

Still Awaited: A Truly Objective History of the Making of the Modern Middle East

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The Fall of the Ottomans, The Great War in the Middle East

By Eugene Rogan

Basic Books, 2015, 512 pages, \$20.75, ISBN: 9780465023073

The Ottoman Endgame, War, Revolution and the Making of the Modern Middle East, 1908-1923

By Sean McMeekin

Penguin Books, 2016, 570 pages, \$35.00, ISBN: 9781594205323

Lawrence in Arabia, War, Deceit, Imperial Folly and the Making of the Modern Middle East

By Scott Anderson

Signal, 2014, 577 pages, \$22.00, ISBN: 9781782392026

The Poisoned Well, Empire and Its Legacy in the Middle East

By Roger Hardy

Oxford University Press, 2017, 380 pages, \$27.95, ISBN: 9780190623203

The Enemy at the Gate, Habsburgs, Ottomans and the Battle for Europe

By Andrew Wheatcroft

Basic Books, 2008, 337 pages, \$24.00, ISBN: 9780465020812

We are now witnessing a harvest of new history books on the making of the modern Middle East. Five are chosen for a critical review below. They are works by experts, well-researched and highly readable and infinitely more objec-

tive than the over-supply of Eurocentric or Orientalist books of the past. Yet, all four have limitations, lacking due Ottoman/Turkish/Arab/Muslim sentiment and “flavor.” The fifth on the Ottoman siege of Vienna is illuminating and relevant to the on-go-

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ing debate on Turkey-EU relations. It, too, has its limitations.

When, finally, the Ottoman world came to a bitter end [Turks, Greeks, Armenians, Arabs and others paying heavily in blood and tears], were the Turks and Ottomans irrational, wholly responsible for what happened? What really explains the numerous Western invasions from the British take-over of Egypt in 1882 (or still earlier the French in North Africa) to the Bush-Blair intervention in Iraq in 2002 and its shameful aftermath to this day? Can the people of the Middle East ever taste freedom and independence so long as the Israel-Palestine problem remains unresolved?

The trauma and vacuum created by the Western imperialist destruction of the Ottoman Empire haunt us still. Imperialism has spawned Neo-imperialism. Kipling's Great Game is now a globalized market-place in which capital and technology move freely, but not labor. Sadly, we are still a long way away from a truly objective history of the Death and Heritage of the Sick Man of Europe. [By "objective" we mean history that is unbiased, evenhanded account, in which local people's welfare is uppermost, outsiders' interest secondary.] Aksakal's superb, but short, book, *The Ottoman Road to War in 1914* is but an opening chapter in yet an unfinished History of the Modern Middle East. The standard-bearer in objective history-writing remains Toynbee's *The Western Question in Greece and Turkey, A Study in the Contact of Civiliza-*

tions, first published in 1922. We shall return to this theme presently.

It is instructive to begin this review with some questions that remain unanswered.

Why was the Ottoman Empire, long in decline, suddenly condemned to death in St. Petersburg, London and Paris at exactly the onset of the Automobile Age? Yes, old men and empires all, Roman and Ottoman and others, die mortals' death. But why was the Sick Man of Europe put to rest at the onset of the new oil wealth? Who got that wealth?

If religion and faith mattered, why did the Sultan's call for a Global Jihad go unheeded in the Muslim World? Why was it that hundreds of thousands of Indian, African Muslims (alongside ANZACS and other colonials), as well as Arabs could be recruited to fight the Ottoman armies in Mesopotamia and Gaza and elsewhere? What were these Ottomans fighting for anyway?

Who exactly did the leaders of the Arab Revolt represent? How come the Sharif of Mecca got cartloads of gold from the Sultan to raise an army against the British on the Suez, only to betray his master at the last moment? How far did dynastic (and personal) interest prevail in final settlement of those artificial 'lines in the sand' drawn up in secret agreements to divide the Ottoman Loot?

And a contemporary question: Who now believes that George W. Bush

and Tony Blair invaded Iraq and destabilized the region for human rights and democracy?

