

## **At What Point Is Killing 'Genocide'?**

Nearly Nine Decades After the Massacres, A Battle Still Rages To Define 'Genocide'

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The festive atmosphere last month at an advance screening of Atom Egoyan's "Ararat" wasn't what one would expect at an evening devoted to a movie about genocide and denial.

The Library of Congress event, hosted by the Congressional Caucus on Armenian Issues, felt decidedly celebratory, with a young congressional staffer all smiles as he spoke of the progress toward greater recognition of the crimes perpetrated on Armenians by the Ottoman Turks during the final years of the First World War. Members of the caucus introduced the film, and celebrated the accomplishments of Egoyan, a Canadian filmmaker of Armenian descent. Genocide and genocide denial are grim but perennial topics in human history, but this was a night to enjoy the success of Armenian muscle in the halls of American power.

And then Egoyan's film began to roll. It is an onion of a film, with historical events wrapped inside layers of memory, confusion and argument, with everything unsettled and elusive. Miramax is now promoting it with blunt ads that play up expectations that the film's direct treatment of the Armenian genocide will anger the Armenians' most ardent critics, Turks and the Turkish government: "Uncover the shocking secret of the movie they don't want you to see" and "the most controversial film of the year." But this is not a punch-in-the-gut film. It is not even a slick potboiler like "Schindler's List."

In that sense, Egoyan's movie mirrors the strange fate of the Armenian genocide in cultural memory: The Armenian tragedy is a fact of history kept permanently unsettled, not because it didn't happen, but because -- like a shuttlecock in a badminton game -- a small number of people have succeeded in keeping it up in the air.

Some facts are simply read into the record of history. Others are contested every step of the way. Even as writers of popular history, mainstream journalists, politicians and academics find greater comfort with attaching the label "genocide" to the events in Eastern Turkey 85 years ago, the Turks still contest the basic facts so successfully that it doesn't make much sense to speak of a "middle ground" between the contested viewpoints. Rather, like the efforts of creationists to question established evolutionary science, there is a vast planet of accepted truth around which orbits a satellite of vocal dissent.

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In the final years of the First World War, the Ottoman Empire was falling apart, under stress from a war being fought against the Russians and Western allies, across several fronts. Within the empire's vast, polyglot territory were Christians and Muslims, Turks, Kurds, Armenians and Jews; it was a fractious world. Spurred in part by a fear of Armenian sedition that was vastly disproportionate to any real threat, the Turks rounded up Armenian intellectuals and killed them. There followed a series of mass deportations and killings, and soon horrendous starvation. No settled figure for the death toll is agreed upon, though estimates run from the hundreds of thousands to more than 1.5 million.

The suffering was documented, at the time, in American newspapers, and the American ambassador to the empire, Henry Morgenthau, repeatedly decried the genocide. Morgenthau, whose account of the events has been criticized by Turkish scholars as being exaggerated and perhaps fabricated, appears as a character in a film-within-the-film that frames Egoyan's story.

When Raphael Lemkin, a Jewish lawyer and activist, coined the term "genocide" in the 1940s he was inspired, in part, by the fate of the Armenians. Adolf Hitler took inspiration, too: "Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?" he is supposed to have asked while planning his invasion of Poland in 1939. Those words appear in the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, as an ominous warning about memory and conscience; and their presence in the museum has been vigorously opposed by Turkish Americans and the Turkish government.

Fast forward to this past spring. Samantha Power, author of "A Problem From Hell: America and the Age of Genocide," was speaking at the Holocaust Museum. Her book began with a brief sketch of the Armenian genocide, perhaps two dozen pages out of more than 600. Those few pages were enough to inspire a fusillade of angry questions from people who identified themselves as Turkish American and, in one case, a staffer from the Turkish Embassy.

"It was a very crowded event, and person after person called on asked about that," she remembers. "It was spooky. At one point, I said, 'Look, I don't have a dog in this fight.' "

Asked whether this was an organized confrontation, a Turkish official said, "This is an issue that Turkish people are very sensitive about." He also said that Power, a scholar at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, is not a specialist in Ottoman history, and takes an idiosyncratic view of the United Nations genocide convention.

In that official's broadside on Power are the major elements of the Turkish strategy for controlling the argument: a general appeal to treat the Turks (who are U.S. allies and who form a significant minority community in the United States) with sensitivity; a warning that only specialists in Ottoman affairs are qualified to sort through the relevant history; and the exploitation of the gap between what genocide means in international law and what it means in most people's common understanding. The last of these has been particularly fruitful.

Genocide, in the popular imagination, means the crimes perpetrated by Hitler: the boxcars and death camps, the industrial efficiency of killing and the seven-figure body count. But neither Lemkin, who invented the word, nor the diplomats who forged the United Nations convention on genocide wanted Hitler to be the last word on the subject. While Germany established the benchmark for genocidal madness, the club is easier to get into than most people realize.

