

A PBS Documentary Makes Its Case for the Armenian Genocide, With or Without a Debate

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It is impossible to debate a subject like genocide without giving offense. PBS is supposed to give offense responsibly.

And that was the idea behind a panel discussion that PBS planned to show after tonight's broadcast of "The Armenian Genocide," a documentary about the extermination of more than one million Armenians by the Turkish Ottoman Empire during World War I.

The powerful hourlong film will be shown on most of the 348 PBS affiliate stations. But nearly a third of those stations decided to cancel the follow-up discussion after an intense lobbying campaign by Armenian groups and some members of Congress.

The protesters complained that the panel of four experts, moderated by Scott Simon, host of "Weekend Edition Saturday" on NPR, included two scholars who defend the Turkish government's claim that a genocide never took place. The outrage over their inclusion was an indication of how passionately Armenians feel about the issue; they have battled for decades to draw attention to the genocide.

But the fact that so many stations caved is a measure of something else: PBS's growing vulnerability to pressure and, perhaps accordingly, the erosion of viewers' trust in public television.

The camera lends legitimacy, but as Senator [Joseph R. McCarthy's](#) performance on Edward R. Murrow's "See It Now" famously showed, it also can undermine credibility. Panel discussions in particular give people with outlandish views a hearing — and also an opportunity to expose the flaws in their arguments.

That is certainly the case with the discussion program "Armenian Genocide: Exploring the Issues." It turns out that there is only one articulate voice arguing that Armenians died not in a genocide but in a civil war between Christians and Muslims — that of Justin A. McCarthy, a history professor at the University of Louisville. His Turkish counterpart, Omer Turan, an associate professor at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara, tries ardently to back him up, but his English is not good enough to make a dent. And the two other experts, Peter Balakian, a humanities professor at Colgate University, and Taner Akcam, a visiting professor of history at the University of Minnesota and a well-known defender of human rights in [Turkey](#), lucidly pick Mr. McCarthy's points apart.

Mr. Balakian, who is one of the experts cited in the documentary, gets the last word. "If we are going to pretend that a stateless Christian minority population, unarmed, is somehow in a capacity to kill people in an aggressive way that is tantamount to war, or civil war," Mr. Balakian says, "we're living in the realm of the absurd."

Tone and appearance on television can be as persuasive as talk. Mr. McCarthy mostly sounds condescending and defensive, while Mr. Balakian is smooth and keeps his cool.

"The Armenian Genocide " which was made by Andrew Goldberg in association with Oregon Public Broadcasting, does not ignore the Turkish government's denial, or its repression of dissidents in Turkey who try to expound another point of view. One of the film's merits is that it tries to explain both the circumstances that led to the atrocities of 1915 and the reasons why Turkish officials are still so determined to keep that period unexplored. "There is a feeling that Turkey would be putting itself permanently in the company of [Adolf Hitler](#)," Samantha Power, the author of "A Problem From Hell: America and the Age of Genocide," says. "That same stain would envelop Turkey as it seeks, of course, to be a major player on the international stage."

Several of the experts in the film, including Turkish scholars, argue that because Turkey is seeking admission to the [European Union](#), its leaders will eventually have to bend to international will and acknowledge responsibility. But official Turkish denial remains fierce, and intellectuals and even well-known writers like Orhan Pamuk can still be brought to trial for mentioning the treatment of Armenians and Kurds.

The documentary, which is partly narrated by [Julianna Margulies](#), [Ed Harris](#) and others, includes rare clips of Turkish scholars acknowledging the anti-Armenian campaign as genocide as well as Turkish villagers recounting their ancestors' stories about

participating in the killings. "They caught Armenians and put them in a barn and burned them," a man in a town in eastern Turkey says to an interviewer. There are also shots of ordinary Turks who insist their ancestors were incapable of that level of barbarity.

Mostly, however, the film painstakingly makes the case that a genocide did take place, relying on archival photographs, victims' memoirs and the horrified first-hand accounts of diplomats, missionaries and reporters. The forced deportations and killings did not take place unnoticed — public figures like [Theodore Roosevelt](#) and H. L. Mencken spoke out about the horrors. In 1915, The New York Times published 145 stories about the systematic slaughter of Armenians.

Even after World War II, the fate of Turkey's Armenian population was high on the list of crimes against humanity. The film includes a clip from a 1949 CBS interview with Raphael Lemkin, a law professor who in 1943 coined the term genocide. "I became interested in genocide because it happened so many times," he tells the CBS commentator Quincy Howe. "First to the Armenians, then after the Armenians, Hitler took action."

The documentary honors the victims of the Armenian genocide and also pays tribute to dissidents in Turkey who are brave enough to speak out despite government censorship. And that makes it all the odder that so many public television stations here censored the follow-up program as soon as a few lobby groups complained.

The Armenian Genocide

PBS, tonight at 10 Eastern and Pacific times; 9 p.m., Central time.

Written, directed and produced by Andrew Goldberg. Produced by Two Cats Productions in association with Oregon Public Broadcasting. Narrated by [Julianna Margulies](#), [Ed Harris](#), [Natalie Portman](#), [Laura Linney](#) and [Orlando Bloom](#).