

BEDROSS DER MATOSSIAN:

*Shattered Dreams of Revolution: From Liberty to Violence in the Late Ottoman Empire.*

xii, 249 pp. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014. \$24.95. ISBN 978 0 8047 9263 9.

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In the introduction to this timely and well-researched study of the Ottoman Constitutional Revolution of 1908 and its aftermath, Bedross Der Matossian insists on defining the three groups under study as “ethnic” as opposed to “national” collectives. This distinction is crucial to avoiding the all too common tendency to project retrospectively unified, nationally-imposed historical trajectories back onto a period of considerable variety, ambiguity and difference. Perhaps the greatest achievement of Der Matossian’s fine study is that it brings to life the multiple voices of some of the most important of these ethnic groups where others have tended to lump them together *en bloc*. The author’s impressive linguistic range allows him to make use of sources, particularly the vibrant press of the period, that are beyond the limits of almost all scholars working in this field. These materials in Armenian, Hebrew and Arabic as well as Ottoman Turkish allow Der Matossian to reveal the complexity and, at times, the contradictions that were rife in these diverse communities in the period before the cataclysmic events of the First World War.

Der Matossian’s book, a revised version of his Columbia University doctoral dissertation, is a welcome addition to the major works on the 1908 Constitutional Revolution, commonly if inaccurately referred to as the “Young Turk revolution”. Whereas studies by the likes of Erik Zürcher, Şükrü Hanioglu, François Georgeon, Feroz Ahmed, Aykut Kansu and Nader Sohrabi have tended to focus on the Young Turks and tell the story from the perspective of the centre of the empire or its “dominant” group, the work under review focuses on three of the empire’s ethnic groups: the Armenian, Jewish and Arab populations of the empire. This is not an immediately obvious combination and is one that, to quibble, might have been more explicitly explained. One might have expected, for example, to find the Greek Orthodox (Rum) population to be considered alongside its fellow “minorities”. On the other hand the inclusion of the empire’s Arabs usefully complicates tidy notions of affinity and belonging. Encompassing Muslims and Christians, Ottoman Arabs straddled the important lines that traditionally divided the empire’s population into confessional groups. During the preceding period Sultan Abdülhamid II had played on their common religion in attempting to solidify the allegiance of the empire’s Arab Muslims, including Turks, Arabs, Albanians, Kurds and Circassians. By contrast, appeals to Arab sentiment cut across confessional affiliation in favour of a national one.

It is precisely tensions like these that Der Matossian skilfully highlights in the chapters of this book. Organized chronologically, it focuses first on the optimism with which the Constitutional Revolution was greeted. This “euphoria of the revolution” is perhaps the best-known part of his story, but seeing it through Armenian, Jewish and Arab eyes, and in a number of locales across the empire, provides a useful context for the chapters that follow. They draw our attention to the debates that took place within and among the “non-dominant” groups of the empire in the revolution’s wake. Coming to terms with the new political dispensation, in which the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) was in the ascendancy while some elements of the pre-revolutionary system remained intact, involved discussing notions

such as freedom and equality, the nature of the *ancien régime* and what the future might hold. Plumbing these internal discussions affords Der Matossian the opportunity to demonstrate the range of opinions held in and the various factions that comprised these ethnic groupings. He carefully shows the ways in which each community was divided over important questions of the day. The fall of Sultan Abdülhamid II was shadowed by important changes in all three of the populations under study. The Armenians, who had their own national assembly, were represented by a number of political parties and tendencies that differed on important issues such as how far to co-operate with the CUP, whether or not to push for political autonomy and, generally speaking, the extent to which further reforms should be demanded after the revolution. The empire's Jewish groups were similarly divided between, on the one hand, progressives who demanded reform within the community and greater participation in the politics of the empire and, on the other, conservatives who were closely associated with the pre-revolutionary system. It was also split between Zionists and non-Zionists. The post-revolutionary period witnessed similar tensions among the Arabs. Absent a central religious figure like the Patriarch or the Chief Rabbi, the main areas of difference concerned whether or not to demand autonomy for the Arab provinces and the proximity of individual notables to the governing CUP.

The following chapters trace these groups through the Ottoman parliamentary elections of 1908, subsequent debates in the legislative chamber and the tumultuous events of the counter-revolution of 1909, including the Adana massacres. The narrative trajectory of the book thus leads from one of high optimism in its opening pages to one of calamity and despair in its final chapters. Particularly poignant is the treatment of the Armenians of Adana in light of what we know will happen to the Ottoman Armenians during the First World War. In this light it is interesting to note that one of the main Armenian parties, the Dashnaks, continued its policy of co-operation with the CUP even after the Adana massacres, testifying to the many ambiguities and contradictions for which the subsequent historical and historiographical trajectories leave us unprepared.

If pressed for a criticism, I would only say that, given the extent to which the book highlights the important points of tension and disagreement that characterized the three groups during the period under review, the final pages, which include a comparison with the events of the "Arab Spring", seem to retreat to a stance that treats the three groups as more or less homogenous entities once again. Nevertheless, the abiding impression left by this work is of meticulous scholarship and clarity of expression that usefully complicates and enriches our understanding of this decisive period of late Ottoman history.

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NAJAM HAIDER:

*Shī'ī Islam: An Introduction.*

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Najam Haider's recent survey of Shiite history endeavours to present Shiism as only partially constituted by the majority Twelver sect. This stands in contrast to most