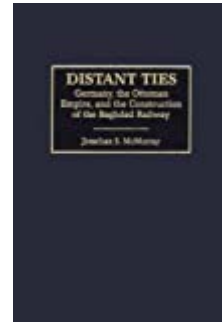




**Jonathan S. McMurray.** *Distant Ties: Germany, the Ottoman Empire, and the Construction of the Baghdad Railway.* Westport and London: Praeger, 2001. x + 155 pp. \$67.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-275-97063-5.



**Reviewed by** Mustafa Aksakal (Department of History, Fordham University)

**Published on** H-German (September, 2003)

## Building the Baghdad Railway

### Building the Baghdad Railway

In *Distant Ties* Jonathan McMurray sets out to accomplish a worthy task: to unearth the contributions of Ottoman officials and workers involved in the construction of the Baghdad Railway. Wishing to “bring to life a fascinating intercultural dimension of the railway by analyzing the railway’s rich human legacy” (p. 2), McMurray takes a promising departure from the voluminous and more traditional literature on the Baghdad Railway’s diplomatic and financial history. *Distant Ties* argues that the close German-Ottoman interaction during the construction of the railway shaped German-Turkish relations at the turn of the twentieth century, and that, in fact, this historical connection continues to shape German-Turkish relations down to our own day. McMurray’s elegantly written study draws on unpublished and published archival documentation, including records of the crucial Deutsche Bank, which oversaw and financed the greatest extent of the railway’s construction between 1903 and 1918. Based on the author’s findings, however, only scant material seems available to illuminate the day-to-day interaction between Germans and

Ottomans along the construction sites. And even less evidence is convincingly presented here to support the claim that the experience of the Baghdad Railway construction exercised a continued, and positive, influence over German-Ottoman/Turkish relations throughout the twentieth century.

The study’s central idea of conceptualizing the Baghdad Railway as a project of German-Ottoman “intercultural cooperation,” therefore, remains largely undeveloped (p. 40). Too rare are McMurray’s forays into the world of “personal relationship, which,” as the author claims, “the Germans forged with their Turkish counterparts,” and which “served as the foundation of the cultural partnership” (p. 137). In 1912, we learn, over 15,700 unskilled workers labored on the famous railway, as “small working towns emerged complete with coffeehouses, beer taverns, gramophones, and even cinemas” (pp. 87-88). But a fuller description of these loci of cultural encounter is surprisingly missing; and especially so if the author is correct in his estimation that the “railway’s success, more often than not, depended on the ability of German officials and Ottoman laborers to work in

concert” (p. 86).

The vast part of the book, therefore, deals with older rather than newer questions. Who was behind the Baghdad Railway project, the German Foreign Office or profit-motivated businessmen? To what extent had the Ottoman Empire become a German “satellite” by 1914? In discussing these questions, McMurray initially takes the position that the railway was not a product of Wilhelmine *Weltpolitik*, that the Deutsche Bank treated the railway as a business opportunity, and that the Ottoman Sultan Abulhamid II pushed for the railway’s construction more than anyone else, including Kaiser Wilhelm II and his ambassador at Constantinople, Freiherr Marschall von Bieberstein. But McMurray’s own evidence speaks to the contrary, since it is clear, for example, that Marschall pressured the director of the Deutsche Bank, Georg von Siemens, to sign off on the preliminary 1899 concession despite Siemens’ opinion that the railway would make for risky business and little profit. The studies by Boris Barth and Lothar Gall, for example, show clearly that the Deutsche Bank was by no means acting independently.[1]

There are very understandable limits when it comes to the languages in which a scholar is able to conduct research, but the absence of Ottoman, or even modern Turkish, sources in this study makes itself obvious in critical ways. One example is the German characterization as to why the construction of the railway was not progressing more successfully. While German observers often blamed construction problems on Ottoman “fanaticism and fatalism” (p. 100) as well as Ottoman on “laziness and the religious dogma” (p. 101), the voices of the Ottomans are entirely unrepresented. In a study whose avowed intention aimed at emphasizing Ottoman contributions, the reader will be disappointed to find that Ottoman workers and officials remain nameless and without a role. In fact, the Ottoman government is characterized from the German perspective as a conniving, unreasonable partner, resource-sucking and inhumane (withholding adequate food and shelter from workers so as to force the railway company to foot the bill [p. 124]). McMurray surmises that “[i]n the 1916 fiscal year alone, the company suffered great losses while the Turkish govern-

ment [sic] stashed 10 million francs of profits into its coffers” (p. 126). And finally, the study claims that ironically the “Turks’ greatest contribution to the railway was their own obstructionism” (p. 131).

While readers will find parts of the general discussion of the making of the Baghdad Railway succinct and useful, aspects of Ottoman history are often mis-portrayed or erroneous. In the Balkan Wars, sixty-nine percent of the Ottoman Empire’s European population was lost, not sixty-nine percent of the entire Ottoman population. Mustafa Kemal (later Atatürk) was not a cabinet member in 1917, nor was Talaat Bey a German-trained officer. The author’s claim that after 1911 the “the railway once again became a purely commercial enterprise” (p. 85), because of the new Ottoman government that succeeded Sultan Abdulhamid II, is hardly convincing. The governments following the so-called Young Turk Revolution of 1908 were just as focused on the empire’s security as the former sultan. The truce signed by the Ottomans with the British ending Ottoman involvement in World War I, moreover, was signed at Mudros on October 30, 1918, not October 20. Sayyid Talib al-Naqib is more accurately characterized as a sometime Arab decentralist, opposition politician, and a three-time elected member of the Ottoman parliament rather than “a warlord from Basra” (p. 96). While *Distant Ties* points into interesting new directions, therefore, its full potential remains unrealized.

Note:

[1]. Boris Barth, *Die deutsche Hochfinanz und die Imperialisten: Banken und Aussenpolitik vor 1914* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1995); Lothar Gall, “The Deutsche Bank from its Founding to the Great War, 1870-1914,” in *The Deutsche Bank*, ed. Gall et al. (London: Weidenfeld, 1995).

Copyright (c) 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

**Citation:** Mustafa Aksakal. Review of McMurray, Jonathan S., *Distant Ties: Germany, the Ottoman Empire, and the*

*Construction of the Baghdad Railway*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. September, 2003.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8112>

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).