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Rogan's book, much to the author's credit, explicitly links the British landings in Basra in the summer of 1915 to the newly discovered oil wealth in Kuwait and Bahrain, which were coveted by British oil interests in London (pp. 79-81). British India played a vital role in this campaign, not only with pre-war intelligence concerning the oil wealth and trade opportunity. Most significantly, British India provided the raw manpower, Hindus and Indian Muslims, to drive the Ottomans out. Rogan also well documents the diplomacy of betrayal of Sharif Huseyin (p. 402), his final (secret) meeting in Cairo in 1921 with Churchill, when the Arab national cause was traded for British-dependent dynasties in Saudi Arabia, Transjordan and Iraq. Rogan's account of battles is especially unique and fascinating as he stresses the ordinary soldier and minor actors caught in a wider conflict which only few could decipher.

This otherwise superb work suffers when the author suddenly stops being an objective historian and allows personal emotionalism to take over. He endorses the genocide narrative in the tragic case of the Ottoman Armenians in chapter seven and footnote 17 (pp. 424-425). Missionaries write from "conviction," objective historians from archival evidence evaluated with an open mind. Rogan

chose to rely on "genocide" authors only, rejecting the converse hypothesis in historians such as Guenter Lewy, while also ignoring important facts of the conflict. McMeekin's account on this tragedy (chapter 10) is far more balanced and factually more complete. Here the Ottoman Armenian fight amidst the Great War is explained as an "ethno-religious war" (p. 232). Extensive archival details of the short-lived Armenian victory at Van are given, and "genocide scholars" are chided with a telling quote from none other than Morgenthau (p. 235). McMeekin provides revealing details on an ill-fated Armenian-British collaboration, which Rogan ignored: This is the strategic role of Cilician Ottomans in the never-implemented Alexandretta landings of the British forces from Egypt who chose instead to attack Gallipoli. In McMeekin's words, in Alexandretta a "golden opportunity" was missed. The "Armenian-British" military operation against the Ottomans in Cilicia was first planned, Armenians of the region were provoked to rebellion, but then abandoned. Boghos Nubar Pasha is quoted with his promise of "armed collaboration" to the British with "25,000 Armenian insurgents in Cicilia" and additionally a "formidable force of close to 50,000" from nearby provinces (pp. 241-245).

Overall, *The Ottoman Endgame* by Sean McMeekin is a rich and detailed summation of a complex story of imperial destruction. He analyses, in 550 congested pages, all the important historical facts and related

dynamics of decision-makers, the unceasing stories of intrigue and scheming that finally brought about the destruction of the House of Osman, almost a thousand-year-old. The Great War, 1914-18 started as a senseless European fight in which Ottomans had no business. The key figure was Wilhelm II, the ambitious Kaiser who felt cheated out of imperial plots, most recently in the “Scramble for Africa.” In desperation, he looked East. In Istanbul Sultan Abdul Hamid and the adventurist Enver, the pro-German War Minister were all too willing to lead the warmongers. The linchpin of the conspiracy was a dubious global Jihad. Announced by the Caliph Sultan it aimed to beat the British and the French colonialists at their game. Alas, the poor Muslims of British India and French Africa enlisted (some pious Malays rioted in Singapore). By force or choice, these Muslim troops took the money and joined the imperial fight in the deserts of Iraq and Palestine against their co-religionists. The irony did not escape the attention of the keen Ottoman warrior, Mustafa Kemal. His plans for the salvation of what became the Turkish Republic were first crafted in the Middle East deserts with these bitter realities etched in his mind. Witnessing in Palestine the inevitability of Ottoman defeat and the futility of Pan-Islamism, he dared to withdraw as many Turkish soldiers as he could back into Anatolia to fight later in the War of National Liberation.

