

**Kristian Coates Ulrichsen.** *The First World War in the Middle East*. London: Hurst & Co., 2014. xiii + 263 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-84904-274-1.



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Kristian Coates Ulrichsen's *The First World War in the Middle East* marks the centennial of the Great War with a comprehensive overview of the region's major battles and their consequences. As such, it brings readers closer to Middle Easterners' experience than did David Fromkin's 1988 chestnut, *A Peace to End All Peace*, a diplomatic history written from the view of the British archives. While Ulrichsen opens his book by noting that the Great War's shadow falls upon current events in the Middle East, he closes his book in the same place as Fromkin did, with an account of how the British, not local agents, determined history for the next century: Winston Churchill, as British colonial secretary, presided over the 1921 Cairo Conference that "sealed the geopolitical map of the modern Middle East" (p. 201).

Ulrichsen's first major contribution is to lay the environmental, economic, and political foundations for the events of 1914-18. Part 1 gives a historical view of the region as a crossroads—and battleground—between European and Indian worlds. The Dardanelles Straits fought over at the

1915 Battle of Gallipoli had been prized by Alexander the Great, and East-West trade routes were coveted sources of imperial revenue long before the Suez Canal was built. The conditions for the Great War were set with Britain's imperial expansion in the nineteenth century. In 1903, the British declared a kind of "Monroe Doctrine" in the Gulf. By 1914, India, Egypt, and the Iranian oil-fields were strategically important territories guarded by the petroleum-fed Royal Navy. The British had lost interest in propping up the Ottoman Empire against Russia's expansive aims.

The Ottomans were vulnerable because they had built only skeletal networks of roads, railroads, telegraphs, financial institutions, and medical care. With Britain's guard lowered, other powers moved in on Ottoman territory. In 1908 the Hapsburgs annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina. Bulgaria declared independence, and Greece annexed Crete. In 1911, Italy occupied Tripoli (Libya). In the Balkan Wars of 1912-13, Britain and France turned a blind eye as Russia supported the occupation of Ottoman Europe by the small and ambi-

tious states of Greece, Serbia, and Bulgaria. The Ottoman Empire lost 40 percent of its landmass and 15 percent of its population just before 1914.

This context helps to explain how and why the Ottomans entered the World War I allied with the Central Powers. In response to defeat, the Young Turks staged a military coup in January 1913, ending the fledgling constitutional revolution begun five years before. Anxiety about national defense trumped talk of political freedom and minority rights. Several Young Turk leaders approached Britain and France for alliance, but they were snubbed. This gave the upper hand to pro-German leaders of the Young Turk party, the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP). On August 2, 1914, they signed a secret treaty of alliance with Germany and the Central Powers.

The great tragedy of the Middle Eastern war, Ulrichsen argues, is that Ottomans were forced to fight an industrial war with a pre-industrial social structure. The lack of railroads, factories, and hospitals forced the empire to squeeze drastic resources from its relatively impoverished population. Civilian suffering—and the deaths of soldiers from lack of food and medical care—far surpassed that in most of Europe. While British imperial forces suffered 260,000 deaths in the Middle East, 420,000 Ottoman soldiers died. And while France's population fell by one percent in the war, the population of Turkey decreased by 20 percent (p. 3).

Ulrichsen makes a second important contribution to the historiography in part 2, by integrating the different theaters of war into a single narrative. He explains with clarity why battles roared or subsided at times, depending on the need of resources in other theaters. Most interesting is his demonstration of how critical India was to the British war effort in the Middle East. He also grounds the military discussion in the realities of climate, environment, and the region's political economy set out in part 1. And in a real step forward from Fromkin's Anglocentric narrative, Ul-

richsen acknowledges the agency of local decision makers. The CUP leaders, for example, chose to focus their war strategy first on Russia, which made open claims on Constantinople and the Straits. Efforts to retrieve territory in the Caucasus, however, left the empire's southern flank open to British advances. The Ottomans' slender resources were immediately strained as the British waged war on the empire's peripheries—in Mesopotamia, the Gulf (Arabia), and Egypt/Palestine.

Chapter 3 details the Ottomans' campaigns in the Caucasus. CUP leaders aimed to take advantage of the Russian losses at Tannenberg to recapture their eastern provinces with an advance toward the crucial railroad head at Sarikamish in late December 1914. Clear skies suddenly gave way to a brutal winter storm, however, catching both armies high in the mountains. Nearly half of their troops died as temperatures plunged to minus 26 centigrade; more died as a typhus epidemic swept through. In January, less than one-fifth of the Ottoman troops returned to their base at Erzurum (p. 58). While both Russians and Ottomans scapegoated their Muslim and Armenian minorities respectively, the Ottomans would soon embrace genocidal aims. Ulrichsen draws on works by Taner Akçam, Peter Balakian, and Sean McMeekin to argue that decades of ethnic hatred boiled over when Ottoman officials overreacted to the defection of a small minority of Armenians to the Russians and the resistance of others to conscription.[1] After the fatal deportations and the Ottoman victory at Gallipoli, the Ottomans and Russians renewed their battles over the Caucasus in 1916. The Russians would reoccupy eastern provinces until the 1917 revolution forced them to withdraw. The March 1918 Brest-Litovsk treaty fueled new CUP ambitions in the Caucasus, and dreams of a pan-Turkic empire.

