

T.E. Lawrence and the Arab Revolt

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Abstract

The article explores Lawrence's entrance into the Arab Revolt, his role in the movement, and how it affected Lawrence personally. Moreover, it argues that Lawrence's asceticism allowed him to relate to the Bedouin in such a way to engender respect and lead them to victory. At the same time, it also illustrates the effect of transculturation on Lawrence and his inability to identify with either culture in the end.

Keywords: the Arab Revolt, Lawrence's asceticism, masculinity, the Middle East, Islamic society, the Syrian Scientific Society, the Ottoman Empire, culture, language, science, literature, religion.

Introduction. Despite the enormous amount of literature written about T.E. Lawrence and his exploits in Arabia, he continues to be one of the most mysterious and elusive figures in modern history. This article seeks to explore Lawrence's early life and his role in the Arab Revolt of 1916 but not the Lawrence legend, as they are two very different people. Lawrence's masculinity and the early Victorian ideals of asceticism and chivalry shaped his world view and how the world viewed him. His unique style of masculinity engendered the trust of a small band of Arabs who risked their lives to inspire revolt against the Ottoman Empire. In so doing, Lawrence became a hero and symbol of national prestige while the old ideals of Victorian masculinity died on the Western Front. Lawrence became the last Victorian knight.

Lawrence's reference to his journey during the Arab Revolt of 1916 illustrates a man who sacrificed his mind and body to lead an army of Arab nationalists to victory against Ottoman rule. Lawrence wrote:

Some of the evil of my tale may have been inherent in our circumstances. For years we lived anyhow with one another in the naked desert, under the indifferent heaven ... The mentality of ordinary human slaves is terrible they have lost the world-and we had surrendered, not body alone, but soul to the overmastering greed of victory. By our own act we were drained of morality, of volition, of responsibility, like dead leaves in the wind¹.

Throughout Lawrence's "tale," he exhibited different and competing masculinities at certain times, but his identification with asceticism helped save his life in the harsh conditions of the Arabian Desert. Lawrence exemplified much masculinity including a soldier-hero, an adventurer, man of action, man of letters, and a figure of romantic Victorian chivalry. Lawrence's asceticism, however, appealed to the Bedouin Arabs of the Hejaz, and with his background at Carchemish, Lawrence was able to assimilate easily into their culture. However, Lawrence's ability to traverse cultural boundaries makes him unique in a sense. The Arab nationalists saw Lawrence not as an imperial conqueror but as a liberator of sorts, loyal to them, as established in his willingness to live like them in the desert.

¹ Lawrence, T.E. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1926., P. 29.

When the First World War began in August of 1914, many middle-class men in Britain volunteered for military service, including Lawrence and three of his brothers. Lawrence planned to serve in Military Intelligence when he finished compiling the maps for the PEF. The War Office also prevented Lawrence and Woolley from serving until the reports were complete, and the War Office could find the best division in which to place them. The War Office in Cairo wanted Lawrence and Woolley for their experience in the Near East over the past few years. As Lawrence waited for orders, he wrote to, Mrs. Rieder, a friend of his:

I am writing a learned work on Moses and his wanderings: for the Egyptian people say they want me but not yet, and the War Office won't accept me till the Egyptian W.O. has finished with me. I have a horrible fear that the Turks do not intend to go to war: for it would be an improvement to have them reduced to Asia Minor, and put into commission even there. Don't come back to England The horrible boredom of having nothing to do, & getting news about once a week, and hearing all the rumours and theories and anxieties of everybody all round gets on all our nerves. And you couldn't do anything².

For Lawrence and Woolley, the wait was agonizing. Woolley finally lost patience, joined an artillery regiment, and was later sent to France. Lawrence eventually found work in the War Office in London, and he still feared that the Turks would refuse to go to war. He wanted the Turks to enter the war so that he could “root them out of Syria”³. During Lawrence's initial journey to the East, he had become an advocate for Arab independence perhaps in an effort to keep the Young Turks and Western nations from modernizing, or Westernizing, the Arab provinces. Lawrence wanted to preserve Arab culture and developed a strong detestation for Western and modern influences on Arab culture⁴.

