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** The surnames are listed in alphabetical order.*

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BOOK REVIEW

Sean R. Roberts

The War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign against a Muslim Minority

(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020, ISBN: 978-0-691-20218-1, 328 pp., \$29.95.)

The War on the Uyghurs is the first book published by Sean R. Roberts, a cultural anthropologist with some 30 years' experience of studying the ethnolinguistic group which has recently become the focus of international media and political attention due to the Chinese communist regime's ongoing effort to establish an unprecedented high-tech police state in their homeland, known officially as Xinjiang. The author's main argument is that this latest stage of Beijing's attempts to attach the whole region to China proper for good amounts to a "cultural genocide," which finalises a several centuries old aim to colonise it and has been particularly aided by the US-led Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) since the beginning of this century. The thesis that GWOT has legitimised state repression against consciously dehumanised alleged "terrorists," especially Muslim ones, across much of the world and particularly in countries that are mostly at odds with the US, is not novel. Roberts, however, provides a meticulous, convincing, and genuinely frightening account of how this unfolded in the Uyghur homeland, defiantly called "Eastern Turkistan" by many of those who are critical of Beijing's radical actions there.

The book unravels this process in a rough chronological order throughout six well-thought-out analytical chapters with the logical focus on the post-2001 Chinese policies towards the "Uyghur homeland" that coincided with GWOT. The case study is embedded within a strong and fitting theoretical framework focusing on

Foucauldian biopolitics directed against alleged terrorists who are dehumanised through a "presumption of guilt." As is befitting of a serious social scientist, Roberts pays close attention to critical and contextualised usage of his key concepts. The case study thus provides the narrative of how the Uyghur homeland has been transformed from a "frontier colony" to a "settler colony" as the alleged terrorist threat there increasingly became a self-fulfilling prophecy. The latter process has been exemplified by the evolution of Uyghur resistance from the phantom "terrorist" Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) to a real organization – the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), which itself rapidly developed from a video production company with a militant wing in Afghanistan to a serious fighting and settlement force in Syria. By the author's own recognition, it is precisely this analysis of Uyghur militant groups that represents the book's most original research. However, the meticulous account of political violence within the Uyghur homeland up to its peak in 2014–15 also merits such evaluation.

The analysis convincingly reveals that, contrary to China's allegations, these two developments were largely separate, except for the fact that intensifying repression within the Uyghur homeland has forced many of its indigenous inhabitants to flee abroad, with some joining the TIP as a result. Crucially, it was the global "counterterrorism industrial complex" led by the US and composed of politicians, diplomats, security operatives, and scholars that greatly contributed to this

self-fulfilling prophecy and thus also to the legitimisation of both the “People’s War on Terror” and the subsequent cultural genocide unleashed on the Uyghur homeland by China’s current leadership of Xi Jinping. The Xinjiang panopticon nowadays is characterised by huge and multi-dimensional systems of *de facto* incarceration for the most “suspicious” indigenous Muslims and omnipresent high-tech surveillance. Roberts’ book, however, places part of the blame for the rise of this Orwellian, quintessentially biopolitical police state, on the outside world, particularly its developed Western and Muslim-majority components, both of which have contributed to or at least enabled this collective tragedy and thus far have not done enough to halt it.

The author’s two most contentious propositions of conceptual nature – namely, that the vast majority of the actual instances of Uyghur violent resistance to Chinese rule cannot even be defined as truly terrorist, and that Beijing’s post-2017 actions against them amount to a cultural genocide aimed at erasing and replacing the Uyghur identity itself by “breaking their roots” – are both supported by plenty of evidence. As this review is being written, the one-party state continues to alter the Uyghur homeland’s physical and human “terrain” in its own image. One can safely speculate that the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and China’s resultant isolationism would only contribute to this sinister process.

In the meantime, Roberts offers valuable thoughts regarding the implications of his findings on what comes next for the Uyghur homeland and the world at large. The book’s conclusion deals with three critical questions about this tragedy’s future trajectory in a remarkably humanitarian way. Answering the first one – what may be the future of the cultural genocide itself – the author believes that there is little that can fully stop and retract it, short of complete overhaul of the leadership in Beijing. The wider implications of the Uyghur tragedy for the future of GWOT derive from the fact that it is only a prime example of using allegations of terrorism to

justify and pursue other interests across the world, leading Roberts to call for the adoption of an internationally recognized and objective definition of “terrorism” to prevent atrocities in “forever wars” waged against it. Third, in order to prevent the Uyghur crisis from getting any worse, the author suggests putting significant pressure on China that would come from the grassroots and targeting it economically.

According to Roberts, the ongoing war on the Uyghurs is actually about more than the next global superpower, as it is merely symptomatic of a “post-privacy,” “post-rights,” and “post-diversity” world that gradually came into being after the declaration of GWOT. This timely, thought-provoking, and significant book should thus be of utmost interest to any reader who wants to live in the rules-based international order, however imperfect it may often seem to be. As someone who was lucky enough to visit the Uyghur homeland just before the “people’s war” unleashed not upon terror but against this proud, hospitable, and unique community, I can only agree with and fully support the author’s conclusions and recommendations.

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