



**Benjamin Lieberman.** *Terrible Fate: Ethnic Cleansing in the Making of Modern Europe.* Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 2006. xv + 396 pp. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56663-646-9.

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## From Ethnic Cleansing, a Nation-State Is Born

Reporters covering the violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the early 1990s repeated a similar story over and over again, that of neighbor killing neighbor. In his new book, *Terrible Fate: Ethnic Cleansing in the Making of Modern Europe*, historian Benjamin Lieberman describes a similar situation in nineteenth-century Bulgaria, where victims of ethnic cleansing under Achmet Aga point out that “he had lived thirty years [as] their neighbor and had eaten bread and salt with them” (p. 17). How was it possible that such intimate acquaintances could commit such atrocities against one another? Who was responsible and who could be held accountable, individuals or larger institutions, states and empires? These are questions familiar and ever-present for scholars of genocide and violence. In *Terrible Fate*, both state-based institutional ambitions as well as the everyday social relations that give rise to ethnic cleansing command a central place. The everyday—or what Lieberman calls “grassroots”—ethnic violence in fact coexists with violence committed by states and empires. Under what conditions does it arise?

Following both testimony of victims and witnesses as well as state documents, Lieberman traces two centuries of ethnic cleansing in cities and towns, arguing that ethnic cleansing is concurrent with the decline of empires. Through this narrative, Lieberman deftly connects the histories of Central and Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East, showing not only the impossibility of disentangling the events that occurred in these regions, but also the necessity of examining violent acts in a larger historical and geographical setting. “A focus on ethnic cleansing shifts perspective,” (p. xv) asserts Lieberman, focusing attention away from the “standard histories of Europe” (p. xiv) which are the histories of the nation-state. Ethnic cleansing, Lieberman argues, allows us to understand why Europe looks the way it looks today and how nation-states came to be.

Written chronologically, Lieberman’s narrative is di-

vided into eight chapters that describe three waves of ethnic cleansing which, Lieberman argues, occur in tandem with three periods of “imperial” decline. The first—spanning the nineteenth century and the moments during and after World War I—examines ethnic cleansing during the disintegration of the Russian, Ottoman, and Austro-Hungarian empires. The second period covers the interwar and World War II period, concurrent with the emergence and swift end of Nazi Germany. The last period Lieberman examines follows the violence generated by the “collapse of the Communist empires” (p. xii). It is important to note that Lieberman’s use of the term “empire” is quite flexible in his timeline. The characteristics of empire important to Lieberman’s argument are those that describe a large territorial entity (1) comprised of many diverse populations (2) operating under one particular political system (3), rather than the characteristics we traditionally attribute to empires: overseas acquisitions, a defined metropole, particular economic relations between core and periphery, etc.

Lieberman points out that ethnic cleansing was only coined as a legal term (and therefore a prosecutable crime) at the end of the twentieth century, but he argues that it is a valuable term with which to research the past. He provides a useful starting point by defining understandings of ethnic cleansing against other acts of mass violence. Ethnic cleansing “refers to the removal, through violence and intimidation of an ethnic group defined from a given territory” (p. xiii). It can include deportation, population transfer, and forced migration. He distinguishes this from genocide, which, for Lieberman, is synonymous with the goal of large-scale extermination. The strength of the argument Lieberman makes throughout *Terrible Fate* lies however, not in Lieberman’s ability to show how these types of violence are distinct, but rather how they are related. Lieberman manages this particularly well when describing the situation of the Armenians within the Ottoman Empire and thereafter (see

chapters 1 and 3), by linking pogroms, rioting, population transfers, cleansing, and eventual genocide. It seems counterintuitive then for Lieberman to continually separate out forms of violence and refer to a “spectrum of violence ... where genocide or extermination lies at the extreme end ... ethnic cleansing lies in the middle [and] pogroms are a comparatively limited form” (p. 37), for his argument suggests that all coexist, may be connected, be causal of one another, or represent different stages in a particular government’s policy. In a suggestive move, he even points out that some ethnic cleansing can be carried out under the umbrella of larger cleansings, such as the ethnic cleansing of not only Jews but also Serbs and Gypsies by the Croatian Ustasha government under the auspices of its alliance with Nazi Germany (p. 188).

While he outlines “strategic” reasons why empires or states might want certain regions to be ethnically “pure”—citing the importance of loyalty to the state in volatile border regions—Lieberman also tries to empirically pin down the motives behind everyday grassroots violence. This is the central point that Lieberman returns to again and again: what are the motives behind violence between neighbors? Some of Lieberman’s most poignant insights arrive in dealing with this question comparatively and historically. First, Lieberman points out plunder (of property, animals) as one possible motivation mentioned in almost all of his examples of ethnic violence (pp. 29, 63, 309 among others). More importantly, he then turns to the antipathy based on an understanding of identity and/or national belonging. The nineteenth century, especially those events unfolding around the Russo-Turkish War, “was one of the first to feature what would become a common element of ethnic cleansing: civilians who expect to be attacked because of their identity” (p. 20). The notion of identity and national belonging in particular then becomes a pivot point for Lieberman in determining violence between neighbors. Lieberman’s main contribution to this recognition of national belonging and subsequent nationalism is a fascinating questioning of the idea of nationalism put forth by Benedict Anderson in his *Imagined Communities* (1991). How do people come to understand themselves as part of a group and why do antagonisms appear with another group/(s)? For Anderson, the main mechanism in the nineteenth century that allowed face-to-face relations to translate into a translocal idea of nation was the advent of print capitalism. As Lieberman points out, however, “key institutions, such as schools, the press, and military conscription, that encouraged nationalism among peasants in Western Europe developed much more slowly in Europe’s East” (p. 29). What accounted for the rise of nationalism then in

these areas? He offers three avenues for the development of national identifications: education, the translation of religious identity into national identity, and personal experience. It is this final category of “personal experience” that remains the most abstract, the most hard to grasp, yet the most pervasive in *Terrible Fate*.

