

**Crucial Images in the Presentation of
a Kurdish National Identity: Heroes and
Patriots, Traitors and Foes**

Martin Strohmeier

Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003. 265 pages.

This book is primarily a history of the early Kurdish movement, from its inception in the late nineteenth century to the 1930s. Yet, its distinctiveness comes not from the Kurdish nationalists' more publicized products, but from its focus on the margins of their literary attempts. This study of failed nationalism "is concerned less with how and why Kurdish nationalism did or did not 'catch on' than with the efforts made by [the] Kurdish elite to construct a viable concept of Kurdish identity" (p. 1). In other words, the author's main concern is to identify how images of the Kurds were constructed and represented, and how they evolved, over time, until the late 1930s.

The book is divided into three parts, each of which corresponds to a different period that delineates differing self-images of the Kurds. Each part, in turn, consists of six to eight chapters that provide an account of both key events in the Kurdish movement's history and literary works. Part 1, "Awakening' the Kurds," deals with the movement's background context and early period by discussing its leaders, several publications, and organizations. In this period, the Kurds' self-definition was predominantly negative, and obstacles to modernization abounded: tribal structures, a nomadic way of life, illiteracy, ignorance, and wildness.

Yet the Turks were never the "inimical other," except for such people as the Ottoman sultan Abdulhamid and "a long line of Ottoman despots." They had a long list of prescriptions to awaken and literally "remake" the Kurds so that they could be accepted by the nations of the civilized world. When the Wilsonian principles granted their right to self-determination without this cultural leap, some Kurds wanted a Kurdish state. However, the vast majority mourned for the Treaty of Sevres along with their Turkish brethren, despite the fact that its articles established Kurdistan. This chapter also describes how most Kurds joined forces with the Kemalists to drive out the occupiers, only to be frustrated by the Kemalists' subsequent assimilation projects.

Part 2, "The Kurdish Question in the Turkish Republic," revolves around developments during the early Republican period as well as the reactions of prominent Kurdish leaders. Strohmeier covers new organizations in exile, most strikingly Khoybun, together with Sheykh Sa'id and the Ararat

Revolts, and letters to Turkish statesmen. The nationalists' agenda involved attempts to reinterpret what had happened and to undertake new roles for themselves, as well as to influence the resistance in Turkey. The most striking transformation was the self-definition of the Kurds, which was assuming a positive image (p. 103), thereby a full-fledged nationalist identity and cause. The Kurds were now portrayed as morally superior people struggling against their oppressor, the "evil Turks" (p. 103). Following the failed Khoybun-sponsored Ararat revolt, the Kurdish movement also had its own traitors. Dr. Sükrü Mehmed Sekban, in his *La Question Kurde*, disputed the tenets of Kurdish nationalism that he had helped to propagate and the goals that he had tried to realize. Despite several responses by his compatriots, he had already given the Turkish state a valuable instrument (p. 124).

Part 3 analyzes the following period, during which it became evident that Kurdish dreams to achieve nationhood would not be realized in the near future. As a result, Kurdish leaders dedicated themselves to imaginative nation-building efforts (p. 137). Bedirxans assumed an important role, coupled with the enthusiasm and interests of French Orientalists, in traditional Kurdish culture. The idea was to ensure cultural survival and keep foreign sympathy alive for the Kurdish cause. Kamuran Bedir Khan wrote *Der Adler von Kurdistan* (The Eagle from Kurdistan), a militaristic novel to pursue the former aim. Strohmeier aptly identifies the positive image of the Kurds portrayed in this novel, as well as the entire cast of a nationalist drama, and hence shows the role of images in the construction of a Kurdish national identity as political developments unfold.

Overall, the author does a great service by spelling out the voice of a subaltern identity. In particular, Turkish readers who are unfamiliar with the Kurds' history will find many details at least appalling. The book also gives the different attitudes of Kurdish leaders in the face of changing Turkish policies. Sadly enough, such racist Kurdish arguments as the superiority of the Aryan race and the essentialization of the Turks as "evil Turks," both of which were devised to gain the West's sympathy, would only perpetuate the negative image of the entire Orient rather than help their cause. This is very telling in terms of how people of the "Orient," even for their secularist aims, should frame their self-identity, for colonial images eventually also hurt their people.

In addition to this case of failed nationalism, a second volume covering the later period of Kurdish nationalism until today could be promising. How have the images of the past been used and transformed by the current movement? More importantly, what explains the current secular-Marxist

Kurdish movement's success in mobilizing the largely religious Kurdish community in Turkey? In this regard, a burning issue could be the Marxist Kurdish dilemma with the recent American role in attaining the Kurdish people's dreams in Iraq.

This book's implication for the study of nationalism raises a larger question. We have seen the lack of an "inimical other" in the eyes of a modernizing elite who aspired to awaken its people in the former period, until the Turkish Republic was replaced by a pro-western movement whose "inimical other" appeared as the "evil Turk." Ironically, this new face of the movement sought Kurdish authenticity through such colonial images as free unveiled women and the racial superiority of the Aryan Kurds.

As a Turk with Islamic ideals, I found many lessons in this book for my fellow Muslims who face the dilemma of self-criticism and resistance against colonialism's multiple faces. Muslims have the responsibility to eliminate all traces of nationalism from their minds, while upholding the cultural autonomy of their fellow Muslims. As Muslims in the diaspora experience the challenges of cultural issues in their Islamic practices, I hope that we can develop a more viable idea of ummah, one that will be able to achieve real diversity in unity.

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