TEHLIRIAN'S REVENGE GRAPHICALLY

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By Jirair Tutunjian, Toronto, 29 July 2016

Comic books have come a long way since Mickey Mouse, Tom & Jerry, and Roy Rogers. While the traditional comic book is still around, in the past few decades there has been an energetic newcomer to the comic book scene. It's the graphic novel. The new variation on the genre is "adult", daring, sometimes "noirish" and often tackles serious personal, societal and political issues. The illustration is almost always superior to that of the traditional comic book including the fabled "Classics Illustrated" of the '40s and the '50s which made literary classics accessible to children and teenagers.

Responding to the popularity of graphic novels, two groups of writers and illustrators have issued, in the past two years, two versions of Soghomon Tehlirian's assassination (1921) of Talaat Pasha in Berlin. "Special Mission: Nemesis" written by J.B. Djian and Jan Varoujan, and illustrated by Paolo Cossi, was published in French in 2014 and is now available in English. The publisher is Sigest of Alfortville, Paris. The second graphic novel--"Operation Nemesis: A Story of Genocide and Revenge"-- is by veteran Josh Blaylock and is illustrated by Hoyt Silva.

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The novels tell the same story but "Operation Nemesis" has more detail and is more complex since, at 144 pages, it has more than twice the pages of "Special Mission". Of the 55 pages of "Special Mission" 46 are devoted to the court case. The court proceedings equally dominate the narrative of

"Operation Nemesis".

The critically acclaimed illustrator Cossi of "Special Mission: Nemesis" is obviously influenced here by the popular Tin Tin French-Belgian series of comic books by Herge. In fact, several characters (Dr. Lepsius is almost a double of Tin Tin's Prof. Tournasol) are right out of Tin Tin. The dots signifying eyes are another Tin Tin touch. Cossi, a versatile artist who two years ago illustrated "Medz Yeghern", is far more adept at drawing landscapes, buildings, and streets than faces. While the illustrations in the early pages are well done, they soar to great heights in the latter part of the volume which depicts court scenes, lawyers, and witnesses. Again and again Tehlirian looks weak and confused. Perhaps the wan depiction is intentional… we know Tehlirian wanted the court to see him as an emotionally disturbed person. The text by Djian and Varoujan—translated by Lou Ann Matossian--has no fat. It's brief, clear, and to the point. The overhead bubbles, which carry the text, are not intrusive. A couple of lapses in the English text t are forgivable since the book is a made-in-France production.

Blaylock, a self-publishing guru, is the author of numerous comic books. Illustrator Silva is also an old hand. One impressed reader described the book as "awesome…very noir." Another reader wrote to the publisher: "Blaylock has risen to new heights and his passion shines through. The art is stylized, capturing movement emotion and symbolism well." Others have described the Blaylock volume as a "page turner…I couldn't put it down. I loved the darkness of the art…"

According to the publisher's PDF, 50% of the reviewers have given the book 5 stars and 20% have given 4 stars: impressive stats from consumers.

The cover art (very important in the genre) of the two narratives are different in content and in style. The "Operation Nemesis" cover is minimalist with a blood-red Turkish flag and a James Bond lookalike in the foreground. There's also a cross-hair on the page. The mostly grey colored "Special Mission" is far tamer—it's almost a Tin Tin cover. It has a lonesome Tin Tin figure (Tehlirian) in trench coat standing on a platform which includes a sketch of Talaat, a Luger, two bullets, and a trio of men in elongated fezes.

Both volumes are obvious labors of love as the writers and illustrators have gone the extra mile to do justice to Tehlirian's daring and commitment to avenge, albeit in a small way, the Genocide of Armenians.

A quibble: The organizers of the assassinations of the 20 Young Turk leaders called their plan "Hadoog Kordz". It means special work and not special mission. Mission is "arakeloutyoun" in Armenian.

In addition to the above two gothic novels, there's a new book out about Nemesis by the granddaughter of Aaron Sachaklian, the man in charge of Nemesis finances. "Sacred Justice: The voices and legacy of the Armenian Operation Nemesis" is by Marian Mesrobian MacCurdy, a retired

professor and chair of the Department of Writing at Ithaca College and special assistant to the president at Hampshire College where she teaches writing.

"Sacred Justice" is a cross-genre book that uses narrative, memoir, unpublished letters, and other primary and secondary sources to tell the story of Operation Nemesis. The book contains a large collection of unpublished letters, found in the study of the author's accountant grandfather. The letters provide information about the strategies, personalities, plans, and the bios of the people behind Nemesis: Tehlirian, Shahan Natalie, Armen Garo and others. The book has an informative foreword by Gerard Libaridian, former foreign minister of Armenia and editor of Transaction's Armenian Studied series.