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Shadow of the Sultan's Realm: The Destruction of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East

by Daniel Allen Butler

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In recent years, there has been a growing conviction in popular scholarship for a more pragmatic and *longue durée* approach to the study of the formation of the modern Middle East. In so doing, there have been many noteworthy—and some not so noteworthy—contributions to the field. Most center around the post Great War mandatory system and tell the story of the resulting states in relation to their European tutors. Scholars are beginning, however, to address the role of the long-neglected Ottoman Empire in this narrative and examine how the death of this once great empire actually shaped the region. It is with this idea that Daniel Butler begins his survey, attempting to show that the configuration of states we call the Middle East is as much a product of Ottoman machinations while the empire existed as European ones after its demise.

Butler begins his survey by outlining in broad strokes the contours of the formation and expansion of the Ottoman Empire. It is regrettable the author included this foundational chapter, because it marks the weakest section of the book. There are some glaring factual errors—his claims that the Ottoman Empire was some fourteen hundred years old being the most egregious. Mistakes such as these demonstrate an author trying to do too much, without possessing the necessary foundation to execute this part of the book. This sort of essentialism is all too common in monographs where the author attempts to synthesize huge swathes of history; however, given the author's stated aim is not a discussion of the origin and high-water mark of Ottoman rule, but its decline, this error can be forgiven.

Where this work really shines is when Butler compresses the time period and digs deeply into the material. His lead-up to the Great War makes for an interesting examination of the interactions of the Great Powers and the precipitous military build-up between the navies of Great Britain and the German Empire. Likewise, his discussion on the various campaigns as they pertained to Ottomans, once hostilities began, is detailed and lively written. His descriptions of the Ottoman Grandees and their dealings with their European counterparts read as fascinating character studies, and his analysis of the historical outcomes are authoritative and logical. The Ottoman triumvirate of Ismail Enver Pasha, Ahmed Jamal Pasha, and Mehmet Talat Pasha really comes alive, and the author pays close attention to them, from their highs as power brokers

in the Committee of Union and Progress after the 1913 coup to the ignominy of their deaths roughly a decade later.

One element that is all too common in works appearing in this genre though, is the lack of even an attempt to utilize primary source materials from the Middle East or to tell the Ottoman story from an Ottoman-centered perspective. While Topkapi Serai archives are currently closed to the public, making access to some critical official and diplomatic records difficult, often the voice of these narratives is decidedly European. We should laud Butler for his attempt at constructing a narrative that speaks from the Turkish point of view. While his bibliography is overwhelmingly constructed of European language sources, there are (as mentioned above) some critical biographies of Ottoman notables included. Though this is a European driven narrative, the Ottoman Empire does not appear as a passive—although not mute—witness to the events in which it was to participate, but rather as an active participant in its own downfall.

In the title of this work, the author suggests he will tackle the creation of the modern Middle East that emerged from the rubble of the Ottoman Empire, but there is very little of this element in the work. This is the Ottoman Empire's story and the book concludes with the treaties that ended the allied occupation of the Anatolian peninsula and the formal dissolution of the old empire. We see little commentary on the arcs and trajectories of the various kingdoms and states that would arise out of her wreckage. Interested parties should look to new entries to the market such as James Barr's *A Line in the Sand: The Anglo-French Struggle for the Middle East, 1914-1948*; Efraim Karsh's *Empires of the Sand: The Struggle for Mastery in the Middle East, 1789-1948*; or even the now well-aged but still excellent narrative in David Fromkin's *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East*.

In conclusion, aside from the unfortunate first chapter, there is much that is praiseworthy in this work. Butler is able to successfully straddle the line of an Ottoman work without forgetting the Ottomans. If one is looking for a lively and easily read book describing the death throes of the Ottoman Empire and its conduct prior to and through the Great War, then look no further. If one is looking for a work that leverages the formation of the modern Middle East into the equation, then some other works are likely better choices. With those caveats in mind, in the realm of nonspecialist literature on this critical period of Middle Eastern history, this book is a good option.