

ANGLO-TURKISH RELATIONS IN THE 20TH CENTURY

Pioneering a new research agenda on the history of UK-Turkey relations, the British Institute at Ankara introduced this strategic research initiative in 2015 in combination with the undertaking of a major research project, entitled *Turkey and Britain 1914–1952: From Enemies to Allies*, that ran until 2019. This strategic research initiative aims to build on this project in order to create an active and sustainable network of scholars from Turkey, the UK and other countries that will promote diverse approaches to the study of the early Turkish Republic, especially its foreign policy, its relationship with Britain and its place in the world order. Research and funding administered under this initiative will support diversity and collaboration across different historiographic traditions (for example, diplomatic and military history, oral history and microhistory) with the aim of unearthing and accessing a full range of archival and other source material in the UK, Turkey and elsewhere. The objective is to promote the exploration of new themes significant for the understanding of bilateral relations in the past, as well as their development in the present and future.

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Britain's Levantine empire, 1914–1923

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My first book, *Britain's Levantine Empire, 1914–1923*, was published in summer 2021 by Oxford University Press. The project had begun with my 2009 MPhil thesis, which focused on the 1918–1923 British occupation of Istanbul, and then continued through my PhD research, which compared British actions in the city with those in wartime Thessaloniki and Alexandria, while still more sources from archives in Turkey were added during my postdoctoral fellowship at the BIAA in 2014–2017. Ironically it was the global pandemic, so disruptive to the lives of many researchers, that provided me with the time and space to finalise the full draft and work through the changes requested by editors and reviewers. Covid-19 has, however, prevented me from properly introducing the book at the usual conferences, lectures and book launches; therefore, I will attempt to do so here.

At the outbreak of war in 1914, Britain had little direct control in the eastern Mediterranean beyond the territories of Egypt and Cyprus, both of which remained under the nominal sovereignty of the enemy Ottoman empire. Over the next four years, this informal empire multiplied in its extent and intensity, growing to encompass an imperial archipelago of garrisoned islands, major cities, such as Thessaloniki, Batumi and Istanbul under temporary occupation, and vast tracts of the Ottoman empire's Arab provinces. But as Britain's military presence in the eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea reached its high-water mark in 1919, it simultaneously began its retreat. By 1923 British troops had

evacuated most of the places occupied in the course of the war and armistice period. A new division of the eastern Mediterranean, still visible in the political borders of the present day, was cemented by the Treaty of Lausanne. Although the post-war treaties confirmed British control of Palestine and Iraq, they dashed hopes for a far greater extension of British power and more radical remaking of the eastern Mediterranean that had appeared possible. In the aftermath of these losses, British statesmen and diplomats attempted to save face, obscuring the significance and extent of military control that Britain had established and hoped to maintain in the post-Ottoman world.

The book explores this largely forgotten off-shoot of empire, presenting a novel assessment of the expansion and contraction of British military rule in the period. It argues that the changing itineraries of British personnel produced a new form of military imperialism spanning the eastern Mediterranean and an imagined geography of the Levant as a fragmented but distinct space between Europe and the Orient. The book shows how British official policy and off-duty behaviours were formulated in accordance with these ideas, setting the stage for overextension, confrontation and retreat.

I base this argument on my readings of the testimony of British servicemen and officials who toured the region, alongside documents from state archives in Britain, France, Cyprus, Egypt and Turkey. The widespread feeling 'that the East is now soon to be the scene of historic events', as one British sailor wrote approaching the Dardanelles, and the



British sailors guard the British Embassy in Istanbul (Bibliothèque nationale de France).

novelty of their surroundings encouraged servicemen to record their experiences in letters, diaries and memoirs. My book draws on over one hundred such individuals' testimonies, most of them unused by historians so far. Common themes emerge between soldiers' narratives, allowing for the generalisation of their feelings, thoughts and experiences in the eastern Mediterranean. Their lives centred on three distinct spaces – the military camp, the transport ship and the Levantine city – each with its own characteristics, which were compared, contrasted and gave each other meaning. Histories examining soldiers' experiences in the First World War have focused on the trenches of the western front and other battlefields, neglecting their participation in these complex military geographies away from the front lines.

By shifting focus from the western front to the eastern Mediterranean the book helps challenge the myth of the First World War as one of stasis and immobility. While infantry advances in the battles of the Somme and Verdun were measured in yards, the Mediterranean saw the establishment of convoys and ferry services that brought men and material thousands of miles across largely unobstructed waterways. Military and naval histories of the First World War in the Mediterranean have tended to measure the significance of such operations by their contribution to the Allied victory over the Central Powers, neglecting their polyvalent impact on the residents of coastal towns and the thousands of soldiers, prisoners, labourers and refugees who moved between them. The mobilization of unprecedented tonnages of shipping could not help but have wider material, cultural and political impacts.

