

### 27 Articles

T. E. Lawrence; introduction by John Hulsman (Simon and Schuster, 2017), 56 pp.

### Reviewed by J. R. Seeger

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One hundred years after the end of World War I, it is reasonable to ask whether the world needs another book on the writings of Thomas Edward Lawrence. Since the turn of this century alone, there have been books focused on Lawrence before WWI, Lawrence during WWI, and Lawrence's role in the Middle East after WWI. The centenary of the end of the war and the coming centenaries of the 1919 Paris Peace Accords and Lawrence's death will add to the list. There seems to be a never-ending demand for further details and new commentary on the actions of Lawrence and his contemporaries and their roles in the making of the 20th century Middle East.

The "Great Arab Revolt" started as a simple enough idea. As soon as the Ottoman Empire declared support for the German and Austro-Hungarian empires in WWI, the British government knew that the Ottoman caliph would be "encouraged" by his German allies to declare jihad against Britain and France. This was precisely what the caliph did on 14 November 1914. When this happened, German "agent provocateurs" as well as the Ottoman government, led by the "Young Turks," used multiple networks to deliver messages to Muslims throughout the regions dominated by the British Empire, calling for good Muslims everywhere to rise up against the "infidel British."<sup>a</sup>

What British leaders in London, Cairo and New Delhi did not know was how Muslims inside the British Empire would respond. British diplomats and intelligence agents operating out of Cairo, New Delhi, Aden, and Kuwait City were tasked with determining whether the call for jihad would resonate with communities in their areas of responsibility. The reporting from agents on the Arabian

Peninsula was clear: Proclamations from Constantinople had little bearing in the decisionmaking of tribal, ethnic, and sectarian leaders in the region; rather, alliances were made and broken based on far more practical factors, like success in raiding and the delivery these leaders of gold and guns from regional combatants. Given this perspective, British political and military leaders based in Cairo and New Delhi were determined to neutralize German and Ottoman activity in the region and expand the British influence campaign in the Peninsula through alliances with the various tribes—especially those tribes already hostile to their Ottoman overlords. If that also meant building a successful surrogate fighting force that might tie down some of the Ottoman forces in the region while British conventional forces conducted "real military operations" against the Ottomans, so much the better.

In 1914, Britain had an established tradition of using both formal intelligence professionals operating in the region and informal intelligence collectors in the Middle East. The professionals were most often based in British consulates throughout the region, and their activities followed the pattern of training, assignment, and supervision used with great success in British India. The intelligence professionals were based in British consulates throughout the region or, in the case of Egypt and the Sudan, serving as "political officers" supporting British proxy governments in the region. Members of the "official network" included Capt. William Henry Shakespeare, based in Kuwait; Col. Alfred Parker, based in the Sinai; and Col. Gerard Leachman, based in New Delhi and eventually in the Arabian Peninsula as "O.C. Desert" (officer in charge, desert).<sup>b</sup>

In the book *Spies in Arabia*, Priya Satia begins the chapter "The Foundation of Covert Empire" with a de-

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a. For additional information on the propaganda and subversive side of World War I in the Middle East, see Lionel Gossman, *The Passion of Max von Oppenheim* (Open Book Publishers, 2013); Jules Stewart, *The Kaiser's Mission to Kabul* (I. B. Tauris & Co., Ltd., 2014); Sean McMeekin, *The Berlin-Baghdad Express* (Belknap Press, 2010); and Peter Hopkirk, *On Secret Service East of Constantinople* (John Murray, 1994).

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b. See biographies of these three officers, each written or edited by H.V.F. Winstone and published by Quartet Books, and respectively entitled, *Captain Shakespeare* (1976); *The Diaries of Parker Pasha* (1983); and *Leachman, O.C. Desert* (1982).

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scription of the official nature of “consular” intelligence collection, as follows:

*... consuls everywhere were responsible for producing commercial intelligence and protecting British citizens in their districts, but in the Ottoman Empire they were also entrusted with political functions, including collection of political intelligence, normally left to the more prestigious diplomatic service . . .*<sup>a</sup>

She contrasts the formal collectors with the informal collectors who were most often well known, well connected archaeologists or private travelers. These informal collectors included some of the most famous names in Middle East archaeology, including Leonard Woolley, Gertrude Bell, David Hogarth, and T. E. Lawrence. While conducting their own research in the area, these people were expected to also service collection requirements essential to the British government but inaccessible to formal collectors. Satia captures this role in her description of Gertrude Bell’s travels before the war:

*Gertrude Bell’s friendships in the upper reaches of Whitehall allowed her to fuse polite travel and amateur archaeology with (unpaid) information gathering . . . The social world and institutions of this community extended abroad in the empire. In 1902, at the Delhi Durbar, Bell “met all the world.” It was there with Lorimer, Chirol, and Cox that she learned the latest news about the peninsular feud between the Houses of Saud and Rashid.*<sup>b</sup>

Formal or informal, these collectors shared a number of key skills: they lived in the environments of their targets, they had excellent Arabic (and French, and usually Persian), and they were anthropologists by training or habit. In sum, they knew their targets and could easily harvest intelligence from information, and ferret out fact from fiction.

