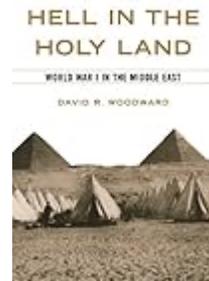


David R. Woodward. *Hell in the Holy Land: World War I in the Middle East.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006. xiv + 253 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2383-7.



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Soldiers of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force

Often hailed as “forgotten” or “lost” by hyperbolic publishers, the experiences of ordinary British soldiers are actually quite well represented in the historical literature on the First World War. Thousands of diaries, letters, and memoirs produced by participants in the conflict have appeared in print since 1918. There also exist numerous compilations of soldiers’ accounts. Authors such as Lyn Macdonald and Peter Hart have chronicled the major campaigns of the conflict through the eyes of ordinary participants. In 2005, two different authors published books claiming to contain the last reminiscences of Britain’s few surviving veterans of the conflict. While these accounts are often insightful and poignant, a large majority are set in France and Belgium. Thus, the world of the common soldier on the Western Front has become a familiar one, but the conditions faced by his counterparts in other theaters remain more obscure. *Hell in the Holy Land*, David Woodward’s recent study of the war in the Middle East, casts new light on the experiences of soldiers that, in relative terms, really have been “forgotten.” In the process, the book underlines the global character of the First World War.

Woodward chronicles British operations in Egypt and Palestine from early 1916 until the fall of 1918, focusing primarily on “the personal and individual side of this campaign” (p. xi). He begins by relating the experiences of British soldiers under U-boat attack in the Mediterranean en route to Egypt, as well as their first impressions of the Middle East. Personal letters and diaries offer numerous insights into their attitudes toward an unfamiliar culture as well as the illicit diversions that beckoned, among them alcohol, drugs, belly dancers, and prostitutes. Succumbing to such temptations could have damaging consequences. As Woodward notes, “British soldiers in Egypt in 1916 were contracting venereal disease at a rate four times greater than those in France” (pp. 29-30). Soldiers’ correspondence also contains evidence of the many relationships destroyed by long-term deployment to the Middle East.

The book is not simply a collection of anecdotes. Woodward has written previously on the conduct of the British war effort at the strategic level. Drawing on this background, he places the stories of individual soldiers in a broader context by introducing the principal

British commanders and explaining their conduct of operations. He notes that the theater “represented a return to Napoleonic warfare in which a great captain of war might impose his genius and personality on the outcome of a battle” (p. 57). Archibald Murray fell short of this ideal. Woodward credits the first commander of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF) with suppressing the Senussi revolt, securing the Sinai, and orchestrating an advance to the borders of Palestine. He is critical of Murray’s leadership at the First Battle of Gaza, however, and accuses him of “Monday morning quarterbacking” in its aftermath. Woodward also offers a balanced assessment of Edmund Allenby, Murray’s more celebrated successor. Famously ill-tempered and gruff, Allenby nonetheless brought a new energy to the campaign. Just as importantly, Woodward notes that Allenby “had advantages possessed by no British general in France: a massive superiority in men and material, and an open flank to attack” (p. 100). Allenby used this relative strength to win a series of victories, culminating in the capture of Jerusalem in December 1917. His dynamic leadership became increasingly reckless, however, as he continued to push into Jordan in 1918 despite reductions to his force. Rather than articulating a central argument, Woodward is content to let the soldiers’ accounts speak for themselves. Nevertheless, several themes emerge from this study. First, Woodward shows that service in the EEF was not necessarily an easy assignment compared to the Western Front. Soldiers were more likely to survive the war in the Middle East, where battles were smaller and shorter, but mobile warfare and a hostile climate contributed to acute shortages of food and water as well as a high prevalence of disease. Moreover, the possibility of home leave was exceedingly remote. According to Woodward, “when the war ended, the EEF contained a sizeable number of men who had been in Egypt since 1914-1915” (p. 208). Sec-

only, Woodward emphasizes the extent to which the EEF was a multinational force. In the summer of 1918, only one of its eleven divisions was entirely British, with units from “Armenia, Britain, Burma, Algeria, Australia, New Zealand, India, South Africa, Italy, France, Singapore, Hong Kong, the West Indies, and Egypt” (p. 181). Three battalions of Jewish soldiers also served with Allenby.

Finally, the book touches on the racial and religious tensions that permeated the war in the Middle East. The accounts of British soldiers reveal negative stereotypes of the local Arab population as well as harsh treatment of the *fellahin*, the Egyptian laborers on whom the EEF relied. In addition, Woodward notes that Allenby hesitated to characterize the campaign as a “Crusade” out of concern for the morale of the thousands of Muslims under his command. Many of his subordinates, however, had no compunction about emphasizing its religious connotations to the British soldiers, who responded positively. Given the multiethnic composition of the EEF and the religious issues raised by a campaign in the Holy Land, it is unfortunate that the book is based solely on the diaries and correspondence of British soldiers. Records produced by non-European participants in the campaign are certainly less abundant, but they can be unearthed. Censor’s reports held in the British Library’s Oriental and India Office Collection, for example, provide some inkling of the impressions of Indian sepoy regarding the war in the Middle East. Examining such material would have enabled Woodward to provide a fuller picture of the experiences of ordinary soldiers in the EEF. That said, *Hell in the Holy Land* provides a welcome look at the experiences of soldiers in the Middle East from 1916-1918. It also sheds light on a campaign that has been dismissed as a sideshow, but had consequences that continue to reverberate today.

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