

BOOK REVIEW

Daniel-Joseph MacArthur-Seal, *Britain's Levantine Empire, 1914–1923*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. xii + 287 pages.
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The decade that runs from 1914 to 1923 is often considered as one of cataclysmic upheavals in the Eastern Mediterranean. On the heels of the Balkans Wars, which saw the bloody end of Ottoman dominion in Southeast Europe, the Great War, followed by the Russian Civil War (1917–1922) and the Greco-Turkish War (1919–1922), marked the collapse of the multicultural empires of the Czar and of the Sultan. In their stead, new polities emerged, in the familiar form of nation-states (e.g. Turkey) or the novel ones of communist states and League of Nations Mandates (Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Transjordan, Iraq).

Acknowledging the scale and human cost of these transformations, Daniel-Joseph MacArthur-Seal's book proposes nonetheless a slightly different angle to that narrative. Over the shifting grounds described above and through a mastery of the connections between key “city-nodes,” Britain built a “Levantine Empire,” characterized by its capacity to profoundly influence or channel the urban, demographic, and political changes that the region underwent between 1914 and 1923. This “constellation of military power” (p. 2) emerged in the context of war, when Britain, already in control of Alexandria, established a military presence in Thessaloniki (1915), then occupied Jerusalem (1917) and finally Constantinople (1918). The sinews of this empire are therefore military, and its ideological coherence provided by the views of the British soldiers. Indeed, the real substance, the “flesh” so to speak, of this British Levantine Empire materializes through the impressions of the soldiers whose writings – diaries, letters, memoirs – constitute the main source of this book, although the author also draws on an impressive body of archives in multiple languages, from the War Office and Cabinet Office papers in London, to the French diplomatic correspondence and Ottoman government papers.

The five thematic chapters (experience of travel, experience of the Levantine city, reordering of the Levantine city, leisure, securing the Levantine Empire) of the book immerse us into the soldiers' sensory as well as spatio-temporal disorientation as they navigate between and within the different Levantine cities to which they are sent. Their gaze is unmistakably colonial, shifting from aversion to desire, as their senses are saturated with mostly unwelcome, sometime welcome, smells, noises – together with a Babylon of languages – and sightings (pp. 91–97). But this is no typical orientalist reaction, because blurring these perceptions is a vague sense of familiarity. The Levant, for British soldiers and officials, is not the Orient, and the “category of the Levantine . . . present[s] ‘every gradation of character, from the European with no

trace of the Oriental about him, to the European who is so thoroughly Orientalised as scarcely to have preserved any distinctive European characteristics” (citing Evelyn Baring, p. 20). Specific sites, churches, and ancient ruins evoke, among our traveling soldiers, memories of classical studies or the Scriptures, although these are quickly frustrated by what they perceive to be the derelict state in which Ottoman rule has left such signs of that glorious past. The elusive space that connects the different cities of the Eastern Mediterranean is primarily the imaginary product of a shared experience among British soldiers: “Sea voyaging’s contraction of space between these sites encouraged officials, officers, and men to parcel them together as an imagined collective geography, the Levant” (p. 65, also p. 237).

Three main “chronotopes” constitute the points of articulation of Britain’s Levantine Empire and structure the imagination of the book’s main protagonists: the ship, the military camp, and the Levantine city. As is known, Bakhtin defined “chronotope” back in 1937 as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (Bakhtin 2008, 84). Transposing this concept to capture what emerges from the writings of British officials and soldiers, MacArthur-Seal uses it in dialectic fashion and the entire book may be said to be swaying to a binary rhythm: just like the “Levant” is contrasted to the “Orient,” the city is opposed to its hinterland, and the hygiene and orderly temporality of the ship and the military camp to the untidy chaos of the Levantine city (p. 50). This series of contrasts is, of course, what inspires a British civilizing mission in the region: “[t]he clash of temporal routines between occupier and occupied added to an ongoing conflict between time-conscientious military and bureaucratic representatives of the state and its purportedly ill-disciplined subjects” (p. 151).

