



2014-029

Scott Anderson, *Lawrence in Arabia: War, Deceit, Imperial Folly and the Making of the Modern Middle East*. New York: Doubleday, 2013. Pp. xii, 577. ISBN 978-0-385-53292-1.

Review by Roberto Mazza, Western Illinois University (robbymazza@gmail.com).

Current political events, but above all the upcoming hundredth anniversary of World War I have stimulated renewed interest in the history of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the creation of the modern Middle East. Many of the events that unfolded during the war and its aftermath as well as their interpretation remain matters of intense debate, subject to potent ideological, religious, and political influences. Scott Anderson is a veteran war correspondent who has reported from war-torn countries, including Lebanon, Sudan, Bosnia,¹ and Israel. This familiarity with international issues in the relevant region stands him in good stead in *Lawrence of Arabia* as he discusses (more or less) significant actors in the emergence of the twentieth-century Middle East.

The book's eighteen chapters concentrate on four key individuals—T.E. Lawrence, Curt Prüfer, William Yale, and Aaron Aaronsohn—who, the author argues, created the conditions that brought British military and political campaigns to fruition and, more importantly, made postwar policies and national border drawing possible (5). Anderson maintains that the British shaped the future of the Middle East through the Paris peace agreements signed in 1919 and the establishment of the Mandate System. He believes that Lawrence played a major role, first as a game player, but also as firsthand witness to the “great loot,” that is, the establishment of British and French neo-colonial states. With an audience of general readers in mind, Anderson opens with an interesting note on nomenclature:

As many Middle East historians rightly point out, the use of ... Western-preferred labels—Turkey rather than the Ottoman Empire, Constantinople instead of Istanbul—is indicative of a Eurocentric perspective that, in its most pernicious form, serves to validate the European (read imperialist) view of history. This poses a dilemma for historians focusing on the Western role in that theater—as I do in this book—since the bulk of their research will naturally be drawn from Western sources. In such a situation, it would seem a writer must choose between clarity and political sensitivity; since I feel many readers would find it confusing if, for example, I consistently referred to “Istanbul” when virtually all cited material refers to “Constantinople,” I have opted for clarity. (xi)

Drawing on both the extensive secondary literature and much archival material, Anderson intertwines the stories of his four subjects, two of whom—Prüfer and Yale—have previously received very little attention. Curt Prüfer, a German diplomat, became a sort of spymaster, contriving unrealistic schemes and generally playing the part of a young man seeking action and glory. Other historians see him as inconsequential to the story of the Middle East during the war, and Anderson sometimes makes greater claims for him than the sources will support, though Prüfer's checkered postwar career (499) merits investigation. Moreover, some appreciation of his actions helps us better understand certain complexities of the situation of the Middle East during and after the war. One episode in his life may cause some embarrassment to traditional Zionist historians. Prüfer came up with the idea of recruiting Jewish émigrés to infiltrate British-controlled Egypt: one of these spies, a young woman named Fanny Weizmann, was both Prüfer's lover and the sister of the leading Zionist in Britain and future first President of Israel—Chaim Weizmann (14-15).

The second less well known character discussed by Anderson, William Yale, was a member of a prominent American family. After the 1907 Wall Street panic, however, he found himself in straitened circumstances (26). Through some family connections, he landed a job at the Standard Oil Company of New York

1. His article, “What I Did on My Summer Vacation: Inside the Hunt for Ratko Mladic,” *Esquire* (Oct 2000) was (very loosely) the basis for the 2007 film *The Hunting Party*, directed by Richard Shepard and starring Richard Gere and Terence Howard - www.miwsr.com/rd/1407.htm.

(Socony) and was sent to Palestine in 1913 to search covertly for oil in the region; he and his companions posed as wealthy Americans on a Grand Tour of the Holy Land (43). Though Yale spent most of the war in Palestine, managing to become close with many important political figures, not much has been written about him. Anderson portrays him as indifferent to the events going on around him, unless they affected Socony; he nevertheless accumulated vast knowledge about the Middle East. Yale became more concerned with the politics of the region because of the failures of the Peace Conference in addressing its problems (498–99). In short, a good case is made for reconsidering Yale’s historical agency in the Middle East.

Aaron Aaronsohn—an agronomist and leading Zionist in Palestine—formed a spy-ring that has been described in many scholarly works and popular narratives. Though Anderson does not add anything new to these, he does demonstrate that combining Aaronsohn’s story with those of Lawrence, Yale, Prüfer, and others, gives us a better perspective on the larger context of the operations conducted by his spy network.

As the book’s title indicates, T.E. Lawrence occupies center stage:

Despite scores of biographies, countless scholarly studies, and at least three movies, including one considered a masterpiece, historians have never quite decided what to make of the young, bashful Oxford scholar who rode into battle at the head of an Arab army and changed history. One reason for the contentiousness over his memory has to do with the terrain he traversed. Lawrence was both eyewitness to and participant in some of the most pivotal events leading to the creation of the modern Middle East, and this is a corner of the earth where even the simplest assertion is dissected and parsed and argued over. In the unending debates over the roots of that region’s myriad fault lines, Lawrence has been alternately extolled and pilloried, sanctified, demonized, even diminished to a footnote, as political goals require. (2–3)

Once again, we find that Anderson’s ability to entwine the histories of several seemingly unconnected agents is a real strength of his work. There is nothing novel here about Lawrence as an individual; indeed the author’s analysis of him is occasionally superficial and too uncritical in accepting sources at face value. Though some scholars have even argued, with reason, that Lawrence was a charlatan, he had a place in the unfolding of significant historic events. Anderson wisely steers clear of otiose debates over Lawrence’s sexuality and his postwar choices; a few “what if?” questions are relegated to some paragraphs at the end of the volume (490).

The book has its deficiencies. One wishes, for example, for more detailed treatments of Mark Sykes and Djemal Pasha, who, in their own distinctive ways, greatly contributed to the creation of the modern Middle East. Although there are no striking factual mistakes, Anderson’s citation of sources is problematic: end-notes are rich in detail but not referred to (by superscript numerals or otherwise) in the text itself.

Lawrence in Arabia will reward lay readers interested in World War I in the Middle East and both its immediate and long-term aftermath. Specialists will learn little but may be attracted by the lively narrative style and the stress on fascinating individuals as they affected the course of history; they will also find that Scott Anderson has raised new questions in need of serious investigation by professional historians.