

# DELAYING ANNIHILATION: MOUNTAINS AND THE POSTPONEMENT OF MASSACRE

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*“And it came to pass, when they had brought them forth abroad, that he said, Escape for thy life; look not behind thee, neither stay thou in all the plain; escape to the mountain, lest thou be consumed.”*  
Genesis 19:17 (King James Bible)

*“Run to the hills, run for your lives.”*  
Iron Maiden, “Run To the Hills,”  
The Number of the Beast (1982)

This paper aims at conceptualizing the physical environment of genocidal violence. Perpetrator organizations are understood to use artificial and natural settings to facilitate the task of mass killing. It is argued that mountains may be relatively distinct from other features of terrain because they offer advantages that strategically favor the defender. If targeted groups use these advantages to meet the goals of first arrival, maintaining biological needs, keeping the enemy at bay and alerting the outside world, they increase their chances of surviving destruction. Three case studies are examined: Musa Dagh (1915), Bisesero (1994) and Sinjar (2014).

Key-words: Musa Dagh, Bisesero, Sinjar, Armenian Genocide, Rwandan Genocide, Yazidi Genocide, mountains, resistance.

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## Introduction

Facing genocidal violence, groups targeted for extermination seldom find solace or succor in the physical environment.<sup>1</sup> Outside of urban settings they face a variety of natural impediments, including deserts, frozen wastes, ravines, swamps and, rivers. In peacetime, these features are typically benign and incidental; in contrast, during mass atrocity events, the physical environment is strategically co-opted to meet the nefarious designs of perpetrator organizations.

Alternatively, terrain may instead introduce an unanticipated setback to a perpetrator’s plans. If an organized actor commits to a course of extermination, then no terrain is truly safe; nevertheless, some terrain functions to inhibit mass killing, even if only temporarily.

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1. This paper was originally presented at the Twelfth Meeting of the International Association of Genocide Scholars (July 8-12, 2015) in Yerevan, Armenia. I would like to thank my two anonymous reviewers, my graduate supervisor Dr. Adam Jones, and the IAGS for hosting the conference.

Mountains, for instance, can offer a defensive refuge by postponing the forcible imposition of genocidal intent. Mountainous terrain may delay massacre by ensuring that the task of extermination is rendered more problematic and time-consuming. Targeted groups can extend this delay by pursuing four objectives: arriving first upon a mountaintop position, amassing the necessary biological requirements for survival, organizing a defensive effort, and alerting the outside world of their need for immediate rescue. If followed successfully, these four objectives are critical to the preservation of life.

This paper is structured around three objectives. The first sections aim to conceptualize the physical environment in terms of its strategic or counter-strategic function. It argues that terrain either promotes the exterminatory goals of perpetrator organizations, or it imposes an obstruction to their plans. This paper uses mountains as a specific category of terrain. Additionally, it contends that, from the perspective of targeted groups, mountains often possess a set of advantages that may be utilized to delay massacre. These advantages are outlined according to the OCOKA framework.

Finally, three illustrative case studies are examined: Musa Dagh (1915), Bisesero (1994) and Sinjar (2014). It is shown in each case how mountainous terrain was used to counter a genocidal perpetrator's exterminatory strategy. Each case is detailed with an emphasis upon how the targeted groups pursued the goals of first arrival, survival, resistance and alerting, as well as how mountainous terrain was utilized to postpone massacre.

## **Genocide, Terrain, and Strategy**

This section aims to conceptualize the varied landscapes of extermination. The commission of genocidal violence and massacre invariably occurs within a tangible material context; this context constitutes the ambient surroundings of atrocity. The physical environment may be of an artificial, man-made origin or, alternatively, it may consist of pre-existing natural features. One-sided mass killing frequently occurs *in situ*, in urban, industrial and residential settings. During the Holocaust, urban areas were transformed into ghettos, and specialized facilities, such as concentration, transit and extermination camps, were developed. Moreover, prisons, from the Lubyanka to Tuol Sleng, have been used to torture, to "disappear" and to house mass executions.

Conversely, violence may occur in areas that are less developed or uninhabitable, including forests, lakes, and mountains. In these instances, the natural environment has been used functionally to facilitate the process of mass killing. Thousands of Ottoman Christians were driven into the Syrian deserts to die of exposure, an experience shared by the Herero and Nama in German South-West Africa. Conversely, the frozen expanses of Siberia and the Soviet Gulag system prevented escape while harming those within its icy embrace. Forests and ravines have been utilized to assist the implementation of massacre, including Katyn and Babi Yar. Lakes and rivers have been used to kill undesirables, such as during the French Revolution as hundreds were cast into the Loire River; or, like the Nyabarongo River in Rwanda, they are used to dispose of bodies. In short, mass killing never occurs in a featureless vacuum; rather, it is committed indoors and out, from dank prison cells to open-air executions at designated or impromptu killing sites.

The terrain present within a process of exterminatory violence may be classified as

either (1) instrumental or (2) detrimental.<sup>2</sup> The terrain of the first type strategically serves the genocide, while terrain of the second interferes and slows down its operation.

Groups that conduct organized violence against civilian targets do so *strategically*; these strategies are understood here as the deliberate and routine use of the physical environment — including both artificial and natural terrains — to implement a genocidal policy or end-goal. When the physical environment is used strategically, a facet of terrain is instrumentalized in order to facilitate the commission of genocidal violence. *Where* massacre occurs (i.e. upon what type of terrain) is largely determined by the strategy utilized by the perpetrators.

