
H-France Review Vol. 12 (August 2012), No. 111

James Barr, *A Line in the Sand: the Anglo-French struggle for the Middle East, 1914-1948*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2011. xii + 359 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography and index. \$29.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0393070654.

Review by Adam Guerin, Eckerd College.

James Barr's *A Line in the Sand* begins in the archives in 2007, where the author stumbled upon a recently declassified British intelligence memorandum from early 1945. The shocking memo made the author's "eyes bulge" (p. ix) as it established that French security services had been secretly supplying arms and intelligence to local Haganah (Zionist militia) forces in British-occupied Palestine. In other words, while British and French soldiers were fighting together in Western Europe against Axis armies, French intelligence agents were supporting forces undertaking assassinations and bombings against the British police. This instance of Allied duplicity was not an isolated occurrence, but a deeply embedded trend that characterized British and French foreign policy in the Middle East from the Great War to the end of the mandates in Syria and Palestine.

A Line in the Sand traces the origins of Franco-Anglo imperial competition in the Middle East and maps the short- and long-term consequences for the nascent states of Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, leading to the establishment of Israel in 1948. While similar diplomatic histories focus on the ways in which indirect rule allowed European powers to carve up the former Ottoman lands into spheres of influence, Barr's work brings together biographies of some of the well- and lesser-known agents on the ground who facilitated and implemented the decisions hammered out in Paris and London. By drawing on a range of official and private government sources as well as personal correspondence and memoirs, Barr maps a more gritty geography of espionage, secret treaties, assassinations and state-condoned terrorism through the lives of the agents who cleared the ground for indirect empire. While the book is written primarily for a non-specialist audience, Barr's meticulous research contributes new perspectives for diplomatic and military historians, while his narrative verve and riveting prose make for a truly addicting read.

Fascinating biographical sketches of official and unofficial colonial agents--T. E. Lawrence, Gertrude Bell, Bertrand de Jouvenel, Edward Spears and a host of others--offer a window into the role of international espionage in the rapidly evolving interwar Middle East. By connecting policymakers in Paris and London with the street-level agents in Cairo, Damascus, the Hijaz and Palestine, Barr reminds us how European fears of national decline and late-imperial anxieties over access to resources and supply routes drove decades of cynical, sordid and at times ad hoc policy in the region. Over the years, British and French foreign ministries largely relied on patronage of local leaders--Arab nationalists, Bedouin guerrilla groups, pretender monarchs and Zionist extremists--in order to solidify indirect rule and strengthen their respective geopolitical positions. Demographics and the role of minority groups are central in this story, as Britain's fluctuating sponsorship of Jewish emigration to Palestine--a program which Barr characterizes as a "colossal blunder" (p. 156)--and France's preference for Christians in Lebanon "deeply antagonized the predominantly Muslim Arab population of both countries...with irreversible effects" (p. 358) and continually undercut the lofty ideals of self-determination and national sovereignty enshrined in the metropolises.

Barr clearly establishes the complicity of both the British and French governments in using various local militant groups at key moments as proxies for maintaining and reproducing colonial control, a precedent that did little more than teach indigenous populations that European support was mercurial and that terrorism was a viable alternative to diplomacy. While specialists will agree that this conclusion is not particularly novel, Barr's focus on the men and women charged with implementing the unstable, protean and ultimately disastrous policies emanating from London and Paris provides a thoroughly engaging vantage into the daily machinations of empire. French and British designs in the region, complicated at every turn by continental affairs, local contingencies and at times deeply personal animosity among the historical actors involved, emerge as frenetic, short-sighted attempts to maintain regional hegemony in the crepuscular years of empire. As the author concludes, "It is a story from which neither country emerges with much credit" (p. 359).

The book is divided into four parts and develops in a linear, chronological order. Part one, "The Carve Up," marks a welcome contribution to the historiography of international diplomacy following the Great War by decentering the story of the Versailles peace process and rooting the important debates over postwar reorganization squarely in the Middle East. Barr highlights the precariousness of the alliance that linked France and Great Britain during the war years. While the ephemeral wartime relationship may have papered over the seemingly timeless Franco-Anglo enmity, outright hostilities reappeared with renewed vigor with the question of the postwar imperial order. Access to Ottoman lands was the single priority for both the French and British, while the pesky promise of self-determination for the peoples of the Middle East represented an obstacle to be overcome by the respective foreign ministries. The most illuminating chapters focus on the individuals tasked with dividing up the Ottoman lands and reveal the relative ignorance of French and British so-called experts of the region. Among a cast of bold and blustering diplomats, the British Arabist Sir Mark Sykes emerges as a particularly brash arriviste while France's Francois George-Picot, a man "who seemed never to have been young" (p. 14), leaps from the page as a vicious lobbyist truly ahead of his time. Considering the tension between postwar competition and the promise of self-determination for former Ottoman subjects, the duo's eponymous agreement on the division of Greater Syria and the Arabian peninsula was clearly little more than a "shamelessly self-interested pact" (p. 26).

