Hotel Rwanda: history with a Hollywood ending

Making measured judgments on traumatic events is a difficult task, and this film offers only one perspective on the genocide

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Hotel Rwanda (2004)
Director: Terry George
Entertainment grade: B+
History grade: C+

On 6 April 1994, a plane carrying Rwandan president Juvénal Habyarimana was shot down over the airport at Kigali. This triggered massive civil unrest between the majority Hutu and minority Tutsi people. It is usually estimated that more than 800,000 Rwandans, mostly Tutsis, were murdered in the following three months - a number almost equivalent to the entire British and colonial military death toll for the whole of the first world war.

People

Paul Rusesabagina (played brilliantly by Don Cheadle, who earned an Oscar nomination for best actor but lost out to Jamie Foxx as Ray Charles in Ray) is the kind of hotel manager who knows how to keep all the local generals sweet with Cohiba cigars and Glenmorangie whisky. Gradually, tension builds outside the Hotel des Mille Collines' smoothly whitewashed walls - until the president's plane is shot down, and the whole country seems to go off like a bomb.

International relations

Paul gets his family and friends into the hotel by bribing a local general. The United Nations, represented by the fictional Colonel Oliver (Nick Nolte, overacting), are about as much use as the proverbial chocolate teapot. "We're here as peacekeepers, not as peacemakers," burbles Oliver, as children are hacked to death with machetes all around him. Somewhat unfairly, Oliver is based on real-life Canadian UN General Roméo Dallaire. The UN has been criticised for its failure to respond effectively to the genocide in Rwanda, but Dallaire was not to blame - in fact, most reports indicate he did everything he could.

Intervention

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Western journalists aren't much better than western soldiers, in Hotel Rwanda's view. "We're not leaving the hotel grounds unless we have an armoured car," the chief reporter tells cameraman Jack (Joaquin Phoenix). "That's the ground rules." Disgusted, Jack replies: "The ground rules? Where do you think we are, fucking Wimbledon?" The film is sharply critical of the international community for failing to take action. "How can they not intervene?" Paul asks Jack. "I think if people see this footage, they'll say 'oh my goodness, that's horrible'," says Jack, "and then go on eating their dinners". Historically speaking, though it may make some people uncomfortable, Hotel Rwanda's critical view is supportable. The UN itself accepted that it had failed in Rwanda back in 1999, five years after the genocide, and repeated its admission for the 20th anniversary this year.

Controversy

Hotel Rwanda runs into greater controversy as its depiction of Rusesabagina approaches the saintly. It suggests Rusesabagina provided the hotel's services on a charitable basis and only issued bills to keep up the pretense of being a legitimate business rather than a refuge - but some survivors have alleged that he extorted money from them, or that he refused to let some people in who did not have means, or that he forced them to vacate their rooms if they couldn't pay. Hotel Rwanda's director, Terry George, responded angrily to these allegations, accusing Rusesabagina's critics of running a "smear campaign". Making measured judgments on traumatic and highly politicised events like those of the Rwandan genocide is the most difficult parts of any historian's job. There are always wildly different opinions and enormous contradictions in the evidence. It's hard for any outsider to know what really went on in the Hotel des Mille Collines, but historically-minded viewers would do well to remember that the film's version of the story is only one version - and it is disputed.

Happy endings

At the end of the film, Paul and his wife Tatiana (Sophie Okonedo) are evacuated by the UN to a well-organised refugee camp at Kabuga. Here the film diverges from Rusesabagina's own version of the story as told in his memoir, An Ordinary Man. The real Rusesabaginas were transported by the Rwandan Patriotic Front, not by the UN. Kabuga, he wrote, "was no camp in the conventional sense. It was a looting zone ... I, too, was among those who had to forage for food." It is true, as the film shows, that the Rusesabaginas were reunited with their two infant nieces in Kabuga, but they were not so well-looked-after as they appear to be in the film. "Both of the children were covered in dirt and appeared to be starving and barely alive," Rusesabagina wrote. "They had been living for months on ground-up chicken feed." Kabuga was run like a prison, he wrote: "Weeping filled the air." It's easy to see why the film has altered the truth - the sense of security and order returning allows it to create a happy ending. In real life, unfortunately, happy endings are harder to come by.

Verdict

Hotel Rwanda is a very well-made film, but its version of events is far from universally accepted.

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