

Allenby and British Strategy in the Middle East 1917-1919

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Until the early 1990s - the insistent writings of John Terraine notwithstanding - the campaign in Palestine in 1917 and 1918 was, more often than not, portrayed by historians and military commentators as perhaps the most attractive, significant and viable alternative to the carnage of the Western Front. Influenced by the self-serving *War Memoirs* of David Lloyd George and by Basil Liddell Hart's equally persuasive advocacy of the strategy of indirect approach, the ongoing historical debate between 'Westerners' and 'Easterners' swung noticeably in favour of the latter for several decades from the 1930s onwards. The perceived futility of operations in France and Flanders led to an uncritical assumption, in the public mind, that the Palestine campaign had not only been less wasteful in human lives but had also been conducted with greater flair, boldness and tactical acumen. Above all, as Brian Holden Reid has suggested, popular views on the subject have been undeniably affected by the legacy of T.E. Lawrence. 'His glamour', observes Holden Reid, 'shone all the more brightly because of the brutal and indecisive character of the First World War which shattered the romantic illusions cherished by so many in 1914'. Even within the somewhat thin body of published works on the Palestine campaign, the exploits of Lawrence and the Arabs - of *marginal* military importance at best - have arguably received a disproportionate amount of attention.

The intense scholarly scrutiny to which the First World War has been subjected in recent years has, nevertheless, resulted in general agreement among British and Commonwealth historians that the Western Front was indeed the decisive theatre of operations and that, in the final analysis, the Entente powers had no real alternative to seeking the defeat of the Imperial German Army there. The strategic policies and priorities backed so doggedly between 1916 and 1918 by Sir William Robertson, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS), and Sir Douglas Haig, the Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force in France and Flanders (BEF), therefore seem to have been largely justified. Moreover, recent work by Ian Malcolm Brown, John Bourne, Richard Bryson, Paddy Griffith, John Lee, Robin Prior, Bill Rawling, Shane Schreiber, Gary Sheffield and Trevor Wilson has demonstrated that, under Haig, there was a detectable and fairly steep 'learning curve' in the British and Dominion formations in France and also that, by August 1918, the BEF was at the tactical and technological cutting edge of the Allied armies on the Western Front. It has, in fact,

taken some twenty or thirty years for a new generation of scholars to acknowledge the veracity of John Terraine's assertions that Haig's BEF engaged the main body of the main enemy in a continental war for the only time in British history and, in defeating that enemy, won the greatest *succession* of victories ever achieved by the British Army. If this revisionist school of First World War historians is at last overturning many of the most deeply-rooted popular assumptions about the nature and conduct of the war on the Western Front, the same challenging approach has not hitherto been fully applied to the campaign in Palestine. Now, in this work by Dr Matthew Hughes of University College, Northampton, we have a welcome attempt to fill a long-standing gap in the historiography of the Great War.

As Dr Hughes himself points out early in his illuminating study, he is not endeavouring to present yet another examination of Allenby's mercurial temperament and character but rather to analyse Allenby's command of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF) and to set his military operations firmly within the overall context of British strategy during and after the First World War. In the process, the author certainly provides a more balanced and substantial assessment of Allenby's achievements and shortcomings than one can find in the most recent biography by Lawrence James (*Imperial Warrior: The Life and Times of Field Marshal Viscount Allenby, 1861-1936*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1993). It is perhaps a pity that Hughes does not pay just a little more attention to Allenby's performance on the Western Front - particularly as commander of the Third Army from October 1915 to June 1917. The period immediately before Allenby's transfer to the Middle East tells us much about his relations with the CIGS, Robertson, and about his professionalism and loyalty - facets of his character which are by no means irrelevant to his command of the EEF. It is similarly a trifle disappointing that the author does not attempt to probe Allenby's personal and military relations with Major-General J.S.M. 'Jimmy' Shea, who was 'degummed' by Allenby for an indifferent performance as commander of the 30th Division at Arras in April 1917 but was later picked to command the 60th (London) Division, one of the principal British formations in the EEF. These, however, are only minor criticisms of what is undoubtedly a work of considerable importance and admirable scholarship.