As it happens, we do not remain, in MacArthur-Seal’s book, at the level of representations. In an approach reminiscent of Khaled Fahmy’s in his *All the Pasha’s Men* (Fahmy 2003), an important reference for *Britain’s Levantine Empire*, MacArthur-Seal argues that what happens in the barracks, so to speak, has, and is meant to have, much wider social effects. “Military occupation reshaped the cities of the Eastern Mediterranean” (p. 109). Thus, through martial law, civil conscription, and property confiscation, British authorities strove to regulate both time and space, as well as manage and channel population flows, in the Levantine cities under their rule. The displacement and settlement therein of conscripted Egyptian workers, Cypriot muleteers, Armenian, Greek, and Russian refugees, as well as Ottoman prisoners of war inspired British authorities to perfect instruments of control such as passports, military intelligence, and quarantine (p. 52). In addition, local administrations were made to levy special taxes to build and repair roads (p. 128), while curfews were imposed to restrain what were perceived to be the corrupting influence of Levantine nightlife, to “silence and extinguish the night” (p. 183). Of course, all of this was conducted with unabashed colonial arbitrariness, essentially making a mockery British denunciations of “Oriental despotism” (p. 220), as the agents of Western civilization, accountable only to very lenient military courts, were left free to roam and prey in the Levantine cities (p. 213).

While the material, cultural, and perhaps psychological legacy of Britain's short-lived rule over the Levant is tangible to this day, can the latter still be conceived of as an "Empire"? This, in the opinion of this reviewer, is perhaps the one claim of this book that remains debatable. No doubt Britain's investment of the Near East corresponded with the "high watermark of the British tide in the Eastern Mediterranean" (p. 36). And surely, the notion of "empire" we have here, influenced as it is by recent discussions on "imperial formations," is a conceptually more sophisticated one than what more formalistic definitions of the term would allow. Yet all in all, and with the exception of Alexandria, which indeed stayed for a long time under British rule, it remains to be seen whether this decade-long experiment (1914–1923) indeed "challenges the presumed trajectory of British imperial decline in the twentieth century" (p. 241). Of course, "decline" is an unwieldy notion; the seeds of decline are often sowed in the furrow of imperial expansion. This much is acknowledged by the author when he writes that the "connectedness of the Levantine city, useful as it was for the establishment of British military influence and supply of its imperial war machine, provided points of entry for hostile agents, who were blamed for almost all resistance to British military domination" (p. 228). It is perhaps the rapidity with which British rule was contested in the region before it even properly settled that challenges its designation as "empire"; Britain, just as it secured its position as a mandatory power in Palestine, Transjordan, and Iraq, was essentially pushed out of Batum, Constantinople, and the Near East by sufficiently dissuasive "hostile forces" (Bolsheviks, Turkish or Egyptian Nationalists, and the French) (pp. 65 and 208).

A second and final feature of the book this reviewer found questionable is of a more structural nature and specifically concerns the choice to end every chapter with an account of events unfolding in the region. For example, following the introduction, the author relates the political history of the region between 1800 and 1914, after Chapter 1 he turns his attention to the developments between 1914 and 1916, and this is accordingly pursued until 1923, the end of the period covered in this study. While these are briskly written, engaging guides through a convoluted period, they break the flow of the narrative without adding much to an otherwise very insightful analysis.

These two issues do not, however, compromise in any way the overall importance of this book as a significant contribution to several historiographies, including British imperial, post-Ottoman, military, and urban histories as well as the history of the Mediterranean. Through the experience of the British soldiers, it gives substance to the radical reconfigurations of time and space pursuant to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and Western military and imperial interventions. It draws on an important, and, as mentioned before, plurilingual body of sources and engages with a rich theoretical literature, including the works of Michel Foucault, Michel de Certeau, Walter Benjamin, and Henri Lefebvre. Its lively narrative, sprinkled with evocative vignettes, will make this a very valuable and pleasant read for students and confirmed researchers alike.

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