GALLIPOLI DIGGERS AND THE 'FORGOTTEN' HOLOCAUST

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Nick Toscano, Eureka Street , A publication of Jesuit Communications Australia, 20 April 2009

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That same day, the same place and the same battle also mark a nation's destruction. The battle at Gallipoli was the first stage in an effort to systematically exterminate the Armenian race. Denied by Turkey, and unrecognised by the United States, the Armenian Genocide — dubbed 'The Forgotten Holocaust' — has slipped from the memory of a world that has grown accustomed to atrocity.

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But it happened. Everyone knows it did. It's the reason 1.5 million Armenians remain unaccounted for, and why their skulls and bones are still embedded in the clay of the north-Syrian river banks. It's the reason modern Armenia's borders lie far away from its historic home.

Just as two decades later Hitler deported Jews to concentration camps in Poland, the Pashas — the Ottoman rulers — expelled the Armenians from their homeland.

Due to nothing more than a fear of Armenians siding with the Russians, and a desire to create a uniformly ethnic pan-Turkic state from Anatolia to central Asia (hindered only by Armenia), the Turkish nationalists embarked on the most horrific crime against humanity the world had seen.

At the Gallipoli landing, the Turks conscripted hundreds of Armenians in the momentous battle for

nothing more than cannon fodder. As they ran unarmed into our troops' firing line, it was mass-execution.

The Ottoman government executed 600 of the Armenian educated-elite in Istanbul on 24 April, the very day before the Gallipoli landing, and, immediately afterwards pursued the rest in the Anatolian highlands.

From 1915, tens of thousands of Armenian families crossed a desert the locals called Der-el-Zor, but which the survivors would later name the Desert of Death. They marched for weeks at a time, snaking across the desert, not daring to fall behind in the heat. They faced death by starvation or execution.

Survivors tell of seeing women taken from the rows of prisoners into the fields, hearing screeches, gunfire and, after a time, seeing the soldiers returning alone. Thousands were marched into underground caves in what were the world's first gas chambers.

Mamikon came from a village near the border of Azerbaijan. His parents hid him from the government so he would not be conscripted to be killed at the Dardanelles or forced to join a labour camp at far-away places like Baghdad. Mamikon was a 16-year-old boy.

At his village, they were starved of water. In desperation his mother would cut her fingers and feed her blood to her son so he would not die of thirst.

Children like him from villages all across Armenia were hidden from the government, often in the homes of sympathetic Turkish neighbours. And they watched the Armenians of their villages rounded up and marched off, never to return.

From behind the dark windows of their refuge, they would hear soldiers descend on defenceless Armenian women and elders, killing them with guns or with scythes. After the last cry was stilled, only the lucky ones were left there in a silent village.

'Who now remembers the Armenians?' joked Adolf Hitler as he embarked on a holocaust of his own. While he was mistaken in thinking that his genocide of European Jewry would be similarly overlooked, his words ring sadly true. Turkey denies the claims of an Armenian genocide and manipulates history to conceal anything that suggests otherwise.

In fact, the Turkish government does not even acknowledge that Armenians ever lived in those areas from which they were deported and killed: not even by the banks of the vast and glimmering Lake Van, the ancient capital where Armenian nationality was forged among the Nairi tribes over 2000 years ago; or on the white-capped Mount Ararat that soars into the clouds above it, the very symbol of Armenia, the centrepiece of its national flag.

In 2007, tens of thousands of Armenians and Turks gathered in Istanbul to commemorate the life of Hrant Dink, a decorated writer who demanded recognition of this genocide and spent his life's work

striving to bridge the rift between the two nations.

'Hepimiz Hrant'iz! Hepimiz Ermeni'yiz!' read the banners that stretched across the wide streets of Istanbul on 19 January: 'We are all Armenian. We are all Hrant Dink.'

The last to leave the office building of the local Armenian newspaper, The Agos, Dink was confronted by two assassins who appeared from the shadows. They were young boys, ultra-nationalists. Pulling their pistols, they fired two bullets to his head and two to his chest.

He was not starved, he was not gassed, his wife and daughters were not raped and his children were not burned alive, but, in the words of the decorated British journalist, Robert Fisk, Dink was the 1,500,001st victim of the genocide. 'At least the world will not forget him so easily.'

His death stands as an example of the continuing hatred and intolerance that initially wrought this crime against humanity over 90 years ago.