Indeed, this web of logistics was at the heart of Britain's Levantine empire. Warships and transports traversing the Mediterranean deposited people and things that then took on

local perambulations in and around the region's port cities. These new traffics intersected and interrupted established urban circulations and fed back into larger maritime circuits. In this sense, Britain's Levantine empire was constructed on two planes, dependent on the dominance of the maritime routes of the Mediterranean and the penetration of the urban network of its port-city outlets. Military transports and warships spread the sediment of Britain's Levantine empire.

In addition to the material they conveyed, ships bore new ideas of governance and social organisation to their waypoints in the Mediterranean. The transport ship occupies a central place in the narratives of soldiers. The ship offered servicemen a place to write and reflect, while officers attempted to refine an idealised form of military order in the temporary isolation offered by sea voyages. Against the routine-bound inactivity of life on board, the apparent chaos of the city, multiplied by the logistical operations of war, was all the more overwhelming.

Servicemen greeted the cities of the eastern Mediterranean with demands for their synchronisation and alignment with the disciplinary regimes formed on board ship and in the military camps to which they were dispatched. The experience of the built and human environment of the city and efforts to alter them form a major topic of research of the book. Camp commandants took on the roles of urban planners, developing an idealised model of the barracks and camp that stood in contrast to the disorder of the pre-existing city. The book provides an important revision to the history of urban planning by emphasising the importance of military inspiration in major contemporary developments in the field such as the contemporaneous urban plans for Thessaloniki and Alexandria.

It was not only these cities' streets that were altered by occupation, however, but also the life that filled them. Servicemen and their commanders created new cultural

institutions in the eastern Mediterranean city where existing opportunities for leisure and pleasure were seen as either insufficient or harmful to the health and morality of British troops. Sporting clubs and libraries comprised one end of the spectrum of off-duty entertainments, while at the other stood cabarets, bars and brothels. Although such sites drew both servicemen and local subjects, they often provoked the ire of the wider population, and the book devotes significant focus to the attempt of military authorities to police the boundaries and times of leisure time and nightlife.

Soldiers' testimonies and the complaints of local subjects reveal how the populations of the cities under study were acutely affected by the arrival of British and Allied soldiers. Colonial subjugation in Alexandria, uneasy neutrality in Thessaloniki and defeat and occupation in Istanbul led to tensions between soldiers and civilians that frequently erupted into violence, conflicting interpretations of which were given in the reports of British and local authorities. Military commanders responded with the implementation of new legal measures, contributing to an unprecedented militarisation of the policing of urban crime and disorder. By addressing this, the book considers an understudied aspect of the lives of servicemen – their interaction with local populations – too often thought to be defined by isolation at the front.

Appreciating how soldiers were transported from their home recruitment centres to developing fronts around the eastern Mediterranean is key to understanding not only the necessary material underpinning of this new imperial edifice, but the sequential encounters that defined experience of it. The monotony of sea voyaging brought disparate cities up against each other. The ports of Thessaloniki, Alexandria and Istanbul were conflated by the men who passed between them into a single demographic and geographic constituency of empire, known by the name, among others, of the Levant. There was no consensus on the borders of the Levant and doubts as to whether it formed one contiguous space. Instead, the Levant remained above all an imagined geography, one mentally rather than territorially mapped. This Levantine geography approximated the logistical network of British military power in the Mediterranean, centred on Alexandria, Thessaloniki and, after 1918, Istanbul. It is these port cities, through which British military material and human resources coursed, that formed the conceptual keystones of the Levantine imaginary. By focusing on these sites, the book contributes to the growing number of comparative studies of the cities of the eastern Mediterranean.

British officers and their men were both fascinated and confused by the social, religious and ethnic distinctions of the cities they encountered. But despite their diversity, the physical, behavioural and cultural commonalities that spanned the shores of the Mediterranean seemed to necessitate some collective identification, and so people and not just places were referred to as Levantine. Historians have

used the term Levantine as an unproblematic, if vague and anachronistic, way to refer to long-resident western European populations in and around the Ottoman empire. The book shows the term 'Levantine' to have been as malleable and invested with as many meanings as its geographic corollary. From the perspective of British officers and officials, the characteristics of the population of the Levant invited and even necessitated British intervention and rule. The book provides a first rigorous theoretical treatment of the place of the Levant and the Levantine in early 20th-century discourse, subjects of growing academic and amateur historical interest.

Though servicemen and their commanders often wrote of such grand tracts of space as the Orient, they equally frequently drew distinctions on a micro-geographical level. In the streets of the eastern Mediterranean city, they noted a range of divisions attached to differing cultural and racial hierarchies – by employment, religion, ancestry, residence, habits and dress – that criss-crossed the same space. The Levantine city was experienced as a place where conceptualised geographical and civilisational units like Europe and the Orient were granulated and interspersed. The book's engagement with the idea of the Levantine brings into question the assumed geo-civilisational fault lines that retain a dispiriting popularity in analyses of the Mediterranean and Middle East.

