UNTIL ERDOGAN CALLS IT 'GENOCIDE'

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Armenian Reconciliation Won't Happen

Atom Egoyan, The Globe & Mail, 24 April 2014

A week ago, AGOS – the leading Armenian language newspaper based in Istanbul and whose founder Hrant Dink was assassinated in 2007 – asked several prominent Armenians to write an open letter to the 'people of Turkey'. Amongst letters from Serj Tankian and Arsinée Khanjian (available to read online), I wrote the following words, "Your government has allowed you to indulge in denial for a century." Rather than help move things forward, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's statements on Wednesday are a manipulative attempt to perpetuate the state denial of the Armenian Genocide.

We are one year away from the centenary of this haunting date. While Mr. Erdogan refers to events around 1915 as "inhumane", he makes no reference to the inhumanity of continued denial and how this has effectively perpetuated the violence of the horrific act. I write in my open letter that 'there is nothing more seductive than the dream of reconciliation", but that without recognition of the Armenian Genocide by its perpetrators "the crime remains a raw wound on the very land it was committed upon."

Rather than appease this poisonous situation, Mr. Erdogan's words escalate his government's denialist tactics and obstructs the possibility of any justice for the Armenian Genocide. He expresses his wish that "the Armenians who lost their lives in the context of the early 20th century rest in peace, and we convey our condolences to their grandchildren."

What he doesn't state is that the 'context of the early 20th century' is the context of a state-orchestrated act of mass murder. With yesterday's statements, the context has suddenly become all too modern and alarmingly toxic. In William Faulkner's famous words, "the past is never dead. It's not even past". Mr. Erdogan uses the relativist argument that there were deaths on all sides. Equating the deaths of Ottoman soldiers in the First World War with the elimination of Turkey's Armenian, Greek, and Assyrian populations is simply outrageous.

I have no idea if the letters written in AGOS this past week in any way precipitated the tenor of Mr. Erdogan's statements, but it is clear that Turkey is nervous about the year ahead. While it continues to press for the setting up of an historical commission to probe events around the killings, I stated in my letter that there is no need for any commission to reveal a truth that every serious scholar of genocide and holocaust already understands to be true. The Armenian Genocide is a fact. On this day, April 24, Armenians around the world commemorate this fact.

While we long for "Turks and Armenians establishing compassion and mutually humane attitudes among one another" (Mr. Erdogan's words), we understand that this can never happen without

absolute clarity and acknowledgment of the crime. We will never accept using terms like 'relocation' (also Mr. Erdogan's word) as a euphemism for mass killing.

In my open letter to the Turkish people, I state that I am "exhausted by my anger, exhausted by your government's vehement denial, exhausted by my inability to move on. Yet there is little choice but to accept this exhaustion in the face of its alternative."

It may sometimes be difficult to understand the weight of this burden to remember, to understand how easily this whole matter would disappear in light of myriad other human rights violations that the world is facing. But these were my grandparents, these are the ghosts of my people, and this is my history. When Mr. Erdogan disingenuously offers his condolences to 'their grandchildren' he's talking to me.

And this is precisely what I find so upsetting about yesterday's comments. It's extremely tempting to move on, but as my letter to the Turkish people in AGOS states, "I have made a promise – like so many other Armenians – and it would haunt me to the end of my days to break this promise. I have made a promise to remember things that no one wants to speak of."

What Mr. Erdogan made clear on Wednesday is the need for resolve. On this day, Armenians remember a genocide that began 99 years ago. It will continue as long as the perpetrator denies responsibility for the crime. Nothing could be simpler. Nothing could be more complex.