‘For Civilisation’

The First World War in the Middle East 1914►1923

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IN FLANDERS FIELDS MUSEUM

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Ottoman Empire, 1914

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'The Middle East'
The Ottoman Empire at the outbreak of the First World War

Pieter TROGH

'For Civilisation': the First World War in the Middle East, 1914–1923

The 'Middle East' features regularly in the news. All too frequently in the form of war reports or accounts of tensions between different groups of people. Trying to trace the origins of those conflicts often leads us to the First World War.

In the West the guns fell silent on 11 November 1918, but for various reasons fighting continued in the Middle East until 1923. When war broke out in 1914, the region was largely dominated by the Ottoman Empire, then under the regime of the Young Turks. They had allied with Germany and so found themselves on the losing side in 1918. The Ottoman Empire disintegrated, and the borders were redrawn to suit the interests of Great Britain and France. That process caused considerable ill feeling among the people and communities living in the Middle East. Conflicts were created then that have continued to smoulder and can still flare up into new violence even today. We need only think of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for instance, or the fate of the Kurds, or the fraught relationship between Turks and Armenians, over which the legacy of the Armenian Genocide hangs like a black cloud. But in general terms, too, the impact of the First World War on the Middle East was enormous: the people who lived there lost many opportunities. If we want a better understanding of present relationships and the balance of power in the Middle East, we must go back to the First World War and its aftermath.

This book re-examines the impact on and legacy of that war in the Middle East. It is part of a project initiated by In Flanders Fields Museum in Ypres in 2022 to explore that subject and is conceived as a popular history book, published on the occasion of the exhibition entitled *'For Civilisation'. the First World War in the Middle East, 1914–1923*. In short and accessible essays, ten experts expand on a number of themes that were dealt with in the exhibition. A select bibliography directs interested readers to the more specialised literature.

Houssine Alloul sheds light on the multifaceted relationships between Belgium and the Ottoman Empire during the long nineteenth century. The geopolitical game played out in the region during the First World War is outlined by Alp Yenen, while Ozan Ozavci examines the shaping of the modern Middle East in the war's aftermath. Nicholas J. Saunders investigates the role of T. E. Lawrence (aka Lawrence of Arabia) from an archaeological-cum-anthropological perspective, and Bruce Scates describes the contentious creation of the commemorative landscape of the First World War in the Middle East. Nazan Maksudyan looks at the Armenian Genocide, but from a child's perspective. Dotan Halevy goes back to the origins of the Israeli-Palestinian question by interpreting the Zionist project in Palestine between 1914 and 1948. Djene R. Bajalan examines the fate of the Kurds during the First World War

Ottoman infantry column at rest

A delegation from the Ottoman parliament is received in Jericho by Djemal Pasha, governor-general of Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. Djemal Pasha is in the centre of the picture. Also in the photograph is Friedrich Kress von Kressenstein (second from left), the German general who led the Ottoman campaigns through the Sinai desert.

The Imperial Camel Corps going
into action, Palestine, 1918.
Photograph by Frank Hurley

Group photograph of the Australian 11th Infantry Battalion at the Great Pyramid of Giza in Egypt, January 1915. Research has shown that at least ten of the men in this photograph survived the Gallipoli Campaign but later lost their lives at the Third Battle of Ypres.

Shenorhig TENGUERIAN

1905 – ?

In April 1915, Melkon Tenguerian, a resident of Sivas, was arrested by Ottoman-Turkish gendarmes for the crime of being Armenian. He had to leave behind his wife and four children. Before he was led away, Melkon put his tiepin in his daughter Shenorhig's hands, as a sort of talisman. Melkon was hanged and a few weeks later his family was deported to the south, along with all the other Armenians from Sivas. During those infamous death marches—one of the tactics the Ottoman regime used to destroy the Armenians—Shenorhig lost two sisters, her brother, and her mother.

By some miracle, Shenorhig herself survived the death march. She ended up with a Kurdish family who tried to convert her to Islam. To that end they even tattooed her face with the crescent moon symbol. Towards the end of the war, Shenorhig was sent to an orphanage, where she was safe. After the war, she emigrated to America but carried her scars with her, literally and figuratively. It was not until the 1970s that she discovered her sister Aghavni had also survived the Armenian Genocide, the only other member of the family to do so.

The Berlin-based visual artist Silvina Der-Meguerditchian is Aghavni Tenguerian's granddaughter. Silvina grew up with stories of the genocide. She carefully preserves a suitcase full of all kinds of memorabilia connected with relatives who died in those years or survived the genocide. Melkon's tiepin was also in the suitcase. For years Silvina looked for a fitting way to fill the void left by the genocide. She found inspiration in *Houshamadyan*, an online community project 'to reconstruct Ottoman Armenian town and village life'. The aim of the project is to digitally restore the rich, pre-genocide Armenian history that was wiped out during the war. *Houshamadyan* collects and publishes on its website photos, maps, articles on gastronomy, crafts, festivals, religious customs, dialects, songs, and so on produced by the Armenian community in the Ottoman Empire before 1915. The emphasis is on life.

