

## **It was genocide**

Los Angeles Times

March 22, 2006 Wednesday

Editorial

JOHN EVANS IS THE U.S. ambassador to Armenia, as of this writing. But he probably won't be for long. Evans, a career diplomat who was selected to receive an American Foreign Service Assn. award last year for his frank public speaking, irked his superiors at the State Department by uttering the following words at UC Berkeley in February 2005: "I will today call it the Armenian genocide." For that bit of truth-telling, Evans was forced to issue a clarification, then a correction, then to endure having his award rescinded under pressure from his bosses, and finally to face losing his job altogether.

What happened in Armenia in 1915 is well known. The Ottoman Empire attempted to exterminate the Armenian population through slaughter and mass deportation. It finished half the job, killing about 1.2 million people. Yet the State Department has long avoided the word "genocide," not out of any dispute over history but out of deference to Turkey, whose membership in NATO and location between Europe and Asia make it a strategic ally.

It is time to stop tiptoeing around this issue and to accept settled history. Genocide, according to accepted U.N. definition, means "the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group." Armenia is not even a borderline case. Punishing an ambassador for speaking honestly about a 90-year-old crime befits a cynical, double-dealing monarchy, not the leader of the free world.

Turks point out that their Ottoman ancestors considered it treason to side with Russia at the outbreak of World War I, as many Armenians did. But the massacres were also fueled by Muslim animosity toward a Christian minority. When then-U.S. Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire Henry Morgenthau protested the bloodletting, he received a telling response from Mehmed Talaat, the interior minister in charge of the anti-Armenian campaign. "Why are you so interested in Armenians anyway? You are a Jew, these people are Christians," Talaat said. "Why can't you let us do with these Christians as we please?"

For Armenians who escaped the killing and came to this country, inadequate recognition of their history is crazy-making. Rep. Adam B. Schiff (D-Burbank), whose district includes the heart of the Armenian diaspora, keeps introducing a bill to officially recognize the genocide, only to see congressional leadership quash it each year, under pressure from the State Department.

Some nations, thankfully, are stepping where Congress fears to tread. The European Parliament last year passed a nonbinding resolution asking that Turkey acknowledge the genocide as a precondition for joining the European Union. The Turkish government, typically, was infuriated, yet it still desperately wants to join the EU.

One day, the country that was founded as a direct repudiation of its Ottoman past will face its history squarely, as part of a long-overdue maturing process. Some day before then, we hope, the State Department will too.