Locations were often sought out for their remoteness, for their difficulty to escape from and for how well they obscure the commission of atrocity; elsewhere, they were chosen for their centrality and ease of access. Sometimes these sites have a history of violence, for others the introduction of violence is a novelty. When the same terrain is utilized within the same genocidal event or episode, the functional use of the physical environment is seen to result in patterns of killing in analogous physical contexts. What all these locations share is a functional role in facilitating perpetrator strategy.

For instance, the Rwandan genocide provides an excellent example of the routinized use of corresponding terrains of destruction. Based upon his field research, Scott Straus contends that killing occurred in four main locations: (1) at central congregation points such as churches, schools, and government buildings; (2) at roadblocks; (3) during house-to-house searches; and (4) during searches through cultivated fields, wooded zones, and marshes.<sup>3</sup>

This paper would argue that the first three killing venues were the result of the perpetrator's strategy. In contrast, category four describes areas of counter-strategy. The fields, swamps, and forests highlighted by Straus were terrains that helped Tutsis and moderate Hutus to escape and hide from the agents of Hutu power. These locations were sought out because they countered *génocidaire* strategy by relocating the meeting of hunter and hunted to areas less conducive to mass killing.

Counter-strategy draws violence towards locations that are not explicitly part of a perpetrator strategy; instead, these locations slow the overall task of killing and occasionally make it dangerous for the perpetrator to complete his task. A successful counter-strategy disrupts a perpetrator's strategy by forcing the two parties to relocate their eventual engagement to an alternative setting, one more conducive to the defenders' requirements. Arguably, when beset by hostile forces, choosing where to die is one of the greatest acts of resistance. Groups targeted for destruction are handicapped by what genocide scholar Vahakn Dadrian describes as the "critical disparity of power relations."<sup>4</sup> Individually and collectively they are in an inferior position. They lack the resources, arms, and coordination

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2. There is also a third category as well. When the physical environment is understood to be incidental, it accompanies genocidal violence but does not play a major part in the killing process; rather, it resides in the background without a meaningful impact.

3. Scott Straus, "The Historiography of the Rwandan Genocide," in *The Historiography of the Rwandan Genocide*, ed. Dan Stone (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 526-527.

4. Vahakn N. Dadrian, "The Determinants of the Armenian Genocide," *Journal of Genocide Research* 1, no.1 (1999): 65.

of the state that seeks their destruction. But by choosing where to resist, they disrupt the schemes of the perpetrators, and in doing so, they may be able to endure a genocidal onslaught.

## **Mountains: Advantages and Counter Strategy**

From the perspective of resistance, mountains possess unique advantages. Targeted groups may hide upon them or use them to flee to safer areas. Most importantly, mountains possess certain characteristics that allow for fighting back. Whether fleeing, hiding or fighting, mountains delay the killers' plans whose strategies depend upon bringing targeted groups to terrain that facilitates their goals.

The advantageous features of mountains may be elucidated by adapting the OCOKA (Observation, Cover and Concealment, Obstacles, Key Terrain, Avenues of Approach) framework of terrain analysis.<sup>5</sup> Developed and utilized by the U.S. military, this analytical framework provides a simple technique for determining the advantages of particular features of terrain.

First, mountains allow for observation over long distances, even if unaided. This means defenders may identify and anticipate the advance of hostile forces well before their arrival. Conversely, being able to see and communicate over longer ranges assists in locating potential rescuers; for example, a passing ship or vehicle. Furthermore, in terms of defense, mountains are enhanced by their advantageous "fields of fire". Even with less than ideal firearms, those conducting mountain resistances may use the terrain to place themselves in a much better position than the approaching enemy. These advantages, however, are not guaranteed: inclement weather, fog, and cloud cover may act to conceal the advance of the enemy or obscure the vision of a potential rescuer.

Second, mountains often provide both cover and concealment. During combat, rocks and trees provide hardened positions from which to fight. In contrast, hostile forces advancing up a mountain often lack the advantage of cover. For non-combatants, concealment is made possible by forests, ravines, caves and dense vegetation. Those incapable of fighting such as children, the elderly, sick, injured and women<sup>6</sup> are able to hide while others do the fighting.

The third advantage of mountains is the ubiquity of obstacles. The task of advancing upwards in the face of boulders, outcroppings and cliffs makes scaling a mountain more difficult. Obstacles may prevent the refugees from successfully making their initial climb. However, if they can overcome these difficulties they may turn these natural barriers to their advantage.

Fourth, mountains also constitute a form of key terrain. By giving the defenders the advantage of height over their foes, the defenders are granted a position of dominance. Key terrain is not only significant for repelling an attack, it also includes a protected base; here, supplies of scarce resources may be kept safely, and defenders and non-fighters alike can recuperate, work and plan without molestation by outside forces.

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5. National Park Service, "OCOKA Military Terrain Analysis," *Vicksburg National Military Park Cultural Landscape Report* (Atlanta, Georgia: National Park Service, 2009), 243-245.

6. It should be emphasized that women are equally capable as their male counterparts; resistance to their inclusion in defence efforts is more based upon social norms than capabilities.

Finally, mountains may possess avenues of approach and withdrawal. A viable route for withdrawal is fundamental; otherwise, the defending group has no options for escape and will eventually perish. They require an outlet to the sea or a corridor to a safer locale. An easy avenue of approach is also important, but is a double-edged sword: if it is a simple task for targeted groups to ascend the mountain, then their pursuers will likewise follow them with ease.

