Journal of American Studies of Turkey
28 (2008): 87-92

Book Review

Elliott West, *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado*. Lawrence, Kan.: UP of Kansas, 2000. 422 pp.

Daniel Richter, *Facing East From Indian Country: A Native History of Early America*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2003. 336 pp.

Charles Weeks, *Paths to a Middle Ground: The Diplomacy of Natchez, Boukfouka, Nogales, and San Fernando de las Barrancas, 1791-1795*. Tuscaloosa, Ala.: U Alabama P, 2005. 304 pp.

Timothy M. Roberts

Halil İnalcık's recent translation of Henry Commager's and Allan Nevins's *A Pocket History of the United States,* published in Turkish as *ABD Tarihi* by Dogu-Batı in 2005, paradoxically suggests the distance between contemporary Turkish interest in American history, including Native American history, and an old-fashioned conception of American history, in which Native Americans are generally left out, which has lingered since *A Pocket History of the United States* first appeared in 1951. The cover of *ABD Tarihi* shows the face of a weathered American Indian, tight-lipped, wrapped tightly in a blanket. The attribution of the image inside the front cover is "Edward Curtis, A Yuma Type, The North American Indian." This cover suggests that Indians play a significant role in the book. But the book's index shows that various Indian tribes – Apache, Arapahoe, Arikara, Blackfoot, Chickasaw, Cheyenne, Choctaw, Comanche, Creek, Erie, Fox, Huron, Iroquois, Kiowa, Miami, Muskogean, Nez Perce, Sauk, Seminole, Sioux, and Ute—appear only on 17 pages of the book's total text of 690 pages (and Yuma Indians are completely absent from the book). While the cover of *ABD Tarihi* suggests, in other words, that the book will offer an orientation or at least significant discussion of the role of American Indians in U.S. history, the book's contents prove otherwise. The Indians have disappeared. Thus the book begins with Chapter 1, "The Planting of the Colonies," which opens with the sentence, "The history of English settlement in America began on a beautiful April morning in 1607, when three storm-beaten ships of Captain Christopher Newport anchored near the mouth of Chesapeake Bay, sending ashore men

who found 'fair meadows, and goodly tall trees, with such fresh waters as almost ravished' them to see."[1] They apparently didn't see any Indians.

But today it seems, or it should seem, to us that to speak of American history without giving significant attention to the role of American Indians tells only part of the story of the United States. We should see the Indians. In the last thirty to forty years, scholars in American history have given greater emphasis than did the generation of Nevins and Commager—the generation of "consensus" historians that emerged shortly after World War II—to "dispossessed" groups, especially women. Feminist scholarship, focused on the history of women and its complementary concept, the history of gender, has become the mainstream of American history. But other fields have also grown, though not quite as significantly, including the histories of African-Americans, Chicanos, immigrants, American Indians, and even gays.[2]

The three books under consideration ask us to place Indian history at the center of American history, away from the perspective of white European-Americans who landed "on a beautiful April morning in 1607" on the Atlantic seaboard and began the process of settling the American frontier, and toward the perspective of the peoples who looked upon those Euroepean-Americans. *Facing East* gives an account of America from the beginning of contact between Europeans and Indians through the early 19th century, but profoundly through the eyes of the Indian hosts, emphasizing the story of Indian peoples east of the Mississippi River, not the European visitors. *Contested Plains* traces the history of what became Colorado from pre-history to the Rocky Mountain Gold Rush of 1858, and the effects of the Gold Rush on Indians, especially the Cheyenne people, and whites alike. Paths to a *Middle Ground* focuses on diplomacy between the colonial government of Spain and the Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Cherokee Indians of the lower Mississippi River Valley, prompted by the mutual realization of the Spanish and Indians that they should try to deter American settlers' "insatiable appetite for land" (Weeks 6), after the American Revolution's end to British restraint on American westward expansion. Because all of these books portray American history from a Native American point of view, they show Indians as "subjects," not "objects," or, as postmodern scholars like to write, the "self," not "the other."

---

[1] In the İnalcık edition, this reads, "Amerika'da İngiliz kolonizasyonunun tarihi, 1607 yılının güzel bir Nisan sabahı başlar. Kaptan Christopher Newport'un . . ." (17).

[2] A useful survey of the new fields in American history is Foner, Eric, ed., *The New American History*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1997.