Part two, "Interwar Tensions," traces French and British clandestine maneuvering for control of the newly apportioned mandate zones of the Middle East. Through intermittent support of various clients in the region, both nations were able to wield considerable indirect power in determining the shape and tenor of emerging political and economic structures, particularly in Iraq, Syria/Lebanon and Palestine. It is in focusing on this system of patronage that Barr makes the most important intervention in the historiography. With an eye for events on the ground, he convincingly demonstrates the consequences of Britain's vacillating policies between support for the Hashemite king Feisal bin-Husayn al-Hashemi in Greater Syria and later for Jewish emigration to Palestine. Barr reminds us how both approaches were, in many respects, veiled attempts to contain French power in the region. Of course, Jewish emigration never served the political purpose that many of Barr's protagonists would have liked, and Zionist state-building during the Mandate period did little more than undermine British ability to rule effectively in Palestine. The French foreign ministry fares even worse in Barr's treatment, as it worked at every turn to undercut self-determination and to continue the bankrupt, essentialist *mission civilisatrice* by brutally suppressing the Druze Revolt in Syria and supporting the politicized Christian minority in Lebanon in an equally shortsighted attempt to curb British influence. In the end, Barr concludes that the European meddling during the interwar period did little more than introduce new social and political fractures in the region while exacerbating latent animosities that had been percolating since the late Ottoman period, all in an attempt to secure access to scarce resources (particularly oil), shore up political power and keep local nationalisms at bay.

In part three, “The Secret War,” Barr’s treatment of the World War II era in the Levant is particularly rich as he illustrates the complexities of de Gaulle’s wars against both the British and Vichy forces in the region. Through an exhaustive treatment of correspondence and secret memoranda he is able to illuminate the complex relationship among British army and police forces in Palestine, Zionist organizations such as Irgun, the Stern Gang, and the Palmach (elite fighting force of the Haganah), local nationalist leaders in Syria and Lebanon and French forces throughout the region. Barr shows that while the Palmach, Stern Gang and Irgun were continually trying to sabotage Vichy in Syria, there were also important moments of collaboration between Vichy spies and Zionist extremists. Most importantly, these relationships of political and material support did not disappear with the Allied and Free French victories beginning in 1941. As General de Gaulle retained much of the mid- to low-level Vichy bureaucracy in Syria, the largely inherited administration continued many of its established policies: suppressing Arab nationalism and subverting British authority in Palestine through proxy groups. Despite de Gaulle’s ascendancy as the leader of the Free French and an ally of the British government, his political goals in Syria were quite similar to those of his Vichy predecessors. In Barr’s telling, guarding against Arab rebellion and marginalizing British influence were two sides of the de Gaulle coin in the Middle East, as French reconnaissance, arms and logistics assisted Zionist terror campaigns against Arab nationalists and British police forces between 1941 and 1948.

In part four, “Exit,” (i.e., the departure of European powers from the region following World War II) Barr deftly contextualizes the violence in Palestine as direct reactions to British and French policies in the region beginning in the 1930s. Barr turns much of the conventional wisdom about well-known policy measures such as the Peel Commission (1936-1937) and the “White Paper” (1939) on its head. In Barr’s telling, these governmental responses to local violence between Palestinian Arabs and Jews were not measured attempts to mediate disputes and establish a sustainable, independent Palestine, but cynical, backroom arrangements that stoked and even created new forms of political violence. While he may stretch the argument too far at times, Barr shows how the emergence of Arab and Jewish terrorist groups was a logical response to an ever-changing European constellation of official and unofficial patronage for local groups. While the British were desperately trying to extricate themselves from an impossible, quickly-deteriorating colonial situation, “the mandatories’ abrupt changes of policy under pressure, and their refusal to institute meaningful, representative government, made it clear to those they ruled that violence worked” (p. 358).

