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Subject: Armenia in the News

Dear Colleagues,

I must bring a troubling issue to your attention.

Two years ago, Forward, a Jewish weekly in NYC, printed an article by its assistant editor, Jonathan Mahler, on the front page. He wrote that one reason the Turks massacred Armenians in 1915 was that the Armenians were Soviet(!) Agents. There were many other distortions also.

A few months ago, Moment, a Jewish monthly published in Washington, DC by Hershel Shanks, published a long and even more insidious distortion of Armenian history. The Genocide was treated as a regrettable tragedy that the Armenians themselves had provoked, in which there was no element of premeditation and no genocidal intent. Nakhichevan and Zangezur were both presented as Azeri lands usurped by the Armenians.

I wrote to the Forward to rebut their article, and they only agreed to print my letter after I threatened to contact the ANC and attempt to organize a boycott of their advertisers. I wrote a very lengthy and detailed response to Moment. Mr. Shanks never acknowledged my letter. What he did do, was to call Prof. Peter Machinist in my department here at Harvard and read him select sentences towards the end. Peter told me of this, and I gave him the whole text.

In recent months, three major American Jewish organizations published a big ad in the NY Times Op-Ed page with the Turkish flag and a warm Tebrikler! on the anniversary of what the ad called a great democracy. As a Jew and a supporter of Israel I wrote to the Armenian press to dissociate myself from this odious ad.

Last Sunday, the NY Times had an article on Caspian oil by Stephen Kinzer. He wrote that masterpiece, "Armenians always Remember: Maybe

They Should Forget” about the way people in Erevan think about the Genocide and its aftermath. His present effort was different: it was accompanied by a map of the region, on which every country but Armenia is labeled. Evidently the NY Times finds that the best way to encourage Armenians to forget history is to consign Armenia itself to oblivion--and perhaps soon no Armenians will be left to remember anything anyhow, that way.

If enough people repeat, often enough, the big lie that the Armenians were an unimportant but unpleasant minority who provoked the massacres (not genocide, mind you) that befell them, the big lie that none of Eastern Anatolia is rightfully Armenian, and that in fact the Armenians are usurpers in almost every part of the Transcaucasus except maybe Erevan and its outskirts--once this snow job on public conscience and opinion is completed, what is the next step?

That should be plain: Armenia is stigmatized as an obstacle to peace, worse, an obstacle to petroleum--a nasty outpost of Russian power and nothing more. Let us suppose then that the blockade tightens. Cut off and strapped for resources, the Armenian economy founders. Pressure for “concession”--that euphemism for life blood--increases. Perhaps Armenia is so weakened that it is itself invaded. If there are new massacres, if the Turks and the Azeris link up in Zangezur, if they make a dash over the plain of Ararat, if they are not stopped at Sardarabad this time, if they reach Erivan... What then? What will the world do? This brave new world that has sat by till it was far too late every single time--in Biafra, Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo--will not lift a finger for distant, delegitimized Armenia.

We are not just Armenological scholars. We are men and women of conscience. To sit by and allow extreme distortions of history to become the common knowledge of the people, country, and culture to which we have devoted our lives, would be a dereliction of our calling. It seems it was

possible for scholars to study texts and print articles on Judaism and the Hebrew language while the Holocaust raged: the subject had its Gerhard Kittels, its great minds trapped in spiritual monsters. This is not the paradigm of Armenology. The great Macler and other savants involved

themselves in public action and relief efforts in the second decade of this hideous century.

As the year 2001 and the celebration of seventeen centuries of Armenian Christianity comes near, I would ask every member of our society to dedicate himself to political activism, to combating the systematic anti-Armenian propaganda campaign of lies that has been launched against us by the Turks and Azeris, by pro-Turkish lobbies and Big Oil. Rather than responding to mendacities, it is time for us, singly and collectively, to take the offensive.

I will try to encourage Atom Egoyan to make a feature film on the Genocide, something on the scale of "Schindler's List". Perhaps it might be based on Black Dog of Fate, the memoir by Peter Balakian. Please think of other initiatives. It would be very nice to have another millennium of Armenian Christianity, but for that we must have a surviving Armenia.

With best wishes,

James Russell