Such approaches require that Indian, not European, sources be used as much as possible; or, as is often the case, that truly Indian voices and actions be detected through careful reading of European commentaries, since most of the Indian historical record has not survived over time. Where no direct evidence of Indian history exists, Daniel Richter, Elliott West, and Charles Weeks and West use interpretive license to re-create "scenes . . . imagined, but . . . rooted in verifiable historical events" (Richter 13). Thus, for example, Chapter 4 in *Facing East,* "Native Voices in a Colonial World," uses Indian "conversion narratives" transcribed by Puritan missionaries upon the Indians' description of their conversion to Christianity. And *Facing East* uses speeches given by Indian diplomats, transcribed by colonial government authorities. Likewise, *Contested Plains* uses interviews of modern Indians to understand historic Indian planting and harvesting systems, and uses reports about Indians created by the U.S. Commissioner of Indian Affairs. Similarly, Weeks draws on English- and especially Spanish-language documents from archival sources. He acknowledges these documents "represent . . . the perspective of their [European] authors," but he attempts to recover "through them, the voices of Native Americans, filtered additionally through interpreters and recorders" (Weeks 279). None of these sources provides much direct evidence of Indians' point of view about Europeans' presence in the "New World." But with close reading by the historian, and, again, the historian's liberty to imagine, historic Indian voices may gain an audience.

Moreover, by shifting our attention to Indians' perspective on American history, these three books emphasize that American Indian societies were hardly static before and during the time the Europeans came, contrary to traditional historical perceptions. Indians, like Europeans, were human, motivated by a mixture of self-interest, ideals, curiosity about others, and limited knowledge of the future. Indians responded to changing conditions, or at times anticipated changes and sought to exploit them. They were hardly passive receivers of European displays of culture and power.

Thus, for example, *Contested Plains* shows the profound and fateful decision by the Cheyenne people to abandon their settled farming ways and to invest heavily in the horse, brought to America by the Spanish. Reliance on the horse brought the Cheyenne Indians greater access to buffalo and the ability to raid other Indian camps for slaves and trading goods. Reliance on the horse also made the Cheyenne dependent on finding enough grassland on the plains for their horses to feed. Once white settlers and gold prospectors arrived in Colorado in large numbers in the early nineteenth century, their need for

land clashed dramatically with the Cheyenne horse culture—more dramatically than if the Cheyenne had maintained their earlier more settled way of life. "Horse nomads pushed harder than most. . . . Within a couple of generations horseback Indians were suffering the inevitable environmental "tit-for-tat." Their new power brought other problems. Military aggressiveness brought appalling losses. Even worse, opportunities and the new environment cracked and pulled at their understanding of themselves" (West 334). Cheyenne decisions played a significant role in what happened to them.

Likewise, *Facing East* emphasizes the "balance of power" diplomatic system that Indian groups realized was better than either direct military confrontations with European colonial forces, or consistent alliance with only one European power. "The Native peoples who survived and even prospered into the eighteenth century capitalized on their geographic position, their economic and military value to European governors, and their decentralized political systems to keep their options open, to maintain connections with more than one imperial power, and thus to maintain their cultural and political autonomy. As a frustrated British secretary of Indian affairs put it, "to preserve the balance between us and the French is the great ruling principle of the modern Indian politics" (Richter, 164). In diplomacy Indians shared Europeans' capacity for bluff, pragmatism, and *realpolitik*. Indians, like Europeans, adapted, manipulated, won, and lost.

And of course, at the conclusion of all of these books, the Indians still lose. Elliott West concludes *Contested Plains* by writing, "Whites did not set out, directly at least, to destroy Indians' life. They were simply following a script that had no Indians in it, except as exotic relics…. The advantages of the invaders were incalculable – a population hundreds of times that of the Indians, gigantic reserves of capital, a technology capable of changing its world with a twitch. Despite their adaptive genius, the plains nomads could not possibly sustain themselves against that force" (West 335). Daniel Richter concludes *Facing East* by suggesting how European-Americans erased "memories of Indians who neither uncompromisingly resisted like the King Philip of their imagination, nor wholeheartedly assimilated like the Pocahontas of their fantasies.[3] Native peoples who instead struggled to find ways to incorporate European people, objects, and ideas into Indian country on Indian terms . . . could find no place in the

[3] In 1675 King Philip, or Metacomet, led an uprising of the Wampanoag Indians against the Puritan colonists in "New England," who captured and executed him, then dismembered his body. Pocahontas, of the Powhatan people, allegedly saved an English soldier of fortune, John Smith, from execution by her tribe, then married another Englishman and traveled to England as a diplomat in 1616, but died and was buried in England a year later.

