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Nikolas Gardner, *The Siege of Kut-al-Amara: At War in Mesopotamia, 1915-1916*. Bloomington: Univ. of Indiana Press, 2014. Pp. xiv, 205. ISBN 978-0-253-01384-2.

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In his latest book, Nikolas Gardner (Royal Military College of Canada) investigates problems of commanding Indian Army units in a peripheral theater of the First World War. The surrender at Kut-al-Amara of Maj. Gen. Charles Townshend's Sixth Indian Division was the largest by British forces between Yorktown in 1781 and Singapore in 1942. Coming at the hands of the Sick Man of Europe (in the form of the Ottoman army), it was an event so unimaginable that a parliamentary commission was appointed to discover exactly why it happened. Ironically, the repeated defeats of the relief forces at Kut-al-Amara, which were numerically superior to their Ottoman opponents, came after a string of successes that had taken the Indian Expeditionary Force D (IEFD) from Basra to the gates of Baghdad. It was a surprising finish for Townshend, who had famously withstood siege in the Chitral Fort in 1898 [[1895?]].

The existing (mostly Anglocentric) literature on Gardner's subject is based on the British official history and relevant secondary materials; these cover in detail Townshend's advance to Ctesiphon, his retreat and encirclement, the siege, and the failed relief efforts. The story centers on the plight of British soldiers caught in the harsh tactical conditions of Mesopotamia in 1915-16. Much less attention has been paid to the performance of the IEFD in the theater. As Gardner points out, military historians are only now beginning to explore systematically the Ottoman army's achievements as well. In particular, the subject of command and control has been neglected. Fortunately, Gardner has written previously on how individual presuppositions and sensibilities affect command and control in combat.¹ In the present book, he asks two previously overlooked yet compelling questions: how did Townshend and the relief forces conduct operations against the Ottoman army and how did the response of Indian personnel (the sepoys) affect the outcome of the siege?

Gardner evaluates the operational moves by Townshend and the relief force commanders, Lt. Gen. Sir Fenton Aylmer and Maj. Gen. Sir George Goringe, with due consideration of the nature of the forces they commanded—the besieged Sixth Indian Division and the relieving Third and Seventh Indian Divisions. Much depended on the attitude of the British generals toward their own non-western soldiers and their non-western enemy. Townshend, Aylmer, and Goringe shared a belief in the superiority of the British Empire and regarded the Ottomans as second-rate opponents. Gardner explains why this bias was understandable, even unavoidable at the time, but he adds something new in stressing the extent to which the British commanders' fatal misjudgment of the morale and tactical capacities of their Indian soldiers undermined their operational goals.

The author writes that “In retrospect, the siege of Kut-al-Amara appears to fit neatly into a narrative of hubris, comeuppance, and redemption” (167), but insists that the results were never actually predetermined. Chapter 1, “Charles Townshend and His Army,” highlights the self-promoting Townshend's egotistical and eccentric personality. The public acclaim he won for his defense of Chitral Fort made his “superiors [grow] weary of his incessant maneuvering” (17) for prestigious assignments, and his career languished. The First World War revived his prospects as he zealously pursued combat command opportunities. The chapter also outlines the strengths and weaknesses of Townshend's “army”—the reinforced Sixth Indian Division and a cavalry brigade. Chapter 2 describes “Townshend's Advance on Baghdad” in November 1915 after his forces were nearly defeated by Nurettin Pasha at Ctesiphon some twenty miles south of the city.

1. In his highly regarded *Trial by Fire: Command and the British Expeditionary Force in 1914* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003).

In chapter 3, on the “Retreat from Ctesiphon,” Gardner critiques Townshend’s decision to withdraw from Ctesiphon into Kut-al-Amara. Under relentless Ottoman pressure, the Sixth Indian Division was outflanked and surrounded several times. The author exposes Townshend’s occupation of Kut as the result of a succession of hasty decisions by a fatigued commander operating with ambiguous intelligence. Chapter 4, “Outset of the Siege,” highlights Townshend’s preoccupation with the morale of his sepoys and the six thousand Arab inhabitants who remained in the town. Chapter 5, “Operations of the Relief Force,” describes how Townshend’s inaccurate reports forced the Tigris Corps to squander tactical opportunities through hurried attacks.

Chapter 6, “Deprivation and Defeat,” concerns the progressive weakening of the Kut garrison, while Townshend obsessed over Indian morale and insubordination, fretting, for example, about whether the sepoys would refuse to eat horsemeat. His command came close to complete paralysis (170). In the seventh and final chapter, “Innovation, Starvation and Surrender,” Gardner posits, contrary to the standard narrative, that the relief force lacked for nothing except time. He concludes that it was Townshend’s misunderstanding of the men under his command that caused him to make the flawed decisions that led to his encirclement; faulty reporting then induced the relief forces to make premature attacks and take up a position where the Sixth Indian Division could not assist them.

The book features previously unused sources, including papers and correspondence from the India Office Records, the Indian divisions’ war diaries, and communications from the IEFD headquarters. The author’s balanced presentation of Townshend as the architect of his own failure rests on a persuasive analysis of the ill effects on tactical operations of entrenched prejudices about the abilities of non-western soldiers. Nikolas Gardner has filled an unexplored niche in the literature on the British campaigns in Mesopotamia. *The Siege of Kut-al-Amara* will appeal to general readers as well as scholars interested in this remote theater of the First World War.