

World War I and the Beginning of Global Interests in Middle Eastern Oil

Modern notions of conflict in the Middle East are centered around oil. As with many global conflicts during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, their current status can be traced back to World War I. There are many opinions as to the initial discovery of and attempt to control the oil in the region by western countries.

The outbreak of World War I coincided with, and later accelerated, advancements in technology that required oil to operate.¹ As the lifeblood of modern warfare, oil was not only important for the economies of the belligerents, but also their ability to make war and develop technologies to gain the upper hand.² Opinions differ about the foresight of participants in the war and their presence in the Middle East.

While many were aware of the large amounts of oil in the Middle East before World War I, the war provided justification to establish a presence in the region.³ Since much of the oil during this time was within the borders of the Ottoman Empire it could not simply be taken or secured with a small or localized conflict.⁴ The decline and fall of the Ottoman Empire after the war supported the ability of Western powers to divide the region in their favor.⁵

To understand the importance of World War I in the current global desire for oil, I decided to consult sources that cover different aspects of the time period in general. Some authors examine the years or decades leading up to the war, others focus on the implications of

¹ Marian, Kent. *Oil and Empire: British Policy and Mesopotamian Oil, 1900-1920*. The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1976. 15-16.

² Jill, Crystal. *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar*. Cambridge University Press, 2011. 33-34.

³ Crystal, 15

⁴ Daniel, Yergin. *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power*. Simon & Schuster, 1991. 12-13.

⁵ Yergin, 13-14

the conflict from a global perspective, and others talk about the results of the war and the consequences.

Daniel Yergin argues in *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money and Power* that there are three themes that offer an understanding of the importance of oil in the modern world.⁶ The first is that capitalism combined with modern modes of business created a global web of dependence and profitability reliant on oil.⁷ Secondly, Yergin emphasizes the largescale transition from horses to combustion engines that occurred during the war.⁸

Finally, many oil-based products such as gasoline, kerosene and petroleum had a presence as another was phased out.⁹ This meant that oil continued to prove necessary for products that were replacing older technologies thereby integrating it with modern technology and the economies of all major and emerging powers.¹⁰

Yergin's views on the importance of oil in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are common among historians. His argument that the global pursuit of oil originated during World War I are similar to mine and he offers many of the aforementioned reasons. However, there are some that argue that this quest for oil was established earlier during the late nineteenth century.¹¹

Some historians argue that there was a legitimate economic need for oil, especially with the technologies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries but that the ability to control and hold oil rich areas for long periods was equally important. Jill Crystal makes this point in *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar*.¹²

⁶ Yergin, 12-16

⁷ Yergin, 12-13

⁸ Yergin, 12-13

⁹ Yergin, 12-13

¹⁰ Yergin, 12-13

¹¹ Jill, Crystal. *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar*. Cambridge University Press, 2011. 29-31

¹² Crystal, 31

Most of Crystal's book describes the motives of empires and major powers in controlling areas of the Middle East beginning in the late nineteenth century under the Ottoman Empire and during the twentieth century under primarily Western Powers.¹³ Crystal's argument reinforces the ideas of Yergin but does not place the roots of the desire for oil in World War I specifically.¹⁴

Instead, the book suggests that the war led to the pattern of establishing and deposing dictators and regimes through which major powers could maintain influence over oil in the area without being officially present there.¹⁵ Crystal differentiates between the area being under the control of the Ottoman Empire and being divided amongst several smaller states after the war.¹⁶

Following World War I, there was no longer one large empire (Ottoman) that actually controlled the area, but rather affable governments that were heavily influenced by the victors of the war.¹⁷ Crystal's argument is that instead of major powers trying to take over and control the region themselves as the Ottoman Empire did, they fostered an amenable political environment that allowed them to remove themselves officially but have regular access to the oil.¹⁸ There are many different opinions about the extent of European foresight in regards to the Ottoman instability and the timing of technological advancements that required oil.

This view is consistent with the views of other historians in that it places the role of World War I in the context of opportunity rather than cause in the pursuit of oil. Crystal's view also aligns with the prevailing attitude that World War I was an opportunity to act upon ambitions that presented themselves before the beginning of the twentieth century.¹⁹

¹³ Crystal, 33

¹⁴ Crystal, 34-35

¹⁵ Crystal, 37

¹⁶ Crystal, 34

¹⁷ Crystal, 34-35

¹⁸ Crystal, 43

¹⁹ Crystal, 43

While this opinion of western influence in the region is popular, some historians suggest that this type of influence existed during the time of the Ottoman Empire.²⁰ Marian Kent argues that although the Ottoman Empire controlled a large portion of the Middle East, it was heavily influenced by European powers.²¹ In *Oil and Empire: British Policy and Mesopotamian Oil, 1900-1920* Kent makes the point that this could have indicated to the Europeans that the region's instabilities could be used to their advantage.²²

