it, or they can perform

⁶⁷ Rosoux, ‘Passé Colonial et Politique Étrangère de La Belgique’, 9–16; Rosoux and van Ypersele, ‘The Belgian National Past: Between Commemoration and Silence’, 51–54.

⁶⁸ Valérie Rosoux, ‘De l’Ambivalence de La Mémoire Au Lendemain d’un Conflit’, in *Questions d’Histoire Contemporaine: Conflits, Mémoires et Identités*, ed. Laurence van Ypersele (Paris: PUF, 2006), n.n.; Valérie Rosoux, ‘Negotiating Friendship: Franco-German and Franco-Algerian Cases’, *PIN-Points*, no. 43 (2016): 18–19.

what she calls “memory work” (“*travail de mémoire*”). This “memory work” takes into account the possible “conflict of interpretations” that inevitably follows after past violence and places these interpretations in a historical perspective. In doing so, the plurality of perspectives is acknowledged, without resorting to absolute relativism.⁶⁹ It is through this conceptual frame that Rosoux explains why the Franco-Algerian reconciliation did not work. In this case, France and Algeria could not reach a consensus on the interpretation of the Algerian war.⁷⁰ This insight is very relevant for the Belgian-Rwandan case. The current Rwandan government, led by Paul Kagame, heavily relies on the memory of genocide for its legitimization. It has formulated an official memory, of which deviating interpretations are not accepted.⁷¹ However, this official memory is very selective in who counts as a victim and who does not. For example, Jessica Auchter states that in framing the genocide exclusively as the “Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda”, the trauma of others, for example the moderate Hutu, is not acknowledged.⁷² Therefore, both in Rwanda and in Belgium, many critical and dissident voices challenge this version of the genocide created by the RPF.⁷³

Looking at the memory of Srebrenica in the Netherlands allows us to get more insight in how Belgium dealt with the memory of a failed UN peacekeeping mission. As mentioned before, the failure of the intervention in Somalia was one of the causes of the inadequacy of

⁶⁹ Rosoux, ‘De l’Ambivalence de La Mémoire Au Lendemain d’un Conflit’, n.n.; Markus Breitweg, ‘Collective Memory After Violent Conflicts: Can Collective Amnesia Ever Be a Sustainable Option for Reconciliation Initiatives?’ (5th ECPR Graduate Student Conference, Innsbruck, 2014).

⁷⁰ Rosoux, ‘Negotiating Friendship’, 19. Of course, building a completely shared narrative of a violent past is often nearly impossible. There are, nevertheless, more minimalist approaches to this “memory work”, in which different or even irreconcilable interpretations exist next to each other. Still, there needs to be a basic acceptance of the perspectives of all parties. For more on this, see: Valérie Rosoux, “‘Du Désespoir à l’Optimisme”: Comment Faire Du Clair Avec de l’Obscur?”, *Mémoires En Jeu* 3 (2017): 88–94. For an overview of some efforts that we can consider as forms of this “memory work”, see: Berber Bevernage, ‘Narrating Pasts for Peace? A Critical Analysis of Some Recent Initiatives of Historical Reconciliation through “Historical Dialogue” and “Shared History”’ (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019), Pp. 71–93., in *The Ethos of History: Time and Responsibility*, ed. Stefan Helgesson and Jayne Svenungsson (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019), 71–93.

⁷¹ Filip Reyntjens, ‘Understanding Rwandan Politics Through the Longue Durée: From the Precolonial to the Post-Genocide Era’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 12, no. 3 (2018): 527–28; David Newbury and Filip Reyntjens, ‘Alison Des Forges and Rwanda: From Engaged Scholarship to Informed Activism’, *Canadian Journal of African Studies/La Revue Canadienne Des Études Africaines* 44, no. 1 (2010): 52–60.

⁷² Jessica Auchter, ‘Narrating Trauma: Individuals, Communities, Storytelling’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 47, no. 2 (2019): 277.

⁷³ These voices range from taking a critical stance towards the Kagame government and its human rights violations to the so-called “second genocide”-hypothesis, which accuses the RPF of also having performed a genocide on the Hutu immediately after the first genocide on the Tutsi. There is also a small but vocal minority denying the genocide altogether, although it should be mentioned that this opinion is largely not accepted. It is not the aim of this article to comment on this debate. For a quick overview of some arguments, see: Helen M. Hintjens, ‘Explaining the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda’, *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 37, no. 2 (1999): 241–86; Reyntjens, ‘Rwanda, Ten Years On’, 177–210; Philip Verwimp, ‘Testing the Double-Genocide Thesis for Central and Southern Rwanda’, *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 47, no. 4 (2003): 423–42; Judi Rever, *In Praise of Blood: The Crimes of the Rwandan Patriotic Front* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2018); Jean Flamme, *Rwanda 1994: De Samenwerking van de Machtigen* (Kalmthout: Van Halewyck, 2019). Of course, this list is not exhaustive.