Hughes maintains that, despite a patchy performance on the Western Front, Allenby really did make a difference to the EEF, improving its organisation and restoring its morale after the failures of his predecessor, Sir Archibald Murray, at Gaza in March and April 1917. In this respect at least, Hughes confirms, Allenby's reputation stands up to historical inspection. Allenby was, however, impeded in his task by the civil-military struggle in Whitehall, especially that between Lloyd George and Robertson in 1917 and early 1918. Because the politicians and military strategists were unable to agree on the objectives of the operations in Palestine or their degree of priority relative to those on the Western Front, Allenby's campaign never formed part of a 'comprehensive, unanimous British and Entente strategy'. The disputes between Lloyd George and Robertson therefore 'worked against the overall usefulness of the campaign to eventual victory'. As Hughes remarks, the origins of the struggle lay in the Prime Minister's desire to find a feasible alternative to the bloody attrition of Flanders while Robertson and Haig - believing that it was precisely there that the war would be won or lost - wished to concentrate all efforts on the Western Front and felt that any diversions were dangerous and pointless.

Hughes is commendably even-handed in his judgements on the nature and course of these disputes. Like David French before him, Dr Hughes claims that to divide Lloyd George and his military advisers into 'Easterners' and 'Westerners' is to use terms that are overworked, simplistic and misleading. For all his humble beginnings and gruff exterior, Robertson possessed too sharp a mind not to appreciate the need to protect Britain's route to India with an eastern strategy that would offer adequate control or influence in the Middle East both during and after the war. But, even when he had given due consideration to post-war imperial requirements, Robertson still saw only minimal value in the campaigns in Mesopotamia and Palestine, regarding them as a waste of vital energy and resources and preferring to deal with threats in the Middle East through 'small, specialist British-led military missions'. Lloyd George, for his part, knew only too well that Germany had to be defeated on the Western Front, though not necessarily by Britain. The Prime Minister 'hoped to save Britain and the empire for the post-war settlement in which Britain needed its army intact and territorial bargaining assets to help secure its imperial desiderata'. Hence, by changing the

thrust of national strategy, Lloyd George planned to save the British Army from destruction on the Western Front and shift the burden of defeating Germany there to the French and, after April 1917, the Americans. Robertson and Haig, on the other hand, were deeply convinced that, in pursuance of this 'long term' strategy, Lloyd George risked losing the war in the decisive theatre by relaxing the pressure on Germany on the Western Front in the short term, just when the German Army in France was showing signs of collapse. Matthew Hughes thus supports the view of David French that 'it was a question of "time" as much as emphasis that divided the two strategies'.

The author also convincingly clears Robertson and the General Staff of the charge that they prompted Allenby to inflate his requests for additional troops to such an extent that the Palestine campaign would be seen as totally impracticable and should consequently be abandoned or wound down. After examining the evidence in some detail, Hughes judges that Robertson's correspondence with Allenby, both private and official, underlines the consistency of Robertson's belief 'that the Palestine campaign was not going to knock the Turks out of the war, that the war in France was decisive and critical, and that Allenby needed to take these factors into account'. However, Robertson's determination 'to push his strategy must not be taken for deceit', and while his correspondence was 'robust' it was decidedly not 'conspiratorial'. In Allenby's case, Hughes argues, it was faulty military intelligence that led him to misread and exaggerate Turkish capabilities and intentions and so to continue sending alarmist reports and demands to London. His caution may well have been coloured by his own supposed reverses at Arras in April 1917 but, as a commander, he was not unique in striving to strengthen his forces as much as possible in order to cope with the 'vagaries of war'.

One of the most refreshing aspects of this book is that it challenges the long-established orthodoxy that, following Allenby's accession to the command of the EEF, the Palestine campaign was invariably conducted at a much higher level of tactical proficiency than was ever manifest on the Western Front. The view that prevailed for many years was that, as a cavalryman, Allenby - freed from the constraints of the Western Front - was in his tactical element in Palestine, where the terrain and conditions favoured mobile operations. Even allowing for the fact that he was not helped by the civil-military struggle in London - or that many of the EEF's trained infantry battalions were transferred to France in 1918 and replaced by inexperienced Indian units - Allenby's tactical performance in Palestine was, as Hughes reveals, far from unblemished. For example, at the Third Battle of Gaza, which began at the end of October 1917, Allenby's acceptance of Chetwode's frequently-praised plan to use the bulk of the mounted troops to attack the Turkish eastern flank at Beersheba is now deemed to have been a serious mistake. Although the vital wells at Beersheba were captured virtually intact, along with 90,000 gallons of water in Turkish reservoirs, these supplies were still not sufficient to sustain the units involved, leaving Allenby's cavalry 'impotent and stranded' in the arid land between Gaza and Beersheba and therefore negating 'the whole purpose of the flanking operation'. The lack of mounted troops opposite Gaza itself, where the strength of the Turkish defences was overestimated, in turn prevented rapid exploitation of success in the coastal sector and delayed the highly symbolic occupation of Jerusalem after the artillery of Bulfin's XXI Corps had created the opportunity for a breakthrough.

