

Ending Ottoman Misrule: British Soldiers, Liberal Imperialism, and the First World War in Palestine (Dr. Justin Fantauzzo, History Department, Memorial University of Newfoundland, jfantauzzo@mun.ca)

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Introduction

Perched atop the Umayyad White Mosque in Ramla in October 1920, Major Vivian Gilbert of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, nearing demobilization and a return to Britain, gazed down at those collecting the autumn yield,

In the fields below me they were gathering in the harvest, Christians, Jews, Moslems, Syrians, Bedoueen, Arabs – all gathering in the golden grain...In the distance I could hear a military band at divisional headquarters playing the latest popular dance tune; nearer an Arab boy was playing on his reed flute as he drove his goats to water. We had finished our crusade, peace and freedom were in the Holy Land for the first time in five hundred years – and it all seemed worth while.¹

Although Gilbert labeled the war in Palestine “our crusade”, his twentieth-century crusader was not dressed in the armor of a medieval knight intent on reclaiming the Holy Land for Christianity. Instead, this was about the modern crusader as an agent of moral righteousness, a beacon of empire, a rifle-in-hand protector of the meek and liberator of the oppressed and downtrodden.

While much work has been done on the war in France and Flanders as a crusade for democracy, liberty, and against Prussian militarism discussions of the war in Palestine have been mostly shackled by the incorrect suggestion that British soldiers viewed the fight against the Ottoman Empire as a holy war, a twentieth-century religious crusade.² Elizabeth Siberry’s *The*

¹ Major Vivian Gilbert, *The Romance of the Last Crusade: With Allenby to Jerusalem* (London: D. Appleton, 1923), 235.

² Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 173-4; Allen J. Frantzen, *Bloody Good: Chivalry, Sacrifice, and the Great War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Philip Jenkins, *The Great and Holy War: How World War I Became a Religious Crusade* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), Chapter 2; Albert Marrin, *The Last Crusade: The Church of England in the*

New Crusaders, a study of crusading culture in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain, concluded that many British soldiers saw the campaign against the Ottoman Empire as a holy war.³ Michael Snape's *God and the British Soldier* argued much the same after looking at only two Roman Catholics who fought in Palestine.⁴ Adam Knobler's insightful look at the manifold uses of the crusades in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe has suggested that "a wide range of commentators and participants looked upon the Palestine campaign, both during the action and in retrospect, as nothing less than the last crusade, destined to restore Jerusalem to the forces of Christendom."⁵

Eitan Bar-Yosef's *The Holy Land in English Culture*, a wide-ranging study of orientalism in Britain, has argued for a more nuanced approach. Bar-Yosef has ably shown that crusade as a *religious* metaphor was restricted almost entirely to those of a public school, Oxbridge education: sensitive, well-read, and religiously-inclined Englishmen. Far more British soldiers, he argued, relied upon vernacular biblical culture drawn from parochial activities such as Sunday school and Christian hymns. Although he was on the right track, Bar-Yosef went no further than pointing out that the crusading theme was just as common post-war as it had been between 1914 and 1918.⁶ Stefan Goebel's *The Great War and Medieval Memory* has looked at the broader pan-European trend of commemorating the First World War through a medievalized language. Of the war in Palestine, in particular, Goebel has suggested that crusade was used as a contextual reduction to simplify the complexities of the war for a mass audience.⁷ More recently, James E. Kitchen has argued that more British and Dominion soldiers had a rather harmless fascination with Middle Eastern architecture, society, and Islam than a neo-crusading impulse.⁸

First World War (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1974); Shannon Ty Bontrager, "The Imagined Crusade: The Church of England and the Mythology of Nationalism and Christianity during the Great War," *Church History* 71, no.4 (2002): 774-98.

³ Elizabeth Siberry, *The New Crusaders: Images of the Crusades in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 94-7.

⁴ Michael Snape, *God and the British Soldiers: God and the British Soldier: Religion and the British Army in the First and Second World Wars* (London: Routledge, 2005), 182-3.

⁵ Adam Knobler, "Holy Wars, Empires, and the Portability of the Past: The Modern Uses of Medieval Crusades," *Comparatives Studies in Society and History* 48, no.2 (2006): 315-16.

