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Contested Nationalism and the Politics of Commemoration in a Sectarian Society

Commemorating the dead is about bestowing posthumous meaning on the loss of human life. Martyrdom may be actively sought, but more often the dead had no intention of making the ultimate sacrifice. This is as true for Lebanon as elsewhere in the Middle East and beyond, notwithstanding persistent portrayals in the Western media that life is cheap in the non-West.

In recent years a growing number of remarkable monographs have established memory studies as a potent field of inquiry in the humanities. Judith Butler's elaboration on the suffering of others and Michel Rothberg's sensitive argument against competitive and towards multidirectional memory chart a path for comparative and integrated approaches to memory.[1] Since the end of the Lebanese Civil War in 1990, there has been an upsurge in research on modes of coping with postwar conditions of loss and disorientation and on urban belonging in the context of neoliberal gentrification and destruction of historical Beirut.[2] Indeed, Beirut has emerged as an international laboratory of memory studies. Countless architectural commissions, academic conferences, and NGOs appeared to wage a political battle by aesthetic means to contest a pervasive atmosphere of forgetfulness in 1990s Beirut. The critical works of Aseel Sawalha, Laleh Khalili, and Sune Haugbolle challenge the cottage industry of coffee-table books, and the glossy brochures of SOLIDERE, the company in charge of the reconstruction of downtown Beirut. They also tussle with the doyen of Lebanese memory studies, the sociologist Samir Khalaf, and other Lebanese intellectuals who are nostalgic for a bygone urban order.[3]

Anthropologist Lucia Volk's work is a reflection of recent research trends in Lebanon, but stands apart from these in a number of significant ways. Volk offers a tightly packed investigation and beautifully crafted analysis of the culture and the politics of commemorations in Lebanon from World War I to the Israeli war on Lebanon in the summer of 2006. *Memorials and Martyrs* begins with a thorough introduction in which Volk brings into conversation studies of ritual spaces, public art, and memory with nationalism, sectarianism, and religious self-sacrifice. In the next five chapters, she revisits key moments in the history of the Lebanese nation and how they were remembered. Through free-flowing interviews and well-chosen photography and archival footage, Volk brings out the intensity and idiosyncrasies of the politics of commemoration across Lebanon. In a final essay, Volk summarizes her main arguments and concludes with the important insight that Lebanese nationalism is *not* antithetical to sectarian identities. Rather, both are constitutive of each other, and have been staged together in celebrations of Muslim-Christian difference after two world wars, two civil wars, two Israeli massacres, and a litany of political assassinations. The book presents a gripping tale of the work and contestation that her interlocutors–politicians, artists, historians, restorationists, journalists, grassroots organizers, and victims' descendants–have put into the design, building, destruction, and disappearance of memorials over the last five decades.

The hanging of twenty-five Lebanese and Syrian Ottoman intellectuals for conspiring against Young Turk rule during World War I is widely remembered in Lebanon as a foundational sacrifice for national independence. It is one of the few unifying facts on which authors of Lebanese notoriously divided history textbooks can agree, even if–privately–and surprisingly–some senior national historians consider the hanged not heroes but traitors for colluding with European diplomats (p. 62). What is more remarkable, however, is the fate of the martyrs' corpses and the unstable fortune of their commemoration. For years after World War I few knew what happened to them, where they were buried, and, indeed, what to do with them. Volk discovered that the martyrs

of 1915/16 were not always consigned to oblivion during the intervening eight decades between their death and the start of her fieldwork in 2008. In describing their fate and the mnemonic practices around the "independence heroes" of World War I, Volk presents a wonderful narrative of key turning points in the history of modern Lebanon.

It was not until 1930 that the first memorial to the hanged martyrs was unveiled on Sahat al-Burj/Martyr Square in busy downtown Beirut. Yussef Hoyek's statue represented two women–sartorially identifiable as Muslim and Christian–facing each other over an urn. By purporting to contain "the ashes of *both* Muslim and Christian martyrs," Volk argues, "one nation was created … in Lebanon's first piece of national art" (pp. 55, 59) Soon, however, discontent was voiced over the date of the commemoration. Nationalists of all stripes rallied against the French authorities who had self-servingly scheduled the official ceremony on September 2, the first day of colonial rule in 1920. But once the date had been moved to May 6, the day on which twenty-one of the martyrs were killed in 1916, the monument itself became highly contested.

