

13 March 2007

Rwanda's Genocide: First the Deed, Then the Denial

By Gerald Caplan

The genocidal pattern never varies, though the deniers' motives are mixed. They run a gamut from the obvious—to escape punishment—to the geopolitical, to the incomprehensible. But deniers there always are. The Turkish nation, led by its government and military, overwhelmingly denies the consensus of objective scholarship—that the Turkish government in 1915 set out to annihilate the country's Armenian population and murdered more than a million of them. Neo-Nazis, anti-Semites, some anti-Zionists and a motley crew of the demented to this day deny the reality of Hitler's extermination of six million Jews and hundreds of thousands of Europe's Roma people, very possibly the best-documented event in modern history. Many Serbians deny the responsibility of other Serbians for what two international tribunals have ruled was the genocide of Bosnian Muslim males in Srebrenica.

Then there is Rwanda. It is a statement of fact that every scholar who has studied the 1994 conflict in Rwanda has concluded that a small, sophisticated group of power-hungry Hutu extremists conspired to exterminate the country's entire Tutsi population, and very nearly succeeded. The number of books and detailed studies increases at a welcome pace, and while there is disagreement about many aspects of Rwanda's 100 days (as there is too with all its forerunners), the central truth is not in doubt. Denying the genocide of the Tutsi in Rwanda is morally equivalent to denying the Holocaust.

Rwanda's deniers, exhibiting the usual mixture of self-serving and perverse motives, fall generally into two categories. First are Hutu Power sympathizers and outsiders with close ties to the long-serving Rwandan regime whose extremist core planned the genocide. Second are newcomers to Rwanda whose first introduction was as attorneys (or their associates) for those accused of genocide being tried by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR). All accused everywhere should have the right to a rigorous defence. But some among this group made the giant leap from arguing that their clients were innocent of the crime of genocide to arguing that no genocide had been carried out at all.

Bizarrely enough, a number of these deniers are left-wing Canadian lawyers and investigators, whose motives are as dim as their case is hollow. But Canada's most prominent non-Hutu denier for many years has been Robin Philpot, born in Ontario but long a resident of Montreal. Although Mr. Philpot lived in west Africa more than 30 years ago, his only apparent link to Rwanda is his brother John, who was a defence lawyer at the ICTR for a man convicted of genocide.

Robin Philpot believes there was no genocide in 1994. In many articles over the years—some published in English in the American left-wing journal *Counterpunch*, others in French in Quebec newspapers—and in a book translated into English as *Rwanda 94: Colonialism Dies Hard*—Mr. Philpot has insisted that what happened in Rwanda was part of a diabolical American plot to end French influence in the Great Lakes area of Africa. Paul Kagame's Rwandan Patriotic Front and General Roméo Dallaire, according to Mr. Philpot, were among the United States' chosen instruments in this cynical geopolitical game. Maybe this explains why certain self-styled leftists embrace Mr. Philpot's fantasies.

Mr. Philpot says many people were killed in 1994 by both sides making those who carried out the genocide and their enemies morally equivalent. There was no one-sided conspiracy by armed Hutu forces and militias against a million defenceless Tutsi, he says. Since the evidence completely contradicts these assertions, Mr. Philpot churns out a strange, incoherent series of assertions, rumours and speculation tied together solely by his unwavering determination to deny the truth.

Robin Philpot is now a candidate for the Parti Québécois in the provincial election. His Rwandan stance has become a campaign issue. Unlike him, both his leader André Boisclair and Premier Jean Charest accept history's verdict on the genocide. That left Mr. Philpot with limited options. He chose consistency. Having denied the genocide for so many years, he has now denied his denial. He insists that "at no time did I ever deny the existence of a genocide in Rwanda." Mr. Boisclair has said he is "very happy with the explanations" Mr. Philpot gave him and won't demand his resignation as a PQ candidate. Mr. Boisclair is too happy too easily.

Genocide experts understand denial as a second cruel ordeal for survivors and families of victims—first the event, then the pain and insult of denial. All of us need to demonstrate our sensitivity to this searing issue. At the very least, surely Mr. Philpot has lost his right to be embraced by a self-respecting political party.

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