⁶ Eitan Bar-Yosef, *The Holy Land in English Culture 1799-1917* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2005), Chapter 5.

⁷ Stefan Goebel, *The Great War and Medieval Memory: War, Remembrance and Medievalism in Britain and Germany, 1914-1918* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 114-24.

⁸ James E. Kitchen, "'Khaki crusaders': crusading rhetoric and the British Imperial soldier during the Egypt and Palestine campaigns, 1916-18," *First World War Studies* 1, no.2 (2010): 141-60.

Bar-Yosef, Goebel, and Kitchen are most certainly right in asserting that only a religiously fanatical fringe saw the war as a holy crusade. But if not out of some misguided sense of religious zealotry, then why did average, working-class British soldiers refer to the crusades? Was there an alternate meaning to crusade that did not rely upon its medieval and inherently religious connotation? What had the ‘crusade’ in Palestine accomplished? Could it be compared on any level to the war on the Western Front?

This article looks at how British soldiers remembered the First World War in Palestine. It argues that the war against the predominantly Muslim Ottoman Empire was not remembered as a religious holy war, but instead as a moral crusade to free Palestine’s inhabitants – Christian, Jewish, and Muslim – from Ottoman tyranny.⁹ First, this article looks briefly at the evolving definition of crusade in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Britain as well as the more relevant and widespread discourse about the Ottoman Empire as the ‘sick man of Europe’. It then explores the ways in which the British Department of Information represented the Turk and the Ottoman Empire in propaganda efforts, most notably in *The Turk Must Go* campaign. Although the press and popular media occasionally made references to the war as the last crusade, the Department of Information focused more on depicting Turkish civilization as a backward society that hampered progress across the Middle East. Lastly, this article suggests that propaganda efforts that depicted the Ottoman Empire as a civilizational blight were more successful and had a longer impact than any rhetoric about a religious holy war. Particularly after the Armistice, British soldiers who were upset that the Western Front was slowly becoming the only acceptable version of the war looked to the war in Palestine to find a more noble enterprise than the war in the muddied trenches of France and Flanders.¹⁰ By connecting the Ottoman Empire’s misrule of Palestine to a four-century-long march of death, destruction, and oppression British soldiers were crafting an even longer heritage of Ottoman terror than what Germany was being accused of perpetrating against Belgium.¹¹ Ultimately, it was not as medieval crusaders reincarnate, but

⁹ Although a large number of Australian, Indian and New Zealand soldiers fought as part of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, this article made a conscious decision to focus only on British soldiers. Imperial attitudes toward liberal imperialism and the British Empire were significantly different than those in Britain and warrant a separate study of their own.

¹⁰ Janet Watson, *Fighting Different Wars: Experience, Memory and the First World War in Britain* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), Chapter 5 & Chapter 6.

¹¹ For the “rape of Belgium”, see Nicoletta F. Gullace, *“The Blood of Our Sons”: Men, Women, and the Renegotiation of British Citizenship During the Great War I* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), Chapter 1.

instead as liberators of subject peoples from Ottoman tyranny and as harbingers of civilization and democracy in the vein of nineteenth-century liberal imperialism that British soldiers labeled their fight for Palestine a crusade.

The Turk Must Go

By the mid-nineteenth century, the spirit of holy war was spread across all of Europe. During the Crimean War between 1853 and 1856, the British, French, and Russians portrayed the conflict as a clash of civilizations: in Britain and France, opposition to Russian expansionism was stylized as a rebuke of eastern despotism at odds with the Christianity of the West, while in Tsarist Russia the war was meant to unite eastern Christians, deliver Constantinople and Jerusalem to the Orthodox Church, and purge the Caucasus of Turkish-Muslim influence.¹² Again, during the Anglo-Boer War, the British public was mobilized in part by the call-to-arms of a patriotic crusade.¹³

