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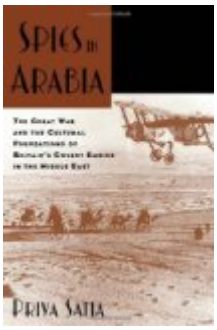

Priya Satia. *Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain's Covert Empire in the Middle East.* Oxford University Press, 2008. 472 $55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-533141-7.

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Published on H-Albion (September, 2008)

Commissioned by Mark Hampton (Lingnan University)

Priya Satia tells a timely story about British engagement with the Middle East in the period surrounding the crisis of the Great War. Well researched and cogently argued, the book analyzes the exploits of intelligence agents in order to understand British cultural, military, and political perceptions of the region that came to be known as Arabia (present-day Jordan, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq). This "cultural history of the interwar British imperial state" incorporates the fields of diplomatic and military history by using a combination of sources that include Foreign Office reports, the papers of individual agents, literary and travel narratives, and private correspondence (p. 7).

At the heart of the narrative is what Satia calls the "state that could not see," a British bureaucracy that uses violence to control a region that it does not understand (p. 4). Intelligence gathering in Arabia during the early twentieth century transformed from an "informal, even accidental, work of world-weary Edwardians to the paranoid preoccupation of a brutal aerial surveillance regime after the war" (p. 5). Nine thematic chapters that move back and forth between the British and Arabian contexts trace the evolution of this process before and after WWI. The "Spies in Arabia" include D. H. Lawrence and Gertrude Bell as well as lesser- known figures, all of whom used their culturally bound understandings of the region and status as semi-autonomous agents of the state to shape military policy.

The book opens by exploring how Arabia came to be defined in the Edwardian imagination. Geographically imprecise, the term "Arabia" evoked a romantic attachment to a land considered the cradle of civilization. Chapter 1, "The Foundations of Covert Empire," describes how Britain built an empire in the Middle East through a series of informal spy networks that linked metropole and colony in a tangled web of power relations. The Levant Consular Service made up one part of an overlapping system of surveillance that oversaw a network of consuls who kept

watch over the region and helped set the stage for the founding of Britain's covert empire during WWI. The nature of the work coupled with the immense distances traveled meant that informal personal networks mattered a great deal in information gathering.

Back at home, a "trendy" cultural industry focused on Arabia had grown up around literary modernism. "The Cultural World of the Edwardian Agent" described in chapter 2 had its foundations in what Satia calls a "literary and artistic cult of the desert" (p. 67). This Arabia did not reflect a current history and culture but rather harkened back to an ancient idea of the region as the land of the Bible. Agents who traveled to Arabia and gathered information for the government thus understood their work through "a particular cultural lens" which "refracted what they saw" (p. 97).

Arabia's incorporation into Britain's "covert empire" during and after the war, according to Satia, happened as a result of military conquest and the literary and cultural representation of the work of intelligence agents. The final three chapters in part 1 build the case for understanding the Middle East as a central text in wartime discourse over the future of the British Empire. A new sort of anti-Enlightenment project takes hold when it comes to intelligence gathering. With few maps of the region in existence before the war, the project of surveying the region fell to agents who helped created a picture of the landscape by combining limited knowledge of topography with "thick descriptions" that read like literary texts to create what Satia calls an anti-empirical way of knowing (p. 106). The absence of a complete scientific survey of the region had important military consequences in terms of how military men created a strategy for a place that remained, even after mapping had been completed, largely unknown.

The point, of course, is not that the British should have used empiricism to more accurately understand the region that they were about to conquer but rather to illustrate how war strategy relied on a cultural construction. Chapter 4, "Cunning in War," sketches the world of the agent on the ground who used rumors and deceptive tactics to gain power and glean information. This new "irregular" thinking about war looked to control Arabia by imitating what agents believed reflected an Arab way of knowing that valued intuition over empiricism (p. 156). Air surveillance, used for intelligence work in the Middle East unlike in western Europe, promised control through covert action that combined the "intuitive" knowledge of the agents with aerial photography.