The Zionist expulsion of Palestinians from their land, the military defeat of Arab forces, and the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 had a cataclysmic effect on Arab self-perception in Lebanon.[4] Amidst the growing sense of political emasculation, politicians and the League for the Commemoration of Martyrs began to call for the replacement of the monument with a more manly structure. One of the members of the league took a ladder and hammer and mutilated the two women in September 1948. While plans were afoot to design a new, "more worthy" memorial over the next dozen years, the May 6 ceremonies were held without the removed statues, which disappeared without a trace until in 2001 they miraculously turned up at the Sursoq Museum in upscale Beirut.

The new memorial was unveiled by President Chehab at the 1960 commemorations. It was the work of Italian artist Marino Mazzacurati, who had already sculpted the statue of the assassinated prime minister Riad el-Solh in 1957. Although Mazzacurati retained a female figure at the center of the composition, she was more reminiscent of New York's Statue of Liberty or a Marianne as she guides a youth over a precipice lined with fallen and clamoring figures. The monument was much more dramatic and heroic than Hoyek's domestic and mournful rendering but it took some time until the Lebanese public warmed to the new memorial's "Mediterranean" style and its generic material. As one editorial put it after the unveiling: "it does not represent–either from close up or far away–the martyrs of May 6" (p. 100).

It is at this point in Volk's monograph that the reader encounters another refreshing and innovative aspect of *Memorials & Martyrs*. The author takes the narrative out of the iconic Martyr Square and beyond the confines of Beirut. Her fieldwork in the Shouf Mountains and South Lebanon are fascinating in their own right and provide a critical vantage point onto the mnemonic practices of Lebanon's capital elites. Kamal Jumblat's little-known syncretic memorial for Druze and Maronite victims of the 1958 civil war in Beqata portrays a socially and religiously inclusive Arab nationalism as its architecture evokes south and east Asian transcendental philosophies. Volk shows how a carving of Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi's poem *The Will to Live* at the entrance of the memorial garden ties the popular uprising against President Camille Chamoun in 1958 to anti-French resistance in Tunisia and Gamal Abdel Nasser's struggle against Western imperialism.[5] Ultimately, this memorial, too, fell into disuse and neglect. The beginning of the second Lebanese civil war (1975-90) and the assassination of Kamal Jumblat two years into it consigned the memorial and the significance of commemorating 1958 to general oblivion.

Shortly after the outbreak of the second civil war, Mazzacurati's "Liberty Statues" in Beirut found themselves abandoned and dismembered on the no-man's land that divided the Lebanese capital into East and West Beirut. They survived the ordeal and during the age of reconstruction in the 1990s the absent memorial acquired a popularity it never possessed before the war. It now came to be embraced as the symbol of Lebanon's will to live, of its people's endurance, and of their defiance against all odds. Lebanon's postwar politician-Messiah Rafik Hariri recognized early in his first term as prime minister the political mileage in transforming "Mazzacurati's statue from a sculpture memorializing independence to a site honoring civil war victims" (p. 109). Toward this goal an intense debate began between international restorationists who advocated retaining the monument's patina and their local partners who preferred to repair the wartime damage. In the end most bullet holes were left visible. "The Bulldozer," as Hariri was called by critics of his *tabula rasa* approach to urban planning, also displayed unexpected energy to revitalize the original martyrs' cemetery. Volk describes in a tone of professional detachment how he was eager to build a reputation as the great unifier of Muslims and Christians in Lebanon.

At this point in Lebanon's history and Volk's nar-

rative, the limelight of Lebanese nationalist commemoration shifted, once again, outside the carefully choreographed mnemonic practices in downtown Beirut to the frontlines of the lingering war with Israel in South Lebanon. When Israel conducted "Operation Grapes of Wrath" in 1996 in order to wipe out the Lebanese resistance to Israeli occupation, its military also killed over one hundred civilians who sought shelter in a United Nations compound at the village of Qana. In the absence of any state institutions, the Shi'a Amal movement took charge of burials, ceremonies, and ultimately the architecture of the memorial. The process followed the allegorical pattern established since Hoyek's interreligious monument in 1930: Muslims and Christians died together to give life to national steadfastness in the face of more powerful enemies. Qana, a village that until then had not even featured on maps of the Lebanese Ministry of Tourism, became a powerful symbol and a site that could bring together Christian and Muslim communities in what Volk terms "commemorative solidarity." In an attempt to match contemporary Shia claims to Qana after the Israeli massacre, the Lebanese government began to promote it as the "important Christian pilgrimage site" where Jesus allegedly stayed during a wedding. The withdrawal of the Israeli army from occupied South Lebanon four years after Qana further cemented this embattled region's status as the real center of national independence, in particular after Hizbollah liberated Khiam Prison and turned it into its museum of national remembrance.[6]