mythology of a nation marching triumphantly westward across the continent" (Richter 252). Weeks shows in the conclusion of *Paths to a Middle Ground* how Spain's 1795 treaty with the United States, the Treaty of San Lorenzo or Pinckney's Treaty, which accepted the thirty-first parallel as the U.S. southwest boundary, contradicted the earlier Spanish promise to Choctaw Indian officials in 1791 "'that the Spaniards…more than any nation favour the Red People'" (Weeks 140). The expedient Spanish turnabout, to ally with the United States and to leave the Indians to fend for themselves, opened Indian land to American settlement. Nonetheless, despite their unsurprising outcome of the destruction of the Indian world, these three books, each in its own way, "problematize" both the process and the outcome of "how the West was won" (the title of a 1962 epic western film), showing Indians were central to the story—even if they were not its victors.

Journal of American Studies of Turkey
28 (2008): 93-94

Book Review

William T. Vollmann. *Europe Central*. New York: Penguin Books, 2005. 832 pp.

Mami Fouad

Like many of his former works, this new novel by William T. Vollmann is thick, running for more than eight hundred pages, and including some fifty pages of footnotes. Despite its fictional form, Vollmann seems determined to present *Europe Central* as a study that is thoroughly researched and heavily documented, thus confounding the assumption that works of historical fiction are more the product of fantasizing minds than of genuine historical consciousness and research.

This is the case of *Europe Central,* the focus of which is to reinterpret the antagonism between Russia and Germany in the era of World War II. What appears as a collection of ordinary biographies becomes a coherent account of the World War II era, with an emphasis on the genius and capacity for good among people on both sides tragically being thwarted or simply wasted because of the rise of stifling dictatorships in both of these two countries.

Thus the book exemplifies how fiction can explore history effectively. In fact, the book portrays events as they were truly experienced by the people who lived them, rather than simply reviewing them detachedly, as far away and distant incidents. Put differently, the style and the momentum of the narrative aim at lifting the drama from paper and pushing it to the level of a live encounter with the past for those of us who did not live through these events. For example, the book describes the struggles of an anonymous German soldier of the legendary Panzer division of the Ninth Army who loses all his mates in battle. He carries a telephone on his back, the division's only means of contact with the principal command simply known as "Europe Central." The line is almost always dead, signifying the separation between the authoritarian governments in Berlin and Moscow, and ordinary people. But the soldier keeps a diary, where he records what he wishes to convey to his superiors: "It had began to seem to me that unthinking obedience, 'cadaver obedience' we called

it, had lost us Moscow and Stalingrad; it hadn't yet won us Leningrad; nor could Operation Citadel be said to be progressing happily. In short, my belief in the sleepwalker [a appellation for Adolf Hitler] had died. But he believed. He held Europe Central in his sleep." Betraying official histories' portrayal of German soldiers as fearless, the soldier confides, "I dialed [Hitler] in Berlin! I wanted to tell him that there was an enemy awaiting outside, a giant in helmet; his mouth was as vast as the gunbarrel of an SU-152." The soldier's fear, however, causes him to kill anyway. When he comes face to face with a Russian soldier, he responds, "a Slav as evil-looking as Rasputin, with stars on his shoulder-tabs, and I was all alone! He saw me; he stretched out his arms to me. And this Russian tried to kiss me on the mouth, which I knew would have been my death, so I blew him up with my last grenade." Soldiers from neither army, in fact, according to Vollmer, harbored bad feelings or antagonistic intentions. Rather, they shared good wishes for peace together, though with an instinctual love for self-preservation.

Vollmann thus takes snapshots of a variety of people during World War II, who find themselves ordered to butcher one another for unclear reasons. The reader gets access to non-official portrayals of people like the Russian composer, Dmitri Shostakovich, the Russian journalist, Roman Karmen, the Russian Army General Vlasov, and the Nazi Germany Field Marshal, Friedrich Paulus. The reader thus has the opportunity to observe these people's rising and falling fortunes as they themselves experienced them. The novel consists of meticulously treated biographies, revealing a common struggle to remain human amid horror.

Vollmann thus argues that regardless of whatever we are told who we are, in the end we all share similar ideals of peace and mutual existence. The book thus makes a subtle statement about the need for understanding across cultures in conflict, surely an important message today. *Europe Central* encourages its reader to look at identity beyond the dividing lines drawn by power mad politicians—whose earlier counterparts brought disaster some half a century ago—can again bring disaster forth. Despite its length, students of the social or intellectual aspects of World War II may find these mini-biographies worthy of consideration.