

Sona Haroutyunian (2015). *The Theme of the Armenian Genocide in the Italian Literature*. Yerevan State University Press, Yerevan, 2015.

Introduction

(by Alan Whitehorn)

In many ways the Armenian Genocide served as a template for other genocides. During World War I, the nationalist Ottoman Young Turk dictatorship targeted the Armenians and other Christian minorities with mass deportations and killings. The Islamic Ottoman regime had always treated the Christian Armenians as inferior subjects and discriminated against them. In the latter part of the 19th and early part of the 20th centuries, the Armenian civilian population had been the target of Ottoman state-sponsored massacres leading to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Armenians. Those guilty of such crimes of mass murder did so with impunity and this greatly increased the likelihood that such violent deeds would be repeated and with far more deadly consequences.

While the Young Turk secret plans were drafted earlier, the Armenian Genocide took place primarily from 1915 onwards. Commencing in February 1915, Armenian male conscripts in the Ottoman army were disarmed and either killed immediately or put into forced labour battalions where large numbers died from exhausting work conditions and lack of food and shelter. The few that survived such brutal conditions were killed subsequently. From April 24 onwards, starting in Constantinople, prominent Armenian civilian men were arrested, imprisoned, tortured, and shortly thereafter killed. This pattern of killing the Armenian social, religious and political leadership spread across the entire Ottoman Empire. Armenian family property was confiscated *en masse* by the state. Entire Armenian villages and towns were swiftly emptied of their Armenian inhabitants. Women, children and the elderly were ordered on only hours or a few days notice to assemble in the town's central square. They were then sent by forced mass deportations into harsh locales, such as the Ottoman desert of Syria. Without sufficient food and water and clothing, these 'caravans of death' involved enormous suffering: hunger, dehydration, harsh exposure to the elements, and rape and kidnapping of young women by the Turkish militia and local tribes. Most Armenian women, children and the elderly did not survive. Those that did endured almost unspeakable horror. (See "Describing the Indescribable" in Alan Whitehorn, editor, *The Armenian Genocide: The Essential Reference Guide*. Santa Barbara, ABC-CLIO, 2015.)

The Armenian Genocide led to the death of an estimated 1,500,000 persons, hundreds of thousands of refugees and over a hundred thousand orphans. The number of dead was enormous. Nevertheless, the massive draconian deportation of Armenian civilians also resulted in a forced mass migration of Ottoman Armenians into neighboring states. Italy was one such destination for Armenian Genocide survivors.

As traumatized immigrants to a new land, the first challenge of the survivors, reflecting Maslow's 'hierarchy of needs', was to seek safety and then to acquire food, shelter and later work. Next, they also needed to adapt to their new land and its culture and language.

Despite the vast loss, ongoing nightmares, and enormous pain when describing such horrific experiences, some began to write about their catastrophic ordeal and tragic fate. Usually, they wrote in their mother tongue of Armenian, but some wrote in other languages, either those acquired in their original homeland or their new, adopted country. Too often these works were fragmentary, incomplete and unpublished. Many were usually self-published, with small print runs in Armenian, and not well-known outside the Armenian Diaspora community. Occasionally, the writings were published and read by a wider audience, some were even eventually translated into other languages, and, on rare occasion, made into a film. Antonia Arslan's *Skylark Farm* is the notable example from the Armenian Italian literature. It is a moving and powerful novel about her extended family's painful odyssey.

These biographical, eyewitness and literary works constitute important witness memoirs (See Verjine Svazlian's epic and pioneering volume *The Armenian Genocide: Testimonies of the Eyewitness Survivors*. Yerevan, Gitoutyoun Publishing House of the NAS RA, 2013.) and can serve as key archival documentation about the traumatic individual, family and Armenian national experiences during the mass deportations and killings by the Ottoman Young Turk dictatorship. Collectively, these writings add to the already overwhelming evidence and testimony of the Armenian victims of the Young Turk 'crimes against humanity' during World War I.

In a number of countries, Diaspora Armenians gathered together and shared their horrific accounts. Both in earlier decades and more recently, they sometimes edited collections of their writings.

In this book, Sona Haroutyunian of the University of Venice presents the Armenian Genocide survivor testimonies, witness accounts and artistic literature published in Italy. She provides detailed analysis from literary, linguistic and psychological points of view. This is the first such comprehensive account from Italy and, as such, provides a significant contribution to our understanding of the experiences and insights of the Armenian survivors and the foreign witnesses from that country. It is hoped that further volumes from other countries might be forthcoming and increasingly coordinated. In this way, the fragments of the Armenian Diaspora story can be woven together and help tell the story of the Armenian Genocide.

Alan Whitehorn
Emeritus Professor of Political Science
Royal Military College of Canada