Chapter 4 retells a familiar story of the Gallipoli campaign based on Ulrichsen's 2010 book *The Logistics and Politics of the British Campaigns in the Middle East* on British campaigns in

the Middle East, as well as other secondary sources. Ulrichsen stresses that Mustafa Kemal's heroic reputation gained at the trenches would serve to propel the Ottoman Empire toward becoming the Turkish Republic after 1918. Ulrichsen also interestingly notes that the British launched campaigns in Gaza and Iraq after their withdrawal from Gallipoli in early 1916, so as to salvage their imperial prestige. Other histories have overlooked the constant fear the British had of appearing vulnerable, which they believed would prompt revolt in India. Like Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney a century later, Ulrichsen portrays Winston Churchill as living in a narcissistic denial of failure.

The Arab provinces, meanwhile, were hit hard by the British naval blockade. It imposed tremendous strain on the Ottomans' ability to shift supplies—especially food and troops—to fronts where they were needed. Mountains and the arid climate undermined armies on the march with thirst and rapid shifts in temperature. Total war brought famine and death to civilians on a scale unseen in western Europe, too. Chapters 5 and 6 take the British viewpoint on the battles for Syria, Palestine, and Mesopotamia. Memoirs supplement Ulrichsen's broad use of secondary histories to weave the story. In 1915-16, the British failed to move north either from their occupied port of Basra in Mesopotamia or from their base in Egypt toward Palestine and Syria. But by early 1917 they had built the necessary infrastructure to overcome obstacles of muddy rivers, deserts, and harsh climate to claim dramatic victories.

The British imposed a protectorate on unwilling Egyptians in 1914 and repelled Ottoman attacks at the Suez Canal in the subsequent two years. The dreaded desert of Sinai, known to film audiences for swallowing one of T. E. Lawrence's young guides in *Lawrence of Arabia*, was tamed with a new railroad and water pipeline, and finally the capture of the forward base of El Arish in December 1916. By then, the Egyptian Expedi-

tionary Forces had been bolstered by use of resources and troops returned from Gallipoli. Similar infrastructural enhancements enabled the British to capture Jerusalem within a year, as a Christmas present for exhausted Britons in 1917. Meanwhile, a new Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force—comprised largely of Indian troops—made its way victoriously to Baghdad under Lt. Gen. Sir Frederick Maude. Here, Ulrichsen lays great emphasis on the manipulation of events by the imperial elite. Sir Mark Sykes, who negotiated treaties with France to occupy Arab lands after the war, wrote Maude's proclamation that the British had come only to liberate Mesopotamia. But Ulrichsen resists flat accusations of hypocrisy: mission creep and a belated appreciation of the oil fields near Mosul led the British to expand their claims by war's end.

The final part of the book examines politics and diplomacy at war's end. It is succinct, and regrettably does not fully deliver on Ulrichsen's earlier promise to show how local actors played a significant role. His reliance on English-language sources is perhaps the reason he gives short shrift to Arab politics. He mentions briefly the hardships suffered by the population, but does not connect these facts to the political developments of 1918-23. With little explanation, he downplays the Arab Revolt as a sideshow to Gen. Edmund Allenby's Palestine campaign, but credits Zionism as a more powerful force (p. 161). Ulrichsen does, however, note that Egyptians' 1919 Revolution made a small impact. Although the British suppressed it with undue violence, they could not maintain the protectorate. Local power forced the British to sign a highly conditional treaty declaring Egypt independent. The book's last chapter, on postwar settlements, has the feel of having been written in a rush. The discussion of the "Denouement in Syria" makes reference to none of the recent literature on Arab politics in 1918-20 and contains several errors. Puzzlingly, Ulrichsen refers to a Syrian revolt in 1919 (p. 185); some Syrians took up arms against the French advance

only in 1920-21 and later against the French occupation in 1925. He also gives an incorrect date for the formal assumption of Britain's mandate in Palestine as June 1922 (it was confirmed in July and ratified the following year with the Treaty of Lausanne) (p. 191). Ulrichsen ends the chapter with a discussion of the 1920 revolt in Iraq that relies heavily on British sources. He consequently downplays the significance of an event that many Iraqis today consider a foundational, national revolution.

The drift away from the book's strong, integrative beginning toward a familiar Anglocentric narrative in the final chapters is unfortunate, but perhaps understandable since Ulrichsen appears to have intended his book as an interpretative essay, not as a monograph based on new primary research. He also aimed the volume at European—and especially British—historians who have neglected the Middle Eastern theater. In the book's introduction, he concedes that the Great War was won and lost in France and Flanders. But, he says, "to dismiss the Middle Eastern theatre as peripheral to the conflict as a whole would do gross disservice to the near-total impact of the war on its societies" (pp. 2-3). Insofar as he succeeds in giving a thoughtful overview of the war's major theaters of battle, grounded in the social realities of the time, the book would serve well as an introductory text to nonspecialists and to students.

#### Note

[1]. Taner Akçam, *From Empire to Republic: Turkish Nationalism and the Armenian Question* (London: Zed Books, 2004); Peter Balakian, *The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America's Response* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003); Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

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