

# Serge Avedikian's "Barking Island" Dog Slaughter as Overture to the Armenian Genocide

By Larry Portis

I think by now we can forget about the slogan "never again." The real question is, "how long to the next genocide?" In this time of capitalist crisis and growing political disaffection, will war provide opportunities to whip up some crusade aiming to ostracize and even physically annihilate victims on a mass scale, most obviously those who profess belief in a different deity and, collaterally, those politically troublesome people who deny deities altogether?

Serge Avedikian doesn't explicitly ask these questions in his new film, *Barking Island* (*Chiienne d'histoire* in French). In fact, no one says a word about anything. It is an animated film about dogs. But it is not one of those Disney-type productions, where the dogs (or other animals) speak in a human tongue and express ideas and emotions. No. In this film, the dogs live in an environment ruled by human beings, but there is no dialogue to disturb our perception of the social relations existing between the canines and *homo sapiens*.

The remarkable thing about this film is the contrast between its aesthetic beauty and the horror it recounts. The animated images are paintings rendered by a young artist Thomas Azuélós. The luminous depth of the colors, the invocations of oriental Constantinople and the ferocity of the figures are sublimely, compellingly cruel. This is great art, and it is not surprising that Avedikian was given the Palme d'Or at Cannes for this 15-minute film.

The plan to kill upward of one and a half million Armenians between 1915 and 1918 required careful planning and rational experimentation. This is where the dogs came in. Cleansing Constantinople of the thousands of dogs roaming free there provided a fine opportunity to test methods used later on the Armenians. In 1910, the government of the Young Turks enlisted the best European scientists in their effort to find a solution to get rid of the homeless dog population. The Pasteur Institute in Paris provided a study explaining the scientific options,

several of which were attempted. The use of toxic gases in specially constructed vehicles was proposed, as was the subsequent rendering of the corpses into hides and meat. Incineration in specially designed ovens was another envisioned solution.

The problem for the Turkish authorities was financial. In practice, cost-benefit analysis made modern methods unacceptable. The potential expenditures for developing the needed technology for canine extermination overrode available resources. So, it was back to the drawing board. At some point, it was suggested that the animals be simply rounded up

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and transported to a desert island in the Bosphorus. It would be an open-air dog pound where, eventually, about 30,000 offending creatures were concentrated. And there the extermination proceeded. The fact that no vegetation or other edible substance existed on the island ensured a definitive resolution to the nuisance they represented. The island was too far from land to allow the creatures to swim back, although many tried. The only disagreeable aspect of the plan, once put into operation, were winds that conveyed the sounds of screams and howls to Constantinople. But this annoyance ceased after a few weeks.

The massacre of the Armenians followed much the same pattern. Although gassing, burning, drowning, the injection of typhus bacilli in children, and other imaginable methods were employed, in the end most of the victims were forcibly displaced and died from exhaustion and starvation.

Real understanding of the murder of one and a half million Armenians beginning in April of 1915 must include knowledge about the preparations for that national effort to cleanse a "modernizing" Turkey of people considered to be outside the pale of "Turkish identity." The Armenian Christian population of Turkey had long served as scapegoats in times of stress due to the declining fortunes of the Ottoman Empire. The attacks against them increased in intensity throughout the 19th century. Between 1894 and 1896, around 300,000 were killed in various urban centers. Around 30,000 were slaughtered in and around the southern city of Adana in 1909. But these were only the most dramatically massive misfortunes befalling the Armenians over a long period.

Increasing numbers of Armenians saw their salvation in having "autonomy" and "independence," as did Jews attracted to a messianic "Zionism" at the same time. The logic inherent in the process is a striking perversity: the realization of the national aspirations of one group means the physical elimination of others, either by removing them from one place to another or using the radical and, it is thought, definitive (or "final") means of group murder.

Thus opened the 20th century with the application of scientific rationalism in the service of the religion of nationalism against those who are "out of place" in the nationalistic scheme of things. The tragedy of the process is that the most prominent victims themselves turned to nationalist solutions in order to protect themselves. It was an understandable reaction, one that confirmed the Turkish mantra that Armenians could not be assimilated into the Turkish "nation."

The Young (which is say "modern" and "progressive") Turks had, they thought, to clear the field for the building of a new state. In their turn, the Nazis propagated the idea that Germany had to be purified of its "blood" enemies in its social and cultural reconstruction. In both cases, and many others, the new "religion of nationalism" (as Carl Jung called it) was a driving force.

For Serge Avedikian, the nationalist mindset is the real problem. This is the meaning of the dog massacre. He explained this during an interview at the Mediterranean Film Festival (Montpellier, France, October 22-30,

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"I chose this story because I think there has been no greater misfortune than the invention of the nation state. I am absolutely opposed to the very notion of nationality as an official type of identity. An identity cannot be 'national' because identities are necessarily multiple, plural, conjugated. Defining anyone in such a standard way is unacceptable." For him, the acceleration of communications of all kinds has paradoxically made people more and more nomadic, like the dogs.

How does Avedikian see himself? "I was born in Yerevan, Armenia, but I live in France and have French 'nationality,' and I also have a memory. My grandfather lived in Constantinople in 1910, it was the moment when empires were breaking up and when nationalism was being imposed on everyone. The eradication of the dogs is evocative of what this government – that of the Young Turks, fascinated by Europe as they were – wished to accomplish. The major players were European dandies. They were educated in Paris for the most part, and many of them were Freemasons. They

were secular positivists fascinated by science and anxious to change the world. When they returned to Turkey, it was with the idea of transforming it according to a European model. For them, the groups of errant dogs were emblematic of an intolerable disorder typical of a backward society and culture."

Why is the story important? "It is an atrocious story. And the implications are clear. I am convinced that if there had been a Nuremberg-style trial of those who carried out the genocide of the Armenians, it is very possible that the Nazis would not have been able to pursue their own genocidal project. It is the belief in impunity that allows little and big dictators to act. All this is undoubtedly complex, but I think crimes are repeated when their authors are not held accountable."

What does all this portend? "The condition of dogs in Muslim countries is very particular. On the one hand, dogs are not generally allowed inside human dwellings. They are considered to be impure. But, on the other hand, they are recognized as having a social function and have the right to live. In fact,

dogs are accepted and protected in these countries as nowhere else. In 1910, there were many examples of people interfering with the collection and deportation of the dogs. But the film is really concerned with more than just the events of 1910. Let me put it this way: modernization, especially urbanization, and now globalization, means the death of the free dogs. The dogs were scapegoats then, and now there is no room for free agents anywhere. Whoever is on the margins, who is nonconventional, who refuses being controlled and forced into the national-state mold, will be an object of such repression. How many errant dogs or errant people will be allowed to exist? That is the question." CP

**Serge Avedikian** is now preparing a documentary called *The Dogs of Istanbul*. For information, contact [ron@sacrebleuprod.com](mailto:ron@sacrebleuprod.com).

**Larry Portis'** book *Qu'est-ce que le fascisme? Un phénomène social d'hier et d'aujourd'hui (What is Fascism? A Social Phenomenon Yesterday and Today)* will be released in December 2010. He can be reached at [larry.portis@orange.fr](mailto:larry.portis@orange.fr).