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## ATOP Meaningfulworld Symposium on Preventing Genocide at the United Nations

Natalia Avendano-Garces and Dr. Ani Kalayjian

*“Shared sorrow is half sorrow, while shared joy is double joy!”*

On 12 April, 2012 the Association for Trauma Outreach and Prevention, with like-minded NGOs & a UN Mission, sponsored an important event held to spread awareness about genocide prevention. This year our symposium was entitled, *“Nations Acknowledging their Dark History: Psychosocial, Economic and Cultural Perspectives”* which took place in Conference Room E, at the United Nation Headquarters in New York City. According to the United Nations, genocide is crime under international law that must be punished and prevented. The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide describes it as acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group. The acts that are committed are horrible atrocities which not only end in massive casualties but also cause tremendous psychological pain, economic downfall and a century of conflicts. The conference began with viewing a documentary on the Genocide of Armenians titled *“River Ran Red,”* by **Michael Hagopian**, and producer **Carla Garapedian**. The late Dr. Hagopian’s family was also present, including his wife and daughter.



where are you placing them, and how are you nurturing them?”

**Dr. Carla Garapedian**, Director of Armenian Film Foundation received *AASSSG’s 2012 Outstanding Achievement Award*. She is the narrator of *“The River Ran Red”* and the project leader for the Armenian Film Foundation’s project which digitizes a rare collection of 400 Armenian genocide survivor interviews. These interviews will add to Steven Spielberg’s Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, which holds 52,000 Holocaust survivor interviews.



**Krieger Essay Winners** also presented summaries of their essays. Krieger Essay Contest is open to high school and college students, writing about what genocide means to them. The winners were: first place: **Dana Hamouda, Alec Gurevich**; second place: **Isabel Bulakh, Faad Asif**. Winners were given certificates, as well as

\$100 for first place and \$50 for second place winners; college winners will receive \$200.



**Dr. Carla Garapedian** presented on the economic impact of genocide. Successive Turkish governments have expended considerable energy in denying the Armenian genocide, not only in Turkey itself, but around the world. The effort to deny such crimes against humanity is based on a fear of what the state will have to pay once these crimes are acknowledged. Dr. Garapedian explained that the fear goes back to First World War when the British, French and Russian governments in 1915, warned the Ottoman Government that it would be punished if it continued with its crimes of humanity against the

Armenians. She offered an explanation on how the Turkish laws allowed for confiscation of Armenian properties. With the Abandoned Property Commission, and the Liquidation Commission, the Ottoman State had detailed registers of items, properties and capital confiscated from the Armenian deportees. Churches, homes, bank assets of Armenians were expropriated by the State. During her presentation she mentioned that any country which profits from the spoils of a war crime is culpable, and that guilt does not expire with the passage of time. Now, through court cases in the last 10 years, these assets are becoming the focus of compensation in the United States. It started with the New York Life Insurance case, where Armenians were compensated by a major U.S. Corporation which sat on the proceeds of Armenian assets for decades. In other words, the U.S. Federal Reserve Bank was the recipient of stolen goods. She finalized by asking to the audience what would the modern state of Turkey save now by acknowledging the Genocide? The audience was attentive to her last words, "Certainly it would free itself of the self-perpetuating cycle of denial, and will provide the Turkish Citizens the basic civil right to know their own history, and a nation must pay for its crimes."

**Prof. Ervin Staub**, PhD, Professor Emeritus and Founding Director of the doctoral program of the psychology of peace and violence at the University of Massachusetts, described



some of the influences leading to extreme violence between groups, and avenues to prevention. As Prof. Staub explained, individuals and groups change as a result of their own actions, making early preventive actions essential. He described that when a society faces difficult life conditions, or groups are in persistent conflict, basic material and psychological needs of people are not satisfied. Scapegoating another group, creating ideologies that provide hope for one's group but identify enemies who stand in the way of its fulfillment are key influences generating violence. He also mentioned how cultural

characteristics such as a history of devaluation of a subgroup of society, and overly strong respect for authority contribute to violence. Emphasis was made on the importance of humanizing members of a devalued group, by words and through significant contact, creates constructive principles that embrace all groups and empower them to work together for a better future. These are both important aspects of prevention and reconciliation. He offered an explanation on the importance of commemorations for healing, especially since remembering the suffering of a group points to a positive future for the community. Acknowledgement by perpetrators, bystanders, and the world in general of a group's suffering has great value for both healing and reconciliation. Unfortunately, because of perpetrators' profound devaluation of their victims, their

ideology, and their unacknowledged shame, they rarely and only with great difficulty acknowledge their acts and show regret. Healing perpetrators can make acknowledgment more possible.



*Prof. Dennis Papazian*, PhD, noted expert on genocide, Professor Emeritus of the University of Michigan Founding Executive Director of the Armenian Assembly of America in Washington, D. C., Grand Commander of Knights & Daughters of Vartan, emphasized three elements that allow or encourage genocide among any people: sovereignty, nationalism and language. He elucidated that the concept of sovereignty is related to the idea of the “divine right of kings,” a concept well- established in history. The king, as representative of the deity, has complete power over life and death of his subject.

The king can kill with impunity, having the ultimate right of life or death over his subjects. It is because of the idea of sovereignty, total power within the state, that post-medieval states have legally been known to deal with inconvenient minorities by slaughter and massacre, an act that was not punishable until recent times.

In modern times, nationalism, pre-nationalism, and religious exclusiveness have been some of the drivers of genocide. States kill minorities in part because they are recognizable, they are different, and they are the “other,” not forming part of the predominant group which has the power of the state in their hands. He suggested that nationalism and racism are often closely intertwined. He reminded the audience that in certain times and places white people mistreated black people, and in far fewer instances black people have been known to persecute white people, such as in Zimbabwe. But nationalism goes far beyond color racism; it can include various forms of mythical racial purity and the division of people by religion. He offered several examples including Egypt today where the Christian minority is persecuted by the Muslim majority; however, if it were not for the numbers of Muslims they might have become victims of genocide. Language can also be a divisive factor. Often, a linguistic minority can be despised by a linguistic majority and thus persecuted, but more often there must be other distinguishing factors involved that can lead to genocide. Those distinguishing factors are either racism, nationalism, or some combination thereof.

Close to one hundred people gathered to witness this transformative conference. All attendees were eager to learn about preventing genocide, and to be enlightened. Except two people who identified themselves to be from the Turkish Mission, and they attempted to disrupt the conference by standing up & insisting to talk in spite of Chair’s kind words asking them to follow proper conference protocol, by writing their questions on a blue index card placed on each chair, to be entertained during the Q & A section at the end of the conference. These two people continued to disrupt the conference a few times, and when the chair asked for security, he responded yelling arrogantly “We are the security, we own the security, and we pay the security....” And they continued to talk over chair’s voice loudly, disrespectfully, & unprofessionally. However, these interruptions did not prevent the rest of the attendees to be enlightened by the humanitarian efforts of the speakers to prevent genocide.

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Association for Trauma Outreach & Prevention, Meaningfulworld is a not-for-profit 501 (c)3 charitable organization founded in 1990 & affiliated with the United Nations Department of Public Information. ATOP has been serving communities in distress locally, as well as internationally in over 35 calamities, presented over 1500 lectures, workshops and conferences on healing, psychoeducation, empowerment, transforming generational trauma, creating peace, and visionary leadership. With its innovative 7-step Integrative Healing Model, the Biopsychosocial and Eco-Spiritual Model, ATOP has successfully treated, trained, and transformed generations. ATOP has over 100 publications, 4 books, 7 films, and an ancestral healing meditation CD.

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