Transmission of personal experience, often in the form of rumor and stories, generally precedes instances of violence in Lieberman’s narrative and analysis. Lieberman sources will mention not only what happened in their community but what “they heard” happened elsewhere. He describes how the Jews of Vilna, who suffered fewer attacks than others Jews in Lithuania, “heard of worse crimes than [the] kidnapping [that occurred in Vilna]” (p. 184). Similarly, Turkish national extremists told stories of “treasonous Armenians” during World War I (p. 216). As Lieberman argues, “stories, of course, do not by themselves turn people into thieves and murderers, but the nationalist stories of Europe’s war were powerful because they changed the way many residents of Central and Eastern Europe looked at people who lived nearby but spoke different languages or practiced another religions” (p. 216). Though this part of the argument appears in every chapter, it remains sadly underdeveloped by Lieberman in his overarching theory of the perpetuation of ethnic cleansing. This is unfortunate since Lieberman’s source evidence spans two hundred years; it is thorough and remarkable for it offers the possibility that storytelling and the spread of rumors—the very face-to-face interaction that Anderson discounts in the formation of national identity—are a key element in understanding group belonging and violence, and the “cycles of revenge” (p. 217) that follow identification with an ethnic or national group. This rapid spread of information, of opinion, of experience over large distances is not dependent on the paths traced by print capitalism. Lieberman’s extensive evidence and sources provide rich material that only begins to hint at new possibilities for how images of “the enemy” are formed among groups and how “nationalist desires and myths” (p. 78) come to pit neighbor against neighbor. Classificatory systems and their production, then, are not just the domain of large states, empires, or bureaucracies but also of social groups that can span a continent and create interconnections in novel ways.

Lieberman must be credited for his clear and lucid prose, which makes his narrative not only a fluid and enjoyable read for interested scholars, but also for the general reader. His writing style comes through most vividly in wonderfully detailed descriptions of the former diversity of cities such as Salonica and Smyrna, and the sub-

sequent melancholic nostalgia its expelled residents describe in letters and other writings. The sources Lieberman uses are varied and range from news stories, to travelogues, government documents, other written histories, and even the poetry of literary figures that witnessed (sometimes both disparagingly and other times triumphantly) instances of ethnic cleansing. In addition, Lieberman introduces a large body of documents from both the British Foreign Office and the American Diplomatic Records (p. 343) reminding us (probably most usefully the non-historians amongst us) of Britain's and the United States' ongoing interests in these regions.

One of the most important contributions Lieberman makes in *Terrible Fate* is that he empirically shows how easy it is for perpetrators and victims of ethnic cleansing to change roles. As he points out in the case of the Armenians and the Turks: "precisely because of the extermination of Armenians in Turkey, Armenians in the Republic of Armenia moved toward more extreme violence to protect themselves" (p. 137). Similarly, Croats who were driven out from eastern Slavonia in 1991-92, later expelled Serbs from the Slavonia and Krajina regions (p. 320). Lieberman also points to the little-known aftermath of the most extensive genocide project of the twentieth century, the Holocaust: the exodus of millions of Germans forced out of their homes by new authorities. Lieberman argues that "the exodus of Germans at the end of World War II was the largest single population movement in modern European history" (p. 221). The value of this empirical research—demonstrating shifts among victims and perpetrators—and its addition to a growing body of scholarly work is as academic as it is political for

it situates acts of violence in time, space, social, and political settings. It negates racist, prejudiced arguments that attribute particular people or entire social groups with inherent tendencies towards violence or aggression. Though scholars often claim that work such as Robert Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts* (2005) or any other suggesting a "clash of civilizations" has been discredited or debunked, it is work like Lieberman's, however, that will continue to positively reach and shape a general readership.

Lieberman's conclusion to *Terrible Fate* is very prescriptive in its assertion that we can use historical evidence to pinpoint future sources of potential ethnic cleansing: "we should look for an ethnically and religiously diverse region, a border zone of civilizations, especially one undergoing rapid modernization, where the boundaries of major ethnic and religious groups do not match the boundaries of states" (p. 334). The simplicity of this statement however does not appear to do justice to the complexity of the argument Lieberman presents in the rest of his book, especially since he so acutely shows that boundaries of groups and of states are but one factor in the complex set of conditions that allows violence to occur. He shows us cities that survive for hundreds of years as places where diversity thrive peacefully but then collapse suddenly. Does a diverse modernizing region always mean ethnic violence? Or does his conclusion point to an oversimplification that scholars of violence and genocide are often quick to make because of the recognition that it is a necessary step in the transition from scholarly research to policy change in today's world of the nation-state?

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