A highlight in Silvina's work is *The Texture of Identity*, a series of 'carpets' in which lost Armenian stories—effectively the Armenian identity—are literally woven together again. Silvina's carpets speak to both collective and personal memory. They deal with loss and nostalgic longing, but also restoration and repair. Silvina's own family story is incorporated, but the *Texture of Identity* symbolises the story of every Armenian family.

The tiepin of Melkon Tenguerian, which he gave to his daughter as a talisman at the time of his arrest

Portrait of Shenorhig Tenguerian

Marsovan (Merzifon, Turkey), c. 1919. Armenian and possibly Turkish women and children collect wool from which to weave cloths and clothes for the orphans. The women whose faces are covered may be Armenian converts to Islam. The large striped shawls worn by some of the women are typical of the area around Marsovan (Merzifon).

Prince Faisal (sitting in chair)
surrounded by officers, *c.* 1920

T. E. Lawrence—aka Lawrence of
Arabia—in typical Arab dress

Partition of the Ottoman Empire as proposed in the Treaty of Sèvres, 1920

Ozan OZAVCI

Sèvres, Lausanne, and the Invention of the Middle East

Conventional wisdom holds that the First World War came to an end in the autumn of 1918. Exhausted in battles and overhauled by revolution, the Central Powers called for an armistice in October. This was the prelude to the five peace treaties that were eventually signed between the Allied Powers and the defeated during the Paris Conference of 1919–20. Each settlement was concluded in a different suburb of the French capital.

Paris Peace Treaties of 1919–20

TREATY	SIGNATORIES
Treaty of Versailles	
28 June 1919	Germany and the Allied Powers
Treaty of Saint-Germain	
10 September 1919	Austria and the Allied Powers
Treaty of Neuilly	
27 November 1919	Bulgaria and the Allied Powers
Treaty of Trianon	
4 June 1920	Hungary and the Allied Powers
Treaty of Sèvres	
10 August 1920	Ottoman Empire and the Allied Powers

The last of these accords took place in the exhibition room of the Manufacture nationale de Sèvres and addressed the future of what had been the Ottoman Empire, a region now known as the Middle East. Like the other four, Sèvres was a punitive treaty. It espoused the Wilsonian principle of self-determination selectively, re-drawing the borders and partitioning the dominions of the Ottoman Empire. New polities emerged from a crucible of inter-imperial rivalry, competing business interests, and Christian visions of the 'Holy Land'. The treaty partly de-imperialised Asia Minor by paving the way for the establishment of an independent Armenia (Article 88) and by including vague pledges to establish a Kurdish 'national home' as well. At the same time, it re-colonised formerly Ottoman lands in Mesopotamia and along eastern Mediterranean coasts, carving out new states under British (Iraq, Transjordan, and Palestine) and French (Syria and Lebanon) control.

During the conferences in London (February–April 1920) and San Remo (April 1920) at which the articles of the Treaty of Sèvres were negotiated, France and Britain had largely agreed on how to share Mesopotamian oil. Even though the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 had assigned the oil-rich province of Mosul to the French, in 1920 France ceded it to British-controlled Iraq. Borders were re-drawn in line with the Great Powers' oil and other strategic interests. Future pipelines connecting Mesopotamia to the Eastern Mediterranean were considered, above and beyond the French desire to oust the defiant King Faisal from Damascus and control the Levantine coasts. Unlike Britain, France had never made hasty promises to support Arab, Jewish, or any other community's claims to a territory of their own. Her foreign policy focus lay elsewhere, in keeping

Prince Faisal (centre) at the Paris Peace Conference, July 1919. In the second row, from left to right: Faisal's advisors Rustum Haidar and Nuri al-Said; Capt. Pisani, a French liaison officer; T. E. Lawrence (wearing an Arab headdress), his British liaison officer; and Tahsin Qadri, Faisal's military attaché. The man at the back is unidentified.

Elizabeth F. THOMPSON

The Arab Liberal Revolutions of 1919 and the Violent Consequences of European Suppression

hen Europeans cheered their armistice on 11 November 1918, Arabs of the defeated Ottoman Empire were already mobilising to secure their rightful place in a new world made safe for democracy, as proclaimed American President Woodrow Wilson. Since 1916 Arabs had waged a revolt against the Ottoman military dictatorship, which had caused their peoples much suffering during the First World War. In early October, the Arab army entered Damascus and declared an Arab constitutional regime. In Egypt, which was detached from the Ottoman empire in 1914 when Britain declared a protectorate, political leaders also took up Wilson's promises to demand independence. Like the Turks in Greater Syria, the British had drained the Egyptian population of the most basic resources for livelihoods even as they had forced one million peasants into Allied labour brigades.

