

[Articles](#) > [National Interest, The](#) > [Spring, 2001](#) > [Article](#) > [Print friendly](#)

Traveling Light. - Review - book review

Thomas Goltz

Robert D. Kaplan, *Eastward to Tartary: Travels in the Balkans, the Middle East; and the Caucasus* (New York: Random House, 2000), 364 pp., \$26.95.

LIKE HIS previous works, Robert Kaplan's most recent opus, *Eastward to Tartary: Travels in the Balkans, the Middle East, and the Caucasus*, is a study in prophylactic pessimism. It is also a strident plea for his mostly American readers to understand those beyond their borders without sentiment or excessive hope. American policymakers are urged to remember that, the juggernaut of globalization notwithstanding, the counties now emerged from the shadows of communism are not blank slates upon which the financiers and idealists of the West may write what they wish. For this message alone we should all be grateful to Kaplan.

For years, Kaplan has been a refreshing, if exceedingly dark, voice among American observers of foreign affairs. His *Balkan Ghosts* was allegedly Bill Clinton's bedside reading and has been widely cited as an unintended inhibition on America's intervention in the wars of Yugoslav succession. *Eastward to Tartary*, which Kaplan introduces as a sequel to *Balkan Ghosts*, covers a sprawling region extending from the southeastern slopes of the Carpathian Mountains, to the eastern shores of the Caspian Sea, to the desert wastes of the Arabian Peninsula. He has roamed over a three-pronged region he defines as the New Near East, with Turkey at its geographic center, asking weighty questions of everyone from hitchhikers to intelligence agents in his search for insights about everything from national character to national interest. And, as in all of his books, he does this for the purpose of assaying the future.

That future, as Kaplan sees it, is unlikely to be very pretty. Democracy and market institutions require certain attitudes to work well, and those attitudes are scarce in most of the New Near East. He gives timely warning against mistaking the facade of democracy for the real thing, and against outsiders urging systems of governance onto societies not yet ready for them. Overall, Kaplan believes this entire region is in for a long period of bad government and frustrated material prospects.

Kaplan's traveling companions are not the usual headline-seeking hack-pack of parachute journalists, for whom one Sheraton hotel is much the same as another. Rather, we find Kaplan working out of down-market hostels, sniffing around the tangled past, most often in the company of Herodotus and Gibbon as his personal guides to the murky future.

When Kaplan is good, he is very good. His exegesis of why the post-communist societies of Romania and Bulgaria are in danger of being forgotten by the West--because we have "declared" them to be market-driven democracies successfully remade in our own narcissistic image--is right on the money. Kaplan sees a less stable scenario and a different, and deeper, dividing line:

With Romania's 20 million Orthodox Christians joined to NATO, a civilizational divide at Hungary's eastern border would be unlikely; with Romania outside, such a divide could emerge as the Continent's overriding fact. With Romania absorbed into the West, Europe stretches to the Black Sea; with Romania estranged, Europe becomes a variation of the Holy Roman Empire, while the Balkans rejoin the Near East.

Kaplan also illuminates the danger of a neo-imperialist Russia to countries like Bulgaria or Azerbaijan. The industries of such states are particularly vulnerable to Russian mafia schemes because Western investors deem them too unstable to be attractive, even though it was Western institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that forced these baby-states to privatize and democratize in the first place. According to Kaplan,

The Washington establishment prefers to simplify its problems by accepting official truths. . . . But the

issue [in Bulgaria] was whether democracy would become a convenient mechanism for criminal oligarchy. Political systems are not defined by their labels but by the actual workings of the power relationships within them.

BUT THERE ARE also problems with *Tartary*. Unlike his prescient *Balkan Ghosts*, this book is too diffuse to be much more than what its subtitle suggests: travels in three quite different settings, in which Kaplan relies more on anecdotes and glancing observations than serious investigation conducted over a sustained period. This leads him to produce more in the way of abstract generalizations than interpretations closely bound to his subject.