This idea aligns with Yergin's assessment of the changes that capitalism brought to the global market.²³ Kent's observations regarding American and European influences reinforces the commonly held belief that western industry gave them an economic and military advantage.²⁴ This view is also in alignment with most historians' opinions about the anticipated collapse of the Ottoman Empire and subsequent economic competition in the region.²⁵

Marian Kent also expands on this notion in *The Great Powers and the end of the Ottoman Empire*. This book expands the ideas surrounding the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the appearance of Europe in the Middle East.²⁶ Most of Kent's coverage of this topic is within the context of the European anticipation for the decline of the Ottoman influence and each European power's strategy to exploit it.²⁷

Since this book offers a perspective from every major power and why it wanted to prepare for Ottoman collapse, it is one of the most detailed for trying to understand the motives of all the major powers during this time. While it is heavily focused on the late nineteenth

²⁰ Kent, 5-6

²¹ Kent, 15-19

²² Kent, 18

²³ Kent, 7-9

²⁴ Kent, 16-21

²⁵ Kent, 18-20

²⁶ Kent, 22

²⁷ Kent, 34

century and World War I, it is an excellent source for anyone researching the intentions of Europe during this time.

Of all the sources I have consulted for this particular topic, this seems to give the most direct and specific answers. However, it is limited in its coverage of the particular aspirations for oil in the late nineteenth century which is something that many other sources have covered at length. Although, for anyone who wants to understand the role of the ottoman empire and the foothold that the west gained after the war should consult this book.

Simon Davis shares a very similar interpretation of western ambitions during the nineteenth century in *Contested Space: Anglo-American Relations in the Persian Gulf, 1939-1947*. Much of Davis' argument is centered on American and British relations in the Middle East during the years of World War II.²⁸ Though the book is focused on the mid-twentieth century, Davis examines the roots of American and British ambitions that emerged in the nineteenth century.²⁹

Much like Kent's work, Davis covers the economic and military advantages that allowed the west, especially Britain and the United States, to establish hegemony in the region and eventually exercise that control through economics and politics.³⁰ *Contested Space: Anglo-American Relations in the Persian Gulf, 1939-1947* is more focused on a particular time period than some other works but gives a detailed background that is helpful in placing the reading in context.³¹

²⁸ Simon, Davis. *Contested Space: Anglo-American Relations in the Persian Gulf, 1939-1947*. Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2009. 28-30

²⁹ Davis, 15

³⁰ Davis, 27

³¹ Davis, 1-8

Davis elaborates on things like geography more than some other historians and explains dynamics that are sometimes left out by other articles and books.³² Since it is so focused, it offers an in-depth look at the twentieth century from a post-World War I perspective whereas many other sources tend to look at the factors that led to causes rather than effects in the global desire for oil.³³

John DeNovo deviates from the opinions of the authors that I have previously discussed and suggests that American interests in Middle Eastern oil were more tentative than those of European powers during World War I.³⁴ *American Interests and Policies in the Middle East, 1900-1939* covers strictly American motives in the Middle East with less mention of European aims.³⁵ Much like Davis' *Contested Space: Anglo-American Relations in the Persian Gulf, 1939-1947*, DeNovo focuses on a particular time period.

While DeNovo examines a very particular time period, he investigates the conditions of each particular time and what factors were similar or different before continuing on to a new event. As for the early twentieth century and World War I, DeNovo explains that the United States had a more reserved interest in the Middle East and that its involvement there was more gradual like its participation in the war.³⁶

Unlike many of the sources that I have consulted for this topic, DeNovo seems to be the most clear and thorough. His book is very focused but also gives details that place the reading into context and gives information that allows a reader with little background on World War I or the Middle East to understand.

³² Davis, 15-20

³³ Davis, 22-25

³⁴ John A, DeNovo. (John August). 1963. *American Interests and Policies in the Middle East, 1900-1939*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 83-87

³⁵ DeNovo, 91

³⁶ DeNovo, 104-105

Few of the sources that I have read about this topic have covered the instabilities within the Ottoman Empire. One example of this is John Morrow Jr's detailed description of Ottoman errors in domestic and foreign policy and the effects of those errors on their ultimate collapse after World War I.³⁷ *The Great War: An Imperial History* is focused on the imperial aspirations and dynamics that all major empires of the First World War had to contend with.³⁸

Morrow's book is different in that it covers the challenges that all major powers faced during the war solely during the years of conflict.³⁹ While this approach omits certain information about causes and effects, it is very detailed about the conditions of the war as they pertain to the Middle East.⁴⁰ This book is one of the strongest I have found for detailing the particulars of the war and the conditions that all belligerents faced.

