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Eastward to Tartary Travels in the Balkans, the Middle East, and the Caucasus. - Review - book review

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Eastward to Tartary Travels in the Balkans, the Middle East, and the Caucasus by Robert D. Kaplan. Random House (<http://www.randomhouse.com>), 201 East 50th Street, New York, New York 10022, 2000, 364 pages, \$26.95 (hardcover).

Like Fitzroy Maclean's *Eastern Approaches*, an account of his travels as a British diplomat in the Caucasus and Central Asia in the 1930s, Robert Kaplan's new book *Eastward to Tartary* can leave the reader uncertain as to how true and accurate it is. This is a critical question for military readers since Kaplan enjoys a certain vogue amongst senior officers, from his earlier writings on the Balkans and on political instabilities that followed the end of the Cold War. He writes about places where conflict involving the American military seems likely.

One can argue that in the early 1990s, Samuel Huntington's *Foreign Affairs* article "The Clash of Civilizations" and Robert Kaplan's *Atlantic Monthly* article "The Coming Anarchy" shaped the perception of future conflict for a generation of American military leaders. Despite the later criticism of these two pieces, the simplistic but persuasive arguments about cultural determinism and the inherent belligerence of tribal nationalism provided a conceptual framework for senior officers who tried to explain the necessity of military operations throughout the world in the absence of a global Communist threat.

Kaplan's appeal, as evidenced in *Eastward to Tartary*, is easy to understand. He writes beautifully, having a gift for clear prose and a journalist's eye for exact detail--clothing, smells, tastes, and colors--to make the exotic feel familiar to the reader. Eating a lunch of goat cheese and olives in the Syrian Desert near Qala'at Samaan, Kaplan describes the ruins of a Roman cemetery: "The carved faces of the dead emerged from the canyon's soft volcanic rock in all the earthen tones of a rich palette."

He reinforces these distinguishing elements of the story by drawing comparisons between different places. A reader is left not only with an intimate feel for Bucharest's cafes, but also with the sense of how the author tries to make deeper points by contrasting Romanian coffee with the more traditional coffee services he finds in Syria or Georgia. Kaplan is a master of the inductive narrative.

He leavens his own observations as a traveler with summary regional histories as communicated through his conversations with locals and as referenced to classical and scholarly accounts of the region. Such names as Toynbee, Gibbon, Strabo, and Herodotus are invoked to give a certain gravity to the prose, while other names, such as Daniel Pipes, Olivier Roy, and Ronald Suny, are meant to assure the reader of the academic rigor and policy relevance of the analytical interpretations. Kaplan reinforces these narrative devices by interviews with senior officials and influential thinkers in each of the countries he visits.

Notions about the relative rates of political and economic transition in the Balkans and Middle East, the interplay of ethnic and religious hatreds, the merits of secular authoritarianism versus Islamic democracy, energy politics in the Caucasus, and the modern consequences of differing imperial legacies all intertwine into an enjoyable and accessible book. As a travel writer, Robert Kaplan is near the top in current American literature, yet for the reader who wishes to extract more than entertainment from *Eastward to Tartary*, a note of caution is in order.

A travelogue can be truthful without being accurate. Inductive reasoning is correct only if the specific truth of the part is applicable to the whole. Local anecdotes are instructive when balanced or placed in context by the author. Yet, *Eastward to Tartary* fails to pass these tests in too many places.

For example, Kaplan contrasts the impact of organized crime on the political and economic development of Bulgaria with that on other Sovietbloc states. Relying on information given in a discussion with Bulgarian president Zhelyu Zhelev, Kaplan claims that "Bulgarian crime has no centuries-old tradition like Italy's, or even of heroic thieves and warrior clans as in Russia, Serbia, or Albania. Nor are there the colorful ethnic ingredients here that distinguish criminal circles in the Caucasus, particularly Georgia and Chechnya, with their family mafias and highwaymen. The Bulgarian [criminal] groupings are the result of the transition from Communism to parliamentary democracy. Because such a

transition is unique to history, so are the groups" (page 71). Thus, Kaplan casually sweeps away a fine tradition of premodern criminality as captured in local poetry and song, erasing the figure of the mountain bandit--the famed hayduk--as a central element in Bulgaria's nationalist identity.

The comparison between time's legacy in the southern Balkans and in the Caucasus is also indicative of Kaplan's theoretical inconsistencies. Some modern events appear inextricably rooted in the hoary past of tribal identities and imperial politics while others are not. One is never sure when or why Kaplan believes history is relevant.

Factual errors are also a distraction for the informed reader. For example, Kaplan claims that in 1996 Islamist Welfare Party leader Necmettin Erbakan formed a "minority government" that was subsequently pushed from power by the Turkish military in defense of Turkey's secular, republican values. Erbakan's government was, in fact, a majority coalition government--in partnership with center-right, former prime minister, and Washington favorite Tansu Ciller. By simplifying his description of Turkish politics to highlight the tension between a religious minority and a Western-oriented military, Kaplan offers a caricature in place of analysis.

Similarly, the author misuses words and language in places in an attempt to enhance the authenticity of the observations about the enduring nature of historic patterns. In describing the different neighborhoods of Jerusalem, for example, Kaplan writes, "The Old City's various ethnic and religious groups coexisted thanks to the Ottoman wilayet system of communal self-government, which the Israeli authorities had only modestly tampered with. I was sure that the wilayet system would survive longer than Israeli rule in the parts of Jerusalem where Jews did not live, and rarely visited" (page 206). Wilayet (vilayet in Ottoman), however, means a province or a country. The word Kaplan is searching for is millet, meaning a religious community or a group defined by religion and language. More importantly, the origin and scope of the Ottoman government's famed millet system for self-governance of minority religious communities within the empire are themselves matters of scholarly debate among historians.

In *To End a War* (Random House, 1998), Richard Holbrooke notes that comparable shortcomings in Kaplan's earlier *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey through History* (Saint Martin's, 1993) left readers "with the sense that nothing could be done by outsiders in a region so steeped in ancient hatreds" (page 22). Bad history written into an easily accessible book read by many senior Washington policy makers contributed to false perceptions about America's ability to influence events in the Balkans. Similar effects would be tragic were readers to look to *Eastward to Tartary* for a quick overview of the dynamics at work in the Middle East or the Caucasus.

In *Eastward to Tartary*, Kaplan himself offers such a caution when he remarks on the work of Freya Stark, a midcentury travel writer commenting on the same region: "She was a gifted writer, but a poor political observer.... This is why I have never been comfortable with her books" (page 139). As a longtime resident and historian of the regions of which Kaplan writes, my reservations about exceptional travel writers mirror his own.

None of these flaws should detract from the appeal of *Eastward to Tartary*. Instead, Kaplan's writings underscore the point that a story can be true without being accurate and that a book can be entertaining and intellectually stimulating without always being right. For fans of Kaplan and of the debate his work always provokes, his latest book is worth reading. But for military officers and policy makers looking for a quick take on a complicated part of the world, the author's stories often obscure what they are meant to

illuminate.

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