

Editorial

MARTIN VAN BRUINESSEN[▲]

Almost a century ago, Memduh Selim wrote in the Kurdish magazine *Jîn*, which appeared in Istanbul, about the importance of festivals and commemorations for national awareness, and he urged the Kurds to follow the example of other nations and cultivate their national days. The mobilising potential of such celebrations and the various symbols associated with them has been amply proven in the case of the Kurds. As the major festivals to be celebrated, Memduh Bey mentioned Kurdish New Year (*sersal*) and the day of Kawa the Blacksmith, the hero who slew the tyrannical king *Zahhak*. He believed that the latter day was to be celebrated towards the end of summer. Later generations joined the symbol of Kawa's uprising to the spring festival, making Newroz/Nowruz a festival of rebirth, resistance and liberation. Although other Iranian and Turkic peoples also celebrate Nowruz, the day has acquired a distinct symbolic meaning for the Kurds. The festival and the myth associated with it are shared by Kurds of all countries; it has become a core aspect of Kurdish identity as well as a symbol of the Kurdish struggle against oppression.

It did not occur to Memduh Bey to mention days of mourning in this connection; the century that separates us from him, however, was marked by grave human-made disasters that left deep imprints on people's memories and collective consciousness. For the Kurds, the chemical attack on Halabja (on 16 March 1988) and the following Anfal operations (in summer 1988) constitute such defining traumatic events – especially Halabja, if only because of the iconic photographic images of victims, which were endlessly reproduced, and Şivan Perwer's haunting elegy. Halabja has become part of the Kurds' collective memory, not only in Iraq but in Turkey, Iran and Syria as well. The memory of Halabja is part of what it is to be a Kurd, of what constitutes

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Kurdish identity. So is the memory of earlier dramatic massacres such as those of Dersim in 1938.

Before the age of mass education and literacy, it used to be storytellers and bards, known as *dengbêj*, who were the keepers of Kurdish society's social memory, handing down narratives of major events as well as stories embodying Kurdish values from generation to generation. As Kurdish society urbanised and books and newspapers gradually came to replace oral tradition, the *dengbêj* appeared to be losing their social function, although cassette recordings of the greatest *dengbêj* of the past continued to be sold. Due to the resurgence of interest in Kurdish culture that began among the Kurds of Turkey in the 1990s, the *dengbêj* were rediscovered as the core institution of Kurdish oral tradition, becoming themselves symbols of Kurdish culture and Kurdish identity, and a remarkable revival of the *dengbêj* tradition took place.

The reworking of these various symbols of identity in Kurdish cultural production is the overriding theme of this second issue of *Kurdish Studies*. Hilla Peled-Shapira's contribution focuses on the impact of Halabja on literary writing, and Wendy Hamelink and Hanifi Bariş write on the revived *dengbêj* tradition. In his broad comparison of the Kurdish political struggles of the 1980s and the 2000s, Hamit Bozarslan implicitly comments on these symbols too. Halabja and the Anfal were the culmination of a period that boded defeat and weakness for the Kurdish people, but in the same years Newroz became a widely shared symbol of continued struggle. In the past decade, in spite of divisions, the Kurds have established themselves as major political actors in the region, who will play key roles in the future of Iraq, Turkey and Syria.

These contributions also exemplify the range of disciplinary approaches that are flourishing in the field of Kurdish studies. We intend to publish interesting and innovative work in yet other disciplines in our future issues. Kurdish studies have moved from the margins of academia and have become a respectable subject that attracts numerous young researchers working in academic institutions across the planet. The increasing prominence of Kurdish studies in academia reflects, of course, the increased prominence of the Kurds in the Middle East and the strength of the Kurdish diaspora as well as global shifts in academic interest and research funding.

One dramatic consequence of such global shifts has been the decline of Soviet Kurdology, which had long been the most strongly institutionalised school of Kurdish studies. Khanna Omarkhali's obituary of Moscow-based scholar Olga Jigalina (Ol'ga Zhigalina) is, in a sense, also an obituary of Soviet Kurdology: there is no real successor to Jigalina in Moscow. Khanna Omarkhali is herself the last young scholar to have received the thorough philological training of the Leningrad/St.-Petersburg school, but she now works in the West. Only a small fraction of the important work by Soviet Kurdologists (and the Iraqi Kurds who studied in the Soviet Union) is available in Western translations or summaries, but its significance remains undiminished.

On the other hand, Kurdish studies are now developing seriously in what used to be a most unlikely place: the Republic of Turkey. Mardin's Artuklu University is the main centre of this development, with a large department of Kurdish language and literature and with anthropologists, historians, archaeologists and art historians whose work is focused on the region, but several other universities have also opened modest departments of Kurdish linguistics. Moreover, at numerous other universities students are writing theses and dissertations on Kurdish subjects. This is not to say that the old prejudices and biases of Turkish academia have disappeared overnight, they have not, but this is no doubt a most significant development, which we shall hope to see reflected in future issues of this journal.

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Editors' acknowledgment

We hope the second issue of *Kurdish Studies* with its diverse content including an interview, commentary and articles will stimulate our readers and invite and encourage fresh and insightful research in the field and for future issues. As always, we are indebted to our colleagues who made this issue possible by submitting their high quality work. We are also grateful to our colleagues on the editorial board and all those who continue to contribute, support and promote *Kurdish Studies*. Our gratitude extends to our anonymous reviewers who shared their expert knowledge and provided constructive feedback helping us aim for the highest quality content. Through their kind translation of the abstracts of the articles into Kurmanji and Sorani, Deniz Ekici, Farhad Shakely and Beyan Farshi have made it possible for us to continue implementing this important journal policy. We would also like to take this opportunity to welcome on board our new copy editor Naomi Houghton, who has done an excellent job in editing the content of this issue. Finally we would like to thank Ahmed Foundation for Kurdish Studies (USA) for sponsoring online open access for the articles in this issue.

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