No matter how many times Kaplan rationalizes his peregrinations as being united by a post-Ottoman Empire imprint, the three distinct geographic areas are connected only by Kaplan's itinerary. What, one might ask, connects an analysis of the bizarre personality cult of Saparmurad Niyazov, the Turkmenbashi of Turkmenistan, with the fledgling democracy of Bulgaria under Petar Stoyanov? And what really connects either of these places with the Jordanian monarchy of the late King Hussein, or with the benevolent dictatorship of Eduard Shevardnadze in post-Soviet Georgia? As individual magazine articles published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, each of Kaplan's forays into the obscure and unknown--such as the generally excellent chapter on Georgia--would be enlightening, informative and indeed essential. But if individually his articles represent some sort of Guide to the Perplexed Policymaker, it does not necessarily follow that collectively they make a coherent book.

If Kaplan meant to write a sequel to *Balkan Ghosts* that would explore the post-Ottoman space as a guide to the future, then he should have stuck rigorously to that topic. A study of post-Ottoman statehood should, of course, include the Levantine states of the Middle East ("Greater Syria", in Kaplan's terminology), the Balkans and Turkey. But all the new republics that were once part of the USSR (Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and Georgia, for example) should be excluded. They were either never part of the Ottoman Empire, or were part of it only so briefly and marginally that one cannot honestly talk about latent Ottoman patterns of behavior or bureaucracy, such as are arguably shared by the Levantine states and those on the south slope of the Carpathian Mountains. Rather than force the comparison to former Soviet republics, Kaplan might have written two or three different books, each expanded by the sort of sharp detail for which the author is justly known and celebrated.

Paradoxically, and despite its very scope, the book often suffers from tunnel vision. For all the references to Herodotus, Gibbon and a stream of contemporary interlocutors, too many of the insights and experiences seem to have been derived from free associations while looking out the window of a train or bus. Kaplan comes dangerously close here to the hit-and-run approach to the "high journalism" of international affairs that he rightly condemns. For example, crossing from Bulgaria to Turkey, Kaplan is "shocked" to find he must pay \$45 for a visa--and then proceeds to read everything into the event, from the legacy of the "brutal five-hundred-yearlong occupation of Bulgaria" by the Ottomans to a "larger political story.. that had not quite made it through the world media filter." Now, for the Turks to impose such a hefty surcharge is hardly the way to promote tourism, to be sure. But the excise, with a floating scale for different nationalities (the visa fee for citizens of Turkey's "traditional rival", Russia, is \$10), has nothing to do with Bulgarian-Turkish ties, in history or today; the visa regime was imposed by Ankara in response to restrictions imposed by other countries (such as the United States) on traveling Turks.

And the claim that the fee is part of a "larger story" neglected by the international press is simply nonsense. Kaplan is referring to the "putsch by press conference" by the Turkish military against Islamist Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan, which was not only widely covered in the mainstream media, but has absolutely nothing to do with Kaplan's forgetting to call the Turkish embassy in Washington about travel information before his trip.

Another kind of tunnel vision is less horizontal than vertical; that is, historical. Kaplan rightly insists that history matters, and that its influence perdures more than many of us care to admit. But one can overdo it, and in *Tartary* Kaplan sometimes does. Citing the authority of wise ancients over that of naive contemporary pundits, Kaplan writes,

Turkish flags flew outside the Museum of Anatolian Civilizations [in Ankara] as if the Turkish Republic drew legitimacy from the record of great empires on its soil. But the objects inside told another lesson: that no system of states is secure, and that ancient history may be as good a guide to the destiny of the Middle East as current media reports. Perhaps more so.

What does Kaplan mean by this? Every museum in the world is the same paradoxical mixture of selectively captured chunks of a glorious past pasted onto an unknowable future. Kaplan really pushes the limits of historical determinism with observations such as this, concerning Turkmenistan:

What was Parthian was often Greek, just as what was Turkmen was still, after two millennia, Parthian-as I had seen from the gaudy carpets, the clanging jewelry, and the headdresses sold in dusty local bazaars.

Reductio ad absurdum: If Parthian equals Greek and Turkmen equals Parthian, then Turkmen equals Greek-a conclusion that strains more than credulity.

