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The Terminated

By Christopher de Bellaigue

After a silence dictated by shame, pain and politics that lasted the better part of a century, the suffering of Armenians massacred by the Ottoman Turks and their Kurdish allies during World War I has recently become an urgent issue. The parliaments of several countries in the [European Union](#), a club Turkey wants to join, have labeled the massacres genocide. The Turks refuse to do so. Of all those involved in this slow, bitter process of remembering, it is writers and journalists, not politicians, who have touched the rawest nerves. On Jan. 19, [Hrant Dink](#), a prominent Turkish-Armenian who had promoted both reconciliation and an honest appraisal of the past, was murdered, apparently by a Turkish nationalist. Earlier, [Orhan Pamuk](#)'s reference to the massacres in an interview and an allusion to the Armenian "genocide" in a novel by Elif Shafak led to the prosecution of both on charges of "insulting Turkishness." Neither was convicted (unlike Dink, who received a suspended sentence on the same charge) but the country's reputation has suffered.

The Italian writer Antonia Arslan's first novel, "Skylark Farm," is based — how closely, we are not told — on the experiences of her Armenian grandfather's family during those massacres. The farm of the title is, in fact, a country house that Sempad, a well-to-do Armenian pharmacist living in a town somewhere in Anatolia, is trying to complete in time for the visit of his brother, Yerwant, who emigrated years earlier to make his fortune in Italy. Absorbed in their domestic affairs, Sempad and his family are oblivious to the signs, unmistakable in hindsight, that Turkey's government is preparing to get rid of a minority population it suspects of abetting the empire's Russian enemies.

May 1915 comes around and what follows is, for any Armenian, a dismally familiar story. Out at the farm, Sempad and his male relations are murdered by Turkish soldiers. His wife, their daughters and hundreds more women from the same town are then forced to walk many miles through hostile country to Syria, where death camps await. The marchers are "escorted" by guards who connive with marauding Kurdish tribesmen to take first the women's possessions, then their honor and finally — in many cases — their lives. It's a despicable story, and one that has been told, in Armenian and other languages, in countless memoirs and histories.

In Arslan's hands, the gruesome details of this tragedy are palliated by an old-fashioned story of redemption. After the marchers set off, Nazim, a Muslim beggar who used to inform on the Armenians for the authorities, joins forces with a Greek woman to shadow them, slipping them food and dressing their wounds at night, before finally using guile and gems to buy the survivors' release in Aleppo. As it happens, the unappealing Turkish suitor of one of the family's young women has been posted to Syria. Once he regarded most Armenians as worthy of elimination, but by the end of the book, even though his

sweetheart has died, he undergoes a conversion of his own, using connections to secure passports for the surviving members of the family so they can join Yerwant in Italy.

Although history keeps wrenching her back into shocking events, Arslan seems instinctively a writer of magic and intuition. Premonitions, dreams and religious faith provide her characters with respite from the horror. A bereaved mother dies by allowing her heart to break; a decent German official becomes an angel; and there is a delightful image of those medieval knights-errant “for whom hospitable Anatolia, with its small courts rich in flowing water and lovely maidens, proved more pleasing than their gloomy, distant northern lands.”

Arslan reports dialogues involving the architects of the deportations, including the interior minister, Talat Pasha, who writes in a telegram: “No mercy for women, old men or children. If even one Armenian were to survive, he would later want revenge.” This is a prophetic reference to Talat’s murder in exile at the hands of an Armenian who chanced upon him in a Berlin street.

“Skylark Farm,” is an affecting book, and sensitively translated by Geoffrey Brock, but it is marred by uneven writing. Arslan’s habit of flashing forward at moments of happiness to the wretched times that lie ahead detracts from the novel’s intensity without adding to its resonance. And some of her deadpan descriptions of hideous events — “This was sufficient time for the young bride Hripsime to recover from her delivery and to see her baby die, skewered on a bayonet and held aloft” — slue into bathos.

Putting down this book, it’s worth trying to separate Arslan the promising novelist from Arslan the iffy historian. She describes the Armenians as a “gentle, daydreaming people” who would like nothing more than to share their ancestral homeland, a platitude that ignores the existence of Armenian political groups seeking independence from the Turks. And in a novel containing footnotes to explain historical events, readers might mistakenly assume Arslan’s Talat telegram is irreproachably historical. The lack of a universally authenticated document implicating the Ottoman leadership in a plan to kill the Armenians is a central part of the Turks’ argument that the massacres were not a premeditated genocide but a tragic and unintended consequence of war.

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