

Massachusetts and genocide

By Gregory H. Stanton and Peter Balakian
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THE RECENT lawsuit filed on behalf of the Assembly of Turkish American Associations, a student, and two teachers claims that the Massachusetts Board of Education is censoring history and denying freedom of speech. Why? Because educational materials about genocide and human rights, approved by the board, removed reference to a Turkish government website that denies the historical reality of the Armenian Genocide of 1915. If the board were to endorse websites denying the reality of the Holocaust, Massachusetts citizens would be justifiably outraged.

The lawsuit is wrong in claiming that extermination of the Armenians by the Ottoman Turkish government in 1915 is a disputed history. There is a profound difference between disputed history and denialist propaganda.

Scholarly agreement on the Armenian Genocide is overwhelming; and scholars of genocide are unequivocal about the reality and scope of the Armenian Genocide, in which the Ottoman Turkish government exterminated over one million Armenians, eliminating almost all of the Armenians in Turkey. The International Association of Genocide Scholars (the definitive group of scholars on the subject), the Institute on the Holocaust and Genocide in Jerusalem, and the Institute for the Study of Genocide have repeatedly affirmed the historical facts of the Armenian Genocide.

Exasperated with the Turkish government's campaign to falsify the history of the Armenian Genocide, the International Association of Genocide Scholars unanimously ratified an open letter to the Turkish prime minister last June, noting that Polish jurist Raphael Lemkin, when he coined the term genocide in 1944, used the Turkish extermination of the Armenians and the Nazi extermination of the Jews as defining examples of what he meant by genocide; and that the killing of the Armenians is genocide as defined by the 1948 United Nations Genocide Convention. The Armenian Genocide has a crucial place in every book on comparative genocide in the English language.

The Board of Education's decision to drop Turkish websites from a curriculum aimed at teaching about genocide was a corrective to an egregious situation in which a foreign government managed to intervene (with the help of the ATAA) to insert historical falsehoods in a Massachusetts curriculum. It seems clear that the lawsuit, initiated by the Assembly of Turkish American Associations, has a blatant political subtext, which is to aid the Turkish government's 90-year campaign to deny the Armenian Genocide. The politics are transparent; the intellectual discourse on the Armenian Genocide is the result of mainstream, international scholarship over many decades, while Turkey's denial is the product of its government and a few scholars who work with it.

Finally, this is not a First Amendment issue. States have the right to shape their own curriculums and educational goals. Freedom and educational ethics are at stake here. The leading scholar on Holocaust denial, Deborah Lipstadt, put it well in a statement she made to Congress in 2000: "Denial of genocide -- whether that of the Turks against the Armenians, or the Nazis against the Jews -- is not an act of historical reinterpretation . . . The deniers aim at convincing innocent third parties that there is 'another side of the story,' when there is not. Free speech does not guarantee the deniers the right to be treated as the 'other side of a legitimate debate,' when there is no credible 'other side'; nor does it guarantee the deniers space in the classroom or curriculum, or in any other forum."

The issue, Lipstadt demonstrates, is not about free speech, but about endorsing a foreign government's propaganda. The Turkish government and its supporters are free to express their thoughts, but it does not follow that their genocide denial websites are entitled to endorsement in Massachusetts classrooms.

The First Amendment permits us to express anything, but it does not enable a foreign government's falsification of history to be taught in our public schools. When Elie Wiesel wrote to the governor of Massachusetts in 1999 urging the state to drop the Turkish denial website from resources recommended in the genocide curriculum, he said: "Nothing that is in any way related to genocide must be distorted or diminished. No human rights curriculum sponsored by the state should be teaching the untruths put forth by the perpetrator. Our dignity as human beings is at stake."

Peter Balakian, Donald M. and Constance H. Rebar Professor of the Humanities at Colgate University, is the winner of the 2005 Raphael Lemkin Prize for "The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America's Response." Gregory H. Stanton is James Farmer Professor of Human Rights at University of Mary Washington and vice president of the International Association of Genocide Scholars.

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