

Editorial

A War to End all Peace

This year marks the centennial of the Great War (1914-1918). Ever since the western front went silent at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month in 1918, hundreds if not thousands of books have been written on the war and its effects on Europe, the United States, and on Russia and the Soviet Union. However, only a handful focus on the war on the eastern front. The overwhelming majority of studies usually discuss the eastern front only peripherally. Ironically, the catalyst for the war was an event that took place in the east – the famous assassination in Sarajevo in a region of Eastern Europe which a few decades earlier had been an integral part of the Ottoman world. And even more ironic is the fact that for the Ottoman lands the war had started a few years before the official outbreak of the Great War in 1914. The wars in the Balkans in 1912 and 1913, coupled with the 1911-1912 Italian-Ottoman war over the Ottoman provinces of Tripolitania, Fezzan, and Cyrenaica/Barqah (present-day Libya), had kept the empire in a constant state of war that did not end in 1918, but continued into the 1920s. There was the Arab Revolt and its post-war ramifications in Syria and Iraq, the Greco-Turkish war that continued until 1922, and a series of wars and rebellions in Bilad al-Sham until the mandates were fully in control, close to the middle of the 1920s.

In the case of Palestine, the Great War was also a catalyst. The early demise in the promises of Arab and Syrian nationalisms, coupled with the partition of the region following the war – with all the consequences of severing Palestine from the entire Syrian region – as well as the British occupation and Mandate over Palestine, ushered in new and dramatic developments that still affect us to this day. In this context, the infamous promise made

in November 1917 and known since as the Balfour Declaration proved to be the most deadly. Britain, influenced by a complex assortment of issues and pressures, promised Palestine to the Zionist movement as “the national home of the Jewish people.” Dupliciously, the declaration referred to the country’s indigenous inhabitants simply as “existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine” whose civil and religious rights must be protected – without any mention of political or national rights for the native majority of the country. Developments over the next hundred years attest to the tragic consequences of this absence.

This issue of *Jerusalem Quarterly* is fully devoted to the war period in the region, with a special focus on Palestine and the surrounding area as it was sliced up by the British and the French during the Mandate period. The contributions highlight some of the forgotten histories of the period, especially as they apply to ordinary people struggling to survive in extraordinarily dark times. The war brought about the dreaded conscription known as *seferberlik* during which young men were dragged from their villages and towns to fight on faraway fronts. The French and the British blockaded the eastern Mediterranean coast and thus contributed to the spread of famine among the population. The Great Famine of Bilad al-Sham during the war was also a result of the Ottoman war economy and the ruthless logistical measures taken by the administration of Jamal Pasha, as well as the onset of the locust invasion in 1915, which destroyed crops and devastated the countryside.

Most contributions in this issue had their beginnings in the National Endowment for the Humanities 2012 summer seminar organized by Professors Elizabeth Thompson and Mustafa Aksakal (University of Virginia and Georgetown University respectively). The participants and organizers subsequently held a mini-conference at the annual meeting of the Middle East Studies Association in 2013. The bulk of the material in this issue came out of those two events, with additional submissions and solicitations by JQ editors.

The contributions tackle a broad spectrum of issues relating to the region before, during, and shortly after the war period. The topics vary from the arrival of the locust hordes in Palestine in 1915, the Egyptian-Ottoman front, to events in greater Syria during and after the war, including local elite and missionary activities in the Syrian region. The use of photography for propagandistic, documentary, and military purposes appears in a number of studies. One article deals with the internal politics of the Eastern Christian Orthodox community in pre-war Palestine based on hitherto largely unknown documents at the archive of the Orthodox Patriarchate in Jerusalem. Other studies utilize archival materials available in the US, UK, Turkey, Palestine, Lebanon, Germany, and Australia. All in all, this issue features questions and themes rarely studied before and constitute, we hope, an important addition to the available literature on the Great War in the Middle East.

Overall, the topics examined in this volume constitute a stark reminder that the war itself began a process that transformed the face of Palestine and the whole of the Middle East, and not for the better. To be sure, it hastened the introduction, for military purposes, of fairly recent technologies, such as the telegraph, railroad and

electrification, that helped to integrate the region and connect it to the outside world. The use of aerial surveillance and aerial photography (examined in this issue) made possible more advanced modes of urban planning. Yet these same technologies contributed crucially to the fragmentation and balkanization of the Levant and the Arab East.

Aside from the physical destruction and mass killings, the war dealt the death blow to what little unity remained in the Ottoman Empire, and to the belated experiment in democratization and constitutionalism promised by the 1908 constitutional “revolution.” Ultimately World War I accelerated the dismemberment of Syria, fomented existing sectarianism and tribalism, and spread the Ottoman process of ethnic displacement, culminating dramatically, with British connivance, in the Zionist displacement of the Palestinian people. Palestine was by no means the only affected site in a region that in many ways is still suffering from the war’s legacy. Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Turkey, Greece, Iraq and Armenia have still not recovered from the wounds of the war. There is no turning back the historical clock: the turbulent history of the last century has irreversibly transformed the face of former Ottoman territories. Yet the fragmentation and conflicts in the region today cannot but compel us to reflect on the more tolerant and unifying lost legacies of that period, including the coexistence of the various ethnic and religious groups within the empire in general and Palestine in particular.