Groups escaping genocidal aggression have been known to flee to mountains because of the promise of these advantages. To promote the continued survival of its constituent parts, these groups must use these advantages in order to pursue four objectives. First, the refugees must arrive and secure a mountain base prior to the arrival of hostile forces. If the enemy arrives beforehand and occupies a superior position, the defenders are left at a major disadvantage. Depending upon the duration of this window, the defenders may use this time to evacuate people from the base of the mountain to a protected position; they may also use this time to transport food and medicine, weapons, ammunition and other supplies. Second, the defenders must maintain basic biological needs, including the necessary requirements for food, water, and shelter from the elements. Likewise, medical supplies are scarce or non-existent. Third, the defenders must organize a defense. By coordinating their efforts and using the mountainous terrain to their advantage, targeted groups may be able to hold hostile external forces at bay. Finally, the defenders must alert the outside world to their plight in order to convince a friendly and able force to seek their rescue. This goal is the single most important of the four for two reasons. Even with ample preparations, vital supplies invariably diminish and defense is made impossible without the energy to fuel it. Without an external rescuer, even the most resolute of defenses must ultimately crumble. Conversely, an early and successful attempt at alerting a rescuer compensates for shortcomings in reaching the other goals. Even with scant preparations, a scarcity of food and water, and poor defensive capabilities, a quick and timely rescue ensures a greater chance for survival.

Sometimes the advantages promised by mountains are purely ephemeral. When the advantages are nonexistent, mountains are not refuges, becoming traps and a part of perpetrator strategy. In some circumstances, mountains possess all the necessary advantages, but the very possibility of survival is preempted by other factors. For instance, the level of perpetrator technology<sup>7</sup> and available infrastructure diminishes the defensive strengths of mountains. Furthermore, intelligence plays a factor; if the perpetrators are armed with prior knowledge of the terrain, the staying power of mountains is reduced.

## **Case Selection: Musa Dagh, Sinjar, and Bisesero**

This paper draws upon three historic examples of mountain-based resistance in the context of a genocidal onslaught. First, we discuss the 1915 siege of Musa Dagh in the South-Eastern part of the Ottoman Empire. Then, the focus turns to the 1994 violence on Bisesero in western Rwanda. Finally, the most recent case occurred in 2014 in northern Iraq on Mount

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7. Airpower is one specific technology, but even here targeted groups may adapt. For instance, on the Nuba Mountains, civilians have dug foxholes in order to avoid bombardment by government jets. Nicholas Kristof, "A Rain of Bombs in the Nuba Mountains," *New York Times*, accessed 20.06.2015, [www.nytimes.com/2015/06/21/opinion/sunday/nicholas-kristof-a-rain-of-bombs-in-the-nuba-mountains.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/21/opinion/sunday/nicholas-kristof-a-rain-of-bombs-in-the-nuba-mountains.html?_r=0).

Sinjar. Although arising in diverse historical, political, economic, and cultural contexts, each case represents examples of mountainous terrain being utilized to promote defense against group destruction.

Each mountain defense scenario is outlined in three parts. The first section provides the historical background, context, and sources. The next part documents to what extent the mountain-facilitated window of opportunity was utilized by the defenders. Finally, each case concludes with the success or failure of external rescue.

## **Case No. 1: Musa Dagħ**

The siege of Musa Dagħ and tales of its legendary defense are more than a mere national myth. The story was popularized and gained international recognition when Franz Werfel published his *Forty Days of Musa Dagħ* in 1933. However, from a historical and analytical perspective, the details of *Forty Days* must be treated with caution. He wrote the book 18 years after the events he describes. The cast of characters that populates Werfel's novel is largely his own invention and many of the events he recounts have been altered to fit his narrative; for instance, the siege lasted 53 days and *not* 40 as the title suggests.

Nonetheless, Werfel can be credited with extensively researching the subject by drawing upon a diverse array of sources. One of the most significant documents he utilizes is the account written by Reverend Dikran Andreasian.<sup>8</sup> In his in-depth analysis of Werfel and his sources, Schulz-Behrend concludes that Andreasian's report was the "chief source of *Musa Dagħ*."<sup>9</sup> It is this source rather than Werfel's writings that this paper draws upon.<sup>10</sup>

There were six Armenian villages around the base of Musa Dagħ. The residents of these villages were wood carvers, craftsmen and silkworm cultivators. They were not soldiers and had not anticipated the need to make prior defensive preparations. While some of the inhabitants may have had military experience, they were certainly not an armed fifth column. What they did possess was an intimate appreciation of Musa Dagħ's terrain. Andreasian notes that "Every gorge and crag of our beloved mountain is known to our boys and men."

The Ottoman government in Antioch issued a banishment order for the six Armenian villages on July 30, 1915. These orders were seen in other Armenian settlements elsewhere. The Ottoman strategy aimed at deporting the Armenians and using the deserts as a means of extermination. They were collectively given a week to evacuate their homes. There was no immediate consensus on how to respond and, after debating long into the night, some decided to give in to Ottoman demands. The Rev. Haroutine Nokhoudian, a Protestant

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8. Unless otherwise noted, the following paragraphs draw upon Dikran Andreasian, "Jibal Mousa: The defence of the mountain and the rescue of its defenders by the French fleet; narrative of an eye-witness, the Rev. Dikran Andreasian, pastor of the Armenian protestant church at Zeitoun," in *Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, 1915-16*, ed. Viscount Bryce (Frankfurt am Main: Textor Verlag, 2008), 512-521.