By 1919, revolution filled the air across the formerly Ottoman Arab world. Their revolution was aimed not against the West, but rather to demand inclusion among the civilised nations that had supported the Allies in fighting for democracy. The most popular and powerful politicians in Greater Syria (including today's Syria, Lebanon, Palestine/Israel, and Jordan) promoted liberal constitutional government and the rights of Arabs within a new world order governed by international law and the League of Nations. By embracing East-West unity and equality under the umbrella of the Paris Peace Conference, Arabs aimed to overturn nineteenth-century racial and colonial hierarchies.

The sole independent Arab state recognised at Paris in 1919 was the Kingdom of the Hejaz, governed by Sharif Hussein of Mecca. He had launched the anti-Ottoman revolt on the basis of a promise by the British that Arabs in Greater Syria would also gain independence after the war. In June 1919, Sharif Hussein's representatives therefore signed the Treaty of Versailles, which brought the League of Nations into existence and promised provisional independence for Greater Syria and Iraq under a temporary League mandate. The League, in Arab eyes, had been the brainchild of Woodrow Wilson, whose Fourteen Points had opposed colonial gains in the war and promised autonomy and self-determination to the peoples of the Ottoman Empire.

But the ink on the Versailles treaty had barely dried when Allied leaders initiated a counter-revolution against Arab independence. In Paris and at the League's headquarters in Geneva, colonialists made false claims that Arabs were not liberal or modern enough to rule themselves, and that they were fanatical Muslims who would oppress and even massacre non-Muslims in their societies. By using military force to occupy Greater Syria and Iraq, Britain and France violated the League's requirement that mandates be established only with Arab consent. Likewise, in Egypt, the British turned machine guns on civilians who protested the prolongation of their protectorate.

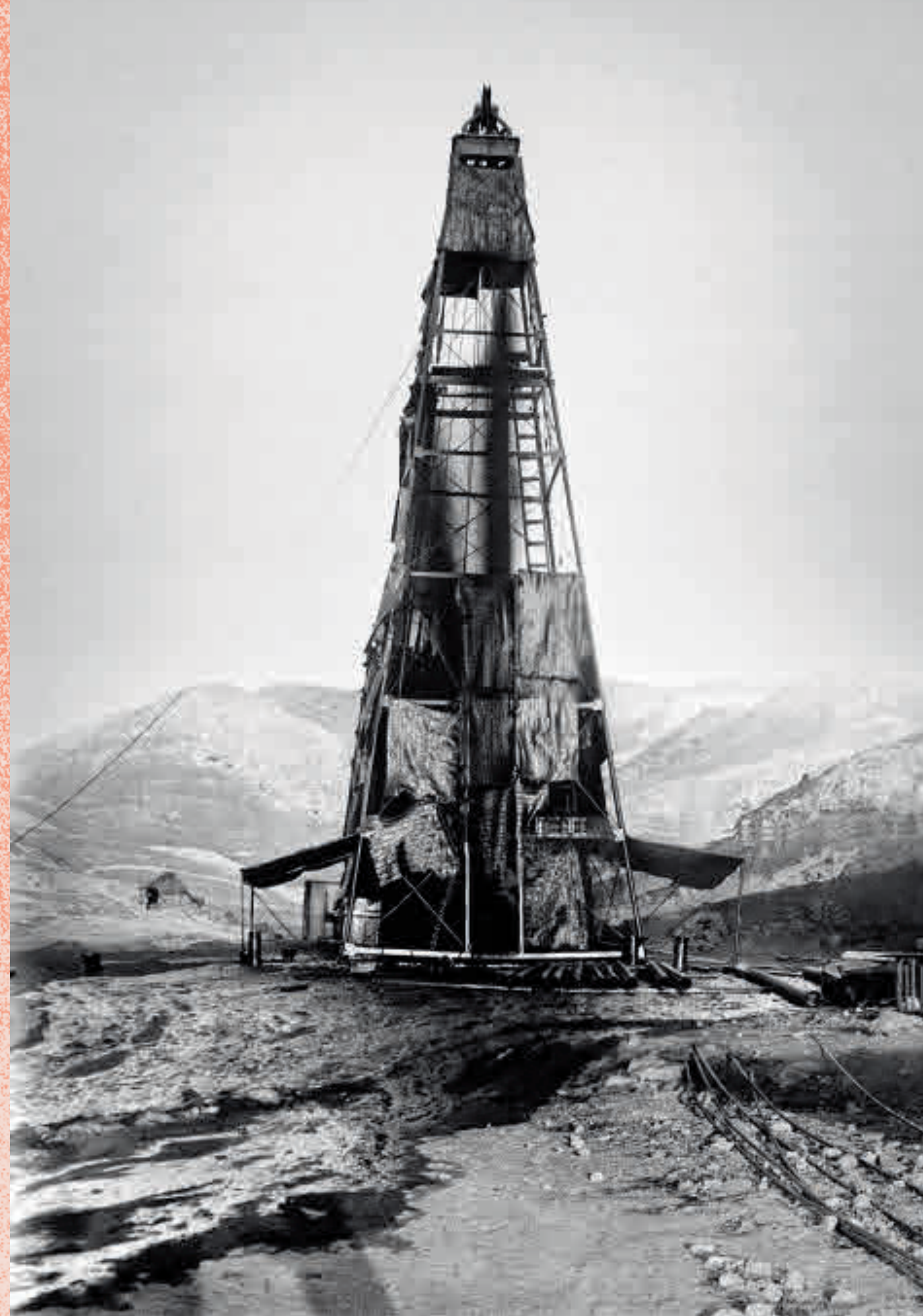
The story of how the Allies betrayed Wilson's principles to expand their colonial empires has been told before, but only in terms of how they denied Arabs independent