Although medievalism and the language of crusade had made a comeback in nineteenth-century Britain, a rigid, religious interpretation of crusade was accessible only by a well-educated, upper-class minority.¹⁴ While satirical press such as *Punch* published cartoons likening the war in Palestine to Richard Coeur de Lion's crusade, British soldiers themselves rarely expressed this neo-crusading belief. This disconnect was also true of the fighting on the Western Front. Although Anglican pastors often demonized Wilhelmine Germany as a Christian farce and sermonized the war as one between the forces of good and evil, this had more to do with reasserting the social position of the Church of England in everyday Britain, as Callum Brown has shown, than a public craving for religiously inspired hate speech.¹⁵ In the decades leading up to the First World War, crusade had lost much of its religious cache and became more associated with righteous action and the defense of civil liberties. In fact, one of the most vocal outlets of pacifist literature was *The New Crusaders*, which began publication in March 1916. Following

¹² Orlando Figes, *Crimea: The Last Crusade* (London: Penguin, 2011), 152-62 & 195.

¹³ Siberry, *New Crusaders*, 86.

¹⁴ Bar-Yosef, *Holy Land in English Culture*, 256.

¹⁵ Alan Wilkinson, *The Church of England and the First World War* (London: S.P.C.K., 1978), 170-1; See also Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800-2000* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009 [2001]).

the line of the left-wing *Daily Herald* and anti-war trade unionists, it promoted Christian pacifism through a network of volunteer “Crusaders”.¹⁶

The Ottoman Empire as the ‘sick man of Europe’ was a far more relevant popular discourse by the century’s end.¹⁷ Countless rebellions and wars of self-determination had plagued the Ottoman Empire since the late eighteenth century. For Britain, the warning signs of Constantinople’s decline were most evident from the Crimean War onward. The suppression of Ahmed Urabi’s nationalist revolt in Egypt in 1882, as part of the Anglo-Egyptian War, brought Egypt under indirect British rule and only furthered the belief that the Ottoman Empire was slowly crumbling. Both before and around the same time as the Anglo-Egyptian War of 1882, talk of liberating Palestine from Ottoman rule became more prominent. The mid-nineteenth century establishment of the Anglican-German Bishopric in Jerusalem had bolstered the fantasy that Palestine could one day become the spiritual hub of the British Empire. Societies such as the Palestine Exploration Fund, founded in 1865, conducted land surveys, mapping exercises, and archaeological excavations of the terrain.¹⁸ Meanwhile, Reverend John Dalton, who toured the Holy Land between 1879 and 1882 with the Prince of Wales’s sons, Albert Victor and George, was one of the first to float openly the idea of “breaking the yoke of the Turks”.¹⁹ Derelict villages, an archaic road system, and the conscription of Arab laborers into the Ottoman Army had convinced Dalton that “if the Turks hold Palestine long enough they will succeed in making the country a desert.”²⁰

By the beginning of the First World War, Britain’s relationship with the Ottoman Empire was on shaky ground. The Balkan Wars of 1912 to 1913 had shown that the Ottoman Empire was on the brink of collapse. Yet Britain had much to lose if the Ottomans disintegrated or, once the First World War began, if they joined the Central Powers. British commercial interests in Mesopotamia, the Persian Gulf, and in Arabian micro-states such as Bahrain were of great

¹⁶ “The New Crusader...A Journal of Enquiry into the Foundations of War”, *The New Crusader*, 1 (1916), 1.

¹⁷ Siberry notes that crusading imagery became popular across all of Europe, *New Crusaders*, x.

¹⁸ John James Moscrop, *Measuring Jerusalem: The Palestine Exploration Fund and British Interests in the Holy Land* (London: Leicester University Press, 2000).

¹⁹ Quoted in Siberry, *New Crusaders*, 66-7.

²⁰ Prince Albert Victory, Prince George of Wales and John N. Dalton, *The Cruise of H.M.S. “Bacchante” 1879-1882* (London: Macmillan, 1886), 594.

importance, as was the safety and security of India.²¹ After Britain was unable to keep the Ottomans out of the war, the British Government launched a determined propaganda campaign to render the Turks as a backward people opposed to the socio-political standards of modern civilization.

