IN ORDER TO PREVENT GENOCIDE, WE NEED TO LEARN ABOUT IT

Posted on December 11, 2008 by Keghart



Category: Opinions

By Alan Whitehorn PhD, The Kingston Whig-Standard, 14 January 2008

Over the past two years, there has been considerable research, discussion and debate about a Grade 11 course being developed for the Toronto District School Board. The course is to deal with the painful yet crucial topic of genocide. The proposed outline seeks to draw upon both historical and contemporary aspects.

The issue of the subject matter of the course has been discussed on CBC-Radio's As it Happens, has received coverage in national newspapers and has even become the target of an online petition by some members of the Turkish community.

One would expect that the Toronto District School Board's efforts at developing a comparative genocide and human rights course would be universally applauded, given the topic's genesis in the founding of the United Nations. The inclusion of the Armenian genocide, which is often seen in scholarly analysis as the first major genocide of the 20th century and as an important template for other genocides, would seem an obvious choice. So why the controversy? What is the background? What is the path ahead?

It is impossible to study modern history without understanding key political concepts, such as revolution, war, totalitarianism, genocide, freedom and security. Indeed, one would not seek insight into the modern history of many prominent countries without some reference to key concepts. For example, for France, we explore the causes and consequences of revolution; for Europe, we observe the enormous impact of world wars; to comprehend the Stalinist Soviet Union or Hitler's Nazi Germany, we carefully study despotic totalitarianism; we draw the important linkage between the end of slavery in the United States and the quest for freedom for all; and to assess postwar Germany, we need to comprehend the immense impact of the Holocaust.

Similarly, to understand genocide, we draw insight from the pioneering and heavily cited case study of the Armenian genocide of 1915.

The accounts of the Armenian genocide exist in considerable detail. More than nine decades ago, in 1915, the Toronto Globe, along with the New York Times, dutifully reported events as the shocking news, often drawn from clergy and neutral embassy officials, circulated around the world. Amongst the troubling headlines were the following: "Extermination the watchword"; "Million Armenians wiped out by Turks"; and "Million Armenians massacred by Turks." In confidential consular reports back to Washington and later in his well publicized memoirs, Henry Morgenthau Sr., the American ambassador to the Ottoman Empire's Young Turk regime, described with enormous despair the persecution, massive deportations and horrific massacres of the Armenians. American president Woodrow Wilson's visionary Fourteen Points for the post-First World War world included Article 12, relating to Armenians' suffering.

The inability of the legal terminology of the day to address the magnitude and scope of the Armenian massacres was a catalyst for Polish lawyer Raphael Lemkin to give the war devastated world of the 1940s the ominous term "genocide." Lemkin also convinced the newly formed United Nations to pass the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. It was a landmark development in international law and the quest to foster global justice.

Any comprehensive review of the substantial genocide literature will reveal that the Armenian genocide is a pivotal

case study that is included in most of the key texts and edited case studies on genocide. One important example is the pioneering book The History and Sociology of Genocide, by Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn, two founders of Concordia University's Montreal Institute for Genocide Studies. Globally, the Armenian genocide is such an important case study and template that the International Association of Genocide Scholars, the distinguished academic organization of leading researchers and authors in the field of genocide studies, has formally declared its official recognition of the historic 1915 genocide. In Canada, both our Senate and the House of Commons have formally recognized the Armenian genocide.

Acclaimed international scholar Gregory Stanton, author of groundbreaking work on the Cambodian genocide, one of the first to forewarn the world about the Rwandian genocide, and founder of the Genocide Watch, provides an analytical outline on the eight stages of genocide. Ominously, he warned that the last stage of genocide is "denial."

Political regimes can offer many excuses why they find it inconvenient, for reasons of state. to acknowledge past injustices. Even democracies find it difficult to admit past misdeeds. Too often, genocidal regimes or their successor states are even less likely to acknowledge their past horrific deeds. Article 301 of the Turkish penal code, which forbids insulting the Turkish state, has often been used to intimidate and silence those within Turkey who dare raise the topic of the Armenian genocide. Neither Orhan Pamuk, a Nobel Prize winner in literature, nor Hrant Dink, the assassinated editor of Agos magazine, were spared from that draconian decree.

Powerful attempts at censorship overseas can spill across borders in troubling ways. It is, therefore, all the more important for educators, researchers, writers and citizens in democracies to speak up in solidarity with brave Turkish voices today, and even more so for those who were brutally killed en masse.

Genocide is a pressing global concern. The past can serve as a warning. We must not shove aside the evidence. We need to be solemn public witnesses to the fragments of the scarred bones of countless genocide victims. We must resist the "sin of indifference." Today, all of us need to honestly and frankly acknowledge what took place. We need to speak up in place of those who have been brutally silenced. Genocide must stop. Genocide denial must cease.
The first step to a better future begins today. We need to teach what happened. We need to analyse why genocide occurred. We need to listen to the victims and somehow comprehend what terrible deeds happened to them. We need to understand their quest for closure. A wide and full education on genocide is a key component in building the foundation for a more just and secure world. Without such an education, we learn too little too late, and too often with tragic consequences.
The Toronto District School Board's course on genocide is long overdue. Its content should be comprehensive, in depth, and should deal with difficult issues in a frank and forthright manner. Such a course could be a model for other school boards across the province to embrace.
My generation has done too little. The next generation carries our hope. However, as teachers, parents and grandparents, we are, nevertheless, fearful. The young deserve a better world. We can help them achieve it with a deeper and broader education.
Genocide education is one crucial tool for a more just and safer world, and perhaps with it "Peace on Earth" will become more than just a seasonal greeting.