Meanwhile, the reconstruction of downtown Beirut was inching forward and Volk shows how downtown Beirut's "age of reconstruction" from 1992 to 2004 became a veritable urban laboratory of postwar memory production. In 2004 Hariri decided to give the reconstruction project a boost by ordering the long-restored Liberty Statues to be returned to Matryr Square. But the memorial disappeared as quickly as it reappeared and Volk–always attentive to the concommittant political atmosphere–casts this bizarre episode as a harbinger of the rivalry between Hariri and the Lebanese president, the wider rifts between pro- and anti-Syrian constituencies in Lebanon, and ultimately his assassination on February 14, 2005. On the day after the killing of "Mr. Lebanon," Martyr Square regained its place at the center of nationalist politics, from where the mass demonstrations of the new Freedom Intifada drove the Syrian army out of the country.[7] The burial of Rafik Hariri between the Greek Orthodox and Maronite churches and his own recently completed and oversized al-Amin Mosque on Martyr Square turned his grave into a shrine of national reconciliation and sacrifice. In location and ritual, Hariri's death was effectively linked back to that of the 1915/16 martyrs and it was, again, framed in Christian-Muslim commemorative solidarity.

Once more, events in the south would overshadow the spree of political assassinations in Beirut. In the summer of 2006, Israel launched "the costliest Arab-Israeli war in Lebanon's history" in retaliation for Hizbollah's killing and abducting of a number of its soldiers on the border (p. 175). And, as if following Volk's script, Israel once again bombed a civilian shelter in Qana, killing twenty-seven women and children. Now Qana boasted two memorials. The first was designed by Hizbollah's Shi'a rival, Amal, in the established sectario-nationalist vein of Christian-Muslim "commemorative solidarity," while the second celebrated the dead as fighters for "Divine Victory" and as Hizbollah's sacrifice to the nation.

Memorials and Martyrs in Modern Lebanon is a rigorous study and a pleasure to read. This reviewer appreciated how, in Volk's analysis, Lebanese mnemonic practices kept eluding and often challenged the semiotic certainties of the memorials. One aspect that could have been developed further is how the script of Christian-Muslim commemorative solidarity has served Lebanese elites to obfuscate a more complex sectarian landscape that, in a country of eighteen recognized communities, is not binary at all. Nevertheless Volk's book teaches us and our students that in order to fully understand the contradictions of a city like Beirut, we need to step out of the autobiographical allure of urban culture. No history of Lebanon is complete without a discussion of events in the south (or the north and the east for that matter), just as no urban history is complete without its rural, regional, and national structures of meaning and power.

Notes

[1]. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2006), and *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable* (New York: Verso, 2010); Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

[2]. Samir Khalaf, *Beirut Reclaimed: Reflections on Urban Design and the Restoration of Civility* (Beirut: Dar an-Nahar, 1993), and *Heart of Beirut: Reclaiming the Bourj* (London: Saqi Books, 2006).

[3]. Aseel Sawalha, *Reconstrcuting Beirut: Memory and Space in a Poswar Arab City* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010); Laleh Khalili, *Heroes and Martyrs of*

Palestine: The Politics of National Commemoration (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Sune Haugbolle, *War and Memory in Lebanon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); and Craig Larkin, *Memory and Conflict in Lebanon: Remembering and Forgetting the Past* (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

[4]. Francis Hasso, "Modernity and Gender in Arab Accounts of the 1948 and 1967 Defeats," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 32 (2000): 491-510.

[5]. Since the Arab uprisings began in December 2010, lines of al-Shabbi's poetry like these have electrified the Arab peoples to overthrow their dictators: "Hey you, the unfair tyrants / You the lovers of the darkness / You the enemies of life … Wait, don't let the spring, the clearness of the sky and the shine of the morning light fool you / Because the darkness, the thunder rumble and the blowing wind are coming toward you from the horizon / Beware because there is a fire underneath the ash…;" or "If the People one day wanted life / destiny will answer their call. / The night will fade away / shackles will be broken."

[6]. Volk credits Lara Deeb, "Exhibiting the 'Just-Lived Past': Hizbollah's Nationalist Narratives in Transnational Political Context," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50 (2008): 369-399 with these insights.

[7]. To invoke Nicholas Blanford's hagiographic account of Hariri's life and death: *Killing Mr. Lebanon: The Assassination of Rafik Hariri and its Impact on the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006).

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