

Mahon Murphy

The British in Jerusalem 1917-1920: The Encountered City

While the prevailing pre-war imagery of Jerusalem presented the city as virtually uninhabited and untouched by modernity, the reality was somewhat different. However, once the British troops entered and took control of the city, they were to come face to face with the reality of the city. However, the occupation of Jerusalem existed in two spheres, as noted by Mark Sykes: The local sphere and the international sphere. The international propaganda narrative once again meant that Jerusalemites disappeared to make way for a primary narrative focused on British actions in the liberating of the city.

The Military Occupation of Jerusalem was not merely the replacement of one regime by another but, Roberto Mazza argues, it represented the entire renegotiation of political and economic values, alliances, cultures and expectations both in Jerusalem and abroad. It was also here in the streets of the city and through soldiers' encounters with the local population that the romanticised image of the city was challenged by the reality of Jerusalem as living city.

The war itself had had a major impact on the city population. Trade of course naturally suffered as tourists stopped arriving, and agricultural products were requisitioned. Local authorities went about seizing convents and hospices for military use. Cemal Pasa, military governor of Syria, particularly aimed at the seizure of buildings under foreign ownership. The church of St Anne (Greek Orthodox) was converted into an Islamic school in an effort to show that there was a restored Ottoman authority over the city. Notre Dame de France was turned into a resting station for troops, while local monuments were placed under renovation and restoration. Before the British Military occupation, the character of Jerusalem was being transformed by war. An influx of troops and artillery changed the urban landscape as more and more space was required for manoeuvres.

Once the British arrived, health was a priority, Occupied Territories East Administration (OETA) was aided by existing institutions such as the American Red Cross, the Hadassah Zionist Organisation of America and the Syria and Palestine Relief Committee established by the Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem, Rennie MacInnes. The Royal Engineers began to pump water to the city from several reservoirs around the city. There certainly were improvements in the city which made daily life in what had been essentially a war zone, tolerable. Although the Turkish government had been tolerant in the first few years of the war, in the run up to the loss of the city, the last few days of Turkish rule were essentially a reign of terror. With the British

arrival public security returned, highways improved, streets were cleaned up clean and commerce restarted. British soldiers had been fighting toward the city for months and with the respite of occupation they wanted to spend their hard earned wages on souvenirs and entertainment. Indeed, one soldier noted in his diaries that it was simply a pleasure to be able to spend money again. Concert parties organised by division musical groups flourished with the most popular band, The Roosters having performed 200 times by late 1918. Local traders were to a certain extent relieved by the influx of troops; they were after all an affluent replacement for the Christian pilgrims who were unable to travel to the city during the war. Under British occupation the economy stabilized and the trade in fruit, vegetables and souvenir trinkets boomed.

However British troops could not merely walk around the city at will, there was still the ongoing matter of the First World War. The military necessity to control British Imperial Troops and military Governor Ronald Storrs's own zeal to redesign the city very much affected the space for encounters within Jerusalem. Before British entry into the city, as noted by the famous musician Wasif Jawhariyeh, Jerusalem was very much a living city, with a vibrant interaction of peoples with one another. At least in the upper-echelons of society, where Wasif circulated, there was a lot of interaction across religious divides, with neighbours often participating in each-others ceremonies and festivals regardless of creed. Wasif's memoirs challenge the pre-conception of pre-First World War Jerusalemites as being confined to their confessional quarters. These divisions which are echoed in the present state in Jerusalem were the product of British planners who wished to map their own conception of the city onto the existing living place. Once in control of the city the British military authorities established segregation strategies that corresponded to a nineteenth century desire to 'rescue' the Holy City from Islam.

An illustrative example of how military necessity and town planning interacted to control encounters in the city can be highlighted through the regulations on brothels (or disorderly houses as they were discreetly referred to in legislation). In a male dominated society one of the spaces where men (and women) of various creeds could interact with one another was in the brothel. Less than a month into his tenure as military governor Storrs decreed that all brothels were to be shut down within the walls of the old city. The military practicality of this was obvious, it would not do to have soldiers running amok in the city and it was also necessary to regulate prostitution due to the damage it was doing to the ranks; before the launch of the Palestine campaign 1,000 ANZAC soldiers had to be invalided out of Alexandria due to contracting VD. Storrs allowed for three areas outside the old city for brothels to operate within.

He also enacted harsh punishments for women who were caught engaging in prostitution outside these zones. One of the more alarming penalties was for boys under the age of 16 who were caught either engaging in pimping or prostitution. The offender was sentenced to twenty-four lashes. Considering that punishments for minors (7 to 16 years old) were normally set at six lashes or in extreme cases twelve, a continuation of Ottoman civil law, one can see how seriously this problem was regarded by occupation authorities. Unsurprisingly, this clamp down on vice in the city also entailed severe restrictions on the sale of alcohol and the complete ban on the sale or distribution of marijuana (hashish). The 're-sanctification' of the city served to break up pre-existing places for cross-cultural interaction that were taken for granted by Jerusalemites and not only decreased chances for local encounters with British troops but also restricted and regulated how Jerusalemites would interact with one another. Soldiers themselves were not allowed to stay within the city walls and were instead bivouacked in tents on around the Mount of Olives.

The sea change in cultural encounters in the city of course would come with British support for the Zionist Commission. The Balfour declaration had already set the inhabitants of the city on edge. Official support for the Zionist cause mainly from the Foreign Office and politicians in Britain also alarmed military planners who feared for the effect an influx of new arrivals would have on the stability of the city. The establishment of the Hebrew University in 1918 was according, to the Spanish Consul, Conde de Balobar, 'a transcending political act' that publically displayed British intentions. The fear of the divisive effects of Zionism on the city were seemingly borne out in the Nebi Musa riots in 1920, when the crowds led by the Muslim-Christian association protested strongly against British support for Zionism. Encounters in Jerusalem would never revert to their pre-war position as the city became increasingly physically divided.

Jerusalemites experienced the war in the same way as the inhabitants of any village near the Somme or the Marne, but ended up being ignored or overshadowed by events later in the city's twentieth century history. The desire of Ronald Storrs to re-design the city ignored its inhabitants. The need to control British soldiers' interactions with the local population also contributed to the division of the city and the reshaping of cultural life within Jerusalem's walls.

Bibliography

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