UNAMIR.⁷⁴ Together with the Srebrenica massacre in 1995, these failures marked the end of a “naive optimism” surrounding peace operations after the end of the Cold War.⁷⁵ After these missions, a debate on the concepts of peacekeeping and interventions was started as the UN started an investigation of its own operations.⁷⁶ Additionally, the Srebrenica case is particularly interesting because of how the Netherlands processed this tragedy. Indeed, following the events in Srebrenica, a “lingering, painful national debate” was held in the Netherlands, in which Prime Minister Wim Kok resigned, causing the entire Dutch government to fall.⁷⁷ Until this day, Srebrenica is regularly invoked in Dutch media or public debates.⁷⁸ Here, this case differs from the Belgian-Rwandan case, where the government had not fallen, and, as I will elaborate on later, one could even say that public awareness of the Rwandan genocide is declining. However, Erna Rijdsdijk highlighted an interesting element of the Dutch processing of Srebrenica. She argues that in calling Srebrenica a “Dutch trauma”, there has been a “trauma inflation” in which Srebrenica is mainly framed as a Dutch failure from which the Netherlands have learned a practical lesson, thereby ignoring the lived experiences of the Bosnian survivors.⁷⁹ I argue that one could also apply this logic to Belgium: the Belgian preoccupation with the ten paratroopers also reflects a form of “collective amnesia”, in which both the Rwandan victims and Belgian historical responsibilities are obscured.⁸⁰

To conclude, I have to discuss the impact of the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001 on international relations as a whole, and the implications for Africa. Indeed, these attacks did not only change the international relations of the US. Considering the central role of the US in global politics, international relations as a whole were affected, with mainly negative consequences for Africa. As the war against international terrorism claimed a lot of attention from the international community, the indifference of the international community towards Africa that played a large role in the failure of UNAMIR was likely to

⁷⁴ Trevor Findlay, *The Use of Force in UN Peace Operations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 276–77; Brent J. Steele and Jacque L. Amoureux, ‘NGOs and Monitoring Genocide: The Benefits and Limits to Human Rights Panopticism’, *Millennium - Journal of International Studies*, 2016, 425–28.

⁷⁵ Thijs Brocades Zaalberg, ‘De nasleep van Somalië, Rwanda en Srebrenica: overeenkomsten en verschillen’, *BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review* 125, no. 1 (2010): 45; Christopher Hobson, ‘Responding to Failure: The Responsibility to Protect after Libya’, *Millennium - Journal of International Studies* 44, no. 3 (1 June 2016): 433–34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829816640607>.

⁷⁶ Joyce van de Bildt, ‘Srebrenica: A Dutch National Trauma’, *Journal of Peace, Conflict & Development* 21 (2015): 136–39. See also: Bruce D. Jones, ‘“Intervention without Borders”: Humanitarian Intervention in Rwanda, 1990–94’, *Millennium - Journal of International Studies* 24, no. 2 (1995): 225–49.

⁷⁷ van de Bildt, ‘Srebrenica: A Dutch National Trauma’, 116–40.

⁷⁸ van de Bildt, ‘Srebrenica: A Dutch National Trauma’, 116–40.

⁷⁹ Erna Rijdsdijk, ‘“Forever Connected”: State Narratives and the Dutch Memory of Srebrenica’, in *Narratives of Justice In and Out of the Courtroom: Former Yugoslavia and Beyond*, ed. Dubravka Zarkov and Marlies Glasius, Springer Series in Transitional Justice (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2014), 132–42, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-04057-8_7.

⁸⁰ Hayman, ‘Abandoned Orphan, Wayward Child’, 355.

exacerbate, rather than diminish.⁸¹ When discussing Belgian foreign policy towards Rwanda, this evolution in the international context should be taken into consideration.

IV. Belgian-Rwandan relations in four themes

In the following section, I will present my findings by discussing some of the themes that appeared most salient during the interviews and linking them to other source material. Chronologically, these are: the UNAMIR mission and the withdrawal of the Belgian contingent; the subsequent period of disengagement under the Dehaene government; the Rwanda Commission of 1997; and the subsequent period of increased engagement under the Verhofstadt government, characterised by the apologies offered in 2000 and 2004.

(1) UNAMIR and the withdrawal of the Belgian contingent

When talking to diplomats, politicians and researchers about Belgium's participation in UNAMIR, the notion of a shared past between Belgium and Rwanda was mentioned almost without exception. Some mentioned the colonial past specifically as a challenge for Belgium's participation, saying the Belgian government was "convinced it would be best for a former colonial power not to participate." However, most simply explained that Belgium was "critically engaged" in "the future of a country with which we had close ties", or that Belgium did not participate out of political or economic interest, but simply because of "history". As to the withdrawal of the Belgian contingent, most of the respondents point to the death of the blue helmets as a direct cause for this decision, although one should take into account that the withdrawal was also linked to the unwillingness of the security council to grant Belgium's request for a stronger mandate. Of course, the implications of this withdrawal provoked mixed reactions. In one of our conversations, a Belgian diplomat said:

"Yes, the consequences of the withdrawal were bad, but UNAMIR could not even protect its own blue helmets. Then how was it supposed to protect civilians? The blue helmets were being killed, and Dallaire knew. He might have had his reasons, but still those blue helmets were massacred for hours. So, the conclusion was that UNAMIR could not protect them. The Belgians were a target, so there was logic in the withdrawal. Okay, there was less logic in the lobbying, that

⁸¹ Omofolabo Ajayi-Soyinka, 'The Fashion of Democracy: September 11 and Africa', *Signs* 29, no. 2 (2004): 604–6; Stephen Ellis and David Killingray, 'Africa after 11 September 2001', *African Affairs* 101, no. 402 (2002): 5–81; Nicholas J. Wheeler, 'The Humanitarian Responsibilities of Sovereignty: Explaining the Development of a New Norm of Military Intervention for Humanitarian Purposes in International Society', in *Humanitarian Intervention and International Relations*, by Jennifer M. Welsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 50–51.

cannot be justified. Belgium should have kept pushing for reinforcement but insist that they would not do it. Maybe they could have still withdrawn, arguing that Belgium had become a liability for UNAMIR. [...] They did not have this debate, and that was a big mistake.”⁸²

Several arguments are generally used to defend or at least explain the decision of the Belgian government. Besides the inadequacy of UNAMIR and the anti-Belgian climate, it was also often argued that there was no opposition to the withdrawal when the decision was made in parliament. Prime Minister Verhofstadt later even admitted he “did not think he would have made another decision.”⁸³ Other respondents condemned the Belgian withdrawal, pointing to the “enormous consequences” of this decision. One much cited example were the killings at the *École Technique Officielle (ETO) Don Bosco*, where between two and three thousand people had sought refuge only to be slaughtered by Hutu militia after the Belgian peacekeepers who were protecting the school were evacuated.⁸⁴ After the retreat of the Belgians, the political counsellor of Jacques-Roger Booh Booh, the special UN representative in Rwanda, said: “Because Belgium has ten men dead, it does not give a damn about thousands of blacks who are going to be killed.” Belgian UNAMIR commander Colonel Luc Marshal shared this opinion and said: “In such circumstances, it is very difficult to be the representative of your country.”⁸⁵ In the documentary *Terug naar Rwanda*, Sandrine Loix, the widow of lieutenant Lotin, called the withdrawal of the Belgian soldiers “a second crime, allowing the genocide to take place.”⁸⁶ However, it is important to underscore that while the opinions on the actual responsibility of Belgium with regards to the withdrawal of the Belgian contingent vary, there was more consensus among the respondents with regards to condemning the Belgian lobby-campaign to ensure the withdrawal of the entire UNAMIR. Reactions on this varied from “not terribly heroic” to “inexcusable”.

(2) Disengagement: the Dehaene government after the genocide

After the withdrawal of UNAMIR, there was a disengagement with Rwanda in Belgian foreign policy, officially referred to as “African Ownership”. As a Belgian diplomat argued:

⁸² Interview with a Belgian diplomat, own translation.

⁸³ ‘Dehaene en Claes Blijven bij Standpunt in Rwandaproces’, *De Standaard*, 25 May 2007, https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf25052007_043.

⁸⁴ Vidal, *Stukken van de Waarheid*, 103–6.

⁸⁵ Alison Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999), 622.

⁸⁶ ‘De Moord Op de Tien Belgische Blauwhelmen’, *Terug Naar Rwanda* (Canvas, 2019), VRT-archief.

“Between 1994 and the end of the war, Willy Claes was succeeded by Erik Derycke as Minister of Foreign Affairs. [...] He, as well as the PS [Socialist Party], pleaded an “out of Africa” policy. This term was never used, but very cynical and hard language was used. It was given the term “African Ownership”. They [African people] also asked for this, and internationally it was applauded, but for the cabinet, it was very cynical: they wanted to get rid of it. Another term was “multilateralisation”, Belgium enrolled in the European policy towards Africa. This policy was non-existent, it was nothing more than just giving money. Belgium had an influence here, [...] it was “leading from behind”. This also had much to do with the temper of Derycke. He thought we had done enough. Dehaene was also not interested in Central Africa.”⁸⁷

Generally, this disengagement is attributed to a combination of two factors: a “*Rwanda-fatigue*” in Belgian politics after the genocide and the personal inclinations of the people in charge.

Domestically, this disengagement was reflected in the contacts between the government and the families of the blue helmets. As a minister from the Dehaene government said during our conversation: “Those contacts [with the families] were dramatic, of course. Their loss was irreparable.”⁸⁸ The families themselves argue that more could have been done to acknowledge the responsibilities of the government and the mistakes that were made. For example, in several newspaper articles as well as in the *Terug naar Rwanda*-documentary, Sandrine Loix expresses her regret that none of the actors, military or political, have admitted their mistakes or offered their apologies.