9. George Schulz-Behrend, "Sources and Background of Werfel's Novel *Die Vierzig Tage Des Musa Dagħ*," *Germanic Review* 26, no. 2 (1951): 114.

10. For an overview that places Andreasian's account of Musa Dagħ within the overall history of the genocide, see Raymond Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011): 610-612.

pastor from Beytias, argued that it was “folly to resist.” He was joined by over 60 families that ultimately chose to accept the Ottoman order.

The rest, however, chose the path of defiance. They used the one-week warning as a window of opportunity, utilizing this time to secure supplies, build fortifications and create a defensive organization. The remaining villagers immediately set to work to transport as many resources as was practicable. They moved supplies of foodstuffs to a secure spot on the mountain called the Damlayik plateau. Flocks of sheep and goats were herded up the mountain and away from the foothills and the soon-to-be-abandoned villages. They collected and hastily refurbished what few weapons they possessed. Andreasian calculated that they possessed “*a hundred and twenty modern rifles and shot-guns [sic], with perhaps three times that number of old flint-locks and horse pistols.*” These quantities were sufficient to arm a mere *half* of the defending men.

In addition to moving supplies, the Armenians made defensive preparations on the mountain itself. Andreasian recounts that “*all hands went to work digging trenches at the most strategic points of the ascent of the mountain.*” Where the ground was not amenable to digging, they barricaded themselves by rolling together rocks to make nests for sharpshooters.

Finally, aware of the pressing need to coordinate their efforts, the Armenians elected a committee of defense by secret ballot. This committee developed and implemented plans aimed at “defending each pass on the mountain” as well as protecting “each approach to the camp.” Additionally, the committee established a division of labor. Scouts and messengers were chosen among the agile, while those with good aiming abilities made up a central reserve of sharpshooters.

True to their word, the Ottomans sent an armed force to Musa Dagh on August 5, seven days later. This advance guard numbered around 200 Ottoman regular soldiers. The force was led by a haughtily overconfident commander who, Andreasian claims, “*boasted that he would clear the mountain in one day.*” The Armenian defenders successfully rebuffed this attack, resulting in a number of Ottoman casualties and the soldiers’ withdrawal. Unfortunately, events later that day overshadowed this important early victory. During their frantic week of preparations, the Armenians had not anticipated the impact of inclement weather and the need for adequate shelter. A torrential downpour happened that evening. Their clothes were soaked and much of their bread became a “pulpy mess.” This failure would come to haunt them as the siege progressed and food reserves dwindled. Luckily, they had the foresight to keep their powder and rifles dry. Without those scarce arms, it would have been impossible to keep the Ottomans at bay.

The Ottomans returned shortly after their first failed attempt. This time they anticipated resistance and brought with them two heavy field guns which they used to hammer the defenders’ base camp. In response, Andreasian describes how one of their sharpshooters, a “lion-hearted young fellow,” stealthily crept down the mountain and handily killed four of the Ottoman soldiers manning the gun. As a result, the guns were temporarily withdrawn, giving the defenders a needed respite.

In the meantime, the Ottomans gathered their forces for a large-scale attack. Word of the upcoming assault was sent among the local Muslim villages and over 4,000 responded

to the call and were armed by the government. 3,000 disciplined regular troops joined them. When this force began its ascent up the mountain, Armenian scouts reported that the Ottomans seemed to be “appearing at every pass in the mountain.” Believing that the attack was coming from all directions, the defensive committee made the strategic blunder of dividing their reserve body of defenders to meet the assault at every point. This played directly into Ottoman hands: with their forces divided, the defenders were unable to meet the main Ottoman thrust. The Ottoman forces advanced further up the mountain, eventually capturing the high ground and threatening the Armenian camp. Andreasian writes that by sundown, “*Three enemy companies had advanced through the dense underbrush and forest to within 400 yards of our huts.*” All that lay between the Armenian camp and the Ottoman bivouac was a “deep, damp ravine.”

The defenders were in a precarious situation and had to act fast. The defense committee resolved to use their intimate knowledge of the mountain to their advantage. Andreasian describes their plan: the Armenians would silently “*creep around the Ottoman positions in the dead of night thus carrying out an enveloping movement, closing in very suddenly with a fusillade and ending with hand-to-hand fighting.*” The plan was immensely successful. The slumbering Ottoman camp was thrown into chaotic disarray and the Armenian encirclement had the effect of magnifying their presence in the minds of the panicked soldiers. The Ottoman colonel ordered a retreat half an hour after the attack began. The result was a clear Armenian victory: as the Ottoman forces retreated, they left more than 200 dead, seven Mauser rifles, and 2,500 rounds of ammunition behind them.

The nocturnal encirclement and ensuing battle resulted in a major victory for the Armenian defenders; however, as Andreasian had to concede, “[*We*] *knew that our foes were not defeated; they were only driven off.*” No matter how many victories they won, the Ottoman forces would always return stronger.

While the mountain provided them a modicum safety, it was a tenuous sanctuary and time was running out. They not only faced more Ottoman forces, but their food reserves were dwindling. Their supplies of bread, potatoes, and cheese were consumed after only a week on the mountain; their bread was destroyed by a rainstorm, and very little flour had been brought up from the villages. They were able, fortunately, to avoid starvation by using the flocks of sheep and goats they had driven up the mountain. Andreasian recounts how the Armenians used the milk to feed the children and sick, and how some animals were slaughtered to ensure a steady diet of meat. However, even with rationing, Andreasian estimated they only had enough food for two more weeks.

