

[Review] James Stejskal (2018) Masters of mayhem: Lawrence of Arabia and the British military mission to the Hejaz

Article (Accepted Version)

Alkabani, Feras (2021) [Review] James Stejskal (2018) Masters of mayhem: Lawrence of Arabia and the British military mission to the Hejaz. *Journal of British Studies*, 60 (1). pp. 249-251. ISSN 0021-9371

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JAMES STEJSKAL. *Masters of Mayhem: Lawrence of Arabia and the British Military Mission to the Hejaz*. Oxford: Casemate, 2018. Pp. 184. \$32.95 (cloth).

The allure of Lawrence of Arabia has endured the test of time and captured the public imagination for over a hundred years since the end of the Great War. Thomas Edward (T. E.) Lawrence has proven to be one of the most iconic and continuously fascinating figures of the twentieth century. Historian, archaeologist, writer, poet, cultural cross-dresser, soldier, and military visionary extraordinaire, Lawrence remains an exceptional Orientalist who has been the subject of countless studies, biographies, films and documentaries, many of which continue to present different (and often paradoxical) aspects of the “Blond Bedouin’s” personae. For many, Lawrence is mostly remembered for his involvement in the Great Arab Revolt (1916–1918), which contributed to the eventual collapse of the Ottoman Empire, leading to the implementation of the controversial Sykes-Picot Agreement, whose ramifications continue to resonate today.

The publication of James Stejskal’s *Masters of Mayhem* in 2018 commemorates the centenary of the end of the Great War and adds a specialized military perspective to the extensive, multidisciplinary scholarship on Lawrence and Britain’s involvement in the Arab Revolt. Stejskal’s book repositions Lawrence’s roles and achievements within a wider, intricate network of unorthodox alliances, duplicitous dealings, and unconventional guerrilla warfare highlighting Lawrence’s political genius and his ability to manipulate what has been seen as the Anglo-Arab marriage of convenience and steer the action in what was regarded as a sideshow, which proved fundamental to the Allies’ eventual victory.

This is not solely a book about T. E. Lawrence, however; it is a synthesis of the collective efforts (and conspiracies) that led to what was seen as the success of the brief Anglo-Arabian alliance in World War I. Stejskal’s introduction, prologue, ten chapters,

epilogue and six appendices, along with a wide range of visual materials (maps and images), provide detailed accounts of the people, places, historical circumstances, incidents, and unconventional military strategies that led to the ultimate defeat of the Ottoman Army. Stejskal pays particular attention to the experimentation with and implementation of what are known as combined operations: the delicate balance of administering the right combination of Bedouin “tip and run” traditional warfare techniques and regular army tactics and equipment, which served as a prototype for future British operations.

The book is a treasure trove for military history enthusiasts; Stejskal provides vivid reconstructions of battlefield confrontations, calculated deployments of reconnaissance strategies, cunning deception maneuvers and diversion plans, in addition to a lavish (visual and descriptive) catalogue of WWI weaponry, equipment, and vehicles, including adaptations made to the iconic Rolls-Royce cars and the types of mines and explosions used to blow up Turkish trains and demolish the Hejaz Railway, which exhausted Ottoman resources. The specialized military focus of the book does not detract from its general appeal to literary historians and other fans of Lawrence of Arabia. The narrative itself moves like a train, stopping at milestones in the Great Arab Revolt and examining them. In so doing, it serves as a complementary step-by-step military guide to Lawrence’s own narrative in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1926), providing much-needed order, cohesion, and historical rigor to his otherwise beautifully written, poetic, and somewhat chaotic and inchoate masterpiece. Stejskal’s analysis of Lawrence’s military strategies—his measured implementation of irregular guerrilla warfare techniques—exposes the roots of his genius: his unconventionality—a quality well known to his fans and scholars but now scrutinized in a military context.

The introduction and the prologue set the scene: the reader meets Stejskal in Jordan, where he had joined the Great Arab Revolt Project in 2012. Using conflict archaeology, the project’s aim was to trace Lawrence’s trail in the revolt in order to establish the accuracy of

his personal account. Stejskal's recent original photographs of the landscape (wadis, deserts, and hills) and remnants of the conflict (such as railway station ruins, demolished bridges, and ammunition) are juxtaposed with older and contemporaneous pictures from the archives showing how much (and sometimes how little) these parts of the region have changed since.

What follows is a detailed historical contextualization of the circumstances that led to the unorthodox Anglo-Sharifian coalition in World War I and a summary of British imperialist ambitions and relevant military operations in the wider region, (including the British skirmishes with the Senussi and the rescue of the HMS *Tara* prisoners in Libya). These preludial operations shed light on the rationale for implementing combined operations in the Great Arab Revolt, whose core events, battles and skirmishes are analyzed in depth in the following chapters. Stejskal shows how these seemingly fragmented tactics and unorthodox combinations of guerrilla warfare and regular army techniques served as the blueprint for what is collectively referred to today as special operations. He demonstrates how these techniques have been studied and emulated by British and non-British officers in future conflicts. What is remarkable, however, is the international appropriation of Lawrence's unconventional warfare—not just by Western forces, but also by anticolonialists, nationalists, and revolutionaries such as Mao Zedong and Michael Collins.

For literary historians of T. E. Lawrence and nonmilitary specialists, the book provides a very accessible specialist account of the military history of the Great Arab Revolt and Allies' (especially Britain's) role in it. As much as I enjoyed learning about these specific aspects of the campaign and the Allies' perspective of events, I would have liked to find out more about the Arab and the Ottoman sides of the story and the ways in which they viewed the combined operations, the collaborative, and saw as treacherous aspects of the political and military alliance. Stejskal makes occasional allusions to certain Arab and Ottoman leaders' viewpoints; however, exploring these angles of the conflict in depth may be the

subject of a new comparative study with a wider, more comprehensive perspective on a conflict that has redrawn the map of the region and changed it beyond recognition. Whatever the new study may be, T. E. Lawrence is bound to pop up on all sides of the narrative.

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