STATE SPONSORED HATE INCITEMENT: TURKISH CHILDREN DRAWN INTO 'GENOCIDE' FILM ROW

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By Sarah Rainsford , BBC News, Istanbul, 23 March 2009

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Sari Gelin, or "Blonde Bride", was commissioned by the Turkish General Staff and distributed in recent months by the education ministry.

It is an attempt to counter what Turkey calls "baseless" claims that Ottoman Turks committed genocide against the Armenians in 1915.

The DVD was sent to all elementary schools with a note instructing teachers to show it to pupils and report back.

At the school of Mr Kaya's daughter, children as young as six had to watch.

"This film is not fit for adults, let alone children," he says.

Serdar Kaya has applied to the courts to sue the Turkish education minister
"They're promoting discrimination, branding certain people as 'others' and teaching children to do the same. My daughter will not be part of this enmity."

Mr Kaya has applied to the courts to sue Education Minister Huseyin Celik, arguing the film incites ethnic hatred against Armenians.

There are around 50,000 Turkish-Armenians left in Turkey, mostly in Istanbul.

In a statement last month, the ministry said it had stopped distributing the film and claimed it was never intended for children.

But teachers are still receiving official reminders to screen it.

'Very dangerous'

Sari Gelin presents the Turkish state's case that the Armenians betrayed the benevolent Ottoman Empire during World War I, siding with invading foreign forces and massacring thousands of Turks.

The film says the Armenians were "relocated" as a result of their actions.

There is no mention of the hundreds of thousands who perished or were killed on the long march through the desert.
Instead, elderly men relate how Armenians cooked Turkish babies alive and used civilians as firewood.

"The word Armenian is used very many times and always negatively," says Ayse Gul Altinay, a board member of the Hrant Dink Foundation.

She has good reason for concern.

Two years ago, Hrant Dink - a prominent Turkish-Armenian writer - was shot and killed by a teenager, who saw him as an enemy of the state.

So, the foundation created in his memory has also applied to the courts to get Sari Gelin withdrawn from schools.

"Showing young people a film with graphic scenes of violence, that repeats over and again that the Armenians stabbed the Turks in the back, and killed innocent women and babies and civilians is very dangerous," Ms Altinay says.

"We worry it will create more hatred."

Clear message

Outside the school attended by Mr Kaya's daughter, parents' opinions were divided.

"I don't think it's right to show children such a film, not at their age," another father said.

"But in Turkey, when there's an order from above, the officials have to comply."

However, one of the teachers disagreed: "We teach children who our enemies are and which countries tried to divide up our territory, but we don't teach them about the Armenians.

"So I thought this film was good, and objective."

Turkey is coming under increasing international pressure to acknowledge the 1915 deportation and mass killing of Ottoman Armenians as genocide.

The US House of Representatives has just introduced a resolution on the issue and when Barack Obama was campaigning for the presidency, he pledged to recognise the Armenian genocide as a

"widely documented fact supported by an overwhelming body of historical evidence".

Ankara is lobbying hard against such a move, arguing it would jeopardise its recent efforts at reconciliation with Armenia.

Official ties with Yerevan were cut in the 1990s, and the countries' common border was closed.

But while Turkey is open to renewing trade and diplomatic ties with its neighbour, the distribution of this film suggests it is more closed than ever to any discussion of its history.

The education ministry's statement calls Sari Gelin a balanced, historical account, but the clear message it gives Turkish school-children is that Armenians are traitors and their enemies.