The Ottomans were aware of this and came to appreciate that a frontal assault was too costly. They decided to change their tactics to starving the Armenians out. They gathered 8,000 Muslim villagers around the base of Musa Dagh, encircling the landward side of the mountain. There were more attacks, but none quite as extensive as the last general engagement. These limited assaults were met by the Armenians rolling boulders down the mountain to great effect. The Mediterranean Sea was on the opposite side of the mountain and the Ottomans were unable to establish an armed presence there. This fact would later prove decisive.

The Armenians desperately needed a way off the mountain. They had sent a runner to Aleppo 85 miles away through hostile Ottoman territory during the early part of the siege. The runner intended to contact the American consul Jesse B. Jackson in Aleppo and plead for assistance. What happened to this messenger is unknown. Another messenger was sent 35 miles away to Alexandretta harbor; it was hoped that an allied warship might be docked there. The messenger, chosen because he was a strong swimmer, was to swim towards any Entente ship and convey the plight of Musa Dagh. When the messenger arrived, there were no allied ships there and he returned empty-handed. Later, an appeal for assistance was written up and three capable swimmers were tasked with watching the seaward side of Musa Dagh and swimming out to meet any passing ship.

When all these attempts to warn the outside world failed, Andreasian suggested that the women create two massive flags, one of which said in English “Christians in Distress: Rescue,” while the other bore the image of a giant red cross. The two flags were tied to trees and defenders were assigned to monitor the seas, day and night, for activity. It was this innovation that ultimately secured their rescue. The French cruiser *Guichen* saw the giant flags while patrolling the coast. When the ship was spotted, a number of Armenians dived into the water and swam towards it. They were welcomed aboard where they recounted the siege and the plight of the Armenians clinging to life on Musa Dagh. The captain of the *Guichen* sent a wireless message to the admiral of the fleet and more ships arrived, including the French flagship *Ste. Jeanne d’Arc* and some battleships.

The evacuation was difficult; the Armenians built improvised rafts to ferry thousands through rough seas. Despite the difficulties, the evacuation was largely successful. In the end, 4,058 men, women and children were rescued and brought to Port Said, Egypt.

## **Case No. 2: Bisesero**

On the evening of 6 April, 1994, the plane carrying Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana was destroyed by a surface-to-air missile in the skies over the Kigali. Initially, the organized violence that followed the assassination was largely against political elites, most of whom were Hutu. The presidential guards followed a strategy of house-to-house searches for individuals on their lists. The emphasis on targeting specific people, however, would soon change: “*By the middle of the first week of the genocide,*” writes Alison Des Forges, “*organizers began implementing a different strategy: driving Tutsis out of their homes to government offices, churches, schools or other public sites, where they would subsequently be massacred in large-scale operations.*”<sup>11</sup>

The best source for testimony on the fight for Bisesero is found in *Resisting Genocide: Bisesero, April-June 1994*. This edited work by African Rights collected 71 survivors’ accounts.<sup>12</sup> The book recalls how, rather than joining their ethnic kin at vulnerable public

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11. Alison Des Forges, “*Leave None to Tell the Story*”: *Genocide in Rwanda* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999), 9.

12. *Resisting Genocide: Bisesero April-June 1994* (London: African Rights, 1997). This volume should be read alongside their other meticulously researched collection of testimonies – African Rights. *Rwanda: Death, Despair and Defiance* (London: African Rights, 1995).

sites, many Tutsis chose instead to flee to the hills of Bisesero. Rwanda is a very mountainous country; it is referred to as *mille collines*, land of a thousand hills. While Bisesero is not the highest mountain in Rwanda, it is still quite high at 2,000 m.<sup>13</sup> The Tutsi inhabitants, known as the Abasesero, developed a reputation for resilience; during previous bouts of anti-Tutsi violence in 1959, 1962, and 1973, the Abasesero emerged relatively unscathed. While *génocidaire* strategy emphasized concentrating Tutsis at public sites, those who fled to Bisesero jointly acted to counter this strategy by moving the fight to an alternative terrain, one less favorable to the attackers.<sup>14</sup>

As soon as word spread of Habyarimana's assassination, both Tutsis and Hutus fled up the sides of Bisesero. Here, tens of thousands of Tutsis fought back for one and a half months. Life on the hills of Bisesero was fraught with difficulties. April is the peak of the wet season in Rwanda and the absence of shelter meant that rain persistently inundated the refugees. They built fires and huddled together to keep warm. Poor diet and sickness resulted in the spread of dysentery and those who arrived on the hills already injured lacked the medical supplies required to recuperate.

The defenders organized themselves soon after their arrival. They elected leaders, including Aminadabu Birara, to organize their resistance.<sup>15</sup> Birara inspired discipline and ensured no defenders retreated until the signal was given. Survivor accounts recall that he would hit those too afraid to advance and that he cleared the battlefield of Tutsi dead.<sup>16</sup>

The defenders divided the people able to work into different groups. The defensive forces were divided into categories based on their capabilities. In the first rank were the strong men and youths. They made up the front line that was positioned about halfway up the hills and were responsible for the actual fighting. They formed a broad line and spread out to reduce the number of people likely to be hit by a barrage of gunfire.

