TURKEY MUST ACCEPT THE TRUTH ABOUT THE GENOCIDE

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The text that follows is adapted from remarks delivered in commemoration of the Armenian Genocideat at the Armenian Youth Centre in Toronto on April 27.

Though almost a centur ontinue to mark its occurrence — especially because there are still some in the world who imagine that this was not truly an epic crime against humanity, but merely an inhumane but unintended side effect of World War I.

I was born in Montreal in the 1960s. After the Second World War, that city had become home to many survivors of the Nazi Holocaust. And as I grew up, I learned much about their terrible experiences. These people had endured unspeakable traumas — not only their own suffering at the hands of the Nazis, but also the knowledge that the world they once knew, including so many of their relatives, had been destroyed. But one tiny dignity that they enjoyed was this: Every educated person acknowledged these horrors. No one — with few, marginalized exceptions — tried to deny the reality of what they had endured. The words "Holocaust denier" comprise a grave insult. It signals that you are a hatemonger who lives in a world of dark fantasy.

Unfortunately, many survivors of the Armenian Genocide and their descendants have not always seen their own history treated in the same way. They have not only had to fight to reestablish their lives, heritage and communities outside of Turkey, but they also have had to wage a constant battle for historical truth.

The avoidance of the truth about the Armenian Genocide is an injustice not only to the Armenian people, but to all humanity — because ultimately, the only good thing that comes out of man's evil to his fellow man is the increase in our knowledge and understanding of the depths of that evil — which becomes a tool for preventing future suffering. And that knowledge and understanding is impossible to acquire if, as in modern Turkey, people hide from the truth, out of a misguided desire to protect their national pride.

This year, 2014, puts us on the cusp of the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the Armenian Genocide. But it also marks the 20th anniversary of the 1994 Rwandan Genocide. The Hutu tribal killers who perpetrated that Genocide killed about 800,000 people in three months — about half of the 1.5-million people who were killed in the Armenian Genocide.

In some ways, the Rwandan Genocide was very different from its predecessors. The Nazis exterminated the Jews with gas chambers, death wagons and shooting squads. The Ottoman military exterminated many Armenians through forced military marches into the outback without food, water or protection from the elements. The Rwandan Hutus, on the other hand, committed their massacres in a far more disorganized and decentralized way — with knives and machetes in scattered homes and churches.

But although the methods of slaughter were different, the result was the same: One group mass murdering another group out of fear and suspicion. In each case, the perpetrators were bigots who believed that the victims were pollutants within their own land. And they became so taken up with their evil bigotry that they began to see their victims as less than human.

What causes human beings to act like this? Earlier this month, American journalist Jackie Northam traveled back to Rwanda, where she had been one of the few Western reporters to cover the Rwandan Genocide 20 years ago. Speaking on National Public Radio on April 10, she recalled a meeting she had in 1994 with a middle-aged Hutu man who had beaten to death a dozen of his Tutsi neighbours. To quote Ms. Northam:

"He told me they were people he'd been friends with and regularly shared dinner with. He was a Godfather to one of the children he killed. He couldn't explain why; he said he didn't know what came over him. For me, this sums up the Rwandan genocide. It's like a madness took over the country, turning otherwise normal, reasonable, loving people into monsters. It took me a long time afterward to try to make sense of what I had witnessed."

But the "madness" Ms. Northam described did not come out of nowhere — it emerged from a vicious propaganda campaign that militant Hutus waged against the Tutsis. Just as Hitler waged a propaganda campaign against Jews before exterminating them. Just as the Armenian Genocide was the product of a propaganda campaign against Armenians, originating from the Turkish War Office, with the goal of demonizing Armenians as an internal security threat.

Unfortunately, the study of the Armenian Genocide has been systematically hampered by those who have tried to make excuses for the perpetrators, or minimize their murderous intent. Germany has paid billions in reparations for the Holocaust, and the odious crimes of the Nazis are extremely well studied. In Rwanda, the crimes of 1994 have been open to exhaustive journalistic inquiry. South Africa has had its Truth and Reconciliation committee, a model that has been used in other nations, including here in Canada, where we have had to deal with the aftermath of residential schools. Yet in Turkey, the search for reconciliation still remains elusive: Indeed, that government still maintains the conceit that some sort of new study needs to be made, in order to ascertain what exactly happened in 1915. It is as if the German government were to inform us that we needed a new, conclusive study of what happened in the 1930s and 1940s before we could lay judgment on the Nazis.

But there is evidence that the ground is shifting — even if we have had to wait nearly a century for that shift to take place: Some Turks are questioning their government's attitude.

I salute those in Turkey, and everywhere else, who truly are making these genuine efforts at reconciliation. Truth is the enemy of evil. And the fight against future human suffering begins with an appreciation of the suffering endured in the past.
jkay@nationalpost.com