McMeekin gives us a more complete picture of Mustafa Kemal than

Rogan. He tells a magnificent story of the rise of Modern Turkey and Atatürk's victory, not only on the battlefield but equally in diplomacy. Kemal's success in replacing the unequal Treaty of Sevres with the Peace of Lausanne is summarized masterfully, in particular with a humane understanding of the massive population exchanges it legitimized. There is a whole chapter on Sevres and Lausanne is covered in the epilogue along with a brief resume of the Ottoman legacy in Arab-speaking countries of the Empire. One wished McMeekin would go more substantively beyond the creation of Modern Turkey and explain the failure of the Arab world to produce its own Atatürk or, at least, embrace Kemalist secularism in nation-building. After all, the Turkish Republic was only part of the Ottoman heritage. For Arab lands, as McMeekin states, "...we should not romanticize the Ottoman past" (p. 492). But the Ottoman past is an integral precursor of the imperial Divide and Rule that followed. David Fromkin put an apt title to it: *A Peace to End All Peace, The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East* (1989), still one of the best books on the subject. Imposed artificial boundaries set the scene for subsequent drama. A thoroughly disillusioned Lawrence was quick to condemn the new colonizing Game. He wrote in the Sunday Times in 1920 before the ink was dry on colonial documents: "Our government is worse than the old Turkish system." (p. 494). Imperialists marched into the Middle East for their own gain,

not to benefit the Arabs, and to this day Western will to invade, overtly or covertly continues.

Of course, the Arab leaders, especially dynastic and military, no less than the imperialists, are at fault. Roger Hardy's *Poisoned Well, Empire and Its Legacy in the Middle East*, is a well-documented and highly readable account of nation-building following the end of the Ottomans. Appropriately, Hardy's first case is the Turkish Republic, created out of the "ashes of the Ottoman empire" (p. 8). Chapter one begins poignantly with Halide Edib Adivar, the early Turkish feminist and nationalist. Reading her one gets a glimpse of the popular patriotic sentiment at the outset of the Great War in the Sultan's capital. In Halide, we see a strong awakening of Turkish nationalism, a passionate yearning for freedom and liberty in an independent Turkish homeland. Halide's passion was shared by her compatriots across the entire Anatolia. It provided the essential foundation, the social grounding of the Kemalist Republic, mobilization of the masses as a first step in nation-building.

Imperial interests in collusion with self-serving Arab leaders prevented similar social grounding in the post-Ottoman Middle East. From chapter two to nine, devoted to case-studies of specific Arab countries, Hardy's narrative is a pathetic story of failed states, betrayal of people by military or dynastic rulers. Imperialism created the Arab countries and Neo-imperialism domi-

nates them still. Oil wealth has been a curse, the wells poisoned. Limited national attempts, from Mosaddeq to Saddam Huseyin and Qaddafi never had a chance because the CIA or Big Power interests always intervened.

History is written by the powerful, not always by the last victor. So, Mustafa Kemal, the victor in 1922, was nevertheless cheated out of oil-rich Mosul. The Kurdish problem was predicted at the time, but he was obliged to swallow it and yield to the more powerful Western imperialists and oil interests. Kemalist Turkey was bottled in Asia Minor. Aegean islands were ceded to Greece in the west, while cheap oil fueled the automobile age in Europe and U.S. The Arab people ended as the biggest losers, their political leaders deeply fragmented, while dynastic families colluded with imperialist interests. Now saddled with the Israel-Palestinian conflict, they were thrown into disunity and never-ending in-fighting behind artificial boundaries.

European domination of the post-Ottoman Middle East may be coming to an end, though the future is far from certain. Hardy dates the demise of the European hegemony in the Middle East in 1967. That was the year of Nasser's humiliating defeat in the Six Day War. It was also the last withdrawal of the British colonizers in Yemen, handing power to the first Marxist regime in the Arab world. The British and the French replaced the Ottomans in direct rule, but they lasted not quite half a century. Hardy's conclusion is clear: "...the West

is deeply implicated in the region's failure" (p. 205).

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European failure in the Middle East is perhaps best demonstrated in Scott Anderson's *Lawrence in Arabia, War, Deceit, Imperial Folly and the Making of The Modern Middle East*. Anderson's book is an impressive study showing that lies and deceit, as much as military power, were instruments of war at the height of western imperialism. The story, built around the personality of Lawrence is far more than about a misguided and pathetic hero who, to the bitter end, chased a mirage in the desert.

