

Review of : Guerra all'ISIS. Diario dal fronte curdo
[Waging War on ISIS : Diary from the Kurdish Front]
Gastone Breccia, Bologna: il Mulino, 2016

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Guerra all'ISIS. Diario dal fronte curdo [Waging War on ISIS : Diary from the Kurdish Front]. By Gastone Breccia, Bologna: il Mulino, 2016. ISBN: 978-88-15-26334-6, pp. 210, € 16,00.

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This very informative, interesting and well-written book is conceived and articulated as a travel diary, following the itinerary of the Author's travel from Erbil to Sinjar for the purpose of observing and understanding the war opposing the Kurds to the so-called "Islamic State", indicated in the book's title by the acronym ISIS. During his three-weeks-travel and stay in Kurdistan, in territories comprised within the Iraqi and the Syrian borders, Breccia meets some of the protagonists of such war, talking with them about a number of aspects, especially focusing on military issues. The idea behind the book is that despite its being seemingly "localized" such war will probably have global implications, to the extent that in his *Post scriptum* Breccia states that «the third world war has started», although this may seem a too «pessimistic view», and that «the feeling is shared in Kurdistan to have been ended up just in the middle of it» (p. 193; all translations from Italian are mine).

One of the most remarkable features of the book is that it has been written by a professor of Byzantine history. You might namely wonder why very "hot" and "timely" topics such as those relating to the "Islamic State" should be addressed by someone who is interested in, and expert at, "things of the past". As a matter of fact, those topics are something still developing *in the present time*, while – as it is well known – historians should deal with *the past*. As Breccia himself recollects at the beginning of the *Introduction*, just his being an *historian* and not a *journalist* – an expert at the present – often came as a surprise to the people he encountered during his journey to the "Kurdish front".

Now, I find that just this preliminary question of legitimacy, so to speak, is a very relevant aspect and that we should take it into account in reading Breccia's book. We are since long used to thinking of historical accounts as

something giving a comprehensive picture of facts and events already concluded that have no longer to do with the lived experience of people in the here and now, if not in the sense that certain consequences of those facts and events still exercise an influence on the present. History, in this (western and “scientific”) understanding, is something sequentially developing along a line – the arrow of time, if you prefer – that can be represented by reconstructing the sequence of facts and events on the basis of “correct” ordering principles.

In this way, that is to say by putting them in order, you become also able to assign a unitary meaning to those same facts and events, but to do this you need to be spatially and temporally situated outside them: in short, you need *distance* in order to exercise the *historical gaze*. However, this is only one possible way to define the essence of historical research and the role of the historian, one that has also given birth to a number of “grand narratives” to which western thinking has been stubbornly sticking until they were definitively deconstructed during the second half of the 20th century.

So, there is now space enough to recover other possible options, of which many eminent examples from the past might be mentioned, to think about history and to perform the role of the historian. Among them, as Breccia highlights, «the ancient historians, and the Byzantine ones who continued their splendid tradition for a millennium, considered the *autopsia* not only useful, but necessary, and they apologized to the readers because – obviously – they could not provide them with a direct testimony to the major part of the facts narrated in their works» (pp. 7-8).

The practice of *autopsia*, in the original ancient Greek meaning of “seeing [something] with one’s own eyes”, was considered by ancient historians as perfectly fitting the purposes of historical reconstruction, even if they felt obliged to apologize because they were not able to see *all* things with their own eyes and therefore could not narrate them exhaustively. The practice to “go and see” facts and events in order to “narrate them to others” is of course different from that of “historical research” as we commonly understand it today, and the same goes for their final products. While historical research results mainly in “historical essays” aiming to provide the readers with a reconstruction and discussion of “historical sources”, the final product of an *autopsia* might be considered an historical source in itself, just because the historian performing it becomes part of the same facts and events

she intends to reconstruct, understand and narrate. But differently from an account given by a journalist, who is usually expected to “go and see” facts and events in order to narrate them *as they are unfolding in the present*, the testimony given by a professional historian is much more nuanced and complicated, just because the witness, so to speak, exercises a different gaze – that of a person who is able to insert current facts and events within a more general framework connecting past and present.

According to Breccia, there is also another reason why this different way of doing history may be considered adequate to the particular topic addressed by the book. In fact, it can be stated that «the war in Kurdistan is a particular case, in that it is the last episode of a collective sequence of events that have not had the possibility, until today, to consolidate to historical reflections and analyses». For various reasons, not least because of the «prohibition to use their own language», the Kurds have at their disposal «a very rich memory, but almost no written text that can secure it and can be used by others». Hence, in this case the possibility to rely upon different historical sources becomes relevant also to «contribute in the next future to the writing of more “pondered” essays» (p. 8).

Through Breccia’s “diary”, which might be also defined as a “chronicle”, we follow the author’s journey to the “Kurdish front” from its very beginning, sharing his encounters with persons involved, in various roles and positions, in the unfolding of a war which may well sound “strange” to the western sensibility under many different aspects. We meet different types of “warriors”, ranging from the *peshmerga* of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq to the guerrilla fighters of the PKK and PYD – getting lost in a forest of acronyms defining and demarcating the various groups (HPG, YPG, YPJ) –, and to the Italian military force training the *peshmerga* to become a more “proper” army. But we also meet “normal people”, differently marked by the experience of the war(s), and we even come to know that the guerrilla fighters seem to take gender issues more seriously than “us”, if it is true that all leading roles are shared between a man and a woman.

While reading the book, the reader slowly enters a world in which time and space are conceived differently, as are the rhythm of everyday life and all the notions she is familiar with, and she becomes even able to recognize different patterns of living and thinking, in a cultural setting in which you

do not drink coffee but *chai* [tea]. *Chai* and *Da'ish* – the name by which people of the area indicate the entity we are used to calling ISIS – are the two words the reader will probably better remember after closing the book. From *chai* to *chai* she arrives with Breccia to the frontline in the Syrian territory, where the enemy can be seen and where a range of military actions are taking place. This is also the end of the journey, you cannot go further.

After that, only coming back is possible, to the point of departure and to the rewriting of the diary in order to transform it in a source available to all who happen to be interested in sharing the experience of the author. As the ancient historians already did, also Breccia seems to apologize because he has not been able to give a direct testimony to all the facts and events that could have been relevant to his readers. Especially, he feels bad that he has been not able to give an accurate account of the war, since he could not consider the enemy's viewpoint. As he himself states: «*I do not know the enemy. I do not know him and therefore I cannot understand him; I am going to leave the places of this war, I have learnt a lot, but Da'ish has remained concealed*» (p. 184).

In my opinion, just the awareness of incompleteness that Breccia evokes in many “personal comments” throughout his diary is one of the main reasons why his book surely deserves to be read. The feeling of incompleteness and the need to assume the attitude of a learner in order to understand the links between past and present to act responsibly in one's own times are just what historical accounts like this one have to offer to those who could not “be there”, leaving open to their interpretation and further learning the task to fill the blanks, so to speak. In short, the merit of this and similar “small narratives”, which we would need much more than the often rolling accounts provided by the media, consists in giving conclusive evidence that before turning into *memory*, history overlaps with *experience*.