British occupation troops outside the walls of the holy city. On 25 April 1920, at the San Remo Conference, Britain received a mandate for Palestine, which was approved by the League of Nations on 24 July 1922. Jerusalem, Palestine, April 1920

View of the Jewish Quarter in Jerusalem, Palestine, late 1918

The British willingly deployed their Royal Air Force to control Iraqi mandate territory and quell uprisings.

View of a street in Baghdad, Mesopotamia (Iraq). The San Remo Conference (25 April 1920) also envisioned a British Mandate for Mesopotamia. Despite the protests, the British founded the new state of Iraq and installed Prince Faisal as king in 1921.



Drilling for oil in one of the Persian oil fields near Abadan (Iran, near the Iraqi border), 1909. The oil fields were managed by the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, a British concern.

Jonathan CONLIN

Oil: A Crude History of the Great War

he story of oil and the Great War is usually told as one in which governments suddenly became aware of the importance of oil to modern warfare and responded by seeking to take control of private oil companies and oil-bearing lands across the globe—particularly lands in the Middle East. 'Control of oil' was achieved by imperialist expansion abroad and by greater economic regulation at home: partial nationalisation of private companies, for example. If only it had been that simple.

Few individuals get to smell crude oil as it gushes from the ground. The same might be said of the many products it contains, from heavy ship oil through gasoline to kerosene, and on to lubricants and the chemicals behind everything from film to TNT. These products powered the dreadnoughts which bottled up the German navy and shelled Gallipoli. They powered the trucks and cars carrying men and materiel to the front lines in France and Belgium, as well as the planes and shells which flew high above the battlefield. Finally, they powered new weapons—notably tanks—which many hoped would end the stalemate of trench warfare. The resulting oil dependence certainly came into focus during the Great War, but it was not a 'lightbulb moment'.

Far from feeling in command, statesmen and diplomats felt uneasy. The war had also seen the oil industry consolidate into a handful of large companies, each with global reach. These were the world's first multi-national companies, a phenomenon familiar to us today, but a source of both wonder and suspicion a century ago. It was difficult to understand how these companies' interests could align with those of individual nations. Alongside the familiar 'Powers' (Britain, France, Italy, the United States), oil seemed to become a 'Power' of its own.

From Baba Gurgur to *Bagdadbahn*

For centuries mankind had exploited and revered the 'eternal flames' caused by seepages of oil and gas. Baba Gurgur ('Daddy Fire') in Mesopotamia (Iraq) is one such natural curiosity. Rubbery pitch was extracted from shallow, hand-dug wells and used to caulk boats. Only in the second half of the nineteenth century were deep wells sunk in the Russian Caucasus and in Pennsylvania in the United States, accompanied by the refining of crude oil into kerosene, used for lighting. By 1910 it was clear that another oil product, gasoline, had beat steam and electricity to become the driving force behind the car, having already enabled the Wright brothers to achieve powered flight. Two years later, Britain's Royal Navy began the long process of converting the fleet from coal- to oil-fired engines.

For Admiral Jacky Fisher, oil's higher power-to-weight ratio offered greater endurance at sea, without calling at coaling stations. Like Germany, Belgium, and France, Britain owed her wealth to an industrial revolution driven by domestic supplies of coal. However, Europe's only oilfields lay in the Carpathian Mountain range. In the absence of