

# PBS' perverse genocide debate

By Aris Janigian  
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I AM A DEVOTED viewer of PBS. From "Masterpiece Theater" to "Sesame Street," I have always considered it a bastion of creative and intelligent TV. But two weeks ago, PBS stabbed me and every other Armenian American in the back when it announced that its upcoming documentary, "The Armenian Genocide," will be followed on some stations by a panel discussion featuring two so-called scholars who claim that the genocide is a myth. Worse, according to genocide historian Peter Balakian, PBS threatened to pull the documentary if he and another genocide scholar declined to participate "on the other side" in the panel discussion, which was taped in January. Although the documentary is not slated to run until April, programmers across the country are now deciding whether to air it at all, air it alone or air it with the taped debate.

"We believe [the genocide] is settled history," said Jacoba Atlas, senior vice president of programming at PBS, but "it seemed like a good idea to have a panel and let people have their say."

This is perverse. Either there was a genocide or there wasn't. Would anyone tolerate David Irving, the notorious Holocaust revisionist, hashing it out on a panel with Elie Wiesel after a documentary on the Nazi concentration camps? Should we give *janjaweed* reps airtime the next time we run a documentary on their genocide in Darfur?

Why has PBS resorted to double-speak in regard to the Armenian genocide? The answer is simple: PBS is capitulating to politics. For years the Turks, America's so-called allies, have issued threats against any organization or country that challenges their quack reading of history. When the French recognized the Armenian genocide, the Turks recalled their ambassador to France, boycotted French products and canceled military contracts. They have threatened to withdraw strategic support from our country if we should dare make the same mistake.

Article 301 of the Turkish penal code makes it a crime to "denigrate" Turkey by, for instance, mentioning the Armenian genocide in public. In March, the famous Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk did just that and faced charges. International outcry and a technicality got his case dismissed, but others are still in peril.

One of PBS' genocide deniers, University of Louisville history professor Justin McCarthy, was invited by the Turkish Grand Assembly — reeling from European Union pressure to come clean about its genocidal past — for a pep talk in March.

"I know that the Turks will resist demands to confess to a crime they did not commit," McCarthy intoned, "no matter the price of honesty. I have faith in the integrity of the Turks." These rousing words brought the lawmakers, many of whom had sanctioned Article 301, to their feet. Does PBS really want to give such a belligerent falsifier airtime?

"It seemed like a good idea," Atlas said.

Raphael Lemkin wouldn't agree. He coined the word "genocide" in 1944, and viewed the Armenian case as a seminal example of such an atrocity. Norman Mailer, Carol Gilligan, John Updike and Cornel West wouldn't think so either. They signed a petition, along with 150 other scholars and writers, reaffirming the genocide's historical truth. Directors of Holocaust research centers around the world — including Wiesel and Yehuda Bauer in 2000 — also signed a statement declaring the Armenian genocide an incontestable historical fact. Even the Turks are on the record as acknowledging the truth. When Turkey was defeated in World War I, the allied powers created a tribunal that included members of the new Turkish government. The butchers behind the genocide had fled by then, but they were found guilty and sentenced to death in absentia.

Certainly the few remaining genocide survivors, now in their 90s, wouldn't think it "a good idea" to give the deniers a forum. They were children when hundreds of thousands of Armenians were herded like cattle through the scorching slaughterhouse of the Anatolian desert toward one of 25 concentration camps. They watched as their people were murdered, raped, tortured and left to starve in those camps. Armenian homes and shops were occupied and looted; ancient churches were turned into mosques or barns, used for target practice by the Turkish army or burned to the ground to eliminate any trace of Armenians in those lands.

By the time the Turks were finished, an estimated 1.5 million people had perished — more than half the Armenian population in Turkey. Armenians called it Medz Yeghern: "The Great Cataclysm."

The denial of genocide, as many have rightly observed, is the continuation of genocide. It should be clear to PBS, to Atlas and to programmers across the nation that the American public broadcasting system should not be complicit in a murderous lie.

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