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Review of Thomas Schmidinger, *Rojava: Revolution, War, and the Future of Syria's Kurds*

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NEW MIDDLE EASTERN REVIEWS

Rojava: Revolution, War, and the Future of Syria's Kurds

Thomas Schmidinger

London, Pluto Press, 2018, 368 pp., \$25.00 (Paperback)

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Thomas Schmidinger's *Rojava: Revolution, War, and the Future of Syria's Kurds* provides an in-depth overview of latest political developments in the Kurdish-led Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS) over the past eight years. While focusing on the political and military changes triggered by the 2011 Syrian uprising in this region, Schmidinger offers an exhaustive introduction to its history, and in particular to the history of Syria's Kurds from the early Islamic ages to contemporary times. After an overview of the area's ethnic and religious diversity (Chapters 3-4) and a glimpse of Kurdish politics beyond Syria (Chapter 5), Schmidinger discusses at length the history of Syria's Kurds under the French Mandate (Chapter 6), in pre-Baathist independent Syria (Chapters 7-8-9), under the earlier Baathist phase and the tenure of Hafez al-Assad (Chapter 10), and under the current regime of Bashar al-Assad (Chapter 11). He then sheds light on Syrian Kurdish party politics (Chapter 12), the 2011 Syrian uprising and the opposition's militarisation that followed (Chapter 13), and its repercussions for the Kurdish-majority regions (Chapters 14-17). He draws on sixty interviews (all published in Chapter 18) and extensive fieldwork conducted over five field visits between 2013 and 2016.

The author offers a balanced account of events on a topic mostly dominated by politically polarised perspectives in favour of or against the chief engineer of the DFNS political system, namely the Democratic Union Party (PYD): the Syrian branch of Turkey's outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Schmidinger provides his readers with the opportunity of accessing a multifaceted patchwork of views, with the exception of Arab supporters of the opposition and the Syrian government – who do not feature among the interviewees.

The author recognises from the beginning the often intentionally overlooked methodological challenges of research in war-torn contexts. He concedes that, despite his best efforts, he might have also fallen into the “trap” of embedded research, thus echoing the politically biased views of Kurdish activists and militiamen who escorted him during his field trips (Chapter 2). As manifested in the prefaces to the book's several editions, Schmidinger also kept up to date with the latest political developments – up to early 2018 – and navigated the challenges of conducting research on rapidly unfolding events.

The author factually engages with the widely circulated assumption that the DFNS represents an alternative to capitalist economies and sheds light on the least revolutionary

aspects of the region's political economy. Chapter 15 (entitled "Political Economy in the Civil War") stands as a fundamental contribution to the ongoing debate between the overwhelming majority of leftists who support the DFNS, and its few critics on the same side of the political spectrum. At the same time, Schmidinger is wary of overlooking existing divisions within the PYD-linked institutions, and the tensions sparked by their marriage of interests with figures who have never been active in the struggle for Kurdish rights, or whose political leaning is far from revolutionary (Chapter 17: "The Kurdish Para-State in Rojava"). On the contrary, most anti-PYD literature tends to neglect such complexities in the attempt to portray the movement as a monolithic Stalinist party.

In his long list of interviews, Schmidinger does not hesitate to challenge his interlocutors by broaching up thorny issues, including human rights violations and support from foreign backers in the context of the Syrian conflict. Furthermore, the author delves into the intricacies of Syrian Kurdish party politics, seeking clarity in a realm that is quite obscure to Syrians themselves, especially outside of Kurdish circles.

Aside from the advantage of reaching both an academic and a non-academic public, a larger number of sources – especially on disputed accounts of events – and references in regional languages (such as Turkish, Kurdish and Arabic) would have further strengthened Schmidinger's research work. Moreover, the socio-historical analysis would have been more comprehensive had Arab interviewees been included, not only because the area is populated by sizeable Arab communities but also because it would have projected the text beyond the realm of Kurdish studies. While, in the introductory chapters, the history of Kurds is presented as intertwined with other areas of Syria, attentive readers may be left wondering about the socio-political relations between the DFNS and other territories during the ongoing Syrian conflict (with only Aleppo discussed in Chapter 16). Likewise, the conditions of Kurds living elsewhere in the country remain under-addressed in the manuscript.

Nonetheless, a specular gap is often present in Syria-focused works that intend to analyse the latest uprising without engaging with the contemporary transformations taking place in the Kurdish regions and in Kurdistan at large, as if they still were peripheries of Arab-dominated central powers. Dealing extensively with Syrian history and politics, Schmidinger's book is one of the most accurate contributions to Rojava's history.