This attempt to paint the Turk and, by extension, the Ottoman Empire as an enemy of civilization – and here little distinction was made between civilization and political liberalism – was done in much the same manner as the propaganda effort aimed at Germany. Across the British Empire the war against Germany was framed along the lines of morality, human dignity, the inviolability of international law, and the need to curb Prussian aggression.²² Yet, as aforementioned, the campaign against the Ottoman Empire required a particularly delicate and careful touch so as not to offend the British Empire’s own sizeable Muslim population. One way to evade the accusation that Britain was warring with Islam was to argue that Muslims did not, in fact, govern the Ottoman Empire. In a farcical press blitz that combined misinformation with outright fabrication, *The Times*, which has been described as an unofficial publishing arm of the British Government by historian Richard Cockett, argued that the Ottoman Empire was not Islamic, but instead was run by “a clique of Judaeo-Ottoman desperadoes known as the Committee of Union and Progress.”²³ Enver Pasha, the Ottoman Minister for War, had been ‘hypnotized by German and Judaeo-German promises and adulation’ into purchasing the German warships *Goeben* and *Breslau* and launching the Ottomans into the war on the side of the Kaiser.²⁴ Unsurprisingly, *The Times*’ baseless accusation of crypto-Jewish subversion elicited a strong response from Joseph Herman Hertz, Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom. Hertz was keen to deflect any association between world Jewry and the Ottoman Government. Although he certainly wanted to avoid an all out war-of-words with the newspaper, he reminded *The Times*

²¹ Marian Kent, “Great Britain and the End of the Ottoman Empire,” in *The Great Powers and the End of the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Marian Kent (London: Frank Cass, 1996 [1984]), 172-4.

²² Catriona Pennell, *A Kingdom United: Popular Responses to the Outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 60-4; Frantzen, *Bloody Good*, 74.

²³ Richard Cockett, *Twilight of Truth: Chamberlain, Appeasement, and the Manipulation of the Press* (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989); “Aims of the Committee,” *The Times*, October 30, 1914, 8.

²⁴ “The Choice of Turkey,” *The Times*, November 28, 1914, 7. These two examples are a small representative of *The Times*’ penchant for finding a Judeo-German conspiracy behind the Ottoman Empire’s decision to join the war.

that the politicians in question were “descendants of men who severed their connexion with Judaism nearly 250 years ago.”²⁵

In more official circles painstaking precautions were taken to prevent any suggestion that the British Empire was at war with Islam. Fearful of the potential reach of the Ottoman-declared *jihad*, which was issued by the *Sheikh ul-Islam* in November 1914 in Constantinople, as well as the need to avoid a public relations disaster amongst India’s sizeable Muslim population, the Press Bureau, part of the Department of Information, released a D-notice, an official bulletin to British newspapers advising them to refrain from any mention of a holy war between Britain and the Ottoman Empire. Although somewhat inconsistent in its warnings to news outlets, the Bureau repeatedly cautioned that Britain’s war with the Ottoman Empire had nothing at all to do with Christianity or Islam.²⁶

Anti-Turkish propaganda became more vociferous as the war continued. Prime Minister David Lloyd George tasked the Department of Information, under the newly appointed Director of Propaganda, John Buchan, with disseminating a far-reaching propaganda campaign against the Ottoman Empire.²⁷ Buchan recruited an eclectic band of academics, intellectuals, and writers such as Stephen Gaselee of the Foreign Office, Sir Mark Sykes of British Intelligence, and Oxford historian Arnold J. Toynbee. Under Buchan, *The Turk Must Go* campaign, as it was known, sought to demonstrate that the Turk, like the German, had been a menace to the civilized world. The campaign was designed to show that Turkish rule had stunted the economic and social development of the Middle East and that the Ottoman Empire was incapable of granting political freedoms to its ethnic minorities.

The team of Buchan, Toynbee, Gaselee, and Sykes produced a number of news articles, pamphlets, brochures, and fictional writings. Buchan’s *Greenmantle*, released in 1916 as part of his five-part series about the fictional British spy, Richard Hannay, portrayed the Turks generally as inept buffoons who had corrupted Islam by using it as a political tool.²⁸ In contrast

²⁵ “Crypto-Jews,” *The Times*, November 4, 1914, 9.

²⁶ Eitan Bar-Yosef, “The Last Crusade? British Propaganda and the Palestine Campaign, 1917-18,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 36, no.1 (2001): 87-92.

²⁷ Correspondence, David Lloyd George to John Buchan, February 1, 1917, 395/139/42320, Foreign Office Records, The National Archives, Kew Gardens, United Kingdom.

