

## Prelude to Genocide: Incident in Erzerum

**Virginia Gavian Rivers**

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*The loyalty of family, the gritty realities of life in times of turmoil, distrust and aching misunderstanding are all underlying themes of this engrossing read.*

In her powerful work of social history, *Prelude to Genocide: Incident in Erzerum*, Virginia Gavian Rivers identifies and deftly explores the tensions that brought suffering, violence, and death to Armenians living in eastern Turkey in 1895. This well-researched novel depicts the horror of violence and the inhumanity of the systematic categorization of groups of people based on race, religion, or culture.

A splendid blend of fact and fiction, Rivers utilizes a first-person narrative style to tell her story through three characters: Hamed, a Muslim soldier; Marjan Kavafian, a Christian wife and mother; and Martiros Kavafian, Marjan's brother-in-law and Hamed's friend. The narrative takes place during a volatile time in Turkish history. Government troops rip through the countryside to rout out Armenians, blaming them for difficult times. The Armenians, afraid to leave the place they consider to be their homeland, flock to Erzerum. Hamed and his father agree to give the Kavafians shelter and protection, but when one of the Kavafian family is killed, much is changed in all of their lives.

The author has clearly done her research into the events of a time period that many likely know little about. Her use of the vernacular of the people of the region adds to the authenticity of the story. While it can be difficult for first-person narration to deliver all characters' points of view, Rivers uses a unique triangle of narrators to address this typical shortcoming in an effective manner.

This work is at its searing best when Rivers turns to the Kavafian family's attempts to seek revenge on the ones who took their loved one from them. Martiros muses in one such moment, "My friend Hamed once said time becomes ice when you're waiting to attack, yet these minutes melted in the flow of possibilities." The loyalty of family, the gritty realities of life in times of turmoil, distrust, and aching misunderstanding are all underlying themes of this engrossing work.

*Prelude to Genocide: Incident in Erzerum* is a heart-wrenching book that explores the very question many have wondered for generations: What is the cause of man's inhumanity to man, and why do many refuse to see what is happening before them? This stimulating and thought-provoking read may not provide the answer, but it certainly provides a lot to mull over for those who enjoy a story that will make them both learn and think critically.

TRACY FISCHER

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