'CHILDREN OF ARMENIA'

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By Aram Bakshian, The Washingtom Times, 27 December 2009

Aram Bakshian Jr. served as an aide to Presidents Nixon, Ford and Reagan. His writing on politics, history, gastronomy and the arts has been widely published in the United States, Europe and the United Kingdom.

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First the facts.

In 1915, after having entered World War I on the side of Germany and Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman government, dominated by militant Young Turk nationalists, engaged in a systematic program of extermination. The target was Turkey's Christian Armenian minority, members of a race that had inhabited parts of the Ottoman Empire for centuries - in some cases, thousands of years - before the arrival of the first Turkic invaders from the Asian steppes. Around 2 million Armenians were rounded up by the authorities and driven from their ancestral homes without compensation, allowed only to take what they could carry on their backs. Many of the men and boys were butchered by Turkish soldiers and gendarmes at the outset. The rest were set off on death marches.

In 1915 alone, the New York Times ran more than 100 articles on the subject, including eyewitness accounts; a typical headline was "Wholesale Massacres of Armenians by Turks." In all, between 1 million and 1.5 million Armenians died. The survivors, many of them widows and orphans, would have to begin life over as penniless exiles. I know, because my paternal grandmother Yevkine Bakshian, was one of the local Washington leaders of Near East Relief, an American charity that held clothe and feed thousands of the survivors.

Although war crime trials were held in Istanbul immediately after World War I, and despite the fact that Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, founder of the modern Turkish republic, referred to the state-organized slaughter of the Armenians as a "shameful act," the Turkish government still refuses to acknowledge the historic facts. You can even be tried and jailed for writing about them, as nearly happened to Turkish Nobel Prize-winner Orhan Pamuk.

When justice is denied, revenge fills the vacuum. Over the years, a handful of expatriate Armenians - some of them holocaust survivors - engaged in wanton acts of murder against innocent Turkish diplomats. Predictably, these isolated and reprehensible acts only hardened official Turkish attitudes while offering no comfort to victims of the holocaust. Symbolic of this historic deadlock was a 49-49 vote in the U.S. Senate in 1990 that stopped the U.S. government from officially recognizing the Armenian Genocide.

In "Children of Armenia," journalist Michael Bobelian, himself a descendant of holocaust survivors, offers a powerfully moving account of the crime, the cover-up and the ongoing struggle of historic truth against real or perceived geopolitical "pragmatism" - a tangled tale of mass murder, mass denial, American ethnic politics and the twisted effects that denying truth and justice has on victims, perpetrators and their heirs, in this case over an entire century.

Mr. Bobelian is particularly effective in describing the behind-the-scenes maneuvering that killed the 1990 Genocide resolution, a textbook case of high-powered lobbying triumphing over public sentiment. The stalemated Senate vote occurred despite the heroic efforts of then-Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole, who first learned of the Armenian tragedy from Dr. Hampar Kelikian, the brilliant Armenian-American surgeon who helped him recover from potentially crippling World War II combat wounds.

By the time the votes were counted, the Turkish government had enlisted, or paid for, the support of lobbying heavyweights like Hill & Knowlton and Gray & Company, major American corporations with business ties to Turkey such as Halliburton, neo-con power brokers like Richard Perle and Douglas Feith, and "a three-month stint with a lobbying firm run by Terry McAuliffe ... future Democratic National Committee chair." Sen. Robert Byrd, a West Virginia Democrat better known for his ability to attract pork barrel for his home state than for his grasp of geopolitics, was the lead opponent of the Genocide resolution.

The actual Senate vote was politically ecumenical on both sides, with Mr. Dole joined by

Republicans like Orrin Hatch, Jesse Helms, Strom Thurmond, Charles Grassley and John Warner, but also Democrats including Ted Kennedy, John Glenn, Joe Biden and Al Gore. The pro-Turkish line-up was also mixed, Mr. Byrd being joined by Republicans like John McCain, Richard Lugar, Trent Lott, as well as fellow Democrats including Daniel Inouye, Patrick Leahy, Jay Rockefeller, Howard Metzenbaum and, alas, Joe Lieberman.

Subsequent legislative efforts would fare no better. A prime example: 10 years later, "Moments before a Genocide resolution reached the House floor, Hastert - influenced by a chilling warning from President Bill Clinton that any harm to Americans in Turkey would fall on Republican shoulders - scuttled the vote."

In 2006, another president, this time George W. Bush, successfully weighed in against a Genocide resolution. True to form, while candidate Obama actually referred to the Armenian massacres as genocide, President Obama has been co-opted by the military-industrial-diplomatic bloc. For some reason, our Apologizer-in-Chief draws the line when it comes to the Armenian Genocide.

As Mr. Bobelian notes, Turkey's attempts to block similar measures in other countries have not been as successful. "In the past ten years, nations as politically and geographically diverse as France, Poland, Argentina, and Canada passed some sort of legislative acknowledgment of the Genocide, sometimes in the face of dire threats from the Turkish government," which invariably proved to be all bark and no bite. There are other small but hopeful signs of progress. More and more Turkish scholars are pushing the margins of state censorship in pursuit of historic truth, and the current Turkish government, hoping to join the European Union, seems to be less wedded to the chauvinist policies of the past.

On a more human note, the 2007 murder of prominent Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink at the hands of a Turkish extremist may have had unintended positive results. As one Armenian correspondent would recount:

"Unexpectedly, Turkey and the world saw a mass outpouring of grief as more than 100,000 ordinary Turks joined a public funeral in Istanbul. The tragedy of Dink's death went beyond influencing Turkish public opinion; it also prompted a new opening within Turkish society, as many began to reassess the past and question the official Turkish line on 'the Armenian issue.'"

In a conversation I had with Hrant Dink in Washington just a few months before his death, he stressed the importance of keeping the truth of the Armenian tragedy alive. But he also expressed reservations about the usefulness of resolutions passed by foreign governments. It was important, he felt, for the Turkish people themselves to break through the wall of censorship and official deceit to discover the truth.

While there is a long way to go - and while some of the reparation issues raised by Mr. Bobelian in his book may never be resolved to the satisfaction of all parties - the cleansing light of truth is beginning to shine through.

CHILDREN OF ARMENIA: A FORGOTTEN GENOCIDE AND THE CENTURY-LONG STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE

By Michael Bobelian
Simon & Schuster, $26, 308 pages
REVIEWED BY ARAM BAKSHIAN