

Talking about Genocide Amidst Toronto's Diverse Ethnicities

by Tim Lynch

Genocide is not a topic I would choose to talk about. It was with some trepidation that I attended a November 2014 meeting of RCMI's Securities Studies Roundtable on the topic. Dr. Maja Catic gave an objective and intellectual presentation about her research on genocide. Her frame of reference was the UN Convention on the Prevention of the Crime of Genocide (CPPCG).

Dr. Catic described a litany of sins about how some factions of humanity justify their right to massacre hundreds of thousands of their fellow human beings. An authority on genocidal practices in the Middle East, she reviewed examples of genocide, or its perception, relate to the contemporary, geopolitical status of Libya, Egypt, Israel, Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India.

Reviewing the emergence of secular authoritarian states that arose from the 20th Century colonial era of drawing straight lines across the sand, Dr. Catic was adamant that future generations in the west will have to cope with the Bush / Blair 2003, shock-and-aw, coalition of the willing, war against Iraq. She stressed that the demolition of military and legal institutions that kept society functioning, albeit along Sunni / Shia religious apartheid practices, has provided the sophisticated military leadership supporting ISIS.

Genocide is not a custom limited to the Middle East. Examples from sub-Saharan Africa, like the misery of Rwanda, as well as Asia, referring to the killing fields of Cambodia were discussed. As I imagined the scenes on the ground, I assumed the role of a "cameraman," just there to record the facts. This role provided me with a feeling of objectivity and no blame. I assured myself that no such horrific tragedies could occur in western societies. That said, comparison was made with the Scottish Nationalist election, the extreme right wing movements in Europe and racially motivated gang warfare in American cities.

Discussion, following the presentation, was thought-provoking. Dr. Catic's absolutely agreed that Canada, like Australia, New Zealand and the US, practiced genocide in dealings with their aboriginal peoples. Her reference to "ethnic homogeneity" seemed in conflict with the ethnic heterogeneity of Toronto where all the nationalities and religions she referenced seem to "get along," and raised questions about "ethnic cleansing" practices. Concerns about women's welfare in emerging societies led to talk about the usefulness of sanctuaries where they may find refuge.

The Nazi holocaust is the benchmark against which all genocides are judged from a pre-meditative, logistical perspective. Genocide results in lots of dead bodies which, in

our era of an International Criminal Court, translate into evidence.

The Nazis created an industrial complex for removing the evidence; so they thought. Creating mass graves is not advisable anymore because satellite surveillance pinpoints such locations. This creates logistic problems in disposing of the evidence. Letting bodies float down rivers or decay in the desert sand, provided such opportunities are available, were suggested as possible solutions.

In attempting to address the question "what next?" there was some consensus for letting the local tribal, ethnic, nationalistic, religious maturation fight it out among themselves in those faraway places. But it was recognized that nowhere is faraway these days and in our technological era the world is a small place.

While the stoning of women, public executions and beheadings may be accepted norms today in some cultures, in western societies they are perceived as medieval, some may say, "biblical." These images were said to desensitize people living in societies where they are commonly practiced. Through their personal communication devices western youth are able to view these practices. It was stressed that no degree of parental control will prevent young people being exposed to such "norms" at a formative stage in their development. The impact of this imagery on current and future generations was seen as a major threat to western values and security.

Postscript: Dr. Catic's introduction to "genocide" became relevant during my 2015 winter retreat in Panama. The choice weapon used by Spaniards who conquered Panama in the 15th Century was the "war dog." These beasts were trained to devour indigenous child, women and men. There was no defence against these dogs: whole civilizations disappeared. Meanwhile in their native homeland the Spaniards, along with the Portuguese, were following their extreme Catholicism through their implementation of the Inquisition. Over the past five centuries Panama has become a boiling pot of humanity providing refuge for humans that other nations refused entry. There is a significant Jewish community in Panama including surviving families of the Inquisition. I had the honour of being among Jewish people during their remembrance of the 70th memorial of the Holocaust and being in the presence of families that survived the Inquisition — and the beat goes on.

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