Matthew Hughes is equally critical of Allenby's Transjordan raids in March-April and April-May 1918. He is careful to set out the seemingly compelling military and political reasons for the mounting of operations across the Jordan in the spring of 1918. These included Allenby's 'wish to secure his right flank before advancing into northern Palestine; the need to cut Turkish communications along the Hejaz railway by seizing the Jordan valley and Amman; and the obvious desirability of giving extra encouragement and weight to the Arab revolt. In Hughes's words, if the EEF cleared the Turkish Fourth Army from the Amman area, there was a possibility that the Arab revolt 'could spread into southern Syria, harrying the Turks militarily and providing for British political control of the region after the war'. However, the emasculation of the EEF by the removal of trained troops for the Western Front, coupled with 'a peculiar mix of confusion and hopefulness' in planning, only resulted in operations in which Allenby deployed inadequate forces in bad weather to seize Amman without artillery, logistical backup or properly co-ordinated support from Feisal's Arab forces. The fortunes of the EEF were at a low ebb after the Transjordan raids, obliging Allenby to train his Indian replacements before resuming the offensive in the autumn of 1918. Curiously - given the amount of operational detail he includes on the Third Battle of Gaza and the Transjordan raids -

Hughes makes only passing references to the Battle of Megiddo - Allenby's 'masterpiece' in September 1918 - which dealt the Turks in Palestine a crushing blow and permitted Britain 'to consummate the Arab revolt by placing Feisal in Damascus as ruler of Syria'. This is admittedly a book about strategy but, as Hughes has earlier been critical of Allenby's tactical and command weaknesses in late 1917 and the first half of 1918, it is unfortunate that he does not devote at least a paragraph or two to Allenby's most successful all-arms battle - in which 'The Bull' was arguably at his operational peak.

Hughes himself is at his best when guiding the reader through the complex web of interrelated and shifting political and strategic factors that shaped British policy towards the Middle East after the fall of Damascus and the Armistice. Allenby's military achievements in Palestine and the installation of the pro-Hashemite Arabs in Damascus were indisputably of value in helping Britain to gain a peace settlement favourable to its imperial interests and to win French acceptance for, or acquiescence in, the occupation of Palestine and northern Iraq. Even so, for a variety of reasons - which Dr Hughes splendidly outlines - the French were unwilling to agree to adjustments of the eastern border of Syria in order to guarantee British communications across Arabia by way of a land route to Palestine from Iraq. Post-war *realpolitik* and retrenchment dictated that Britain withdrew from Syria and terminated its support for the Hashemite régime in Damascus.

Whatever the successes or failures of Allenby's period of command in the Middle East, Dr Hughes makes it clear that the Palestine campaign did not significantly contribute to the defeat of the Central Powers. Lloyd George's belief that by 'knocking away the props' - represented by allies such as Turkey- Germany itself would inevitably collapse ignored the fact that it was really Germany 'that propped up Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria and Turkey and not vice versa'. In addition, following Russia's departure from the war, Turkey was more interested in pursuing expansionist policies in the Caucasus than in retaining Palestine at all costs. Therefore, not even the occupation of Damascus would necessarily draw in the major part of the Turkish armies, and for the EEF to have played the decisive role in removing the Ottoman Empire from the war would have involved Allenby's forces in a march of hundreds of miles across the inhospitable Anatolian heartland to threaten Istanbul (Constantinople) - a logistical nightmare. Thus, Hughes asserts, there were only marginal benefits to be gained from the Palestine campaign after the capture of Jerusalem. 'Turkey's eventual surrender', he stresses, 'was a consequence of Germany's collapse in the autumn of 1918 and the breakout from Salonika that threatened Istanbul. This vindicates Robertson, as neither Gallipoli, Mesopotamia nor Palestine did anything to cause the Ottoman Porte's surrender in October 1918'.

Matthew Hughes is to be congratulated on an excellent study which casts much interesting new light on our knowledge of the First World War. He writes lucidly and his grasp of a wide range of material is impressive. This book is highly recommended to all students of the Great War and of British policy in the Middle East.

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