The Rwandan genocide sparked a horrific bloodbath that swept across sub-Saharan Africa, ultimately leading to the deaths of some four million people. In this extraordinary history of the recent wars in Central Africa, Gerard Prunier offers a gripping account of how one grisly episode laid the groundwork for a sweeping and disastrous upheaval.

Prunier vividly describes the grisly aftermath of the Rwandan genocide, when some two million refugees--a third of Rwanda's population--fled to exile in Zaire in 1996. The new Rwandan regime then crossed into Zaire and attacked the refugees, slaughtering upwards of 400,000 people. The Rwandan forces then turned on Zaire's despotic President Mobutu and, with the help of a number of allied African countries, overthrew him. But as Prunier shows, the collapse of the Mobutu regime and the ascension of the corrupt and erratic Laurent-Desire Kabila created a power vacuum that drew Rwanda, Uganda, Angola, Zimbabwe, Sudan, and other African nations into an extended and chaotic war. The heart of the book documents how the whole core of the African continent became engulfed in an intractible and bloody conflict after 1998, a devastating war that only wound down following the assassination of Kabila in 2001. Prunier not only captures all this in his riveting narrative, but he also indicts the international community for its utter lack of interest in what was then the largest conflict in the world.

Here then is a gripping eyewitness account of the most bloody upheaval of recent times, a book of passionate and unblinking intensity that is our best record to date of one of the great tragedies of the post-Cold War era.
My Personal Review:
This is going to be a complicated review.

First, if you know nothing about the wars of central Africa over the past 15 years or so, in particular the Rwanda-related conflicts, this is an awful book to pick up and try to use as orientation. It assumes the reader already has a basic knowledge of the recent political events in about eight African nations and often launches directly into building cases against the conventionally-held wisdom, often without actually stating what the conventional wisdom is. I did my graduate thesis on the formation of an African Great Lakes rebel group, and I often had to stop reading to give my overworked brain time to process the flood of information or reread a section to make sure I understood Prunier's arguments. I can only imagine what readers who know nothing about the topic have to endure.

Second, one has to decide to what degree one trusts Prunier. If this book was written by someone besides Prunier, I would probably dismiss it largely or in whole. However, Prunier is the author of 'The Rwanda Crisis,' considered a seminal early book on the genocide, and the author of 'Darfur: The Ambiguous Genocide,' also considered one of the best books of that conflict. In this recent book, Prunier recants entire storylines of 'The Rwanda Crisis' and basically says, "Fourteen years ago, I discounted information that I now believe to be credible and this is the story as I now believe it to be." So one has to decide if this is a sign that (1) Prunier has suffered some sort of mental breakdown or has perhaps been subverted by some political agenda or (2) Prunier has reexamined his sources and arguments in the light of new information, as a good historian should, to compile a more accurate portrayal. I seriously considered both as options, but decided that Alternative 2 was the most likely. You will see other reviewers who have decided otherwise.

Moving on to the next roadblock for the reader, Prunier has some rather tenuous sourcing. For example, is a single news account quoting an aid worker describing how a frightened refugee identified a particular armed group credible? Probably not. Are dozens of such thin reports credible in identifying a pattern, or can it all be attributed to enemy propaganda and the chaos of war? Prunier, in light of some of the analysis he presents early in the book, believes he can identify patterns and reports these incidents without caveat. I'm in the strange position of willing to believe his general argument, while of the opinion that any one of the incidents he uses to make that argument might in fact be false. The choice that Prunier faced is either ignoring anything that cannot be 100% confirmed to organizations with proven credibility, which almost by definition excludes all sources present at the bleeding edge of a running war in the middle of a central African jungle, or using the many fleeting news reports and interviews with people pushing their own agenda that he in fact uses to
create a narrative on which he builds his analysis. Readers craving the certainty of a Western style mediatized war, in which credentialed reporters interview the public affairs officials of organized combatants, will be appalled. Others will be heartened by the intimacy that Prunier brings to the work.

OK, so assuming the reader has enough background knowledge to orient themself and is willing to entertain the idea that Prunier might be presenting an accurate-ish account, what does the reader get? Pretty much the only attempt thus far to offer a comprehensive account of the Congo wars.

The parallel that springs to mind is Edward Gibbon's 'Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire,' which was heavily criticized for the many obvious mistakes, e.g. wrong dates, mis-spellings, etc. I once read a defense which, paraphrased, said only Gibbon had the breadth of knowledge to put together such a comprehensive work but, once he wrote it, people of lesser knowledge now had a stationary target against which to launch attacks.

I have no doubt that this book is going to be a foundation stone of scholarship on the Congo wars for at least the next decade, with people reassembling the data Prunier has dug up into new conclusions and others disproving content. I could point out several factual errors myself, but I know that I'm completely incapable of attempting a work of the scale Prunier has produced so I won't be a boor. You can count the number of people who are capable of a work of this scale on this topic on one hand, so I'll thank Prunier for putting his neck on the chopping block and give his book five stars.

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