

Review

Lawrence of Arabia's War: The Arabs, the British and the Remaking of the Middle East in WWI

Neil Faulkner. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016. 552pp.

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Seldom does a newly published book both enlarge our understanding of its subject and enhance our appreciation of its principal primary sources. In *Lawrence of Arabia's War*, Neil Faulkner admirably achieves both objectives. In the first instance, he thoroughly and critically discusses British foreign policy and military operations in the Middle East and North Africa from 1914 through 1922, with emphasis upon British relations with the Arabs, primarily the desert-dwelling Hashemite sherifs as opposed to the landlords and officials who dominated millions of Arab small farmers and city dwellers. Whenever appropriate, he carefully examines relations between the British and their French, Italian, and Russian allies. In the second instance, Faulkner clearly illuminates the political and military context of T. E. Lawrence's partially autobiographical *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, long widely admired as one of the finest literary masterpieces of the Great War and as a somewhat impressionistic portrait of the leaders of the Arab rebellion. In doing so, Faulkner further demonstrates Lawrence's memoir to be an informed evaluation of British strategy and of the actions of Arab and Bedouin chieftains in their relationships with the British and with one another. Furthermore, Faulkner shows how and why *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* is one of the few World War I memoirs that facilitate one's comprehension of the military operations by which Arab forces during 1917 and 1918

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interdicted Ottoman supply lines and effectively supported the right flank of British offensives into Gaza and Palestine.

Faulkner elucidates British, French and Arab relationships during the First World War in the context of the enormous Allied effort required to defeat Ottoman armies receiving German arms, funds and military advice. He is always attentive to the quantitative dimensions of the strategy, tactics and logistics of desert warfare and the management of wartime economies. To illuminate his discussion of events and personalities, he often cites colorful anecdotes adequately supported by quantitative data. While doing so, Faulkner is keenly aware of the extent to which today's apparently intractable conflicts in the Middle East resemble in many respects those of the second decade of the twentieth century. But, he conducts no present-minded examination or resurrection of the past. Rather, he views the achievements and shortcomings of Allied wartime diplomacy and postwar peacemaking more as necessary preconditions rather than direct causes of twenty-first century insurrection and warfare throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

Throughout *Lawrence of Arabia's War*, Faulkner clearly places all actions by T. E. Lawrence and the Arab insurrectionists in the broader context of the strategic objectives of the Allies and the Central Powers on all fronts. In doing so, he demonstrates why the Arab rebellion, though largely a sideshow in the Great War, nonetheless helped to facilitate the Allied victory ultimately achieved by containing German submarine warfare and by defeating German armies on the Western Front.

Faulkner's explicitly critical interpretation of warfare, politics and diplomacy is principally based upon a large and broadly representative selection of primary and secondary sources, many of which cite archival documents or describe personal experiences in World War I. His mastery of this material gives *Lawrence of Arabia's War* a greater breadth of coverage and depth of analysis than most monographs on the same or closely related topics.

Another achievement of *Lawrence of Arabia's War* is Faulkner's objective evaluation of the Ottoman Empire's formidable military efforts despite its inefficient authoritarian government and its economic and technological inferiority to its Allied adversaries. In particular, Faulkner admires the courage and stoical endurance of Turkish Anatolian peasant soldiers, especially when they were outnumbered as well as outgunned by British Commonwealth armies. Simultaneously, Faulkner is highly critical of the

authoritarian and often inefficient wartime leadership of the Ottoman Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) and its executive triumvirate of Ahmed Djemal Pasha, Enver Pasha, and Talaat Pasha. Even though the Ottomans' fear of their religious minorities intensified in the wake of Russian and British Commonwealth offensives, nothing, in Faulkner's opinion, can justify the CUP's deliberate starvation or murder of a million and half Armenian civilians, a policy now recognized everywhere, except in Turkey, as having constituted genocide.

Neil Faulkner's *Lawrence of Arabia's War* is highly recommended as essential reading for students of World War I, the modern Middle East, and early twentieth century British literature. Moreover, this monograph belongs in the libraries of every college or university offering courses on the above or closely related topics. Upon reading Faulkner's work, this reviewer promptly reread portions of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* with enlarged respect for its author and now looks forward to another viewing of David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia*.