Lawrence's moment of glory and defeat came at exactly the same point in time, the moment when Imperialism triumphed. In December 1918 at the end of WWI, Lawrence marched into Damascus to install Faisal, Sharif Huseyin's son, as the King of Syria. That would have fulfilled his promise of reward in return for the Arab Revolt that, in so small way, had paved the way for the Ottoman defeat at the Suez and Gaza. Imperial treachery and deceit negated this reward. Lawrence was rudely rebuffed by General Allenby, commander of the British forces, who categorically declared that Syria was to be delivered instead to the French. Sykes-Picot lines in the sand were drawn well before, carving the Great Ottoman Loot between Britain and France. Betrayed, Lawrence quietly went back to England to face his own hell and finally die a broken man, while Faisal first fought the

French, but then took the consolation prize to become the British puppet ruler in Iraq. Palestine became Jewish. The French ruled Syria and Lebanon in their own interest.

Anderson has done a magnificent job, painting Lawrence as a lost soul in the age of imperialism, victim of his own vanity. Lawrence's Arab Cause was formulated early, when the young Oxford student was doing archaeological excavation in Jerablus, northern Syria. That is where he had spent "the happiest days of his life" (p. 481). In Jerablus, he formulated his "noble Arab," a purely abstract model, and its nemesis, the "cruel Turk." This ethnic stereotyping was the essential element of Lawrence's Reality.

Throughout his life, Lawrence was his own man. Reality was his construct. The abstract "Noble Arab" ideal was both his greatest achievement and folly. In his manners, dress and behaviour Lawrence imitated the "Noble Arab." His military bosses, uncomfortable with his 'trade mark,' permitted, indeed encouraged Lawrence to "go native." He became the super-spy, the willing facilitator of the Great Game, snatching the Arabs from the Sultan's Jihad, enlisting them to the cause of the colonial industrial complex. It was all about oil. Churchill, in 1912, had converted the British Navy from steam to oil. Lawrence was an expert at using desert tribes for intelligence and for map-making. His style, that of "unconventional war," relying on Fifth Columns, revolts and sabotage be-

hind enemy lines, soon emerged as the necessary extension of imperial warfare. Lawrence wrote it all down: In his *Twenty-Seven Articles*, penned in Summer 1917, after his Aqaba triumph (pp. 346-347), he decoded for his military bosses, the Dos and Don'ts of winning Arab hearts and minds, in actual fact ennobling the desert Bedouin who made up less than 1 percent of Arabs!

Yet, Lawrence was always a private person, waging very much his own war within the War. He had a near-obsession, strongly favouring the Alexandretta landing, rather than Gallipoli. In 1915, he saw a grand opportunity to knock Turkey out quickly by splitting the Ottoman Empire down its middle by invading at Alexandretta where the Hejaz Railway was so perilously exposed on the Syrian coast. Not only the local Armenians (pp. 97-98), but the Arabs were ready to revolt against the Turks, (pp. 140-141), in support of such a landing. Critically, a much smaller force would be adequate than the half million despatched to Gallipoli. "The French, not the Turks, are the enemy" (p. 95) he fumed, because France regarded Syria as "theirs," under secret partition plans. The French-British rivalry was to prove fatal.

Lawrence was a victim of treachery. Anderson does an excellent job of detailing it all. About the time when in Jeddah, Lawrence was winning Sharif Huseyin for the imperial cause, Mark Sykes and Francois Georges-Picot were secretly carving up the Sultan's inheritance (pp. 352-354). Lawrence

never liked Sykes, and how much he knew of the details of the secret Agreement of 1916 is debatable. However, in retrospect, one must wonder whether it is possible to fairly allocate treachery and betrayal in the Arab-British-French-Zionist wheeling and dealing in dividing up Osmanli's Loot when imperialism won and the Arabs lost.