Supporting them and making up the second line of defense were women and children, tasked with collecting stones. One of the benefits of Bisesero's terrain was the availability of natural projectiles. Women and children were sent out with bags and cloths to collect as many rocks as they could carry. Many were brought back to a central collection spot on Muyira hill or else taken directly to the front line. The elderly and the cows were positioned at the summit of the hill as the third rank. Many Tutsis brought their cattle with them during their flight up the mountain. These animals proved essential; in order to regain their strength, the defenders drank their milk and slaughtered them for meat.

The first battle occurred on 9 April on Rurebero Hill. In a pattern that would be repeated daily over the weeks to come, militia armed with guns, grenades, and machetes arrived and attempted to overcome resistance. The defenders retreated to Kiziba Hill once Rurebero was overrun; they were, however, pursued and many were slaughtered. Ultimately, thousands

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13. Russell Schimmer, "Indications of Genocide in the Bisesero Hills, Rwanda, 1994," *GSP Working Paper No. 32* (2006).

14. Tutsis also fled into the swamps of Bugesera. Swamps allowed for concealment but made coordinated resistance impossible.

15. *Resisting Genocide*, 16.

16. *Ibid.*

converged upon Muyira Hill, an area of Bisesero covered with forests and bushes. This place became the defenders' chief redoubt.

Many more battles would soon follow. For weeks, the defenders suffered a tragically heavy toll, but they were not completely overrun. They resisted with what few resources they possessed. The majority of the defenders were agricultural workers and they brought farming implements, such as hoes and machetes, with them. Others brought traditional weapons, including spears and spiked clubs called *massues*. Since many of the attackers were drawn from similar rural origins, their weapons were comparable to those held by the defenders. With sheer numbers on their side, the defenders could overwhelm smaller bands of similarly armed militia.

When the organizers of the massacres brought supplies of firearms and explosives it seemed as though the balance would inexorably tilt in favor of the attackers. However, guns and grenades were a scarce commodity and deployed sparingly. Occasionally these weapons fell into the hands of the Tutsi defenders. In order to counter the advantages of the better-armed attackers, the refugees developed the tactic called *Mwuiungesha*, which in Kinyarwanda means "go and merge."<sup>17</sup> One survivor who helped organize the defense described the technique:

When we saw them [the interahamwe] coming, I would go in front of everybody and tell them to lie down. The militia would approach us, shooting as they advanced. When they saw that we were all lying down, they would come up to us. I would then ask the Abasesero to get up and mingle with the militia. In this way they would not be able to throw their grenades nor could they shoot us because there was a high risk that they would kill their own people.<sup>18</sup>

Overwhelmed and caught off guard, many of the attackers fled. Despite their handicaps, the defenders were able to kill or injure militiamen, communal policemen, and soldiers.

Although suffering from many injured or killed, the defenders held their ground for 36 days. However, by mid-May, their position deteriorated beyond repair. Many Hutus and Twas climbed the hills in the chaos following the assassination. At night under the cover of darkness, the *génocidaires* infiltrated the hilltop encampment and persuaded the Hutus and Twas that the Tutsis were the true enemy. On April 20, the Hutus and Twas left *en masse*.<sup>19</sup> Not only did the remaining Tutsis lose capable fighters, the Hutu turncoats divulged information about the *Mwuiungesha* tactic. With this intelligence in hand, the attackers positioned a heavy gun to fire upon the refugees from a distance and made efforts to surround the defending Tutsis' key positions.

There was a brief respite in mid-May; there were no attacks and the worst seemed to be over. This lull, however, was the result of the *génocidaires* making preparations for a final assault. Then, over the course of two days, May 13-14, the defenders' resistance was overwhelmed and untold thousands of Tutsis were slaughtered.

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17. Ibid.

18. *Resisting Genocide*, 16-17.

19. Ibid, 24.

Tragically, the defenders were unable to alert the outside world of their plight before being overrun. French forces from *Opération Turquoise* were alerted weeks after the massacre by a passing journalist. By the time French troops arrived eighty days into the siege, only 2,000 refugees remained. To make matters worse, the French left, promising to return in three days. In the meantime, the *Interahamwe* returned and killed half of the remaining survivors. By the end of the siege, an estimated 13,000 to 40,000 Tutsis were killed, with a mere thousand surviving.<sup>20</sup>

### **Case No. 3: Sinjar**

Sinjar Mountain lies in Nineveh Province in northern Iraq near the Syrian border. Abutting the mountain to the south is the town of Sinjar, home to an ancient religious community of Yazidis. The Yazidis have come under assault by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) since 2014. ISIS justified their campaign as purging the area of so-called “devil worshippers.”<sup>21</sup> However, this wasn’t the first time the Yazidis had come under assault from hostile Islamist forces. In August 2007 al-Qaeda orchestrated one of the most lethal bombings Iraq had seen as four simultaneous bombings targeted a housing compound at Siba Sheikh Khidr. Hundreds were killed or injured. The victims were largely Yazidis, leading one US military official to describe it as “almost genocide.”<sup>22</sup>

At the time of writing [2016], the situation around Sinjar is still a “current event.” While Mount Sinjar is in Yazidi hands, the town is still occupied by the IS. Unlike the other two cases under consideration, in Sinjar the fog of war is still thick and, consequently, this section relies upon recent witness testimony and media reportage.