Chapter 5 turns to discuss what WWI represented for Britons looking to reclaim Arabia for the modern world in order to prove the nobility of wartime sacrifice. Lawrence looms large as a chivalric figure who constructs a redemption narrative of the West by forging connections between Arabia and England in the popular imagination. Here Satia interestingly contrasts Lawrence's romantic war writing about Arabia to the terror-filled writing of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon about the Western front. The modernist literati and the public held up Lawrence as representing a sense of heroic Englishness that society longed for in the midst of a protracted and brutal war.

Part 2 turns to the postwar world and it is here that the main argument of the book takes shape. To understand "how contemporaries made sense of these events" in Arabia in the postwar period, Satia offers four chapters that put military tactics in conversation with public perceptions of the postwar situation (p. 203). Faced with a series of rebellions in Arabia that resulted from the failed promises of the Western powers as embodied in the flawed Treaty of Versailles, Britons looked to explain why Arabs resented British rule. Here structural causes like the failed mandate system, considered by many to be colonialism under a different name, take a back seat to cultural ex-

planations. “Official conspiracy theories” abounded after the war to explain discontent with British rule for those who wanted Iraq, in particular, to remain part of Britain’s contiguous land empire. Reports full of unconfirmed information reminiscent of the intrigue of the Great Game served to justify Britain’s holding on to the region to prevent anarchy.

This system of rule set the stage for the preferred method of British control of Iraq: aerial bombardment. The conspiracy theories that surrounded the rebellions contributed to a sense that only a show of force would end Arabs' resistance. Chapter 7, “Air Control,” remarkably demonstrates how air control was used as a technique of colonial administration and ushered in the world’s first “air control” regime. Aerial bombardment offered the false promise that Britain could hold the regime with agents, not armies. This, coupled with the paranoid delusions of the British military, according to Satia, created “a half-baked intelligence mosaic” that led to an “incoherent” policy of covert empire (p. 274).

The final substantive chapter of the book, “Seeing Like a Democracy,” examines how the state attempted to manage public opinion in the wake of its failed policy in the Middle East. The press set the terms of the debate as a conflict between the public and the government. Outrage over secrecy, censorship, and a general lack of information about the Middle East policy gradually grew after the war. In this way, “Middle Eastern policy was thus central ... to the movement for democratic control of foreign policy” (p. 299). Satia paints a portrait of an impotent press corps unable (or possibly unwilling) to represent the public interest. The government plays the role of the “spin-doctor,” bending information whenever it can in order to conceal its brutality of its covert regime. Here Britain emerges as a somewhat weary conqueror faced with an unpopular campaign in Iraq that it seems to have little hope of winning on the battlefield or at home.

One of the book’s key contributions to both cultural history and the history of the British Empire is how it pushes the boundaries of cultural explanations of the interwar period by placing violence at the center of the story. Drawing on the work of historians such as Mark Mazower, Isabel Hull, and Caroline Elkins, Satia counters the notion of interwar Britain as a peace-loving democracy that existed as a counterpoint to the rising tide of fascism in continental Europe.[1] State terror campaigns undertaken in Arabia during the 1920s had their roots in a culture of violence that came out of the Great War. British policymakers justified the “humanity” of aerial bombardment by comparing it with the brutality of other wartime combat practices. As Satia points out, these tactics were being used for the first time on largely civilian populations in peacetime. One explanation for using aerial surveillance in this way is found in how the British perceived their enemy as intractable, existing in a world that held a very particular place in the British imaginary.

This is a deeply historical and politically relevant book. The very nature of the subject matter makes it essential reading for British Empire specialists and general readers looking to understand how Iraq emerged in its modern form out of the crucible of empire and war. ***Spies in Arabia***, however, does not belong in the category of books that use the history of Britain’s involvement in the region to explain the current failed United States policy in Iraq.[2] This critique of British imperialism in the Middle East as a paranoid and brutal arm of military policy questions the liberal underpinnings of imperial ideology, namely that an empire always acts in the best interests of itself and those it colonizes. What specific lessons it draws for the present day Satia wisely leaves for the reader to decide.

Notes

[1]. Mark Mazower, “Violence and the State in the Twentieth Century,” ***American Historical Re-***

view 107 (2002): 1158-1178; Isabel Hull, ***Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany*** (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2005); Caroline Elkins, ***Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya*** (New York: Henry Holt, 2005).

[2]. Toby Dodge, ***Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation-Building and a History Denied*** (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

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