The Turkification, or process where the Young Turks attempted to centralize the government and create a sense of national unity based on Turkish culture and language, aroused an Arab resistance between 1908 and 1916. However, this resistance was not the first Arab movement against the Ottoman and Turkish rule. The first Arab movement dates as far back as the 1830s when Muhammad Ali and his son, Ibrahim Pasha, led an Arab nationalist movement against Ottoman rule in Egypt. Their rebellion lasted eight years until the Arabs loyal to Ali and Pasha revolted against them after Ali and Pasha raised taxes and threatened to disarm fellow Arabs. Arab division in Egypt only strengthened Ottoman rule over Arabs, Christians, and Turks. With no solidarity, many Arabs lost sight of an Arab state until American and French religious organizations founded educational programs throughout Syria and Lebanon. The organizations were primarily missionary groups who set up schools to educate Christians in the region, but Muslims duplicated their educational methods⁵. French and American collective educational programs provided significant improvements from the antiquated individualist method of educating students. Traditional methods called for students to travel great distances to sit at the feet of their educator, but Western missionaries brought with them an organized, local educational system that spread throughout the Middle East. The formation of educational societies, like the *Oriental Society* and the *Society of Arts and Sciences*, helped Arabs in Syria and Palestine lay the foundation for future Arab nationalist movements by emphasizing nationalist ideals and encouraging Arab unity. Lawrence often commented on the Western groups in Syria and Palestine and their goals to educate the Arab population. At first, Lawrence praised their efforts, but later condemned them, as he feared Western influence would corrupt Arab culture. Western missionaries originally established these societies for educational purposes, but their influence remained limited to Christians in the Middle East while Islamic groups recognized the value in similar societies and limited them to Muslims only. Islamic

² T.E. Lawrence to Mrs. Rieder, Polstead Road, Oxford, September 18, 1914, in *Letters of T.E. Lawrence*, P.185

³ T.E. Lawrence to Mrs. Fontana, Polstead Road, Oxford, October 19, 1914, in *Letters of T.E. Lawrence*, P.186.

⁴ Lawrence, T.E. *The Diary Kept by Thomas Edward Lawrence: Travelling Arabia During 1911*. Reading: Garnett Publishing, 1993. pp.67-68.

⁵ George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement*. London: H.Hamilton, 1938, P.52.

societies, like the *Syrian Scientific Society* educated students in culture, mathematics, language, science, literature, and religion. For the first time in nearly 350 years of Ottoman rule, the *Syrian Scientific Society*⁶ created a sense of national consciousness among Arabs in Syria and Palestine united by their culture and pride in their accomplishments in the arts and sciences. Influenced by European ideology, the *Society* encouraged ideas of nationalism, patriotism, and the desire to end Ottoman rule, and out of this society evolved a political and national movement forty years in the making. By the turn of the century, Arabs within the Ottoman Empire experienced at least two revivals, both of which failed to produce the Arab state Ali and Pasha imagined. The Arab nationalist movement turned to the Sharif and Amir of Mecca and the Hejaz, Sayyid Hussein bin Ali, whom the sultan appointed to rule over the holy cities of Mecca and Medina in 1908. At first, Hussein remained loyal to the Ottoman Caliphate and resisted the Arab call to lead the Arab movement, but an altercation between Hussein and the Young Turks strained their relations.¹⁷⁸ However, after hesitating, the Arabs no longer wanted Hussein as their leader. Meanwhile, the Young Turks continued their process of Turkification, a process of modernizing and essentially Westernizing the Ottoman Empire, which included secularizing education and building railways throughout the empire. Lawrence objected to the Young Turks efforts to modernize, which were encouraged by German advisors in Constantinople. Hussein interpreted a railway through the Hejaz as a way for Constantinople to tighten its grip not only on the holy cities and the annual pilgrimage, but also on his power and influence in the region⁷. During this period of strife between Hussein and the sultan, Hussein began corresponding with the English generals in charge of operations in the East. Hussein's paranoia led him to resist the construction of the railroad, and he sent his son, Abdullah bin al Hussein, to negotiate with the Turkish government.

Lord Kitchener expressed his concerns that, “the welfare and indeed safety of these pilgrims is intimately bound up with the maintenance of order in the districts in question and of a good relationship between the Turks and Arabs whose animosity has undoubtedly been roused by the recent Turkish policy of centralization”⁸. Britain's main goal was to protect its interest in the region including Egypt, access to the Suez Canal, and a clear route to India through the Arabian Sea. In August of 1914, the Young Turks signed an alliance with Germany against the Allied Powers and declared an Islamic jihad against the Allies. The Turks hoped to inspire some form of unity among the Muslims in the Ottoman Empire, but the Sharif of Mecca refused to lend his support to the jihad and caused further division among the Arabs loyal to the Young Turks and those loyal to Hussein.

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⁶ George Antonius, *the Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement*. London: H.Hamilton, 1938, P.54.

⁷ George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement*. London: H.Hamilton, 1938, P.74.

⁸"Lord Kitchener to Sir Edward Grey, Cairo, April 4, 1914, in *Volume X, Part II: The Last Years of Peace* (British Documents on the Origins of the War, 1898-1914, eds. George Peabody Gooch and Harold Temperley (H.M.S.O., 1938)," <http://www.gwpda.org/1914m/arabetuk.html> (accessed September 12, 2010).

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