Early in the morning of August 3, 2014, ISIS units advanced upon Siba Sheikh Khidr and the town of Sinjar. In the aftermath of the 2007 bombing, the Iraqi government built a dirt berm perimeter to protect Siba Sheikh Khidr.<sup>23</sup> After initially failing to break through this defensive line ISIS deployed U.S.-made Humvees that easily overran the barricades. Looted after their victory in Mosul, the use of these vehicles proved decisive, and after five hours of fierce fighting, the battle for the town was lost. Much of the failure to defend Sinjar has been attributed to the abrupt withdrawal of Kurdish Peshmerga forces. Not only did they fail to forestall ISIS’ advance but they did

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20. Philip Verwimp uses the lower estimates of 13,000, while the Rwandan government agency, the National Commission for the Fight Against Genocide, uses the higher 40,000 statistic. See Philip Verwimp, *A Quantitative Analysis of Genocide in Kibuye Prefecture, Rwanda*, Genocide Archive of Rwanda, accessed 20.04.2001, [http://www.genocidearchiverwanda.org.rw/index.php?title=A\\_Quantitative\\_Analysis\\_of\\_Genocide\\_in\\_Kibuye.&gsearch=bisesero](http://www.genocidearchiverwanda.org.rw/index.php?title=A_Quantitative_Analysis_of_Genocide_in_Kibuye.&gsearch=bisesero). National Commission for the Fight Against Genocide, *Bisesero Memorial Site*, <http://www.cnl.gov.rw/genocide/memorial-sites/>.

21. Shirley Li, “A Very Brief History of the Yazidi and What They’re Up Against in Iraq,” *The Atlantic*, accessed 08.08.2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/08/a-very-brief-history-of-the-yazidi-and-what-theyre-up-against/375806/>.

22. “Death toll reaching 500 in northern Iraq,” *Reliefweb*, accessed 15.08.2007, [reliefweb.int/report/iraq/death-toll-headed-500-northern-iraq](http://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/death-toll-headed-500-northern-iraq).

23. “A Child Called Tragedy,” *Al Jazeera*, accessed 26.08.2014, <http://projects.aljazeera.com/2014/new-iraqi-identity/>.

not warn the local Yazidis of their retreat, nor did they make any efforts to evacuate the civilian population.<sup>24</sup>

Nonetheless, despite losing the battle, the effort established a five-hour window for the residents to escape. As many as 50,000 Yazidis are believed to have chosen to make the difficult ascent up the side of Mount Sinjar.<sup>25</sup> Some took vehicles with supplies, while others fled on foot. ISIS forces pursued them to the base of the mountain, but Yazidi resistance kept them at bay. They set up lookout points over the city and along Mount Sinjar's winding roads, watching for ISIS incursions. The Yazidi defenders possessed AK-47s, which could be used effectively from mountain cover but lacked the heavy weapons possessed by ISIS.

ISIS committed numerous massacres around the base of Mount Sinjar. The Yazda Documentation Project has produced a map of known mass graves and slaughter sites. These sites surround Mount Sinjar and are especially focused south and south-east of the town of Sinjar. The highest incident on the mountain occurred when 13 to 17 Yazidis were massacred near the switchbacks between town and Mount Sinjar itself.<sup>26</sup> The mountain itself, however, remained largely unscathed. The Islamic State was unable to gain a foothold on the mountain, thus buying the Yazidis precious time.

Those who made the arduous climb faced numerous challenges. On Mount Sinjar temperatures could get as high as 120 degrees Fahrenheit (nearly 48,8 in Celsius). People, including dozens of children, started dying of thirst soon after arriving.<sup>27</sup> Many were forced to eat crushed leaves picked from the sparse vegetation. Throughout the day the refugees sought out shaded gullies to escape the sun. Although Sinjar is dotted with over 300 caves, these proved insufficient.<sup>28</sup>

Sinjar was the shortest of the three sieges presently under discussion, lasting a mere ten days. The Yazidis' plight was broadcast across the globe as the warning of an impending massacre swept social media. Modern communication technologies allowed the Yazidis to remain in constant contact with the outside world. After only a few hours into the siege, the plight of the Yazidis became a global *cause célèbre*. On August 7, American President Barack Obama announced the authorization of airstrikes and the delivery of humanitarian aid. In a White House press conference, Obama said that the Yazidis were "faced with a horrible choice: descend the mountain and be slaughtered, or stay and slowly die of thirst

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24. "If it wasn't for the Kurdish fighters, we would have died up there," *Global Post*, accessed 28.08.2014, [www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/middle-east/140827/if-it-wasn-t-the-kurdish-fighters-we-would-have-died-there](http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/middle-east/140827/if-it-wasn-t-the-kurdish-fighters-we-would-have-died-there).

25. "Obama authorises Iraq air strikes on Islamist fighters," *BBC News*, accessed 08.08.2014, [www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-28699832](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-28699832).

26. "Mass Graves of Yazidis Killed by the Islamic State Organization or Local Affiliates On or After August 3, 2014," Yazda Documentation Project, accessed 26.01.2016, [www.yazda.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Yazda-Report-on-Mass-Graves-Jan-28-2016.pdf](http://www.yazda.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Yazda-Report-on-Mass-Graves-Jan-28-2016.pdf).

27. "Iraqi Yazidi lawmaker: 'Hundreds of my people are being slaughtered,'" *CNN*, accessed 06.08.2014, [edition.cnn.com/2014/08/06/world/meast/iraq-crisis-minority-persecution/index.html?hpt=hp\\_t3](http://edition.cnn.com/2014/08/06/world/meast/iraq-crisis-minority-persecution/index.html?hpt=hp_t3).

