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The Berlin–Baghdad Express: The Ottoman Empire and Germany’s Bid for World Power, 1898–1918

Thomas E. Seal

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self-proclaimed Southern strategist, is simply and reasonably dismissed as a fantasist.

Given the number of bad books that have been written about the Civil War, it is a pleasure to find a good one.

Stoker is a solid, competent author who makes his points in clear convincing prose. Written from a refreshing viewpoint, *The Grand Design* is a book worth reading.

RICHARD NORTON
Naval War College



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If ever there was a story of epic unintended consequences and “might have beens,” Sean McMeekin’s *The Berlin–Baghdad Express* is it. Approaching the First World War in the Middle East from the German and Ottoman perspectives, McMeekin expands our Anglo-centric understanding of the conflict. In doing so, he unveils a breathtaking catalogue of misunderstandings, miscalculations, simple mistakes, and missed opportunities that would be comic if not so horribly tragic.

While the title conjures images of the fabled Orient Express, the book is a first-rate history of the diplomatic jockeying of the German and Ottoman Empires to gain advantage over their respective archrivals, Britain and Russia. The railway would be a tool to enable Germany’s *Drang nach Osten* (drive to the East) while strengthening the Turks (bitter enemies of Germany’s

Russian rivals) by linking the farthest reaches of the Ottoman Empire with the seat of power in Istanbul. The completion of the railway, first to Baghdad and then extended on to Basra, would have profound political, economic, and strategic importance.

To achieve this end Germany designed a strategy to undermine the cohesion of the British Empire through Islamic holy war. That strategy was an outgrowth of Kaiser Wilhelm II’s reckless and amateurish meddling in Oriental affairs. The kaiser believed that his affinity for Sultan Abdulhamid II, Caliph of the Faithful, and for all things Islamic would enable him to engineer a jihad against the hated British, targeting the empire’s large Muslim populations in India, Egypt, and beyond. The kaiser, in league with the sultan and later the Young Turks, embarked on ambitious propaganda and military campaigns designed to rally Muslims to the sultan’s call for jihad, despite the facts that most educated Muslims had long given up the idea of the caliphate; that there was no distinction in Islamic jurisprudence or practice between a bad infidel (British, French) and good one (German, Austrian, American, or maybe Italian); that Sunni and Shia Muslims had vastly different views of jihad; and that the British had for years controlled access to Mecca for the hajj. McMeekin also points out the oddness of German support for jihad juxtaposed with the German-based Zionist movement, which actually anticipated Britain’s Balfour Declaration to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

The cast of characters includes soldiers, statesmen, adventurers, charlatans, humanitarians, and thugs from across Europe, the Caucasus, Africa, and the

Middle East. Many are familiar, such as Kaiser Wilhelm, Abdulhamid II, and T. E. Lawrence. Still more are rather obscure. Central among this group are “Baron” Max von Oppenheim, a Jewish scion of the famous banking family, and Curt Prufer, a scholar assigned to the German embassy in Cairo. Both were Orientalists, both were devotees of Kaiser Wilhelm, and both shared the kaiser’s vision of jihad. Together they worked to foment holy war from Libya in the west through Egypt, Abyssinia, Sudan, Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan, and India. After the war they emerged in the forefront of Nazi anti-Semitism and the atrocities that it produced.

A common theme found throughout the narrative is that of miscalculation born of ignorance or misunderstanding of basic historical, cultural, political, and religious truths. A prime example is Germany’s tendency to see the Muslim world as either for the Germans or against them, while missing the vast range of options in between, a problem that persists in varying degrees today. Another is the complexity of the region that breeds such miscalculations.

McMeekin’s treatment of the struggle for control of Baku in August 1918 provides a brief but illuminating example of just how complex that corner of the world can be. With British, German, Russian, Turkish, Armenian, Azeri, and other factions vying for control of the city (and its oil), fighting was not only savage but included intramural attacks upon allies. As we look at Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Caucasus, and other tribal regions today, we can see that the same elements of complexity and confusion that bedeviled earlier Western strategists is ours to deal with again, and again.

Sean McMeekin is assistant professor of international relations at Bilkent University, in Ankara, Turkey. His work is based on German, Turkish, Austrian, Russian, and American archives, as well as secondary sources. It is carefully researched, well documented, and presented with a lively style that combines analysis, insight, and a mix of irony and wry humor that makes the book as readable as it is informative.

COL. THOMAS E. SEAL, U.S. MARINE CORPS, RETIRED
Stafford, Virginia