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Review – Embattled Dreamlands: The Politics of Contesting Armenian, Kurdish and Turkish Memory

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MARK LEVENE, MAY 11 2021

Embattled Dreamlands: The Politics of Contesting Armenian, Kurdish and Turkish Memory

By David Leupold

Routledge, 2020

What makes for a strong society? For Ibn Khaldun, the great fourteenth-century Maghrebi sociologist, the answer was *assabiyah*: solidarity. Yet the kinship-based tribal foundations of Khaldun's story of civilisation also held an inherent problem; the solidarity dissipated over time. Then came along an entirely more supercharged concept: the nation. With its metanarrative of group oneness since time immemorial this seemed to be an altogether more durable and resilient formula for the strong society. Yet here again there was an inbuilt problem. National leaders, whether self-proclaimed, or by dint of popular acclamation, might seek to embrace an even greater multitude within their community of fate, as dependent on whatever cultural, linguistic and/or ethno-religious attributes they allegedly held in common. But unless they already were in prior possession of a territorial space, and with the military capability to defend it, their strong society was always in danger of imploding in the face of other national voices with their own putative claims that this same territory was ancestrally theirs. Perhaps it was better, after all, to return to the drawing board in order to reassert some pre-existing, religiously sanctioned framework for oneness, the *umma*, for instance, the only problem here being that whole swathes of the population might not accept its injunctions or be excluded from it, by dint of their own. Of course, one might try and reinvent the formula, stripped of its religious essence, and call one's supra-national entity, Ottoman. And if all these various attempts at cohering people together within a spatial dimension spectacularly fell apart, one might take a crude surgical tool to the parts of the body which didn't fit your solidaristic concept, or held out for something else, and attempt to excise or eliminate them altogether.

This entirely skeletal precis of the challenges of socio-political formation and/or ethno-genesis in the passage from Ottomania to post-Ottomania provides a roundabout way of introducing David Leupold's *Embattled Dreamlands*. As its full title suggests the focus of the book is about the past century and more, of efforts by three competing 'national' groups, Turks, Armenians and Kurds, to imagine and from that encompass a region, to which we might neutrally assign the name eastern Anatolia, as either eastern Turkey, western Armenia or northern Kurdistan. Even then, there would seem to be a Caucasian cross-border spill over as the study also relates in significant part to a once Russian, then Soviet and finally independent (eastern) Armenia as well as a contested part of Azerbaijan, generally known as Nagorno-Karabakh, though falling short of the most recent 2020 war. In other words, this, politically-speaking is a very complicated landscape overshadowed, above all, by an historical 'memory' of one searing trauma, and which, despite the efforts of some parties to it, to forget or elide, refuses to go away. That event, the Armenian genocide of 1915-16, wittingly or unwittingly not only holds all its contemporary descendants in its grip but has, as in the instance of Nagorno-Karabakh, the power of all malevolent ghosts to return with a vengeance. In addition, because most of the available narratives of 1915 and its aftermath are so canonically national, not to say vastly partisan, often crudely one-dimensional, or brimming over with either accusation or self-exculpation in their presentation of the 'we' as always victims, never perpetrators, the possibilities of navigating a path towards sanity and long-term co-habitation would seem as remote as finding the remains of the ark on Mount Ararat.

Complex communities

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With all this in mind it is a great pleasure to report that *Embattled Dreamlands* is not only a wonderfully illuminating and vastly absorbing study, but also a remarkably impartial and clear-sighted one. It is not that Leupold eschews the fraught complexity of the three-way relationship. If anything, he goes the other way in teasing out – as is surely appropriate – its cat's-cradle qualities. There are Kurds who are stridently secular and politically internationalist, Kurds who derive their identity from the world of *shaikhs* and *aghas*, Kurdish speakers whose primary touchstone is their Yezidi faith, Kurds living in the Van region but whose tribal origins are firmly rooted in the Caucasus, including the present day republic of Armenia. Yet there are vast numbers of Armenians – as well as a smaller number of Yezidis – in this republic who still look longingly across the border to their ancestral homes in and around the Van region in present day Turkey, now often inhabited by the refugee descendants of the aforesaid Caucasus Kurds. The two-way expulsions and forced flights of the Great War, thereby adds another layer to the standard narrative of one-(or-two)-on-one genocide. Indeed, the modern day descendants of the *Vanetsi* – in contrast to official Yerevan commemorations of the fact – emphasise the 1915 defence of Van, which enabled the Armenian population there to attempt to break out to Russian lines. Defiance and resistance (as Israel well knows) are always a more uplifting tale in the face of mass murder than going like sheep to the slaughter. Yet, even here Leupold adds further cross-generational complications, in the Kurdish case in particular, a greater receptivity among younger generations to not just cross-relate Turkey's oppression of the Armenians with their own but even to engage with that absolute taboo subject: Kurdish complicity in Armenian destruction.

The sheer weight of information, multiple, competing narratives not to say cacophony of voices might lead one to feel overwhelmed. Yet, Leupold's presentation has rather an opposite, invigorating effect. This successful outcome owes considerably to a rigorous organisation of his material enabling a compartmentalisation of various themes into manageable blocks while at the same time building them into a coherent whole. Indeed, the disciplinary range of his undertaking is impressive; part history, part contemporary politics, a considerable element of memory studies – very much in the footsteps of Maurice Halbwachs – plus a more closely developed core of social anthropology, founded on fieldwork interviews that Leupold conducted over many months on both sides of the Armeno-Turkish border. The particular focus on the Van region makes this, too, a keenly incisive study of the memory politics of refugee communities, even at several generations' removed from their respective catastrophes. This region is to a significant extent inhabited either by Kurds descended from across the international border, or more recently displaced from within the region, as a consequence of Ankara's punitive counter-insurgency against the PKK, by contrast with *Vanetsi* Armenian descendants of the genocide, who long in their dreams for their collective return home. What Leupold thus most effectively explores is the discrepancies between the official, nationalist, rigorously packaged versions of 'what happened in the past' as justification for political – including ongoing – irredentist claims of the present, as set against the entirely more nuanced, layered, personal and family memories and recollections which would seem to infer to a rather different set of revendications.

