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Turkey Decries Toronto School Board Genocide Course

The killings of 1.5 million Armenians in 1915 is being taught alongside the Holocaust and the 1994 Rwandan genocide.

By Michelle Collins

In a letter to Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty and the province's Ministry of Education, the Turkish Embassy has voiced strong objections to a Toronto District School Board decision to teach students that the killing of 1.5 million Armenians in 1915 was genocide.

The lessons will come in a new course entitled "Genocide: Historical and Contemporary Implications" that will be launched with the start of the new school year in September. The course's three case studies include the Ottoman's killing of Armenians in 1915, the Holocaust and the 1994 Rwandan genocide.

Although the Canadian Parliament approved a motion in 2004 recognizing the killings as genocide, the Turkish government has long disputed the description.

The idea of teaching a course on genocide was first raised three years ago by a Toronto board trustee, but has since been met with controversy on all sides. Aside from Turkish objections, the Ukrainian Canadian Congress advocated that the Holodomor should be included in the course, and the Muslim Canadian Congress accused the board of religious bias.

As the controversy escalated over what was and wasn't included in course material, the school board decided earlier this year to strike a review committee. After a few public meetings, the panel concluded that the course reading list would need to be approved by a panel of historical experts.

It's unclear how the Armenian killings were included in the Toronto school board course proposal, but the inclusion of one book in particular, *Extraordinary Evil: A Brief History of Genocide* by Barbara Coloroso, sparked outrage.

At one point the review committee had agreed to remove Ms. Coloroso's book from its reading list, which in turn prompted outcry from the literary community and a letter from Penguin Canada president David Davidar to the school board defending Ms. Coloroso's credentials as an educator.

This past June, after months of debate, committee and public review, the school board decided to include Ms. Coloroso's book as a text examining the psychology of genocide, and on

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Furor Over High School Course Reached House in 1988

Twenty years ago, the debate surrounding the Ottawa Board of Education's decision to refer to the killing of Armenians as Turkish genocide went all the way to the House of Commons.

External Affairs Minister Joe Clark rose in the House on March 17, 1988 to say that one of his senior officials should not have interfered with the board's decision and said an official apology would be sent.

Mr. Clark's assistant deputy minister of the Europe branch, Jacques Roy, had sent a letter to the board criticizing the decision to characterize the 1915 mass killings of Armenians as genocide in a new high school course. Mr. Roy said it would affect relations between Turkey and Canada.

Mr. Clark told the House the letter had been sent without his knowledge and said the Department of External Affairs should not have been involved in the matter.

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June 2 gave final approval for the course to go ahead in 11 Toronto high schools, reaching about 300 Grade 11 students.

Turkish Outrage

That has prompted a backlash from the Turkish Embassy as well as members of the Turkish community.

"This is a pedagogical thing and goes against traditional Canadian principles of objectivity, and this is a matter of history...which should really be immune to political pressures," said Yonet Tezel, first counsellor at the Turkish Embassy. "That's something for Canadian educational institutions to consider themselves, we don't need to remind them of that."

"The school board's decision to go ahead anyway and teach it as genocide, it's very objectionable, that's why Turkish parents are concerned, and I sympathize with them."

Mr. Tezel said the Turkish Embassy has communicated its concern to colleagues at the Department of Foreign Affairs and to provincial officials that as the school year commences, Turkish Ambassador Rafet Akgünay will continue to raise his concerns through diplomatic channels.

The Council of Turkish Canadians has also expressed its disapproval, especially of the inclusion of *Extraordinary Evil*.

Lale Eskicioglu, executive director of the Council of Turkish Canadians, launched a formal complaint against the Toronto District School Board in November. Ms. Eskicioglu also started a petition, which she said has collected 12,000 signatures.

"It cannot be taught as genocide," she said. "You can teach it as a dispute or under Ottoman history maybe, but you cannot teach it in the same category with Holocaust and Rwanda. This is a very serious crime. You cannot accuse a nation or its people of that which amounts to slander and hate propaganda because it's not correct."

For Ms. Eskicioglu, this is a personal plight, and a situation in which she feels she and her fellow Turks have been wronged.

"Why should my daughter, alongside with her Armenian friends, sit in the same classroom and hear one-sided inaccurate versions of history, which is categorized with the worst crime in the world?" Ms. Eskicioglu asked.

Although the course has been approved, she said she plans to pursue the matter further, and that she and other parents will closely monitor the course teachings and materials used. Fearful that children of Turkish descent will face discrimination, Ms. Eskicioglu also said they are prepared to take legal action if any are bullied as a result of the teachings.

This past April, she said, posters accusing all Turkish people of being mass murderers were discovered pinned up around Carleton University's campus in Ottawa.

"This is our fight because these are our children," she said. "Please do not teach inaccurate history."

Course Overdue

But those in support of the course and its inclusion of the Armenian killings as genocide say it is long overdue and that the inclusion of the course is part of living in a diverse and multicultural country such as Canada.

Liberal MP Jim Karygiannis, who represents the Toronto riding of Scarborough-Agincourt and in 2005 travelled to Armenia to commemorate the Armenian genocide, expressed his support for the course at one of the school board's special meetings in June.

Although Mr. Karygiannis said the meeting was "cordial," he said he is disturbed that at least one protestor in turn verbally attacked him and his Greek ancestry.

"The course is needed, we cannot bury our heads in the sand anymore," Mr. Karygiannis said Monday. "This is where we have to move on, we have to turn the page, we have to acknowledge what happened, we have to teach our children what happened."

Executive director of the Armenian National Committee of Canada, Aris Babikian, said there are several respected scholars who have concluded the Armenian killings to be genocide.

Over the last several months, he said, the controversy has been fuelled by some members of the Turkish community misrepresenting some of the issues, and disputes that

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Turkish students will face discrimination or bullying.

"The issue, it's not to try to stigmatize certain segments in our society in Canada on the controversy, it's something the students should [learn] from these past experiences and in the Turkish-Armenian case, it is the hype and paranoia of the Turkish government inflaming the issue here because they are getting involved in these issues," Mr. Babikian said. "We do not have any issue with the Turkish-Canadian community."

System superintendent for special projects for the Toronto School Board Nadine Segal said that despite the controversy, school board officials feel very positive about the planned course and are confident they have knowledgeable teachers. She said it has been an "incredibly exciting project" that has, for the most part, received positive support from international academics.

"There was never any intent to offend any community or to suggest that one person's suffering was greater than another's," Ms. Segal said. She added that the course is not meant to exclude any other genocides and that many of the other 20 events of the 20th century that had also been considered, will be woven into the course. "We had to select areas that were well-resourced, that had materials that were available for high school students."

She said the course was built in alignment with the Ministry of Education's policy for a locally-developed course, and involved input from community groups.

"It's very carefully constructed, also the main focus of the course is global citizenship and what students can do to respect human rights and prevent future genocides, so we expect students to be critical thinkers and do something with this information, and that's where we move into the section of the course that focuses on social action."

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