When the convention on genocide was adopted in 1948, the United Nations didn't interpret the term to mean the utter annihilation of a people, only the "intent to destroy, in whole or in part." And by destroy, the U.N. meant not just killing, but "serious bodily or mental harm," or the deliberate creation of conditions that are deadly or destructive.

"Those who don't believe that what the Turks did to the Armenians, or what the Iraqis did to the Kurds, is genocide have in their mind a standard of genocide which requires the systematic extermination of every member of an ethnic group," says Power. "But the standard isn't based on 6 million people, or mechanized killing, or outright extermination. The Armenians know the definition of genocide and they know it's not even a close call. It was genocide."

The Turkish view, as articulated on the Web site of the Turkish Ministry of Culture, and echoed by a Turkish official, is a collection of arguments, and it is a scorched-earth affair.

Some highlights: The Ottoman Turks are not to be confused with the Republic of Turkey; both Turks and Armenians died, as well as Kurds and Jews; the charge of genocide doesn't fit the crime; the country was at war and feared Armenian disloyalty; there are no hard numbers to justify the case of genocide; evidence used to support the claims of genocide may have been fabricated; and because the Ottoman empire was on the wrong side of the First World War from the point of view of the United States and Britain, sources from those countries can't be trusted. The Turkish argument throws out a lot of firsthand testimony as politically tainted.

If it were a legal argument, say pro-Armenian scholars, it would be rather like saying that my client wasn't there, couldn't have done it, has been charged with the wrong crime *and* it was self-defense.

But it has been enough to chill scholarship. A distinguished professor of Ottoman studies who asked not to be identified because he wants to avoid alienating both Turkish- and Armenian-identified colleagues, says: "I believe there is a lot of self-censorship taking place. People are afraid to go down certain paths, so they avoid controversy."

It is easy to understand why there is self-censorship. To become expert in the issues involved in the Armenian genocide, a scholar would ideally need to know both modern and Ottoman Turkish as well as Armenian, which all use different alphabets. Scholars who devote years of study to learn these skills also need access to important archives in Turkey, which, according to some scholars, has impeded access and evicted scholars deemed too pro-Armenian. And the Turkish government has generously supported the

creation of powerful academic chairs at prestigious American universities, including Princeton and Georgetown.

## Seeking Truth Through Public Policy

Armenian Americans have sought some settlement of the issue not only in the academic world, but also through congressional resolutions recognizing the genocide (which so far have failed to pass). For Aram Hamparian, executive director of the Armenian National Committee of America, the facts of the matter have long been settled.

"We're at the point of waiting for public policy to catch up with the truth," says Hamparian, whose organization has fought hard for a congressional resolution that recognizes the genocide as fact. "When we debated this resolution in 2000, there was only one member of the House International Relations Committee who questioned the facts of the genocide. For everyone else, the debate wasn't about the facts -- they know it happened -- but about how recognizing it would affect U.S.-Turkish relations."

After pressure from President Bill Clinton, who cited national security issues, House leaders pulled the resolution from its agenda in October 2000.

One of the central conflicts in Egoyan's film takes place between an actor of Turkish descent and a young man of Armenian descent, in which the latter gets the upper hand. It is a moment of reverse aggression, the Armenian refusing an overture from the Turk. That, too, captures an important nuance in the political debate of historical fact.

"Some of the main protagonists on the Armenian side have assumed a prosecutorial role," says Ara Sarafian, an Armenian scholar who has compiled volumes of material documenting the genocide. "There are so many different camps, including a very strong Armenian nationalist camp. I personally don't approve of it all."

Looking to politicians for confirmation of historical fact may unleash more forces of confusion and conflict than it offers comfort of official sanction. Over the years, debate about Armenian genocide resolutions has spawned charges that there are larger, hidden goals to Armenian political activism, including even claims for restitution or Turkish territory. And once the debate becomes purely political, there is no predicting the fault lines. Supporters of Israel, for instance, have not been strong supporters of congressional efforts to recognize the Armenian genocide, especially since the mid-1990s, when Turkey and Israel forged a close relationship. A shared past of genocide does not necessarily make allies of people.

There is also a philosophical dilemma. If a political body can lend weight to historical fact by passing a symbolic resolution, what does it mean if that resolution fails to pass? Are the facts thereby less certain? If you turn truth over to people who negotiate, you may end up with negotiated truth.

Egoyan's film ends with an act of leniency, forgiveness and healing that has nothing to do with the Armenian genocide, as if to say that it is not the protagonists of a battle, but those on the outside, who will move things forward. And it may be true of genocide recognition as well, which makes Miramax's efforts to promote the "controversy" of Egoyan's film rather odd. Egoyan takes the genocide for granted, as do most people these days. By calling it controversial, Miramax has joined forces with the Turks. Both stand to profit.

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