

From July 8– 12, 2015, the International Association of Genocide Scholars (IAGS) held its 12<sup>th</sup> annual conference in Yerevan, Armenia. The location was fitting that as the year 2015 also marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Armenian Genocide. The conference was not exceptionally large, with approximately 150 people in attendance, but it was symbolic nonetheless. Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan opened the conference: “Humanity should have already overcome the crime of genocide. ‘Never Again’ should have been reached by now. Yet mass murder and annihilation still occurs. Struggle against Genocide must gain momentum.” Though the fight for genocide recognition and prevention has not yet gained full momentum, the growth of the IAGS organization indicates the movement is progressing. Founded in 1994, the IAGS has since grown to encompass over 500 members from 50 countries. Members of the IAGS came from all over the world to educate each other on the dynamics of genocide, to share in their views and aspirations to resolve current genocides, as well as preventing the possibility of future genocide.

As the conference opened, we learned that the wounds of the Armenian people are still open from the genocide that occurred 100 years ago. To this day, Armenian families remain divided because of this genocide, and the Turkish government has yet to acknowledge it. Nevertheless, I have learned during the conference that Turkish civilians are taking it upon themselves to acknowledge what happened. Various groups from within Turkey are working to reveal the truth and individual Turks have even taken it upon themselves to visit the genocide memorial in Armenia and apologize for what their ancestors did. Toward the end of the first day, the conference attendees came to the realization that honoring past genocides was not enough; we need to counter it when we see it in the works. In regards to how we can counter it, the answer is clear: spread the warning. We are better equipped today. Thanks to the advent of the internet and social media, information spreads rapidly. On the third day of the conference, University of British Columbia student Jeff Stonehouse attested to the power of social media in reference to the notorious Mount Sinjar incident last year. As the murderous terrorist group ISIS stormed through Iraq, tens of thousands of Yazidis, under threat of annihilation, fled to Mount Sinjar. ISIS terrorists had already killed thousands of Yazidis and captured over 7,000 Yazidi women to serve as sex slaves prior to besieging over 40 thousand Yazidi refugees on Mount Sinjar. These Yazidi refugees were trapped on the mountain with no food, water, and were under immediate threat of annihilation. Fortunately, social media helped bring their plight to the world, and thanks to emergency supplies brought in by helicopter, coupled with a counter-attack led by Kurdish Peshmerga forces backed by U.S. airstrikes, the siege of Sinjar was broken after a mere 10 days, and over 35,000 Yazidi were saved.

Throughout the conference, scholars from across the globe came to speak on different genocides, different conflicts, and various methods to not only fight genocide, but also to obtain reconciliation between the victims and perpetrators of genocide. Some speakers like Ernesto Verdeja of the University of Notre Dame chose to focus on monitoring political instability in order to assess the risk of potential genocide whereas others chose to focus on the role that individuals play in carrying out genocide. However, I learned that rather than being separate issues, they were actually linked. People, especially the youth, become influenced by the world around them. If their society preaches violence and oppression, then “ordinary” individuals, especially children, are more likely to pick up a weapon and answer the call for genocide. Tim Williams of Marburg University, Germany,

expanded on this notion in his study of the Cambodian genocide. In his study, Tim stated that in a society where order breaks down and violence becomes the norm, some individuals will use this as an opportunity to settle any old grudges that they may have, or they may simply adapt to the new violent world in which they now find themselves.

Whereas some scholars focused on the motives of the institution and the individual to commit genocide, others chose to focus on post genocide issues. One that the Armenian people are intimately familiar with is the issue of genocide denial. We learned how the nation of Turkey spends millions of dollars in the promotion of denying the Armenian Genocide. Turkey uses every method at its disposal, from threatening to close military bases to the West, disrupting public meetings, economic sanctions, even arresting its own citizens who seek to speak the truth of what happened. A similar pattern has emerged in regards to Pakistan's involvement in the Bangladeshi genocide of 1971. Both nations seek to erase the memory of this dark chapter in their nation's history and seek to twist the facts by downplaying the number of victims and claiming that other parties bare equal, if not greater responsibility for what happened. Maral Attallah of Humboldt State University made it clear that denial is the final phase of genocide, that it has a lasting negative effect on both survivors and their descendants. Many known cases of PTSD and depression have been linked to both parties as a result of genocide denial, which many view as an attack on their own identity.