While the biographical sketches and fast-paced prose give the book a type of spy novel feel, historians of the Middle East may take issue with many aspects of the narrative. On one level, the author falls victim to the same short-sightedness of which he accuses much of his cast of characters. By speaking the language of empire, Barr reproduces many of the Eurocentric blind-spots that his book otherwise does so well to illuminate. For example, when discussing Muhammed Abdullah Hassan, the founder of the Dervish State of Somalia, Barr repeatedly draws upon the British colonial lexicon by dismissively referring to the fierce anti-colonial leader as “the Mad Mullah” (p. 110) and does not deign to assess or elaborate on the anti-colonial critique—an unfortunate silencing of a particularly vibrant instance of anti-colonial revolt. Perhaps more importantly, when recounting the early days of the Druze Revolt in the supposedly “feudal” (p. 123) Hauran region of Syria, Barr questions, “How were the Druze so organized?” In response: “To the French men... the fingers of suspicion all pointed in a single direction: south, toward the British” (p. 150). While it is true that French agents clearly suspected British meddling during the Druze Revolt, works by Michael Provence, Hannah Batatu and Phillip Khoury paint a far more complicated picture of local agency and the considerable degree of coordination among indigenous rural and urban groups in Syria.[1]

For Barr, the importance of the Druze revolt has to do with British and French anxieties over political patronage and regional strategy, a focus which consequently reproduces the colonial assumption that the Druze could not have organized a sustained anti-colonial rebellion without outside help.

Interestingly, Barr's extensive bibliography references the works by Provence and Khoury, which leaves the reader to conclude that he sacrificed the historical complexity of which he is evidently aware in order to maintain the book's focus and lively narrative pace. Finally, as with many works which rely so heavily on biographical information, at times it seems as though Barr lets his fascination with his subjects get the better of his otherwise keen analytical approach. The suggestion, for example, that Winston Churchill's military strategy in Mesopotamia—including considering the use of mustard gas against civilians—was a product of his desire to “outshine his father, at any cost” (p. 105) is an unnecessary foray into tepid psychoanalysis that will rankle many readers.

While the English- and French-language sources are extensive, the lack of Arabic material severely limits the work as a whole and contributes to an uneven narrative. On the one hand, the wide scope of the account knits a complex web of interdependent developments spanning the Levant, the Hijaz and the North Atlantic worlds; while on the other hand, actors whose testimonies are unavailable or whose stories do not fit into the escapades of selected Europeans are generally ignored. In Barr's telling, historical agency is squarely rooted in the hands of a small cadre of powerful British and French diplomats, colonial agents and provocateurs who direct the affairs of the region. At times there are vague references to shadowy “Arab nationalists” or Bedouin and Druze rebels, yet beyond biographies of specific leaders such as Sultan al-Atrash or Sharif Husayn, these important facets of Middle Eastern history are left unexplored and the Arabic-language sources unexamined. A more inclusive treatment of local resistance and the popular politics that persisted outside European circles simply never materializes in the text.

Also owing to the biographical focus of the work and the fast narrative style, much of Barr's terminology use is quite loose, if not tendentious, and the reader is advised to pay very close attention to some key distinctions which Barr often glosses over. For example, when discussing Zionist groups, Barr references terrorists such as the Stern Gang almost interchangeably with the Haganah as part of the same “Zionist extremism.” The question of cooperation and divergence among Zionist groups in the 1930s and 1940s has occupied historians for decades and there is a vast range of credible interpretations. The basic fact, however, on which almost all historians agree, is that these groups had incredibly diverse goals and methods and cannot be lumped into a single anti-colonial, nationalist or terrorist entity.

In general, Barr's work bears the mark of a diligent researcher and a talented writer and it should come as no surprise that the work has been widely praised in the popular press. The author weaves together in novel ways a lively narrative of personalities, intrigues, duplicities and violence, but as far as substantive history is concerned, there is little new material in *A Line in the Sand*. Nevertheless, Barr's general point that European foreign policymakers continually sacrificed the palladia of sovereignty and self-determination in pursuit of geostrategic goals in the Middle East remains an important point for students of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict and anyone interested in the region.

NOTE

[1] Michael Provence, *The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005); Hannah Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of its lesser Rural Notables and their Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999); Phillip Khoury, “A Reinterpretation of the Origins and Aims of the Great Syrian Revolt, 1925-1927,” in George N. Atiyeh and Ibrahim M. Oweiss, eds., *Arab Civilization: challenges and responses: studies in honor of Constantine K. Zurayk* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), pp. 241-271.

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ISSN 1553-9172