²⁸ Ahmed Al-Rawi, “Buchan the Orientalist: *Greenmantle* and Western Views of the East,” *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 10, no.2 (2009).

were heroic British figures that spoiled Turkish plans at every turn.²⁹ Toynbee authored a number of anti-Turkish pamphlets including *The Liberation of the Peoples Who Now Lie Beneath the Murderous Tyranny of the Turks* and *The Expulsion from Europe of the Ottoman Empire Which Has Proved Itself So Radically Alien to Western Civilization*.³⁰

Sykes also got in on the act. He anonymously published “The ‘Clean-Fighting Turk’” in *The Times* on 20 February 1917. The Turks had, according to Sykes, pursued the “most devilish policy” of the war. He pointed to the ongoing slaughter of Armenians, widespread starvation in Lebanon and Syria, the conscription of supposedly unwilling Jewish colonists, and the maltreatment of British POWs as evidence of a Turkish legacy of terror, a genetic predisposition to wanton destruction that stretched back to the rule of Tamerlane in the fifteenth century. Indeed, Turkish policy was intent on destroying the existing world order and reversing the progress made by Europe,

The Arabs are to be robbed of tongue and leading; the Armenians are to be exterminated; Christianity is to be abolished in Turkey; Islam is to be overthrown and Shamanism and Fetishism revived; the British are to be kicked out of India and Egypt; and Russia is to be paralysed by a Turanian revival in Central Asia. Between the dream and its realization nothing is to stand.³¹

Sykes’ article was eventually turned into a pamphlet at the request of the British Foreign Office, and around 100,000 copies were circulated in Britain and the United States.³²

Although the Department of Information occasionally permitted and possibly even encouraged references to the crusades, men such as Buchan and Sykes spent far more time presenting the Turk as a danger to the progress of western civilization than a religious enemy.³³ Just as German *kultur* had threatened civilization in Europe, the Ottoman Empire, under Turkish governance, had oppressed its ethnic minorities and prevented the Middle East from modernizing. In the post-war period it would be the theme of a clash of civilizations, not a

²⁹ David Cannadine, “John Buchan: A Life at the Margins,” *The American Scholar*, 67 (1998): 83.

³⁰ Arnold J. Toynbee, *The Murderous Tyranny of the Turks* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1917).

³¹ “The ‘Clean-Fighting Turk’ – A Spurious Claim,” *The Times*, February 20, 1917, 7.

³² Memorandum, “The Clean Fighting Turk,” 1917, 141/773/4, Foreign Office Records.

³³ Bar-Yosef, *Last Crusade*, 92.

religious holy war between Christianity and Islam that would underscore the majority of soldier memoirs.

The Empire Saves the Day

On the eve of Jerusalem's surrender in December 1917, Rowlands Coldicott of the 60th (London) Division recalled, "That Jerusalem was to be visited by us in the guise of liberators was an idea now handed freely about from man to man."³⁴ Replacing Ottoman misrule was the enlightened governance of the British Empire, which would bring about democracy, civil liberties, and all the principles of liberal imperialism. Coldicott was not alone. Captain John More wrote that "Jerusalem was delivered out of the hands of the terrible Turk after four centuries of misrule."³⁵ In A.O.W. Kindall's memoir, *Through Palestine with the 20th Machine Gun Squadron*, the Ottoman Empire's defeat marked the end of "four centuries of conquest" and "rid the land of his presence."³⁶

However corrupt or tyrannical was the Ottoman Government, British soldiers were particularly careful to separate their opinion of Ottoman politicians from the conduct of Turkish soldiers. The aforementioned Vivian Gilbert, in a backhanded compliment, described Turkish soldiers as a combination of bravery, steadfastness, and patience. They were, however, prone to bouts of stupidity that made them like "a backward child."³⁷ Although Turkish soldiers were poorly equipped and badly outnumbered, Arthur Thorburn of the County of London Howitzer Battery had nothing but praise for their courage, determination, and fighting quality. To blame for the Ottoman Empire's collapse was not the stout and resolute Turkish soldier, argued Thorburn, it was the misguided politicians who sat in Constantinople taking orders from Berlin. The Ottomans' decision to join arms against the Allies "cost them Egypt, Palestine, Iraq, Arabia and the headship of the Moslem world, not to mention such famous oriental cities of the most ancient renown as Baghdad, Damascus, Cairo, Mecca, and finally Jerusalem." The fact that the capital of Kemalist Turkey had been moved to Ankara from Constantinople was a further sign of the Empire's irreversible decline. And responsible for it all was Germany, "Besides ruining

³⁴ Rowlands Coldicott, *London Men in Palestine and How They Marched to Jerusalem* (London: E. Arnold, 1919), 76.

