

Polk, William R.: *Aufstand. Widerstand gegen Fremdherrschaft: vom Amerikanischen Unabhängigkeitskrieg bis zum Irak*. Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, HIS Verlag 2009. ISBN: 978-3-86854-210-3; 340 S.

**Rezensiert von:** Mario Gavenda, Leipzig

William R. Polk's book *Violent Politics*, here to be reviewed in its German language translation, sets out to write the history of violent resistance to foreign occupation ranging from the American Revolution to post-Baathist Iraq. This extensive endeavor naturally requires a selective approach, which Polk realizes through the specific angle he takes. His book is, as the author readily admits, written out of prevailing concern with the American –and also, as particularly emphasized with consideration of the audience of the present edition, German – involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq. Therefore, the cases he selects and the aspects he stresses are determined by their relevance for the present-day situation.

William Polk is a historian who certainly knows the subject he deals with. In two of the examined cases, namely the Vietnam wars and the Algerian War of Independence, Polk has been a first-hand observer as an employee of the US State Department, which he eventually quit because of his critical stance on the conventionally employed counter-insurgency measures (p. 13). He therefore regularly uses quotes from military leaders and intelligence officers directly involved in the fight against insurgents as his sources. However, Polk does not hesitate to also draw on theorists on the side of the insurgents, most prominently Mao Tse-tung. The most outstanding reference Polk gives, not least to demonstrate his own authority on the subject, is a piece of information he claims to have received from former Egyptian president Nasser in a private conversation (p. 191).

The central argument of the book is developed within a theoretical framework around which Polk organizes the narration of events. The centre piece of this theory is the assertion that the main driving force for rebellion is the feeling of belonging to a community as opposed to the element of foreignness the occup-

ying power conveys. Other elements that are illustrated throughout the book are the pre-eminence of politics and administration compared to the military aspect, the differentiation of the three phases of terrorism, guerrilla fight and outright popular insurgency, as well as the conventional designation of the insurgents as mere „bandits“.

The book starts with a chapter on the American Revolution, in which Polk identifies an aspect that will also play a role in the subsequent ten chapters. He argues that insurgents have an advantage when they resort to tactics of irregular guerrilla warfare; however, they are often tempted to set up a regular, but inferior army. This theme is taken up on several occasions throughout the entire book. It is, however, disputable if the American Revolution can serve as an example of rebellion against foreign occupation in the first place. The argument of foreignness driving the rebellion does not seem convincing here as the issues of taxation and representation were not necessarily stirred by a sense of national unity. Therefore, Polk's choice to open the book with this episode seems to be rather symbolic and directed towards the targeted audience in the American public and foreign policy community.

In the following chapter, Polk introduces the Spanish resistance to the Napoleonic occupation, in which the element of „xenophobia“ is claimed to be decisive as the Spanish resistance was not driven by demands for social change but rather by a conservative reaction to the revolutionary French (p. 54). He then examines the struggle of the Philippines against Spanish and American colonial rule. Here Polk identifies one of the examples in which the counter-insurgency strategy proved temporarily successful, which became a model for Vietnam half a century later.

After examining the long-lasting Irish fight against the British monarchy, Polk turns to the Greek and Yugoslav struggles during World War II. Here Polk's insistence on the element of foreign occupation downplays the relevance of ideology present in both cases. In the case of Yugoslavia, the narrative suggests that Tito's communist Partisans and Mihailović's right-wing Četniks were simply two rebel

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groups fighting for the same aim, reducing their clashes to mere personal animosities between the acting individuals.

After discussing the Mau-Mau uprising in Kenya against the British colonial power, Polk turns to the cases he was personally involved: the Vietnamese wars against France and the United States, and the Algerian War of Independence. Finally, he discusses the Afghan resistance to the British and Soviet invaders, which then allows him to turn to the current situation treated extensively in the final section of the book.

Here Polk leaves the terrain of the historian to engage as a partial commentator of current affairs. The conclusions he comes to with regards to the historical patterns help him to argue against further American interventions abroad. His conclusion can be summed up as follows: Regardless of an army's military might, it will never be able to successfully combat an insurgency when the insurgents embody the national cause and manage to obtain the support of the population. Accordingly, combating guerrilla movements drags the occupying power only deeper into the spiral of violence, which in turn will make it even more unpopular. Polk calls on American and other Western foreign policy makers to bear this recurring theme in mind.

The book certainly has some merit with regards to the introduction of a historical and global perspective on issues that are usually discussed within a rather limited horizon, focusing solely on the success or failure of a concrete counter-insurgency strategy. Besides this valuable contribution to the debate, primarily geared toward the American public, the book is also of interest for historians. Polk chooses a comparative approach, discussing eleven different cases in a chronological manner. While doing so, Polk not only regularly refers to the other cases and highlights similarities, but also discusses how previous experiences have shaped the outlook of occupying powers as well as resistance movements. This approach of diachronic comparison across regions and cultures proves fruitful in identifying various interconnections between the different cases.

Another interesting aspect of the book consists in the development of a theory in which Polk embeds the narration of events. How-

ever, this raises the question of the appropriateness of simplifying generalizations of the sort. As already indicated above, the emphasis on the feeling of belonging to a community and the distrust of anything foreign seems to triumph over other aspects. This means that ultimately ideological or social concerns are marginalized in Polk's narrative. Although not doubting the central role of nationalistic sentiments and the importance of questions of self-determination, the argumentation seems rather simplistic. In many cases, the foreign powers were backing local groups who sought to secure their interests against a revolutionary force. A more profound question here would be how and why one decides to collaborate with foreign powers or even calls upon them for support. This would require a more in-depth examination of the mechanisms behind the construction of identities, taking into account, amongst others, social issues and complex historical legacies. Besides, the considerable number of cases discussed within the limited scope of a single book often forces the author to omit the full complexity of the events.

Certain formulations and narrative elements seem to go too far in playing to popular appeal and risk to evoke ambiguous feelings from a scholarly perspective. More caution should have been taken with the use of words pointing to irrational sentiments, such as „national pride“ or „xenophobia“. In the case of Yugoslavia, Polk comes close to what Maria Todorova has called „Balkanism“<sup>1</sup> by reducing the conflicts in the region to the long-standing hatred and distrust between the different ethnic groups (p. 110). Likewise, one wonders about the value of the introductory paragraph to the chapter on the Greek resistance in which the author links the ancient Greeks' passion for politics and power struggles to the events after World War I (p. 131). One can find some more examples of similarly problematic notions in other chapters of the book.

All in all, William Polk presents a book that, on the one hand, manages to insert history into a heated public debate and, on the other hand, offers a concise overview of the history

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<sup>1</sup> Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, New York 1997.

of insurgency against foreign occupation. This can serve as a first step towards a deeper engagement with a specific case and at the same time provoke thought about it as one instance within a longer history, while looking for connections to other events in different places and times.

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