Finally, at the level of diplomacy, there were “cautious” attempts to re-establish international relations with Rwanda. After the reopening of the embassy in Kigali, Belgian diplomacy was mainly aimed at “stability” and the “normalisation” of Belgian-Rwandan relations. Diplomats who were involved in Belgian diplomacy at the time described the relations between both countries as “correct, without more”, “a cold relationship, with little love.” As mentioned before, there was a lot of mutual mistrust between both countries, with Belgium being rather critical towards the sustainability of the RPF government, which in turn did not hesitate to emphasise Belgium’s responsibility in the tragedy.

(3) The Rwanda Commission

In the installing of the commission, two elements were at play. On the one hand, there was an emotional element: the events in Rwanda and the death of the peacekeepers had “traumatised” Belgium, so the commission came as an answer to a “real societal demand for

⁸⁷ Interview with a Belgian diplomat, own translation.

⁸⁸ Interview with a former Belgian Minister, own translation.

truth searching.”⁸⁹ As a government official said, the “deaths of the peacekeepers were the direct cause of the commission.” Several researchers backed this remark, saying that “there would have been no commission if Belgians had not been killed.” On the other hand, there were also political motives involved in the Rwanda Commission. In a newspaper article, Colonel Marchal said:

“At first, I thought the Rwanda Commission was honestly looking for the truth. But soon I knew that Guy Verhofstadt as rapporteur wanted, above all else, to put the former government in a bad light. The liberals dreamt of using this commission to cause the fall of the Dehaene government. Verhofstadt wanted nothing else than to confirm his presuppositions by removing bits and pieces of testimonies out of their context. That is crystal clear in the surreal motivations he ascribed to us for doing nothing to save the ten paratroopers on April 7th. The truth is that I did not know what was happening where.”⁹⁰ [Own translation]

Indeed, VRT journalist Katrien Vanderschoot also addresses in her book on the commission that political motivations played a role, already “burying” some of its recommendations as early as 1998.⁹¹ However, one should not overestimate this political element. Still, the way in which both international relations and domestic cleavages influenced this commission points to a process which a Belgian diplomat called “the nationalisation of international politics and the internationalisation of national politics.”

With regards to the working and the results of the Rwanda Commission, there are some general remarks to make, relating to both the shortcomings and the achievements of this commission. In our conversation, a journalist stated:

“A lot of the recommendations [of the commission] made sense, but there were also limitations. Initially, the commission was mainly based on hearings, it only became a commission of inquiry later on. So, lies have also been told. Some people outlined their position very meticulously, but some of them may have also been lying. It was definitely also a political game between certain parties, which certainly put the CVP in a delicate position. But in general, there was a healthy end result and justified conclusions were taken, especially if the report is complemented with the research of military courts and Human Rights Watch reports. It certainly had a soothing effect on everything.”⁹²

⁸⁹ Interview with a journalist, own translation.

⁹⁰ “‘Ik Werd Gedwongen Hen Als Een Lafaard in de Steek Te Laten’””, *Het Nieuwsblad*, 5 April 2004, <https://academic.gopress.be/Public/index.php?page=archive-article&issueDate=2004-04-05&articleOriginalId=hetnieuwsbladvummarcialmailart5042004-00000&q=rwanda%20herdenking>.

⁹¹ Katrien Vanderschoot, *Graven in Rwanda: De Senaatscommissie en Persoonlijke Getuigenissen* (Antwerpen: Icarus, 1998), 1–12.

⁹² Interview with a journalist, own translation.

Despite the interference of political motivations, most argued that results of the Rwanda Commission were relatively correct. Furthermore, the conclusions of the Rwanda Commission were a turning point in the attitude of Belgium towards its role in the genocide.⁹³ Indeed, a Belgian diplomat said that it led to a “re-evaluation of what happened and the responsibilities of Belgium.” Especially the conclusion that the death of the blue helmets could have been prevented resonated in Belgian press.⁹⁴ However, there was also criticism on the scope and the depth of the investigation. Despite having brought about a significant re-evaluation of Belgium’s role and responsibilities, most observers raise the issue that there are still many questions left unanswered, or even unasked. I have already touched upon this earlier in this article, and I will return to this argument later.

To conclude, the commission also had consequences beyond Rwanda. This is illustrated by the following quote from a Belgian diplomat:

“I did, however, change the Belgian participation in UN peacekeeping missions. Now we insisted on being better prepared, and we were not to participate in countries with which we shared a colonial past.”⁹⁵

(4) Renewed engagement: the Verhofstadt government and official apologies.

