

Professor questions ethnic conflict

Armenian students respond to genocide denials

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Matthew Rist, Hatchet Reporter

One of history's most controversial debates came to the Marvin Center Monday night.

Turkkaya Ataov, a professor at Ankara University in Turkey who is internationally recognized for his vehement denials that the 1915 massacre of Armenians was a genocide, presented a lecture entitled, "How to Come to Terms with One's Past: Searching the Truth Behind Armenian Claims on Genocide."

A handful of Armenian students listened in silence among a crowd of 100 mostly Turkish or Turkish-Americans as Ataov discounted Armenian claims of genocide at the hands of the Turks during World War I.

"I'm not saying that nothing has happened, but certain things have happened and that there are omissions, and omission is a way of censorship," Ataov said.

The professor appeared to speak directly to the Armenian students in the audience at times and even pointed at them at one point in the lecture, telling them to see him afterwards to discuss what he was talking about.

"The Armenians are very fine people, very intelligent, very hard-working, very able," Ataov said.

Ataov characterized Turkey and its people as, historically, accepting of other ethnicities.

"Genocide is the natural outcome and continuation of racism. Only racists can pursue policies of genocide," Ataov said.

Ataov went on to talk about the disagreements that have arisen between the two opposing viewpoints on the interpretation of historical facts.

"We must agree on dispassionate, nonpartisan, open-minded controversy," Ataov said. "I have met very few [Armenians] that fit this description."

During his lecture, Ataov compared the misinformation about the Armenian massacres to a game he played as a child, similar to the game of telephone, asserting that this verbal passing of information is to blame for some of the misinformation.

"What actually happened in history is very different, or to a great extent different, than what the younger generations keep hearing from their elders," Ataov said.

Leah Brayman, president of the Armenian Student Network, said she was offended by Ataov's analogy.

"For professor Ataov to relate the genocide to an elementary school game of telephone is not only completely inaccurate, but it humorizes mass genocide," she wrote in an e-mail after the event. "As a critic of 'uneducated people' professor Ataov's claims about Armenian history and genocide were extremely false, completely misstated and he made a mockery of the Armenian people."

Esra Alemdar, president of the Turkish Student Association, said her organization brought Ataov to campus in order to educate students about the allegations of genocide.

"I feel like we, as Turkish-Americans, really do not have a lot of information about this issue, so that's one of the reasons why I wanted to have the professor speak," she said.

Alemdar said she was pleased to have students from the Armenian Student Association in the audience.

Brayman said that relations between the Turkish Student Association and the Armenian Student Association have never been a problem.

She added, "Unfortunately our history of conflict is still a national and international issue that we hope will be resolved very soon, so that all future relations will be nothing but peaceful and productive."

After his lecture, Ataov had a specific message for GW students of Armenian and Turkish descent looking to move forward and work together in the future.

"The duty of scholarship is to study the views of the other side because the Armenian side is making this mistake; which is described in psychology as the egoism of victimization, in which one side thinks only of its own losses and rejects the other," Ataov said. "In reality, what the other suffered may be even worse."

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