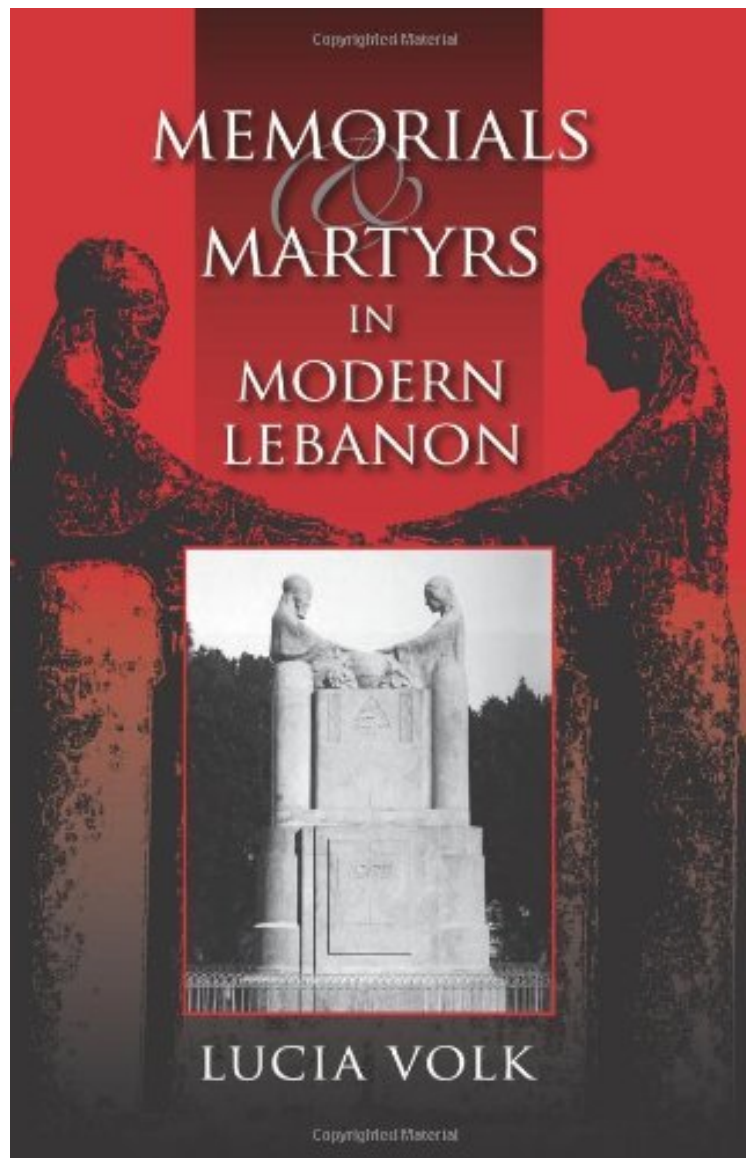


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Memorials and Martyrs in Modern Lebanon (Public Cultures of the Middle East and North Africa)

Lucia Volk

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Lucia Volk : Memorials and Martyrs in Modern Lebanon (Public Cultures of the Middle East and North Africa) before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Memorials and Martyrs in Modern Lebanon (Public Cultures of the Middle East and North Africa):

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Heartfelt History By Wendy Bertrand Memorials and Martyrs in