When Verhofstadt’s “purple-green government” took power in 1999, Minister of Foreign Affairs Louis Michel started a “conscious and outspoken” policy towards Africa. In doing so, he made Central Africa once more “the flagship of Belgian Foreign Policy”.⁹⁶ It is important to note here that this was not a complete “one-on-one” with the memory of the Rwanda genocide or the Belgian blue helmets. As one of the researchers remarked, this was at times “at odds with the recommendations of the parliamentary commission.” Other reasons were given for this shift in foreign policy: the personal ambitions of Louis Michel, a possible emotional component as a legacy from colonial times and simply the opportunity of playing a role on a higher level in the international community as one of Rwanda’s main partners.

For this research, the most important aspect of this period was of course the apologies offered by Guy Verhofstadt in 2000 and in 2004. Throughout my research, this was by far the most polarising element of Belgian-Rwandan relations. On the one hand, there are those who completely endorse these apologies, arguing that offering apologies was the right

⁹³ May, *Quatre Rwandais Aux Assises Belges*, n.n.

⁹⁴ ‘Moord Op Para’s Was Te Voorkomen’, *Het Belang Van Limburg*, n.d., <https://academic.gopress.be/Public/index.php?page=archive-article&issueDate=1997-01-08&articleOriginalId=hetbelangvanlimburg812138011997-00000&q=rwanda%20para%27s>.

⁹⁵ Interview with a Belgian diplomat, own translation.

⁹⁶ Wim Van De Velden, ‘Genocide Was Keerpunt in Belgische Buitenlandse Politiek’, *De Tijd*, 5 April 2004, <https://academic.gopress.be/Public/index.php?page=archive-article&issueDate=2004-04-05&articleOriginalId=detijdfet212185675042004-00000&q=rwanda%20herdenking>.

and the only option to normalise Belgian-Rwandan relations and to “alleviate the sense of guilt with which the Belgians had to live for too long.”⁹⁷ On the other hand, there are those who are completely opposed to the idea of apologising. As a former Belgian Minister said:

“I never understood the apologies, we have nothing to apologise for. We were a small country that tried to take up its responsibilities from the start, despite the unwillingness of many actors. Moreover, from the moment that they decided we should, or wanted to, do a gesture, it is difficult to avoid that scoundrel Kagame.”⁹⁸

However, most observers take a nuanced stance on the apologies, endorsing the idea behind them but criticising their execution. A Belgian diplomat remarked:

“As such, there is no problem with apologising for the withdrawal of the troops. A country should acknowledge its historical responsibility. The only consideration is that these apologies played into a certain ideological framework created by the Rwandan government. The ideology is that the Hutu-vs-Tutsi distinction is a colonial invention, that there is no difference between them and that this distinction is not present anymore in contemporary Rwanda. Okay, but then that also has to be true in practice. The RPF also has its responsibilities concerning human rights violations. The apologies should be seen as given to the Rwandan people, not to the government.”⁹⁹

Indeed, despite the righteousness of Belgian apologies, there are certain aspects to the apologies that are criticised. Even before their departure in 2000, there was a debate on whether or not it was appropriate for Verhofstadt to lead a delegation to Kigali in the first place.¹⁰⁰ As Filip Reyntjens wrote: “However, it is not the RPF who has been the victim of the genocide, but the hundreds of thousands of Tutsi civilians.”¹⁰¹ A journalist summarised it clearly:

⁹⁷ ‘België En Rwanda Kunnen Weer Samenleven’, *De Morgen*, 8 April 2000, <https://academic.gopress.be/Public/index.php?page=archive-article&issueDate=2000-04-08&articleOriginalId=demorgenpersgroep08-koen-analyse8042000-00000&q=rwanda%20herdenking>.

⁹⁸ Interview with a former Belgian Minister, own translation.

⁹⁹ Interview with a Belgian diplomat, own translation.

¹⁰⁰ Koen Vidal, ‘Standpunt’, *De Morgen*, 7 April 2014, <https://academic.gopress.be/Public/index.php?page=archive-article&issueDate=2014-04-07&articleOriginalId=de-morgenpersgroepdmo311684527042014-00000&q=rwanda%20herdenking>; ‘Ex-Premier Faustin Twagiramungu Bekritiseert Belgisch Bezoek Aan Kigali’, *De Morgen*, 5 April 2000, <https://academic.gopress.be/Public/index.php?page=archive-article&issueDate=2000-04-05&articleOriginalId=demorgenpersgroep05-rwanda---kader5042000-00000&q=rwanda%20herdenking>; ‘Neutrale Reizen Naar Rwanda Bestaan Niet’, *De Morgen*, 7 April 2000, <https://academic.gopress.be/Public/index.php?page=archive-article&issueDate=2000-04-07&articleOriginalId=demorgenpersgroep07--rwanda-analyse7042000-00000&q=rwanda%20herdenking>.

¹⁰¹ Filip Reyntjens, ‘Le Difficile Débat sur le Rwanda en France’, Club de Mediapart, 11 October 2017, <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/fatimad/blog/111017/le-difficile-debat-sur-le-rwanda-en-france>.