Genocide denial was not the only post-genocide topic brought up at this conference. Irene Massiminio delivered an address in which she criticized the lack of effective rehabilitation programs within the international prisons as well as the inadequate measure of rehabilitative progress of criminals convicted of international war crimes. On the other hand, Dr. Brenda Gaydosh of West Chester University chose to focus her address on the issue of forgiveness. Utilizing first-hand experience she obtained from her trip to Rwanda, Dr. Gaydosh spoke how in this country, the killers and victims of the Rwandan genocide live side by side, often within the same village. As painful as this obviously must be, the entire Rwandan nation has been emphasizing the necessity of forgiveness and reconciliation for the past 20 years. For the victim and perpetrator alike, it is emphasized that the victim must learn to forgive the perpetrator, and the perpetrator must learn to not only accept forgiveness, but also to try to forgive themselves if they are to ensure that their nation never sinks into the darkness of genocide ever again. There were many other presenters at the conference who brought forth many powerful analyses, but for me, Dr. Gaydosh's speech resonated the most, as I have learned personally that to this day, the Armenian people have a very difficult time forgiving.

While in Yerevan, I took the time to tour the Armenian nation and speak with the Armenian guides who toured with me. I learned how their Christian faith became the center of their entire culture. Whenever an Armenian community gathered in a place to settle, the first thing the people built was a church. Unfortunately, the Armenian people have a long tragic history of fighting off invaders. These invaders included Persians, Arabs, Mongols, and of course, the Ottoman Turks. Throughout the numerous invasions, conquests, and occupations that lasted over 1500 years, the Armenians witnessed many of their churches and monasteries destroyed. As I toured their existing churches, I noticed that while beautiful, they were not like the extravagant cathedrals I have seen in Europe. When I questioned the guide about this, her response was clear: the churches have been

destroyed by invasion so often that the Armenian people focus on quantity, not quality, to ensure that their houses of worship never disappear, no matter what disasters should befall them.

For me however, the most dominating feature that I saw was not within the nation of Armenia, but stood as a sacred site of Armenian heritage: Mt. Ararat. Located today within the nation of Turkey, Mt. Ararat is considered the most sacred site of the Armenian people. It is said in the Book of Genesis to be the mountain on which Noah's Ark landed after the Great Flood. Prior to becoming a Christian nation in the year 301 AD, Mt. Ararat was already considered a sacred site of the Armenian people. The fact that it became the place where Noah's Ark is believed to have stopped caused it to become even more sacred. Unfortunately, 1915 changed everything. The Ottoman Turks slaughtered 1.5 million Armenians and those that survived either fled to Russian territory or were scattered across the world. As this happened, the Turks took complete control over the Armenian land with Mt. Ararat ultimately becoming a part of the Turkish nation.

On July 9, at the end of the second day of the conference, all of the IAGS members, myself included, went to the Tsitsernakaberd Memorial Complex to visit the Genocide Museum and plant a pine tree in memory of the Armenians who lost their lives in the Armenian Genocide. As we planted the tree, I stood on the memorial grounds and looked out over the capital city of Yerevan. Looming over the city was Mt. Ararat. For several minutes, I just stared at the Mountain. To me, it has now become more than a sacred site; it has become a memorial. It now serves as a constant reminder to the Armenian people of what happened, and what they lost. I cannot even begin to imagine what it must feel like to face this reality every day, to look at this magnificent, sacred mountain, and see it as a constant reminder of what their nation had to suffer.

With this constant reminder, and with the Turkish nation refusing to make amends, or even officially acknowledge what happened, it makes forgiving much more difficult. I learned this from my uncle's lifetime friend, Sr. Arousiag Sajonian. Sister Arousiag helps run an Armenian orphanage and summer camp and is very popular within the Armenian community. I was fortunate enough to be able to visit her camp and speak with her in person. As we spoke of the genocide 100 years ago, I could see the great sadness in her eyes. Though I could tell by her gentle demeanor that she wishes to forgive the Turkish nation, it is so hard to do so because to this day, they refuse to acknowledge and apologize. My Christian faith has long taught me that we must forgive those who trespass against us, but when those who commit a great wrong feel that they did nothing that merits the need for forgiveness, it only serves to make it that much harder to achieve true reconciliation.

The IAGS conference proved to me that new genocide issues must constantly be addressed, and in-depth study of this field of study is necessary in order to understand, predict, and prevent genocide. The conference proved to me that we have a long way to go in regards to genocide recognition and prevention. However, the fact that so many people were willing to travel from every corner of the world to present their findings and to seek the elusive answers in regards to genocide understanding proves that the IAGS organization is on the right track. It is essential that conferences like this not only continue, but that the findings be brought out to the world and taught to the masses. If the work of these scholars succeeds in reaching enough of the populace, it may finally mobilize the world to truly honor the vow "Never Again."