

## **Summary of “Preserving Memories: Human Rights Violations/Ethnic Cleansings”**

prepared by Stephanie Ballard

On June 3, DIAL-South hosted an educational event entitled “Preserving Memories: Human Rights Violations/Ethnic Cleansings.” Held at Leavey Library on the campus of University of Southern California, it consisted of a five-member panel and was attended by 30 librarians, students, and others. This event was organized by Judith Samuel, who is DIAL’s official historian as well as a member of the program committee. As promised in the June issue of the CARL newsletter, here is the complete summary of the event. For definitions of terms used, see the Glossary at the end of this report.

Please note that the views expressed are those of the guest speakers and do not necessarily reflect the views of this writer, Diversity in Academic Libraries, or California Academic and Research Libraries. This writer has tried to report those views faithfully, and apologizes for any unintentional misstatements or inaccuracies. Comments and questions may be directed to DIAL-South co-chair, Stephanie Ballard, at [stephanie.ballard@csun.edu](mailto:stephanie.ballard@csun.edu).

For links to all speaker handouts mentioned below, visit the DIAL-South website at <http://isd.usc.edu/~lesinska/DIAL/act.htm>.

### **Speakers**

The panel began with an account of the Armenian genocide by Gia Aivazian, who is the daughter of a survivor, a doctoral candidate at UCLA, and its Greek and Armenian librarian. She noted that this year marks its 90th anniversary. The audience learned that this was the first documented genocide of the previous century when, in April, 1915, the Ottoman Turkish government began to systematically exterminate its Armenian population through massacre and forced deportation. The atrocities were well-known at the time but the world did little to help, and by 1922, 1.5 million had been killed. Referred to as “the forgotten genocide,” the Turkish government continues to deny the Armenian genocide happened and to suppress the truth from its own citizens. The United States government has yet to acknowledge it.

Ms. Aivazian concluded her talk by reading a recent letter from the International Association of Genocide Scholars asking the Turkish prime minister to “acknowledge the responsibility of a previous government for the genocide of the Armenian people, just as the German government and people have done in the case of the Holocaust.” She also supplied the audience with a well-organized bibliography of materials, many of which are part of UCLA’s extensive Armenian collection. Selected primary sources include official records and archives from various governments (U.S. among them); oral histories and personal narratives of survivors and eyewitness accounts from journalists, medics, missionaries, and travelers. Selected secondary sources include works published largely in the last two decades, including studies, films, teaching guides, literature, and bibliographies.

Olka Nikolic, a doctoral candidate in International Studies at University College in London, followed with a presentation about recent violence in the Balkans. Conflict in the former Yugoslavia is complex and long-standing, flaring up in the period following the Armenian genocide. And like its predecessor, it has roots in religious as well as political antagonism. Ms. Nikolic attempted to summarize and clarify the situation, and provided a list of relevant books published in the past decade. She believes that the region's Croats and Muslims were the primary perpetrators and that the Serbs were victims of what she calls "the largest act of ethnic cleansing since World War II."

Describing support for the campaign by the U.S. government, Ms. Nikolic cited the CIA's Operation Storm and Operation Roots. The campaign included the systematic destruction of Serbian symbols and religious artifacts as a way to annihilate its culture. This loss, together with a lack of documentation and access to accurate information, makes "preserving memories" extremely challenging.

Turning the audience's attention to another part of the world was Geoffrey Robinson, history professor at UCLA and a former researcher with Amnesty International. He reported on two genocides in Indonesia, the first of which occurred in 1965-66 and claimed one million lives. General Suharto staged a coup against the Communists who were in power at that time, overthrew the government, and assumed leadership of the country. The entire episode was supported by the United States.

The second genocide occurred during the period 1975-79 in nearby East Timor, a small part of an island that belongs to Indonesia. Suharto similarly moved to squash a Communist insurgency there and many civilians were killed or died of disease and starvation as a result. According to Dr. Robinson, the U.S. also supported the repression, presumably for access to the region's oil resources. Then in 1999, a popular vote for East Timor independence prompted the government militia to go on a bloody rampage, but this time the international community "miraculously" stepped in. Dr. Robinson handed out a bibliography for both conflicts, each including items of history and analyses, documents and archives, memoirs and fiction, websites, and films, as well as a list of web resources on human rights in general.