Several factual errors also appear, some minor, some major. Edirne/ Adrianople was not the first Ottoman capital; Bursa was. Ferry boats go up to Istanbul on the Bosphorus, not the Golden Horn. Heydar Aliyev was brought into the Politburo by Yuri Andropov, not Leonid Brezhnev. The Armenian language is not "akin" to Persian. Azeris did not seize Armenian apartments in 1990 in order to rent them out to expatriate oilmen; there were no expatriate oilmen in the country at the time of the Baku pogroms. While Turks may have turned Armenian churches into stables, no deserted church in Muslim Turkey has ever been turned into a "pigsty." Further, Kaplan is very wrong to say that Turkey has "erased" every Armenian cultural monument in Anatolia; both the ruins of the fabulous city of Ani and the spectacular Agdamar cathedral on an island in Lake Van are advertised on Turkish government billboards as having been built by Armenian dynasties. An ordinary travel writer might get away with the loose use of words like "all" and "every"-but one expects more precision from Kaplan, or at least his policymaking audience should.

This last is a crucial point, especially given the "post-Ottoman" pretensions of Eastward to Tartary. There is no question that the "Armenian issue" continues to haunt Turkey. But aside from Ankara's highly negative reaction to attempts by the Armenian diaspora in the United States and Europe to pass congressional and parliamentary resolutions officially acknowledging the genocide of 1915, there has never been so much public and private discussion in Turkey about the events surrounding the creation of the Turkish Republic as in recent years. This forum includes questions of the alleged genocide and the status of the Kurds- and the plethora of other Muslim "minorities in the country, all previously subsumed under the rubric "Turks." It includes the role of the military in society, corruption in high places, and a whole range of other subjects that were previously kept well under the historical carpet but are now openly aired on a dozen serious discussion programs on privately owned television stations. This is a fascinating story-one that deserves, but does not get, prominent inclusion in the sort of post-Ottoman book that Kaplan set out to write.

Sadly, this tendency to skim the surface of countries he does not know well is nowhere more apparent than in his last chapter on post-Soviet Armenia. His treatment of that state-possibly the most complex polity he deals with-is arguably the weakest chapter in the book. Kaplan himself tacitly admits to not getting too far beneath the surface in and around Yerevan. After effectively declaring Armenia to be the only "real" (meaning historically stable) state in the region--thanks largely to its homogenous population, ancient traditions, church and shared memory of surviving national disaster at the hands of the Ottoman Turks--he was caught completely off guard by the October 1999 multiple assassinations in the Armenian parliament, which decimated the government and remain shrouded in the most complex conspiracy theories to this day. "If this could happen in Armenia, I shuddered for the future of Georgia and Azerbaijan, whose systems were more fragile and whose countrysides were in worse disarray", he writes.

Kaplan might well have asked instead why a similar blood bath has not in fact occurred in the Georgian or Azerbaijani parliaments. Might it be that the "cohesiveness" of Armenian society that Kaplan finds so assuring is actually a chimera? Might it be that internecine violence has always been a hallmark of Armenian politics, but not of the politics of Georgia or Azerbaijan? Why attempt to impose a national characteristic where it does not belong? This is especially troubling because Kaplan is one of the few writers

in this politically correct age to point out that indeed there are national characteristics to reckon with when making a rational assessment of the world. As he writes,

In many of the places I had visited, national and religious myths were powerful stuff, however manipulated by self-interested politicians they might be. Compassion often didn't reach beyond the extended family and ethnic group. And while individuals were more tangible than the national groups to which they belonged, it did not mean that national character was an illusion, especially in wartime. That is why phrases like democracy building and civil institutions seem abstract except to the local intellectuals, whom Western diplomats and journalists quote in their reports.... Of course, countries are not empty slates full of possibilities: history, culture, and geography really do set limits as to what can be achieved.

Robert Kaplan might consider applying that yardstick more carefully to his next book, and focus on a tighter zone bound by common history, culture and geography. Doing so would allow him to exercise truly his strongest suit: intellectual free association practiced in a rigorously defined setting with which he is intimately familiar.

Thomas Goltz is author of *Azerbaijan Diary* (M.E. Sharpe, 1998). He is currently at work on a book on the Caucasus.

COPYRIGHT 2001 The National Affairs, Inc.

COPYRIGHT 2003 Gale Group