“A lot of elements were at play, also in international relations. Matters have interfered unhealthily. There has been a process of legitimate processing and apologising, but this came in a period in which there already should have been criticism on the RPF government. Still, this does not diminish the righteousness of the apologies.”¹⁰²

“Belgium was in a very uncomfortable decision. Michel could not tell the difference between consciously dealing with the past and standing in the present in a righteous way.”¹⁰³

Also, in apologising Verhofstadt only took responsibility for the role Belgium played during the genocide, thereby not addressing the legacy of the colonial past. However, this aspect has rarely been mentioned in the source material I used, with the exception of one newspaper article by Ignace Demaerel and Philip Quarles van Ufford.¹⁰⁴

V. How the blue helmets shaped Belgian politics

The present section will proceed to explain how the collective memory of violence, embodied by the ten blue helmets in Belgium, can shape politics both domestically and internationally. To do this, I discuss the influence of this memory on three levels: domestic politics in Belgium, bilateral international relations between Belgium and Rwanda, and international relations in general.

(1) The Rwanda Commission and change of leadership

The aim of this article is mainly about exploring how the memory of a violent past is used in international relations and how it in turn shapes these relations. However, in this paragraph I try to show how this violent past can return in domestic politics as well. Especially in Belgium, where the Rwandan genocide ties together the memory of violence with colonial memory and domestic political cleavages, national and international politics were inextricably linked.

For Belgium, the death of the ten Belgian blue helmets brought the violence home. Within days of hearing the news of Lieutenant Lotin and his men, the Belgian government announced the withdrawal of the Belgian contingent and lobbied for the withdrawal of UNAMIR. In the following years, there was a period of disengagement with Rwanda under

¹⁰² Interview with a journalist, own translation.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ “België Moet Excuses Aanbieden Voor Schuldig Verzuim Ten Tijde van Genocide in Rwanda”, *Knack.Be*, 7 April 2019, <https://academic.gopress.be/Public/index.php?page=archive-article&issueDate=2019-04-07&articleOriginalId=httpwwwknackbeopoint323874155467042019-00000&q=rwanda%20herdenking>.

the name of “African ownership”. However, under pressure from certain politicians, especially from liberal parties, as well as from the families of the blue helmets, the memory of the peacekeepers resurfaced in Belgian domestic politics with the installation of the Rwanda Commission. The centrality of the blue helmets in this is obvious: not only was the main aim of the commission to find out what led to the deaths of the Belgian soldiers, the actual installation of the commission heavily depended on the pressure from the relatives of these soldiers. As several of the respondents pointed out: if Belgians had not been killed in Rwanda, there would have been no commission.

As discussed above, the Rwanda Commission in itself was highly politicised. On the level of domestic politics, it is mainly important to note that this commission was instrumental in the power struggle between Verhofstadt’s liberal party and Dehaene’s CVP. Indeed, indirectly, the memory of the ten blue helmets helped bring about a change of leadership domestically. Of course, one should be careful not to dedicate too much importance to this factor, since domestic politics are shaped by many things. However, the conclusion that the death of the peacekeepers could have been avoided was a very powerful idea, and we can certainly say that this played a role.

However, there are some critical remarks that should be made here. First, the centrality of the blue helmets in Belgium’s treatment of the genocide memory reflects the issue of “trauma inflation” we discussed through the Dutch case of Srebrenica. Indeed, just like the story of Srebrenica is treated like a “Dutch story” in the Netherlands, one can argue that by focusing mainly on the blue helmets, the Belgian memory of the genocide is overshadowed by its memory of the peacekeepers, thereby also making the Rwandan genocide a “Belgian story”, obscuring the lived experiences of the many Rwandan victims, including Rwandan refugees currently living in Belgium.

Secondly, it is striking that while the memory of the Belgian blue helmets played a significant role in Belgian politics, very little attention is paid to the Belgian civilians who were killed during the genocide. One can understand that the memory of the Belgian soldiers is more powerful politically. However, dealing with the memory of past violence also requires taking care of the acknowledgment and remembrance of all victims. As journalist Jeroen Van Horenbeek wrote in *De Morgen*: “One way or another, the Belgian government does not seem to be able to deal with the families of victims in dignity.”¹⁰⁵ Indeed, this is even a criticism heard by family members of the blue helmets, of which one said that the commemorations in Belgium are “a joke.”

¹⁰⁵ Jeroen Van Horenbeek, ‘Standpunt’, *De Morgen*, 9 April 2019, <https://academic.gopress.be/Public/index.php?page=archive-article&issueDate=2019-04-09&articleOriginalId=demorgenpersgroep107978699042019-00000&q=rwanda%20herdenking>.

To conclude, despite the “trauma inflation” talked about earlier in comparison to Srebrenica in the Netherlands, the vividness of the genocide memory in Belgium seems rather limited. Belgium still does not seem to be able to fully address this – dormant, one might say – memory of the Rwandan genocide. Whereas Srebrenica caused the Dutch government to fall, several people noted that in Belgium, “the fall of the government was never an option.” Whereas Srebrenica is part of the official Dutch ‘Canon’, in Belgium we “already passed the peak of attention for the blue helmets.”¹⁰⁶ One can wonder why, while the memory of the blue helmets has shown to be a potentially strong instrument in domestic politics, this memory is so treated in such a shallow way? Is it because this memory does not have much ‘weight’ of itself, as Rosoux conceptualised it?