³⁵ John More, *With Allenby's Crusaders* (London: Heath Cranton, 1923), 134.

³⁶ A.O.W. Kindall, *Through Palestine with the 20th Machine Gun Squadron* (London: J.M. Baxter and Company, 1920), 62.

³⁷ Gilbert, *Romance of the Last Crusade*, 227.

Germany the warlords of Germany destroyed for ever the prestige of the Osmanli Turk throughout the East.”³⁸ Frank Fox of the Royal Gloucestershire Hussars Yeomanry felt that the cream of the Ottoman Army, the hearty Anatolian peasant, had been duped into warring against the Allies by a deceptive and autocratic Germany. The German Army treated the Turks like second-class soldiers and was “always out to exploit the Turk, not to help him.”³⁹

Some went as far as to suggest that under different circumstances the Turkish soldier would have made a fine ally. If not for their “Hun masters” who had denied the Turks the best equipment and provided them with meager rations, Captain John More of the Royal Welch Fusiliers thought the Turks “would have made a gallant ally, if the Fates had only destined him to fight on our side.”⁴⁰ Propaganda leaflets dropped by the 60th (London) Division during the war played upon the same theme. “We English look upon the Turkish soldier as a highly civilised European,” read its salutary opening, “whereas the ‘Union Committee’ and Germany are treating you as machines.” The leaflet accused Germany of confiscating agricultural supplies to feed starving Germans before it turned to the Arab Revolt as incontrovertible evidence that Britain was the true protector of Islam,

It is a well-known fact, which you also realise, that millions of Mahommedans have allied themselves to us because they know that we respect their laws and religion, and they look to us to protect them and their religion from Germany and her Allies. The best proof of this is the fact that the Sherif of MECCA defeated troops of the “Union Committee,” and has become King of the Mahommedans’ Holy Land, because he knows that the “Union Committee” look upon Mahommedans as infidels.⁴¹

Thus, it was not the population of the Ottoman Empire that was the problem. It was the body politic, the core of the Ottoman power structure that was rotten.

This focus on transforming politics and society in Palestine naturally concentrated on Jerusalem. With Britain as the international guardian of a New Jerusalem, it was hoped that the

³⁸ Arthur Douglas Thorburn, *Amateur Gunners: The Adventures of an Amateur Soldiers in France, Salonica and Palestine in the Royal Field Artillery recording Some of the Exploits of the 2/22nd County of London Howitzer Battery R.F.A. on Active Service* (Liverpool: William Potter, 1934), 85.

³⁹ Frank Fox, *The History of the Royal Gloucestershire Hussars Yeomanry 1898-1922: The Great Cavalry Campaign in Palestine* (London: Philip Allan, 1923), 79.

⁴⁰ More, *Allenby’s Crusader*, 28 & 47.

⁴¹ Colonel P.H. Dalbiac, *History of the 60th Division (2/2 London Division)* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1927), Appendix IV.

laws and social mores of its liberal empire would reform the Holy City. Frank Fox, in *The History of the Royal Gloucestershire Hussars Yeomanry*, envisioned that British Jerusalem would be a city of open worship under the benign sovereignty of the British Empire,

The British people have no place in their minds for religious intolerance. More perhaps than any other people of the world they have a sincere respect for whatever form the aspiration towards God takes in the human heart. In their world-wide Empire, which has more non-Christian than Christian inhabitants, there is the fullest religious liberty. To be not only just but reverent towards the religious views of Moslems, Buddhists, Jews, Pagans, is part of their innate character as well as of their policy. Regarding Jerusalem, they recognise that it was, and is, a Holy City for Moslems and Jews as well as for Christians.⁴²

Fox's point was clear: people of all faiths would be welcome in the New Jerusalem, which would be governed with the same tolerance and spirit of religious freedom as the rest of the British Empire.

