

BOOK REVIEW

Mostafa Minawi. *The Ottoman Scramble for Africa: Empire and Diplomacy in the Sahara and the Hijaz.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016. xvii+240 pp. List of Figures. Acknowledgments. Note on Translation and Transliteration. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$24.99. Paper. ISBN: 978-0804799270.

Mostafa Minawi's book on Ottoman imperial presence in Africa constitutes an important intervention in the study of European colonialism. Minawi places at its center the Ottoman Empire, an imperial actor in its own right, but generally characterized as a bit player in the Great Game of late nineteenth-century expansion. "[E]xplicitly or implicitly," he writes, the Ottoman state is by and large omitted from histories of "interimperial competition" in the half century leading up to the Great War. Indeed, Minawi notes, the Ottoman status as an "empire" has frequently been called into question by historians who have referred to it at different times as "borderline" or even "nonimperial." The author wisely sidesteps the "trap of binary questions" that lead to certain explicit categorical constructions: "Was it or was it not an empire?" "Was it an object or a subject of imperialism?" Instead, Minawi approaches imperialism as an "adaptive, open ended process" where "the productive question is not whether but how the Ottoman Empire adapted to the new demands of imperialism..." (3).

As Minawi rightly notes, the Ottoman state entered the late nineteenth century in a position of weakness *vis à vis* the "great powers," especially Britain, France, and Russia. The Empire had faced decades of external and internal challenges to its authority. Napoleon's invasion of Egypt and the subsequent rise of Muhammad Ali in Egypt, national wars of liberation in Greece and the Balkans, inter-communal strife such as that around Mount Lebanon in 1860, and finally the disastrous war with Russia in 1877 all served to weaken the state's reputation as a major power. Increasingly, its status as a member of the Concert of Europe was called into question.

While acknowledging the waning international influence of the Ottoman state, Minawi eschews traditional characterizations of their inclusion in the Conference of Berlin as either an act of condescension towards the "sick man" of Europe or a desperate, if not delusional, bid on the part of the Turks to remain relevant on the world stage. Instead, he argues that by playing an active role in the process, the Ottoman Porte hoped to secure recognition of political parity with the European powers and Turkey's place

as a “civilized” nation. In doing so, Minawi argues, the Ottoman state hoped on the one hand to secure the right to further colonial conquests in the Sahara but more importantly to render their own borders inviolable as a member of the community of nations, on the other (9–10). This, he is quick to point out, was a grave miscalculation.

The first three chapters concentrate on attempts by the Ottomans to extend their influence into the southern Sahara following the loss of most of their North African provinces (Algeria and Tunis) over the course of the century. Following the Berlin Conference in 1884, they had hoped to exert a claim to the region of the southern Sahara and the Lake Chad basin from their remaining base in Libya. They aimed to achieve this by exploiting clauses of the Act of Berlin related to ideas of natural “hinterland” and “effective occupation,” which might have been used to support their claims to expansion. Istanbul argued a legal claim to Lake Chad and other regions based on the idea they constituted a historical hinterland to their provinces on the coast. More importantly, they sought to demonstrate effective occupation through plans to extend imperial infrastructure in the form of telegraph lines as well as through diplomatic maneuvers aimed at enlisting the head of the powerful Sanusiyya Sufi order as an ally, asserting a claim to sovereignty by proxy. Minawi carefully and convincingly demonstrates the serious nature of these Ottoman efforts, but also their ultimate futility in the face of a European imperial project that simply refused to recognize Ottoman claims, let alone their place as equals on the world stage.

Chapters 4 through 6 focus on Ottoman efforts to fortify and stabilize imperial boundaries and sovereignty. The Turkish failure to participate effectively in the Scramble for Africa, Minawi points out, would have a far-reaching impact on subsequent Ottoman policy as the rapacious and duplicitous nature of European policy-makers became clear. In particular, it resulted in the development of a jaundiced eye toward interactions with European powers and a growing realization that if Ottoman sovereignty were to be protected, the state would have to innovate. One example of this took the form of active resistance, providing arms to the Sanusiyya to assist their struggle against French and Italian expansion. Equally importantly, this enables us to explain the Ottoman drive toward self-sufficiency as represented by their refusal to partner with European companies in the construction of telegraph lines (most notably that with the Hijaz) aimed at modernizing imperial infrastructure. As a result, Minawi references distinct Ottoman policies that emerged as a consequence of the Ottoman experiences with European perfidy.

This is, indeed, an important book that greatly advances our understanding of the global implications of Europe’s Scramble for Africa in the late nineteenth century. It will be of great interest to scholars of colonial Africa and the Middle East, as well to those with an interest in the global ramifications of European empire building. It is, however, something of a slow read, despite its compact size. The narrative is inevitably dependent

on diplomatic reports and ministerial debates whose bureaucratic tone the author is never quite able to shake. As a result, it may have difficulty finding an audience beyond a narrow academic constituency, which is a shame.

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For more reading on this subject, see:

Martin, B. G. 1967. "Turkish Archival Sources for West African History." *African Studies Review* 10 (3): 59–65. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0002020600038403>

Spaulding, Jay. 1990. "The Old Shaiqi Language in Historical Perspective." *History in Africa* 17: 283–292. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3171817>