Jonathan Conlin also covers the demands for oil during World War I in "A Crude History of the Great War: Battle for Oil in the Middle East During World War I". This article is focused specifically on the role of oil during the war and the knowledge that the belligerents had of the regions strategic importance for future access to oil. Conlin focuses on the European anticipation of Ottoman collapse and the opportunities that it would present for oil.⁴¹

Conlin is one of just a few authors that I was able to find who focused solely on oil during World War I. His approach is very similar to DeNovo in that it examines motives by each major power and how Ottoman collapse and access to oil would specifically benefit them.⁴²

³⁷ John, Morrow Jr. *The Great War an Imperial History*. Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group, 2005. 1-4

³⁸ Morrow, 88-89

³⁹ Morrow, 67-72

⁴⁰ Morrow, 88-95

⁴¹ Jonathan, Conlin. "A Crude History of the Great War: Battle for Oil in the Middle East During World War I" *History Today* 68, no. 1 (January 1, 2018): 36-49.

⁴² Conlin, 38

Because of this it is an easy source for a reader to use if they are not familiar with reading methods that target specific information.

Peter Fitzgerald focuses primarily on French interests in the ottoman empire during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in “France’s Middle Eastern Ambitions, the Sykes-Picot Negotiations, and the Oil Fields of Mosul, 1915-1918.” Just like the other historians I have discussed, Fitzgerald’s approach is very specific and focuses on one particular power, that being France. Fitzgerald’s writing style is easy to understand but also detailed enough to provide a necessary background on the topic.

Much of Fitzgerald’s focus is on the French interests in the Middle East and how France went about establishing itself late in the nineteenth century. Specifically, in the oil fields of Mosul, and the particular aspects of their control in that area.⁴³ While much of Fitzgerald’s work is focused on Mosul it is not exclusive to it and covers other aspects of the period in detail.⁴⁴

Compared to some of the other sources I have considered for this paper, Fitzgerald’s had a very balanced approach. It covers a specific time while allowing for enough information to place it in context. Most of this article examines France’s imperialism and how it fit into this particular period.⁴⁵ This makes the reading easy to understand for a reader with a basic understanding of European imperialism during this time.

“Oiling Tyranny? Neoliberalism and Global Governance in Chad.” by Grovogui, Siba, Leonard, Lori, and Grovogui, Siba is written in a similar style to Peter Fitzgerald. Their article focuses on a particular area that was affected by the global demand for oil focusing on Chad.⁴⁶

⁴³ Peter, Fitzgerald E. “France’s Middle Eastern Ambitions, the Sykes-Picot Negotiations, and the Oil Fields of Mosul, 1915-1918.” *The Journal of Modern History* 66, no. 4 (December 1, 1994): 697–725.

⁴⁴ Fitzgerald, 671-674

⁴⁵ Fitzgerald, 710-714

⁴⁶ Grovogui, Siba, Leonard, Lori, and Grovogui, Siba. “Oiling Tyranny? Neoliberalism and Global Governance in Chad.” *Studies in Political Economy*, no. 79 (April 1, 2007): 35-38

However, unlike Fitzgerald this article is not structured in a way that would be as easy for a reader without some background on European imperialism.

Though it is not structured as smoothly as Fitzgerald or some other authors that focus on a particular country, region or time period. It does seem to address a part of oil during this period that does not seem to get much attention from other works I have consulted.

An important aspect of this particular topic that I had not considered before was the transition that occurred in the Middle East after Ottoman rule. While searching for the sources that have been included in this paper I encountered “Oil Policies: From the last Decades of the Ottoman Empire to the Democrat Party Government (1861-1950)” by Cengiz, Savkili.⁴⁷

Savkili’s focus is the transition from the Ottoman Empire to Turkey and subsequent Middle Eastern states.⁴⁸ The version of this that was available was not in English, so some translation was required. However, for those that want to understand this particular time period it worth taking the time to do so. This is an aspect of this topic that was not covered at length when I began looking into this topic. Savkili’s work on this time in Middle Eastern history is intentionally focused on the ramifications of World War I but to someone trying to understand the importance of the war it is quite valuable.

Some of the other historians and sources that have been mentioned have focused on the Middle East immediately before or after the war or explored things that are not directly related. Savkili’s work is crucial for understanding the global consequences of Ottoman collapse. It is centered on post-war politics but is excellent for understanding the longevity of western aspirations in the Middle East.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Cengiz, Savkili. “Oil Policies: From the last Decades of the Ottoman Empire to the Democrat Party Government (1861-1950)”. 373-376

⁴⁸ Savkili, 374

⁴⁹ Savkili, 373-375

In conclusion, there was more coverage of this topic than I had originally thought. Each of the particular articles and books that I have discussed cover a different aspect of it. While they each have their particular focus, when combined they offer a solid understanding of World War I in the current state of the Middle East. Some are more detailed than others and a few would require existing knowledge to be beneficial.

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