28. "If it wasn't for the Kurdish fighters."

and hunger.”<sup>29</sup> Significantly, the White House did not prevaricate on describing the situation as “a potential act of genocide.”<sup>30</sup>

The Americans were joined by Iraqi, British and French airdrops of food, water and medicine.<sup>31</sup> Iraqi forces also arranged to airlift a few dozen refugees off of Sinjar.<sup>32</sup> One of these Iraqi rescue missions crashed on the mountain, killing the pilot Maj. Gen. Majid Ahmed Saadi.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, Kurdish forces from the PKK and their Syrian branch the YPG held ISIS at bay. They succeeded in opening a corridor on the opposite side of the mountain towards Syria. This provided a secure route of for the Yazidis to escape. The sick and elderly were rescued by the YPG from inaccessible areas using tractors. With further assistance by the Peshmerga and American airstrikes, the majority of the Yazidis were able to leave the mountain. The evacuation was so successful that a proposed American rescue mission involving V-22 Ospreys was called off.<sup>34</sup>

### **Comparative Analysis and Concluding Remarks**

While all three cases of resistance against genocidal violence are seemingly drawn from incomparable historical contexts, there are many parallels between them. In each case, mountains were used as a counter-strategy to interfere and interrupt the plans of the assailants. The various genocidal forces depicted here — the Ottoman army, the *Interahamwe* militia, the Islamic State, and their diverse accomplices — all wanted a trouble-free massacre committed on their own terms. In each case, the defenders refused to concede. The Armenians who ascended Musa Dagh rebuffed the order to perish in the southern deserts; the Tutsis of Biseseo refused to congregate at public buildings turned into slaughterhouses; and the Yazidis who managed to climb Mount Sinjar denied ISIS of forced conversions, sex slaves and mass killing.

Each group of defenders, albeit with varying degrees of success, strove towards four goals: arriving on the mountain, maintaining biological needs, keeping the attackers at bay, and alerting the outside world. Of the three cases discussed, Musa Dagh and Sinjar were successfully evacuated, while Biseseo was not.

What the cases examined tell us is that, although each goal is significant in maintaining a continuity of life, they are not of equal weight. Defeat is inevitable and resistance be continued indefinitely. If the defenders fail to alert the outside world in a timely manner, a rescue will arrive too late.

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29. “Statement by the President,” White House, accessed 07.08.2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/07/statement-president>.

30. Ibid.

31. “US carries out air drops to help Iraqis trapped on mountain by Isis,” *The Guardian*, accessed 08.08.2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/07/us-aid-iraqi-trapped-mountain-isis>.

32. “Militants’ Siege on Mountain in Iraq Is Over, Pentagon Says,” *New York Times*, accessed 13.08.2014, [www.nytimes.com/2014/08/14/world/middleeast/iraq-yazidi-refugees.html?\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/14/world/middleeast/iraq-yazidi-refugees.html?_r=2).

33. “The most important ride of his life,” *Telegraph India*, accessed 18.08.2014, [www.telegraphindia.com/1140818/jsp/frontpage/story\\_18731043.jsp#.VhiqXPIVhBd](http://www.telegraphindia.com/1140818/jsp/frontpage/story_18731043.jsp#.VhiqXPIVhBd).

34. “Militants’ Siege.”

The key to the Armenian defense of Musa Dagh was their successful realization of all four of the survival goals. First, they used the weeklong advance warning to their advantage, using this time to make preparations. Second, they secured supplies of food to ensure that the defenders avoided starvation. Third, they competently fought back by organizing a defense and dividing the labor available. Finally, they successfully alerted the outside world to their plight, enabling a full evacuation with relatively little loss of life.

Despite Musa Dagh representing an “ideal” mountain survival narrative, the situation immediately prior to their fateful rescue was becoming increasingly dire. Their food reserves were diminishing and more and more Turkish and Arab reinforcements arrived around the base of Musa Dagh. It was only a matter of time before the starved and weakened Armenian defenders were overrun by the next Ottoman assault. Without the well-timed arrival of an external rescue, Musa Dagh would have been remembered as a tragedy.

Bisesero began as a partial success that ended in catastrophic failure. Like Musa Dagh, the refugees arrived on the mountain before the attackers appeared. They brought foodstuffs and livestock from their homes. Even though they possessed inferior arms, they successfully organized a defense, developed new tactics, and organized an efficient division of labor. However, they failed to successfully alert the outside world to their plight. As a result, the defenders were overrun by mid-May. When help did arrive, it was too little, too late, and ended up costing even more lives.

The final case of Sinjar shows how alerting the outside world early in a defensive effort can overcome other shortcomings. The Yazidis barely had time to evacuate and move up the hill, but they failed to bring sufficient supplies of food, water, and medical supplies with them and their defense was marred by disorganization. However, the Yazidi plight was broadcast across the world, so that after a mere ten days a multifaceted array of actors arrived to extricate the refugees from the ISIS siege. Had the Yazidis been stranded on Mount Sinjar for weeks or months, they would certainly have perished.

Summing up, mountains may provide a degree of sanctuary that is unobtainable in other settings. Whereas mountains can provide protection, other elements of the physical environment are often used instrumentally in the killing process. A perpetrator’s strategy determines *how* and *where* genocidal violence unfolds. Conversely, refugee counter-strategy transfers violence to an alternative context; it shifts violence towards terrain that is more advantageous to the defenders and concurrently detrimental to the forces of destruction. Mountains are one such geographical feature, giving substance to the old idiom *head for the hills!*