One thing is certain: just about everyone, in some degree, lied, betrayed, and conspired in self-interest. The Sharif of Mecca betrayed the Sultan, taking huge amounts of gold to raise an army to fight the British at Suez, only to change sides at the last moment. The Sharif betrayed Arab independence for dynastic interest under British protection. According to Anderson, Sykes lied both to Lawrence and to the Sharif by deliberately misleading them with a "bastardized version" (p. 309) of his agreement with Picot. How much Huseyin conveyed to his son, Faisal, is also moot. In the end, Syria and Lebanon went to the French, while the British got Iraq and Palestine. The Sharif, Faisal and the family dynasty, begrudgingly accepted the Sykes-Picot terms. The Zionists got their Balfour Declaration.

Arab unity was sacrificed on the altar of expediency. Djemal, the last Ottoman governor of Syria exposed it all in Beirut in 1918. It was too late. Imperial interest had won. As for Lawrence, in the end he got his bitter-sweet revenge on those cruel Turks he had spent a whole life hating. On the battlefield of Aqaba, leading his Arab warriors in the ultimate

Lawrence-style daring attack in the most unforgiving desert country, only a heartless human could stand over the pile of fallen Turkish soldiers, massacred without exception in the surprise attack, and glorify mass killing: “The dead (Turkish) men looked wonderfully beautiful. The night was shining gently down, softening them into new ivory...” (p. 336).

The bitter end arrived for the Ottomans and Lawrence at the same time. In Damascus, at the end of WWI, with a colossal human toll of 16 million dead, Lawrence was a defeated man as much as the Ottomans. Mustafa Kemal, not far to the north, was about to launch the War of Turkish Independence, thanks, in no small way, to the strategic pull-back of Anatolian armies into the Turkish homeland to fight in another war. Betrayed and abandoned, Lawrence returned to England to become a part-time champion of the lost Arab Cause. Lloyd George and Churchill used him on short-term assignments selling imperialism to Arabs. In 1934 he killed himself in a motorbike accident. The Arab disunity and conflict has continued ever since.

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Now, turning to the objectivity issue raised in the title of this article. None of the authors reviewed above deal with the vital and key question which must be asked in writing an objective history (as defined here) in the making of the modern Middle East: What did the Middle East and the world as a whole lose with the violent end of

the Ottoman Empire? Are the local populations better off? Yes, at the end the *Osmans* was a Sick Man. He died from fatigue and decay. From Malazgirt 1071 to Malazgirt 1915 (McMeekin, p. 240) the Turkish/Ottoman system lasted almost a full millennium. There is, of course, no room for any romantic nostalgia. Yet, Lawrence’s judgment in 1920, quoted in Hardy above, is especially significant, coming from a major actor who was himself a victim of imperial treachery as shown above.

What did the Middle East lose with the Ottomans gone? The briefest answer is one word: *Multiculturalism*. Some expansion is needed because the region needs it still, as does the world.

Ottoman multiculturalism was an implicit policy of tolerance, allowing different religious and ethnic communities, *millets*, of Muslims, Jews, Christians and a myriad of ethnic groups in the Empire to co-exist with mutual respect in reasonable peace and security. The Sultan’s government, to varying degrees, provided peace and security in return for taxes and other obligations. Mutual respect came from custom and tradition. The system, though far from perfect, fitted very well the polyglot world of the Middle East.

When the Sick Man finally died, so did multiculturalism and tolerance in his empire. Intolerance took over. A millennium of good relations between Turks and Armenians [known in Ottoman Empire as the *Sadik Mil-*

*let, the loyal community] suddenly burst into an ethno-religious inferno provoked by imperialist powers, the Tsarist Russia in particular. Similarly, colonial Divide and Rule fragmented the Ottoman Arab *millet* and opened the floodgates of the Arab-Jewish conflict. Gladstone's Bag and Baggage policy had earlier set ablaze the entire Ottoman Balkans in an unprecedented policy of ethnic cleansing, with its final genocidal finale delayed till the breakup of former Yugoslavia almost a century later.*

In its last phase, when it was too late, the Ottoman intellectuals toyed with three alternative ideologies: Turkism, Pan-Islamism and Ottomanism. These were made-at-home substitutes for the French Revolution ideals of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. Ottomanism was a feeble inspiration, intended to make official the idea of multiculturalism around the Sultanate in its death-bed. It died a most violent death in the holocaust of the Balkan wars for which Gladstone in particular must bear heavy responsibility. Turkish refugees and survivors of this holocaust trekked into Asia Minor having bitterly learnt that nationalism pays.