Once the British forces were in the war and operating in the Middle East, the conflict needed these individuals to engage the locals and support the larger conventional army efforts in Palestine and Mesopotamia. These were complex military operations facing a determined Ottoman army with its own set of tribal allies. Neil Faulkner’s

2016 *Lawrence of Arabia’s War* (Yale University Press) provides the best single history of the conflict. Faulkner succeeds primarily because he does not focus exclusively on Lawrence’s exploits in the Hejaz and into Syria; instead, he describes in detail the complex nature of the two-pronged British attack on the Arab reaches of the Ottoman Empire—one set of operations designed and implemented from a Cairo-based headquarters, and a second set designed and implemented by the British Indian Army, headquartered in New Delhi and controlled from Basra, at the mouth of the Euphrates River.

Faulkner does not dismiss the importance of the Great Arab Revolt, but he does underscore the fact that tribal surrogates enhanced a conventional military success against the Ottomans. As with most special operations, surrogate forces in this conflict were necessary but not sufficient to defeat an occupying enemy force. Faulkner provides essential context and balance with other writings that portray the Great Arab Revolt as more than it was or that dismiss the revolt as just a creation of journalists like Lowell Thomas, who wanted at least one romantic battlefield in an otherwise horrible war.

What makes *27 Articles* most interesting is that it is a printing of a single, handwritten note that Lawrence sent from the Arabian battlefield to British intelligence headquarters in Cairo (known as the “Arab Bureau”) for publication in the bureau’s regularly distributed *Arab Bulletin*.<sup>c</sup> Initially, Lawrence’s *27 Articles* were incorporated into larger books of his writings, such as Malcolm Brown’s well edited book, *T. E. Lawrence in War and Peace: The Military Writings of Lawrence of Arabia* (Frontline Books, 2015) or archival material from the *Arab Bulletin*.<sup>d</sup>

Many scholars have been critical of Lawrence’s two books on the Great Arab Revolt—*The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* and *Revolt in the Desert*. There is a cottage industry even today of scholars and amateurs who try to prove or disprove the events described in these two books. In one sense, the books reflect the thoughts of a soldier trying to manage his post-traumatic stress disorder, years after the war. As many veterans can attest, memory of combat operations is flawed, at best, and even with the as-

a. Priya Satia, *Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain’s Covert Empire in the Middle East* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 24.

b. *Ibid.*, 36–37.

c. For additional information on the Arab Bureau, see Bruce Westrate, *The Arab Bureau: British Policy in the Middle East, 1916–1920* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992).

d. Archival material from the Arab Bureau is available at [https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/The\\_27\\_Articles\\_of\\_T.E.\\_Lawrence](https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/The_27_Articles_of_T.E._Lawrence).

sistance of notebooks and combat photography, there are always parts of a story that are not going to match “what really happened.” In *27 Articles*, we see T. E. Lawrence trying to make sense of his role while he was still in it.

In this small, pamphlet-sized publication, we see a special operations leader giving advice on how to conduct unconventional warfare. Two examples demonstrate the practical nature of *27 Articles*:

*Article 8: Your ideal position is when you are present and not noticed. Do not be too intimate, too prominent, or too earnest. Avoid being identified too long or too often with any tribal sheikh, even if C.O. of the expedition. To do your work, you must be above jealousies, and you lose prestige if you are associated with a tribe or clan, and its inevitable feuds . . . (32)*

and

*Article 15: Do not try to do too much with your own hands. Better the Arabs do it tolerably than you do it perfectly. It is their war, and you are to help them, not to win it for them . . . Actually, also, under the very odd conditions of Arabia, your practical work will not be as good as, perhaps, you think it is. (39)*

There are many books that describe in detail the British war against the Ottoman forces in the Middle East, and these histories are essential reading for intelligence officers today. They describe “how we got to today” in the dynamic world of the Middle East and Southwest Asia. What *27 Articles* provides, instead, is tactical advice for anyone involved in unconventional warfare. This very small book can and should be carried in briefcase or cargo pocket, and used by field officers for years to come.



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