



Setting the Desert on Fire: T. E. Lawrence and Britain's Secret War in Arabia, 1916-1918

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It was T. E. Lawrence's classic *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* that made the Arab Revolt a legend and helped turn the British intelligence officer into the mythical "Lawrence of Arabia." But the intrigue behind the revolt and its startling consequences for the present-day Middle East have remained a mystery for nearly one hundred years. James Barr spent four years trawling declassified archives in Europe and crossing the hostile deserts of the Middle East to re-create the revolt as the international drama it really was. A colorful cast of Arab sheiks, British and French soldiers, spies, and diplomats come together in this gripping narrative of political maneuvering, guerrilla warfare, and imperial greed. *Setting the Desert on Fire* is a masterly account of a key moment in the history of the Middle East, and a portrait of Lawrence himself that is bright, nuanced, and full of fresh insights into the true nature of the master mythmaker.

Setting the Desert on Fire: T. E. Lawrence and Britain's Secret War in Arabia, 1916-1918 Details

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Sam Norton says

Certainly a worthwhile read. Where the film "Lawrence of Arabia" would lead you to believe that Lawrence was a lone British officer sent out into the desert to find and recruit the Arab tribes to fight against the Ottomans. "Setting the Desert on Fire" shows that, as with most historical films, what's on the screen isn't necessarily what actually happened.

"Setting the Desert on Fire" also seems to be symptomatic of a pattern in historical writing that I have come to notice, in particular in writing on the Middle East. The course of the narrative often seems to become bogged down in minutiae, and a greater understanding of the general course of historical events seems to be lost. I guess, however, this is a necessary evil, as the minutiae may be important, depending on why you are reading the book. As someone who is reading for pleasure, with a slight academic interest in this particular historical period, it makes it somewhat more difficult to grasp the overall thrust of the story.

Pbwritr says

Fabulous book! Really went into the intricate details of the political and diplomatic situation in the Middle East during WWI. Amazing to see how Lawrence quickly became an advocate and a mentor for some of the tribes, with 2 primary goals: to prevent the French from claiming Lebanon when the war was over, and to gain Arab help against the Turks, which would, in turn, buttress their claims for territory. Lawrence moved back and forth across the area and Egypt, negotiating with the Arabs, pleading with his bosses, arranging logistics, and helping to blow up railroads. Definitely inspires me to watch the movie again in closer detail.

Mike says

Setting the Desert on Fire: T. E. Lawrence and Britain's Secret War in Arabia, 1916-1918 is a good **4 Star** account of the WWI conflict in the Middle East, pitting the Arabs and the British against the Ottoman Empire. Despite the subtitle, T.E Lawrence is not the sole focus of the book. Barr puts Lawrence's action in perspective, looking at how the entire theater campaign unfolded. Political, diplomatic and military events are covered in some detail. Many others had roles in the desert fighting and get recognized here. Here is an account of the attack to take Jeddah and gain a foothold for the British:

(view spoiler)

The political machinations are a constant impact on events. The British have to abide by the Sykes-Picot agreement but are reluctant to give France a role. The French have done little to help. The scene when Jerusalem is taken, the first time in Christian hands since the Crusades, was well described:

(view spoiler)

Despite the heroics of TEL, he and his band of Arab guerillas did not win single-handedly as the embellished story would have us believe. His raids and struggles are told as they supported or did not support the overall campaign strategy. My first exposure to TEL was the epic, "Lawrence of Arabia". That man is only partly recognized here and many events did not occur as presented. History is not as dramatic as Hollywood depicts. Read this book and learn about others who fought. The impact of the "caliphate" on the islamic world then is also of interest. Learn why it is an important construct and why it is important today.

Lee Tempest says

Hm. I admit, I'm drawn to historic tales of fellow Englishmen of which I resonate with, but not this one. James Barryman, as a much-vaunted historian unfortunately disappointed me. I find it so because he's one of those people who fail to make T.E. Lawrence's story a more personal one. Ah well, might as well get Lawrence's actual book, the Seven Pillars, that'll be more of an arsekick.

Heather says

Fascinating history to delve into!

David says

A funny one this. It's probably more of a 3.5 as a rating, but the scope of activities and the number of personalities involved meant that I found myself constantly flicking to the list of key figures and the maps. So much is condensed into so few sentences that all names became confusing and that can be quite frustrating when you can't get into the flow of reading.

I knew next to nothing about the events in Arabia during World War One, other than the famous tale of attacking Aqaba from the desert rather than from the sea, and so while this is clearly a well researched book and I have learnt a great deal, I probably haven't got as much out of Barr's research as someone who was already more aware of the main events.

There are some wonderful anecdotes about those involved in the guerilla war that Lawrence helped the Arabs wage against the Ottomans and there are some fairly startling insights into the foreign policies of the great powers, who were still jockeying for position to both protect their existing interests and seek to expand their empires further. As Barr himself summarises, the success of Lawrence's tactics was astonishing and was ahead of its time, but the betrayal felt by the Arabs has had an impact that has trickled down to the present day.

Gareth Evans says

Clear, well-organised account of the war in Arabia. Other reviewers have commented that it is rather dry, and it certainly is. However, the story is so interesting that the book becomes quite compelling. It's not without colour, and there are a number of colourful and some quite moving incidents presented in Barr's understated text. Perhaps, Barr could have introduced more colour and certainly more background to the major protagonists. Nevertheless it is a compelling read. perhaps more of a 3.5 than a 4, but I will give it the benefit of the doubt.