Nationalism as straightjacket and eraser of 'the other'

Implicitly, all this points to one persistent, nagging question: why does the fixed, primordially nationalist and hence exclusivist narrative always have to be hegemonic? Or put another way, why are human beings, in this, as so many other parts of the world, trapped in what Mark Mazower in his book *Salonica, City of Ghosts* has described as "rigidly patrolled national cages" (p.23), where *sacro egoismo* rules and acknowledgement of, let alone dialogue with, 'the other' is in such short supply? Chapter 3 of *Embattled Dreamlands* is notably penetrating as to how the national metanarrative suffocates, silences and consciously forgets anything which confuses, contradicts or disrupts its own story of mythic story-telling, public commemoration and monumentalisation to the greater glory of the unified 'us'. The institutional erasure of place names in the interests of a reinvented landscape, obliteration of 'the other' from history textbooks, plus the demolition of monuments, cemeteries and any scrap of material evidence which might suggest some other group of people were historically present in what was and is indubitably 'ours', necessarily follows.

Significantly, Leupold does not only point a finger here at Turkey. On an albeit smaller scale, Armenia's record is also abysmal not to say stuck in an embattled self-image which helped precipitate the two post-Soviet wars with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. By contrast, contemporary Kurdish politics, unencumbered, at least in Turkey, by any immediate possibility of achieving statehood, suggests a more reflective quality including acknowledgement

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that the Kurdish region might be the sum of many parts as founded on diverse ethnic origins. Scratch a little deeper, as Leupold does in his multilingual interviews, and the talk is less of nationalism, more of humanism, or on a regional level, Anatolianism (p.213). Indeed, at one intriguing point Leupold even points to a recognition in some Kurdish households that their recent ancestry includes the Armenian and Syriac grandmothers and great-grandmothers who were abducted, violated and then inducted into their families (p.236).

Alternative possibilities

This is the very stuff of an oral testimony bound to sabotage the mono-directional 'unity' narrative of fiercely homogenising polities. And it is clear that it is in this grassroots, kitchen-table, family and locality-centred counter-culture where Leupold's deeper sympathies lie. There is a long history of intercommunal reciprocity in this once richly pluralistic part of the world, not least through intermediaries such as the *kirve*, or godfather figure. Notions of a colour-blind, Sufi-informed quest for a spiritual unity – *tevhid* – are equally suggestive of subterranean currents which speak of shared cultural affinities between Anatolian peoples (p.213-4). Indeed, the inference could be equally pursued, through music and cuisine.

There are, to be sure, some lacunae in this study. While not one which purports to embrace everybody with an emotional stake in the region – all the many diasporic Armenian and Syriac communities, for instance – even so there are some surprising omissions. The absence of any reference to the substantial, politically significant but in 1915 obliterated Syriac, more specifically Nestorian tribal community in Hakkari is the most notable, given that Leupold does pay attention to the more recently persecuted and displaced Kurds from this area. And while the many other ethno-religious groups on both sides of the Caucasus border are acknowledged, perhaps inadvertently Leupold does rather see the big picture through the lens of the three most politically dominant and competing forces rather than as the multicultural mosaic which many early twentieth century Western commentators such as Cecil J. Edmonds described. Even then, the fieldwork element of the study practically absents the Turks. Ankara's memory politics is necessarily here – and well-dissected – casting as it does a huge, and usually far from benign shadow across its eastern hinterland. But the grassroots voices we hear are primarily from the other two communities. One might add that Leupold is not particularly well served by Routledge in their failure to signpost the maps he does have and the lack of one specific to the Van region which, especially for the non-specialist reader, should have been mandatory.

These quibbles aside, *Embattled Dreamlands*, based as it is on Leupold's doctoral research, has something of a breakthrough quality about it. Not only does it challenge, through rigorous, multi-layered analysis, blinkered state constructions and monopolisations of national memory and with them the toxic justifications for megaphone if not actual wars, it dares to offer a glimpse of an alternative direction of travel. After the breakdown of Yugoslavia and much of the post-Soviet rimlands, the paroxysm of Syria, the seeming impossibility of a shared Israel-Palestine, on the one hand, the global rise of sectarian identities and populist nationalism, on the other, anybody who might infer that bridge-building and people-reconciliation is not just a good thing but practically achievable is likely to be treated by hardened IR observers with something akin to suppressed derision. Yet, by peeling away at the official state versions which necessarily divide, to an underlying bedrock of shared experience and cultural crossover, Leupold implicitly argues for an entirely more inclusive, post-nationalist framework for peoples' solidarity, even one we might consider as a basis for renewed *convivencia*. In a world where sheer existence is so anthropogenically threatened, Leupold's work speaks to more than simply the scarred landscape of eastern Anatolia, it speaks to how we must rethink and thus heal intra-human relationships, *tout ensemble*, if we, as a species, are to survive.

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About the author:

Mark Levene is Emeritus Fellow and formerly Reader in Comparative History at the University of Southampton. His writing ranges across issues of genocide, Eastern European and Middle Eastern nationalisms and 'minority' relations, as well as environmental and peace issues, especially focusing on anthropogenic climate change. He is the founder of Rescue!History.