

The Cut, a story of the Armenian Genocide

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The latest film from Turkish-German director Fatih Akin (*Head-On*, *The Edge of Heaven*, *Soul Kitchen*) takes place during the darkest episode of the First World War—the Armenian Genocide.

Beginning in April 1915, the Ottoman Empire, which had entered the war on the side of the Central Powers, launched a campaign of extermination against its Armenian population. The bourgeois nationalist Young Turks, who had come to power in 1908, now found themselves surrounded by the Allied powers. They had suffered significant defeats at the hands of Russia in the Caucasus Campaign of 1915, thwarting attempts to reclaim territories previously lost along the Ottoman Empire's eastern borders.

Claiming the defeats were the result of support given to Russia by the predominantly Christian Armenian population within the Empire, the Young Turks set out on a program of mass murder and forced relocation of the Armenian people. As many as 1.5 million Armenians are believed to have perished.

Akin's film opens in Mardin, a city in southeastern Turkey. It is 1915, and the first imperialist war is raging. We are on the eve of the Armenian Genocide. Upon returning home from work one evening, blacksmith Nazaret Manoogian (Tahar Rahim) and his family worry that the violence of the war will finally reach them. They hear news of Allied forces arriving in Gallipoli. That night, their worst fears are realized.

Turkish soldiers round up the men of Mardin and march them into the desert. Told that all men over the age of 15 have now been conscripted into the military, they are forced into slave labor and made to build roads. Many are worked in the hot sun until they collapse and die.

The worker-prisoners witness large groups of women and children from the city of Kharput, in eastern Anatolia, marched away in front of them, part of the forced deportations carried out through death marches

into Mesopotamia.

Nazaret and the other captive Armenians work until they are, one day, led away from their camp. Tied together and forced to kneel, all but Nazaret are executed. He is only spared because the soldier chosen to murder him hesitates and cannot bring himself to kill his prisoner. A wound in his neck, however, will prevent Nazaret from speaking for the remainder of his life.

Taken for dead, Nazaret is able to escape his captors and begins a long journey to reunite with his twin daughters, believed to be the only remaining survivors of his family. His search will take him to Syria, Lebanon, Cuba and the United States.

Akin's film is a kind of *Odyssey* of the Armenian Genocide, in which a lone hero floats from episode to episode within the horrible event. This leads to many significant moments, but on the whole the different parts of his film don't feel entirely connected or worked through. One is given glimpses of things, but a fuller picture remains somewhat hazy. It is a sometimes moving but often disappointing work.

Among the most disturbing sequences in Akin's film is Nazaret's journey to the death camps of Ras al-Ayn (on the Syrian-Turkish border today), where those who have not yet been killed lie starving to death. Such moments are brutal and at times difficult to watch. One does not feel, however, that Akin has filmed them in an exploitative manner. His approach during these sequences is generally sympathetic and sensitive. The performance of Tahar Rahim is also quite strong. The actor is able to communicate a wide range of emotions though he does not speak during the second half of the film.

Sequences depicting genuine warmth and even humor between survivors of the genocide, as they gather together to watch a showing of Charlie Chaplin's *The Kid* in Aleppo, Syria, make a strong impression. This is

also true of the scenes inside a soap factory used as emergency housing for Armenian refugees. In their own way, these scenes bring out the horror of what was done to these people far more than the scenes of brutality and violence could alone. One feels the liveliness, the culture, the different attitudes and sensibilities of people.

To his credit, Akin has also not simply made all the Turkish citizens depicted in the film into monsters or supporters of the genocide. In one scene, after witnessing the anguish in the faces of a Turkish mother and her young child being cursed and stoned by a bitter group of survivors, Nazaret decides he can take no part in the violence against them.

Unfortunately, the second half of the film, following Nazaret's search for his daughters, is considerably weaker than the first. While there are moving moments to be found, one senses the scope of the film growing increasingly narrow. The story gradually becomes more and more a tale of one man's determination to find his children, a tribute to the spirit of a strong-willed individual up against tremendous odds. The genocide and its meaning drift more and more into the background.

Akin is perhaps overwhelmed by the history involved and the scale of the horror produced during the genocide. He has tried to include a great deal in his film, but he also passes over too much too quickly. The fate of Armenian survivors across the world, their experience as immigrants in new and different countries is a worthwhile and interesting theme. But these later sequences, in which Nazaret travels from country to country, don't carry the weight of the events in the film's first half. Here one tends to feel as if one were peering at an historical event through a keyhole. Too much is left out.

Many of the more interesting threads from the film's first half are also left dangling. Nazaret had earlier expressed his anger over the gap between the rich and workers like himself. Nothing comes of it; yet it is a central question. What was lurking behind the brutality of Turkish nationalism and behind the First World War itself? What forces and social pressures set all of this into motion? Why, in other words, did all of this happen? The questions one is left with at the end are those the filmmakers did not themselves begin to address.

In the end, behind Akin's epic of the Armenian Genocide, there is just too much conventional thinking and storytelling.



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