CaldoHendo says

When we think of the First World War the images that come to mind tend to be those of the Lord Kitchener's imposing face, the trenches and, after the conflict ended, the poppy fields at Flanders. Yet that conflict, which engulfed most of the most powerful nations in the world at the time, was fought over a much larger area. As well as the dividing line between the German and Russian empires, there was a third axis to this conflict in the Middle East.

T.E. Lawrence, Lawrence of Arabia, was the central figure in the British scheme to stir up an Arab uprising in the moribund Ottoman Empire. Under his leadership, Arab soldiers pioneered new methods of guerrilla warfare in which the enemy was continually debilitated and pushed back, if not entirely defeated. This strategy consisted largely of acts of sabotage upon the Hejaz Railway, built by the Germans and a central artery in the Ottoman Empire. Lawrence, with the assistance of Prince Faisal, a future King of Iraq, amongst others, indulged in an almost schoolboy-ish level of wanton destruction while General Edmund Allenby's troops pushed the Ottomans further and further north.

James Barr's excellent book *Setting the Desert on Fire* tells the whole compelling story, from Lawrence's bravery and cunning to the British duplicity in promising the same area of land to both the Arabs and the French. The conflict may have taken place one hundred years ago but what happened there is extremely relevant to the problems in the Middle East today.

Joe says

Despite the awful title this is actually rather a good piece of popular history. Most accounts of the Arab revolt are closely centred on T.E. Lawrence and tend to be biographical or semi-biographical in approach. However, he was one of a number of British soldiers operating behind enemy lines, with the Arabs, in the Hejaz, and the author has done a good job giving us a broader picture. Lawrence is still a fascinating and critical figure in the venture, but the wider perspective is very welcome.

Jerome says

An excellent general history of the Arab Revolt. Unlike other books on the topic, Barr puts Lawrence's role in context, including the activities of all the other players involved: Feisal, Abdullah, the French, the deluded Turks, the rather typical Germans, and all the various Brits who were busy squabbling, interfering, and generally being a pain in the butt.

Barr is very good at providing context and background. He describes the conflicts between the British and the French, the disputes between political and military leaders over the necessity and aims of the Arab Revolt, and Lawrence's complicated relations with his nominal superiors. Barr gives us a good portrait of Sherif Hussein and his sons, explaining their mixed motivations of nationalism and self-interest. He describes the contrast between the Islamic zeal of the Arabian sherif versus the nationalism of the Syrian Arabs.

Barr gives the right amount of coverage to all the related issues, such as Allenby's Palestine campaign, the Balfour declaration, the Sykes-Picot agreement, and others. Barr also includes his own observations regarding his personal visits to the sites where the events of the revolt took place. These first-hand accounts are often inserted into the narrative, and they are both helpful in gaining insight as well as annoying in breaking up the narrative.

In the epilogue Barr writes "Just as Husein was armed by the British government in 1916, Osama bin Laden was one of those armed by the US government in the 1980s to fight a war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. The supply of gold and guns to both recipients has had disturbing and unforeseen consequences: such as the dangers of war by proxy." While it is convenient for making a point, there is actually no evidence that the US ever armed bin Laden during the Soviet war; while the US did arm radical Islamists like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Jalaluddin Haqqani, these mujahideen never actually became international "terrorists" in the mold of al-Qaeda, they were eventually defeated or co-opted by the Taliban when they took over.

But, in all, an excellent history of the Arab revolt.

Kent says

I was glad to have come across this title at the library and quite enjoyed reading it. I had known the name of T.E. Lawrence, but discovered that I knew very little of his story. This book really filled in a big gap in my knowledge of world history, particularly the history of the Middle East.

Tamgrade says

I picked up this book by chance at a local used bookstore without knowing much about T.E. Lawrence besides the fact that he was "Lawrence of Arabia" and someone had made a famous movie out of his life at some point. The book has an interesting thesis: T.E. Lawrence was one of the first military leaders to realize how changing technology could strengthen the hands of guerilla warriors. This allowed him to champion a cause (self-determination in the Middle East) that seemed extremely unlikely and make it into a success. However, because that cause had always seemed so unlikely, the British over-promised several allies, and

this overpromising set the stage for enduring conflicts in the region.

It's a solid premise, and well-argued in the book. However, in narrating the events of the military campaign, the book sometimes feels bogged down. It's possible that someone who is very interested in military history would really enjoy it: I've never read much military history and I struggled to remember all the actors, their motivations, and their role in the conflict. I would recommend this if you want to know more about Lawrence of Arabia or want to understand some of the trench-level decisions in the Middle East during World War I that set the stage for major conflicts like the conflict in Israel-Palestine. But if you're not already interested in military history, I do not think this is a book that will change your mind.

Michael Morris says

Written by a british scholar, so it reads accordingly. Thus 3 stars. But if you can get past the writing, the story is fascinating and still very relevant today with the wounds caused by the British "betrayal" of the Arabs still unhealed...

Lynne-marie says

After having read [Hero](#) and [Gertrude Lawrence: Queen of the Desert](#), I was eager for more stories of the Arabian peninsula during WWI, and this seemed just the ticket. Sadly it turned out to be a military man's account of the goings on of the formal haggling of the state department, the Arab Bureau and the British intelligence, with only weak asides about Lawrence or the actual action in the desert. It was, I'll be frank, just the thing for a military buff, but not for the Arabian enthusiast or a devotee of Lawrence.

Dermott Hayes says

Broad but detailed account of T.E. Lawrence's role in Britain's imperial ambitions in early 20th century Arabia and the Middle East. Although ostensibly intended as another front in the Great War conflict, Lawrence's machinations gave this conflict of camel guerrilla warfare, double dealing diplomacy and downright treachery, an entirely different perspective. Anyone who wants to understand the underlying complexity of today's Middle Eastern maze of alliances, should read this.