Moving next to the African continent, Jok Madut Jok addressed the current conflict in Darfur, a region in western Sudan. He is a history professor at Loyola Marymount College and an American of Sudanese heritage. Dr. Jok reported that the first genocide in Sudan occurred in 1955 when the country achieved independence from Britain. The second has been active since 2003, displacing two million Darfur residents and killing 300,000, most through starvation and disease. He informed the audience that the Sudanese government uses "independent" militias to do its dirty work and therefore escape accountability.

Dr. Jok also explained how the Sudanese government prevents humanitarian aid from reaching refugees. After the population fled to escape persecution, the UN set up housing and services for them. The hosting country then expelled the refugees and kept the resources for itself. Although the U.S. has acknowledged the genocide in Darfur,

according to Dr. Jok, it has been too preoccupied with the War in Iraq to intervene. Program attendees were given a list of web resources, should they wish to learn more about this situation.

The final presentation, about a Holocaust archiving project, was the most library-specific. Judith Truelson, head of the Doheny Research Services at USC, discussed the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation. This local organization was established by Steven Spielberg as a result of public interest in his 1993 film *Schindler's List*. Using a PowerPoint presentation, Dr. Truelson focused on an access grant from the Mellon Foundation for the purpose of delivering the Shoah Foundation's archive to students and faculty. The archive consists of 50,000+ videotaped interviews with Holocaust survivors, conducted around the world by volunteers. As an example, Dr. Truelson showed an interview with a survivor whose concentration-camp job was to clean the gas chamber after each gassing.

The goal of the million-dollar grant is to integrate this resource via the Internet2 into coursework and research at USC, as well as at partners Yale, Rice, and the University of Michigan. Dr. Truelson explained that each minute of each interview is indexed using a 30,000-word thesaurus, which is quite an accomplishment considering the average interview is over two hours in length. One downside is that there is no remote access; at least for now the archive must be used at USC Doheny Library or one of the partner universities. And although the Mellon grant expires this year, Dr. Truelson is optimistic the project will continue. A faculty user survey has already been conducted, the results of which were shared in the form of a handout.

## **Discussion**

The panel was followed by a Q&A period, which led to some stimulating discussion. One provocative question concerned the risk of bias, as all the speakers demonstrated emotional and personal attachments to their topics. Their consensus seemed to be that true impartiality, even in academia, is impossible and it is best to acknowledge one's bias. One speaker believes there is a scholarly obligation to correct previous misrepresentations of atrocities, which are themselves distortions of the truth. Another stated that "objectivity is overrated." Ms. Aivazian said she does not mind including "denial literature" in her bibliographies because the evidence for Armenian genocide is overwhelming.

Another attendee asked about the prospects for world peace and an eventual end to state-sponsored violence. This question drew a more mixed reaction from the panel than the previous one. Dr. Robinson offered hope by citing the international intervention in East Timor which prevented a potential genocide. Grassroots organizations were said to be the best means for applying pressure to brutal regimes. The Internet was also mentioned as an effective tool for positive change, as it has the potential for rapidly responding to global conflicts, educating the public, and shifting opinion.

## **Glossary**

The following definitions are paraphrased from the Wikipedia online encyclopedia.

*Human rights violation* is a term used when a government violates national or international law related to the protection of human rights.

*Ethnic cleansing*, at one end of the spectrum, is virtually indistinguishable from forced migration, while at the other it merges with genocide. The term is considered by many to be a political euphemism that refers to various policies of forcibly removing people of a particular ethnic group.

*Genocide* refers to the deliberate mass murder of civilians. It has been defined as the killing of people based on their ethnicity, nationality, race, religion, or politics, as well as other deliberate actions leading to their physical elimination.