(2) Apologising: from disengagement to a renewed foreign policy

Needless to say, the withdrawal of the Belgian contingent and the subsequent period of disengagement greatly impacted bilateral relations between Belgium and Rwanda. Following the death of ten of its soldiers, the Belgian government had the feeling that Belgium “did enough already” and “had paid the price”, while the Rwandan government accused Belgium of being responsible for the genocide, both because of the colonial past and because of the fact that Belgium abandoned Rwanda while the genocide unfolded.

This changed after the Verhofstadt government came to power. Here, domestic politics and international politics influenced each other. As I said before, the memory of the blue helmets was instrumental in the installation of the Rwanda commission, which, among other factors, helped bring about this change of leadership. This had a large impact on international relations, as new Minister of Foreign Affairs Louis Michel had the personal ambition of returning Africa to the top of the political agenda, thereby starting a trend towards more engagement in bilateral relations with Rwanda. Even more important was the fact that Guy Verhofstadt was personally very much involved in the Rwanda Commission, an involvement which almost directly led to the decision to offer his apologies to Rwanda on behalf of Belgium. Indeed, a diplomat stated that this period could be seen as “a demarcated period, in which causes and consequences are clear.”

However, domestically the apologies were not without controversy. As discussed above, even those who supported the concept of apologies criticised the delivery of these apologies. The most salient critique, naturally, is the fact that these were seemingly directed towards Paul Kagame and his RPF government, which is broadly criticised for its authoritarian style and human rights violation. However, one can also criticise the content of

¹⁰⁶ Rijdsdijk, “‘Forever Connected’”, 140–42.

these apologies. As discussed above, Verhofstadt only apologised for the responsibilities Belgium had in the genocide as part of the international community. In doing so, the Belgian government has not yet succeeded in acknowledging its historical responsibility, owed to the colonial past.

As I said before, Verhofstadt's apologies helped normalise the international relations between Belgium and Rwanda, allowing for the period of increased engagement between 1999 and 2004. Despite constant fluctuations between engagement and disengagement, today this rapprochement is still reflected in the fact that Rwanda is the second largest recipient of development cooperation from Belgium.¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless, international relations between Belgium and Rwanda also remain tense. Regularly, Kagame publicly denounces the Belgium's responsibilities in the genocide.¹⁰⁸ Still, the Belgian government is criticised by some for conducting a "do-no-harm policy" and failing to criticise Kagame's human rights violations, "treating him with gloves on".

Again, we can turn to the theoretical framework of Valérie Rosoux to explain this tense relationship. As she argued with regards to the Franco-Algerian case, genuine reconciliation after a violent past requires "memory work": the critical assessment of different memory narratives, based upon respect for the "plurality of perspectives". This is where the Belgian-Rwandan case falls short. From the Rwandan side, all voices who critically question the "official narrative" are dismissed and accused of genocide negation, even if they acknowledge the genocide but also point to the Hutu victims, or the human rights violations by the RPF. In Belgium, there is a significant amount of these voices, coming from the large Rwandan community in Belgium as well as from Belgian academics and politicians. Inversely, as Danielle de Lame also remarks in her article *(Im)possible Belgian Mourning for Rwanda*, Belgium adopts a quite similar attitude towards its colonial past. In the assessment of Belgium's role in Rwanda, the colonial past is systematically downplayed or even ignored, as we discussed with regards to the Rwanda Commission, precluding an honest and complete introspection of Belgium into its role in Rwanda. Both of these elements put a critical constraint on the development of a healthy public debate, which is necessary for a successful rapprochement between Belgium and Rwanda.

¹⁰⁷ 'Samenwerkingsprogramma', rwanda.diplomatie.belgium.be, 20 May 2016, <https://rwanda.diplomatie.belgium.be/nl/ontwikkelingssamenwerking/samenwerkingsprogramma>.

¹⁰⁸ For example, see: Vandekerckhove and Vidal, 'Kagame Haalt Uit'; "'België Voerde Ons Mee Naar Genocide'".

(3) Peacekeeping and humanitarian interventions

To conclude, I will discuss how the memory of the blue helmets influenced Belgian international relations in general. For the first years after the genocide, Belgium's other international relations followed the same trend as its bilateral relations with Rwanda: after the withdrawal of UNAMIR, a policy of "African Ownership" reflected a wider disengagement from actively being involved in other countries. Initially, the recommendations of the Rwanda Commission reinforced this policy. After concluding that the deaths of the blue helmets could have been avoided, the Rwanda Commission recommended to no longer send troops to former colonies. Initially, this was a "sealing of the out-of-Africa policy."¹⁰⁹ After this, "for a long time Belgium had withheld on participating in UN missions."

