

Nikolas Gardner. *The Siege of Kut-al-Amara: At War in Mesopotamia, 1915-1916.* Twentieth-Century Battles Series. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014. 224 pp. \$28.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-01384-2.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

In his new book, Nikolas Gardner provides a comprehensive analysis of the siege of Kut-al-Amara. The book offers a clear and precise narrative retelling alongside a thorough historiographic review of how this story has been told and retold. At focus is the story of how the military failed and how authors have attempted to reconcile one of British military history's more humbling moments.

The book revolves around two principle research questions, as described in the preface. First, it examines the operational performance of Major General Charles Townshend, commander of the 6th (Poona) Division, and the commanders of the relief force against the Ottomans between September 1915 and April 1916. Second, it assesses the response of Indian personnel to the conditions of the siege, since the original evidence and the historiography have discussed this issue as a cause for defeat. By focusing on the origins of the siege rather than the events that followed, Gardner's assessment offers a convincing and reasonable perspective on both Townshend's leadership and the performance of Indian troops during the siege and relief operations.

This research sheds more light on Townshend's leadership and Britain's ill-fated garrison at Kut. Gardner offers a fair evaluation of Townshend's strengths and failures as a commander,

but also provides a broader explanation for the British defeat at Kut. The book accounts for matters of military administration in the Indian army, rationing of food and supplies, and morale, and identifies the key command decisions that culminated in the surrender of the garrison.

The book's critique of Townshend's performance as a commander is convincing. Gardner argues that Townshend's assessments of the low morale of Indian troops shaped his fatal decisions to accept a siege at Kut, to rush the relief force before it was ready, and not to attempt a breakaway when the opportunity presented itself. Gardner also notes that Townshend waited too long to force the rationing of horsemeat. He accepted the religious taboos of his troops until they were starving and until the supply was too low to sustain his force for a longer period. Gardner contextualizes these fears. British officers sought to protect their troops' religious observances following the 1857 mutiny, since British officers believed the mutiny was sparked by a rumor about the use of pork fat in gun grease. Indian troops expected competent leadership, medical care, good rations, and protection of their religious observances. These issues remained at the core of an eroding relationship and, on top of starvation and lack of supply, led to Townshend's surrender to the Ottomans.

The book argues that Indian troops performed well, all things considered, and exceeded their commanders' expectations. In fact, Townshend's fears about his own troops led him to underestimate their capabilities and to avoid reasonable risks as a commander. His urgent demands for relief in the new year 1916 spurred an unprepared force into action. Commanders inexperienced in combined arms or coordinating artillery with troop movements were unable to exploit the one opportunity that may have successfully relieved Kut. Townshend never attempted a sortie from Kut, again, for fear of low troop morale and consequent desertion, or even mutiny. Even Ottoman commanders noted the missed opportunity for their opponent. Nonetheless, in Gardner's account, Townshend acted reasonably in the moments leading up to the siege. He was no monster, nor a careerist willing to risk his troops for his own advancement. His most fatal decisions were taken out of his failure to understand the needs, expectations, and capabilities of his own troops.

Gardner offers a good and thorough account of the siege of Kut and the performance of British commanders and Indian troops. This book would make for an excellent case study in any military history lecture or seminar. Gardner provides a clear and concise guide of the key issues of the Mesopotamian campaign and the historiography around Townshend and military failure. He convincingly explains Townshend's decisions, without justifying real mistakes, and still reminds his readers that British forces were sent on an unnecessary expedition to Baghdad against competent and determined Ottoman defenders. *The Siege of Kut-al-Amara* is an important piece of the puzzle in British military historiography and in the history of the First World War in the Middle East.

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