WWI ended Pan-Islamism. Arabs and non-Turkish Muslims who fought the Ottoman armies, rallying behind the calls of Lawrence, Kitchener and Churchill, killed more than their fellow Muslim Turks. They killed a defunct ideology. That, by the way, is why Mustafa Kemal, fighting imperialism in the deserts of Libya, Palestine and in the steppes of Ana-

tolia, had had enough of Islam, the Caliphate and the Sultanate. Kemalism replaced *millet* with *ulus*, ethnic nationalism. He redefined identity and put the Turkish nation on the road to modernity.

Turkish nationalism emerged late in the Empire. Halide's passion and Mustafa Kemal's vision represented a winning formula. It was sheer genius that Kemal went beyond the French Revolutionary ideals and embraced *Laicism* (secularism) as the corner-stone of the Republic. For, only in a political space, freed from the shackles of religion, could national development based on basic freedoms, equality of all citizens, rule of law take root.

In the Arab Middle East, no such transformation occurred. Nation-building, a long-term process of economic, social, cultural and political development, requires social grounding, popular mobilization from grassroots up to the top. Even the oil-rich Arab countries are still at the early stages of such development, dependent more on guest-workers than on their own human resources, especially women.

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War and Western hegemony in the Middle East have now spawned terrorism and refugees. Islam is now hostage of fanatics. The global order is at risk. In the post-Brexit, Trumped World a *Clash of Civilizations à la* Samuel Huntington appears on the horizon. There is a danger of a

post-modern, Post-Truth Crusade between the Muslim Middle East and a Christian West. Prophets of misinformation, on both sides of the religious fault lines, are busy preaching Hate and Bigotry. In this context, *The Enemy at the Gate*, by Andrew Wheatcroft, though written in 2008 before the sub-prime lending financial meltdown, the Syrian civil-war and the refugee crisis, is a timely warning.

The book recounts well the history of the disastrous Ottoman Siege in 1683, detailing with amazing maps, battle-plans and sketches of personalities of the key figures in this tragic event. Missing, however, is a solid analysis of the motives behind this Ottoman adventure in Austria? Habsburgs vs. Ottomans, an inter-dynasty conflict is simply inadequate, and, in all fairness, Wheatcroft, is well aware of the complexity of why the Ottomans came to the Gates of Vienna. However, the reader is left in the dark on the intricacies of the *Divan* politics at the time, especially how these Ottoman politics of the day had become an integral part of the French, Hungarian, Polish and, indeed European conflicts of the day. The Sultan and his Grand Vezir were certainly not out to make Europe Muslim. In earlier centuries, had they Muslim-ized the Balkans? Fear dominates us still. Noteworthy is the author's concluding chapter, his warning against bigotry with quotes from a former EU Commissioner and

Pope Benedict XVI. These quotes are worth noting especially with reference to the Islamophobia and Xenophobia which have engulfed Europe since 2008.

The EU Commissioner rejected Turkey's entry into EU with the argument that "the liberation of Vienna in 1683 would have been in vain."

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI proclaimed more ominously: "The roots that have formed Europe, that have permitted the formation of this continent, are those of Christianity. Turkey has always represented another continent, in permanent contrast with Europe" (p. 267).

The sad reality is that today at the end of 2016, several major European political leaders, from Austria, Hungary, Holland, France and elsewhere, subscribe to such bigotry, content to shut themselves behind walls to keep out the poor and hungry. For those immigrants, already in, the message of political bigots is *Assimilation*, i.e. become like "us" in a Christian Europe or go back. Are we now descending into the Inferno of a Modern Crusade, this one between the Rich and the Rest? We shall see.

Meanwhile, a World of Tolerance, Fairness and Peaceful Co-existence remains a distant dream. Neo-Imperialism, often referred to as Globalization, rules the markets. ■