Nevertheless, as Michel became Minister of Foreign Affairs, he developed a renewed and active foreign policy, thereby making Africa a priority again. In a way, this already conflicted with the recommendations of the Rwanda Commission. Furthermore, as Rosoux remarks, "Belgium contributed to all EU missions in the DRC."¹¹⁰ Still, it should not be concluded that the recommendations of the Rwanda Commission had no influence on Belgian participation in international missions whatsoever. As a diplomat noted, Belgium has indeed contributed to missions since the Rwanda Commission, but Belgian contributions were mostly limited to sending supportive personnel, such as staff or observers.

Finally, the death of the Belgian soldiers and the subsequent withdrawal of UNAMIR also had an impact beyond Belgium on interventions and peacekeeping in general. As mentioned before, the failure of the UNAMIR mission took place one year after the events in Somalia, and one year before the fall of Srebrenica. First of all, these three events influenced each other. Being voted in the UN Security Council immediately after the death of American soldiers in Somalia, UNAMIR was given only a limited mandate and limited resources. Also, Mayall notes that Somalia had a direct influence on the "Western denial that genocide had occurred in Rwanda."¹¹¹ After UNAMIR, the international community had very little trust in the mission in Bosnia. Secondly, after these three missions, a debate opened on the future of UN missions, giving rise to the so-called Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine.¹¹² Again, Mayall states: "Rwanda played a pivotal (although ambiguous) role in the evolution of the theory and practice of humanitarian intervention and peacekeeping."¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ Van De Velden, 'Genocide Was Keerpunt in Belgische Buitenlandse Politiek'.

¹¹⁰ Rosoux, 'The Two Faces of Belgium in the Congo: Perpetrator and Rescuer', 28.

¹¹¹ James Mayall, 'Humanitarian Intervention and International Society: Lessons from Africa', in *Humanitarian Intervention and International Relations*, by Jennifer M. Welsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 135–37.

¹¹² Hobson, 'Responding to Failure', 433–34.

¹¹³ Mayall, 'Humanitarian Intervention and International Society: Lessons from Africa', 135–37.

VI. Tentative conclusions and implications

“Hard evidence will only come to light when we can and dare to ask other questions.”¹¹⁴

- Johan Swinnen

In the methodological section of this article, I have said that I use a phenomenological approach to expose “taken-for-granted assumptions” and contribute to a larger debate on the role of the collective memory of the Belgian blue helmets in Belgian politics. Since the aim of this article is to open up a debate by asking new questions rather than to answer old ones, this last section is not titled ‘conclusion’, as it merely formulates some tentative conclusions and explores the implications of these conclusions.

In this article, I have discussed how the memory of the blue helmets has shaped and was shaped by Belgian politics and international relations. In doing this, I have illustrated the influence of this memory at three levels: the level of domestic politics, of bilateral relations with Rwanda and the level of international relations in general. On the domestic level, I have shown that the memory of the blue helmets had a very large influence on Belgian politics, being a direct cause of the withdrawal of the Belgian contingent and subsequent lobbying to withdraw UNAMIR entirely, of the installation of the Rwanda Commission, and therefore indirectly also contributing to the eventual change of leadership through the formation of the Verhofstadt government in 1999. However, I have also argued that the centrality of this memory overshadowed the broader memory of the genocide, thereby obscuring the fact that the genocide was a predominantly Rwandan tragedy. On the bilateral level, I have shown how, through the installation of the Rwanda Commission on the domestic level, the memory of the peacekeepers was an essential aspect to Verhofstadt’s decision to offer his apologies to Rwanda in 2000 and 2004. However, I have also argued, not only that Belgian-Rwandan relations are still tense, but also that Belgium does not seem to be able to take a nuanced but critical stance towards the RPF government of Paul Kagame. On the level of general international relations, I have shown that the memory of the blue helmets had an impact, albeit subtle, on the way in which Belgium participated in international peace missions, and how this memory also provoked an international debate on humanitarian intervention and peacekeeping.

These tentative conclusions still leave us with many questions: how should Belgium confront its role in the genocide in a comprehensive way, without privileging certain experiences over others? How can Belgium address the questions that have remained

¹¹⁴ Johan Swinnen, *Rwanda: Mijn Verhaal* (Kalmthout: Polis, 2016), 558.

unanswered? And above all: what role can or should Belgium play in international relations with Rwanda? How can Belgium navigate the narrow line between being an uncritical bystander and reproducing lingering colonial attitudes of interference? The difficulties with addressing these questions lie in that they are positioned on the intersection of difficult or unprocessed pasts. Moving forward, Belgium needs to engage in a critical public debate on the meaning of the Rwandan genocide and its own role therein, as well as its colonial past and the contemporary consequences of that period. Without tolerating negationist, racist or neo-colonial revisions of the genocide, critical questions need to be asked and difficult pasts need to be addressed.

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