

H-Net Reviews

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Michael Provence. *The Last Ottoman Generation and the Making of the Modern Middle East.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 336 pp. \$99.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-76117-8; \$29.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-74751-6.

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Michael Provence's new book presents an original thesis concerning the Ottoman Empire and the origins of the modern Middle East. By focusing on a generation of men who matriculated at prestigious military academies at the turn of the century, the book highlights the continuity between the leadership of the late Ottoman Empire and the Middle East mandates as they moved towards independence during the interwar years. The book demonstrates that the Ottoman elite, in their efforts to remain competitive, experienced many of the same growing pains as Western leaders. The emphasis on state military training as a vehicle for modernizing helps explain the resilience of the Ottoman Empire during the Great War, while downplaying the role of nationalism in the years to follow.

The book opens with a fascinating survey of education, childhood, and communications in the 1880s and 1890s, with focus on a cadre of specially trained army officers who learned how to use modern weaponry and tactics, based upon German models, to form the backbone of a newly fashioned fighting machine. In doing so, these self-confident individuals were inculcated with love for the homeland and loyalty to the sultan despite coming from a variety of regions, ethnicities, and social backgrounds. Language was not a primary issue in developing self-consciousness among the Ottoman vanguard. Native Arabic speakers stood alongside Turkish-, Kurdish-, Armenian-, and Greek-speakers. Prosopographies of individuals such as Yasin al-Hashimi of Baghdad, Yusuf al-'Azma of Damascus, and Fawzi al-Qawuqji of Tripoli enliven the story and provide vivid vignettes of a brilliant cohort of officers.

In chapters 2 and 3, Provence adds to the recent spate of studies by Eugene Rogan, Edward Erickson, Mustafa Aksakal, Yiğit Akin, and others devoted to the Ottoman wartime experience. The view here is from high-ranking officers in the army who transitioned to political roles in the postwar era. Provence provides fresh angles on the League of Nations, the San Remo Conference, the Treaty of Sèvres, and the Mandates Commission. After a review of the basic agreements that led to the partitions, the book delves into the experience of the people on both sides of the colonial dividing line. What emerges is the story of lost opportunities: the bags of petitions from former Ottoman subjects to the mandates' new masters were routinely disregarded in a seemingly endless process structured to fail. Yet Provence rarely asks exactly why the European leaders were so reluctant to listen to the indigenous leaders and grant them concessions, although the oil boom, Zionism, and racism rank high on the implicit list of explanations. Remarkably, the post-Ottoman leadership often deeply regretted the demise of the sultan's regime. Indeed, this nostalgia for Ottoman times would serve as an excellent topic for another study.

The central chapters of the book cover the colonial experience in the east Arab heartland, namely Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Transjordan. The example of Mustafa Kemal and Turkey looms over the Arab leaders whose birthplaces were in territories conquered by foreign armies. The degree of attachment to Ottoman institutions, despite the misery and complete breakdown of society during the Great War, is surprising. The outrage among the highly educated Arab elite at the imposition of the new system, its inequality, irrationality, and insulting

attributes is palpably related. William Rappard, the Harvard-educated director of the Mandate Section, and Yasim al-Hashimi, perhaps the most famous and charismatic politician of the era outside Turkey, emerge as the heroes of the story, while Robert de Caix, Henry de Jouvenel, and Damien de Martel are among the key villains. Provence leaves no doubt where his sympathies lie.

The final chapters of *The Last Ottoman Generation* take on the complex and convoluted story of foreign intervention, local political initiatives, and the waning power of the League of Nations. Eschewing a strictly national approach, Provence interweaves the storyline from the perspective of Aleppo, Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus, Mosul, and Jerusalem, thereby providing an important comparative perspective. Provence's interest in detail often towers over the broader picture but his constant shift from region to region mirrors the fragmented experience of the populations involved.

Overall, the French approach based on direct rule and military confrontation was much less successful than the British attempt to employ loyal regional governors to do their bidding. However, in both cases, the high commissioners were the true source of sovereignty, as attempts at constitution-building and consensus failed to make meaningful progress until the end of the colonial experiment and the outbreak of World War Two. Throughout the process Ankara provided the model for ex-Ottoman

civic and military governors and the lesson was clear: independence could only be won at the barrel of a gun. Petitioning, lobbying, and popular protests achieved little, for the colonial governments continued to favor Jews and Christians over Muslims. Even the Syrian Revolt of 1925-27 and the General Strike in Palestine in 1936 resulted in further frustration on behalf of the indigenous majorities.

The viewpoint of the post-Ottoman elite and the emphasis on continuity challenges, convincingly, the common narrative regarding the rise of nationalism. Although Provence does not excessively moralize, it seems fitting in a work that demonstrates how the old system continued among the ex-Ottoman leaders to appreciate the same currents of continuity among those Europeans who anachronistically imposed a nineteenth-century colonial mentality on a twentieth-century reality without fully realizing their inherently flawed values, which were paternalist at best and racist more often.

Based on archives in Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, France, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom, *The Last Ottoman Generation* will appeal to readers interested in a sophisticated scholarly account of the immediate origins of problems facing the region today. Well organized and clearly composed with charts, photographs, and maps, the book ought to provoke debate and spark new interest in the Ottoman legacy and the making of the modern Middle East.

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