Modern Lebanon reads with the draw of a horrific heartfelt documentary. Middle Eastern scholar Lucia Volk introduces us to the politics of memory from her knowledge as a political anthropologist. The well placed memoir-like details of how she got to the topic and respected the complexity of what she learned frames her well researched respectful narrative. I didn't read many of the footnotes, but I was very impressed by Volk's personal research during her many trips to Lebanon where she spoke with selected people about their views, intentions, and actions related to the context of her subject of sacred memorials. As a San Francisco architect, with little knowledge of Lebanon, I found the text, photos, and illustrations engaging and easy to grasp the way history should be. How the public statues were designed and decided on by political elites was fascinating. Volk reports on several sites and cemeteries in different parts of Lebanon, a country smaller than Connecticut, bordered by Israel to the South, Syria to the East and North and the Mediterranean Sea to the West. "With eighteen minority religious communities; the Lebanese have organized themselves into ethno-religious identities." She argues forcefully about the concern to respect diversity, to unify, to build nationness in Lebanon starting in 1916, by boldly including both Muslims and Christians, rather than separating them in the location of memorials, the character of the statues of martyrs, and in the events of commemoration. Although Beirut is remembered by many as the Paris of the Middle East, perhaps because of its Golden Age (1959-1974), Volk's cultural history makes me think that Martyrs Square in Beirut, which looks like a long and narrow public place, rather than a square one, on the map she includes, has symbolic memory as an urban public space for everyday users as well. People get attached to their public places and feel loss when they are abused or destroyed. How the public squares she reports on were conceived by political elites was eye-opening, and could be expanded to include the viewpoint of everyday users. I think that when politically unhappy members of the public attacked the political statue in Lebanon, it may have been because they had very few visible public places to express their feelings and opinions. People want to be heard and respected. Autocratic political elites and world leaders do not provide many outlets for these voices. Public spaces are in decline. The spaces built do not seem to include many benches, or round shapes of steps with stages or other architectural features for public gatherings, speeches, postings, protests, or peaceful discussions. In her account, public art is talked about more than the urbanism for the collective memory of future values, however she references others Middle Eastern Scholars' writings and invites more study. Once I had finished reading the last page, I returned to the introduction, where I was able to absorb more of the message densely presented there. As Volk says, the choices that were made after the wars to cope with grief, and how opinions about what values that needed to be remembered, according to the political elites of the time, were crafted and changed over time. As I was reminded lately, culture has no fixed borders. The hard hitting waves of political violence in Lebanon, from colonial powers, hostile neighbors, and internal factions, some linked to the foreign interests of Israel, Syria, and the United States, as well as other forces such as the impact of large numbers of refugees from Palestine, famine, rigid social laws, and resulting economic turmoil, shape a heart wrenching history. Volk's straight forward style of writing made the record an engaging smooth read: a Lebanese history lesson worth knowing. This is a slice of Middle Eastern reality I was glad to learn. Wendy Bertrand, Architect of 0 people found the following review helpful. An analysis of Lebanese history over the past 100 years By Diane Chehab "Memorials and Martyrs in Modern Lebanon" shows the contradictions that are inherent with the Lebanese construct. Lebanon was created for political purposes, just as the rest of the region after the Sykes- Picot agreement, and later after World War II. The book covers several events and the ensuing memorial spaces, describing the physical aspect as well as the political and social story. This makes the book interesting to a large audience: Middle East scholars, political science enthusiasts, as well as architects and designers, as it explains the creation of the successive memorial spaces. Up till now there was no extensive recounting of the many hurdles and the decision-making process behind these spaces. Unfortunately the story line does make Lebanon appear schizophrenic - but if this is the reality of what happened, then it is what it is, and we are allowed to draw our own conclusions. The saddest fact is to realize that most of the dead in Lebanon's various episodes of war - whether civil war or war with another country - have been civilians and not soldiers. Lebanon is the land of my paternal ancestors. This book is very personal to me, as I lived in Lebanon for nine (non-consecutive) years and was attending the Lebanese University's Institute of Fine Arts, very close to Martyr's Square, when the 1975 civil war started. The book has helped me better understand Lebanon's history, and more accurately its story, in the past 100 years, and reconcile the threads of my own memory. I especially appreciated the reason behind the book: to dispel the notion that Middle Easterners are stuck in the past, constantly revisiting century-old grievances. The Middle East had of course its share of strife and bloodshed, but there were long periods in which not only Christians and Muslims, but also Jews, coexisted harmoniously.

Lebanese history is often associated with sectarianism and hostility between religious communities, but by examining public memorials and historical accounts Lucia Volk finds evidence for a sustained politics of Muslim and Christian co-existence. Lebanese Muslim and Christian civilians were jointly commemorated as martyrs for the nation after various episodes of violence in Lebanese history. Sites of memory sponsored by Maronite, Sunni, Shiite, and Druze elites have shared the goal of creating cross-community solidarity by honoring the joint sacrifice of civilians of different religious communities. This compelling and lucid study enhances our understanding of culture and politics in

the Middle East and the politics of memory in situations of ongoing conflict.

"Volk presents a wonderful narrative of key turning points in the history of modern Lebanon.... [A] rigorous study and a pleasure to read." *H-net* "Volk's argument is relevant, interesting and worthy of praise and follow-up: thinking about Lebanese society outside confessional boxes is tragically relevant in times of sectarian warfare in Syria and beyond." *British Jnl Middle Eastern Studies* "Volk's identification of subjacent gender and class issues in memorialization points the way to fertile ground for future scholarship.... Would memorials commemorating the contributions of women or the working-class bring into question the status quo by relativizing the power of elite males? These are not questions that *Memorials and Martyrs* foregrounds but the book makes it much easier and more plausible to ask them. The next time somebody asks what good scholarship can do for civil society, I'll try to remember this." *Journal of Arabic Literature* "Compelling and compulsively readable.... Provides a fascinating historical reading of Lebanon's contentious politics over the last century." *Laleh Khalili, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* About the Author Lucia Volk is Associate Professor of Anthropology and Co-director of Middle East and Islamic Studies at San Francisco State University.