Echoing Fox's sentiment, Major E.D.M.H. Cooke reminded his reader in *With the Guns East and West* that the EEF's civilizing march was but the latest triumph of a British civilization that began its moral quest in the Middle Ages. Reworking the medieval crusades as a defense of liberty, justice, and good government, as French romantics had done long before him, Cooke slotted the modern expedition into a history of British righteousness closely connected to its Anglo-Saxon knightly ancestors.⁴³ "The real source of all that is splendid in this nation", he claimed,

originated early in our history with the solid foundation and backbone of Great Britain, i.e. the country-bred squires...It was these men, not only in their example of loyalty to king and country, but also in their fighting qualities, who rode as Crusaders to the Holy Land under Richard Coeur de Lion; lord and retainers, who, master and man, from Nottingham and Warwick, Dorset and Gloucester, and other counties, again in this War fought side by side against the enemies of England.⁴⁴

⁴² Fox, *Royal Gloucestershire Hussars Yeomanry*, 188-9.

⁴³ Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The Crusades, Christianity, and Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 73.

⁴⁴ Arnewood (pseudonym, Edward Douglas Montague Hunter Cooke), *With the Guns East and West* (Plymouth: The Mayflower Press, 1923), 66; William Matthews, *British Autobiographies: An Annotated Bibliography of British Autobiographies Published or Written Before 1951* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955), 65.

Many British soldiers were convinced that Ottoman rule had retarded the economic and social development of Palestine. Captain Alban Bacon of the Hampshire Regiment felt that the disparity between the Rothschild colonies of Akir and Katrah and nearby Arab villages was certain proof of Ottoman oppression. With the helpful hand of European finance and direction, Akir and Katrah were model colonies filled with “prosperous-looking houses and moderately well-clad inhabitants”. In comparison, Arab villages “seemed sparse and apathetic.” “Turkish rule”, concluded Bacon, “evidently acted like a blight. Some of the country had been cultivated, but there were scant signs of enterprise.”⁴⁵ Colonel Philip Hugh Dalbiac’s *History of the 60th Division* insisted that the British capture of Palestine had “restored the blessing of civilisation and good government to a country that for upwards of four hundred years had had to submit to the abominations of Turkish misrule.”⁴⁶

Nowhere was the civilizing drive greater than in Gilbert’s memoir, *The Romance of the Last Crusade: With Allenby to Jerusalem*. Although Gilbert was occasionally enchanted by the romance of fighting where the crusaders had fought, he never revealed any sort of religious hostility toward Islam nor the belief that Palestine belonged to Christendom. Indeed, it was the chance to liberate Palestine and return it to its past glory that dominated his writing. Gilbert dedicated his memoir ‘to the Mothers of all the boys who fought for the freedom of the Holy Land’.⁴⁷ Although he had fought in both France and Macedonia in addition to Palestine, Gilbert thought that the former two had produced nothing more than strategic deadlock and appalling casualties. “I had the same feeling”, he wrote, “about Macedonia that I had with regard to France; it was all so futile, so little worth while. Men were dying by the thousands but it never seemed to lead anywhere.”⁴⁸ Modern combat and the stalemate of trench warfare had turned Gilbert and his comrades into ‘an army of “wearers down” and “economic exhausters!”’⁴⁹

Coming long before the tide of disillusioned war books such as Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Gilbert’s disenchanting view of the fighting in France and Macedonia was made easier by the fact that he returned to neither front following his transfer to

⁴⁵ Captain Alban F.L. Bacon, *The Wanderings of a Territorial Warrior. A Territorial Officer’s Narrative of Service (and Sport) in Three Continents* (London: H.F.G. Witherby, 1922), 90-1; E.L. Vaughan, *List of Etonians Who Fought in the Great War 1914-1919* (London: NP, 1921), 59.

⁴⁶ Dalbiac, *60th Division*, 234.

⁴⁷ Gilbert, *Romance of the Last Crusade*, 1.

⁴⁸ Gilbert, *Romance of the Last Crusade*, 63.

⁴⁹ Gilbert, *Romance of the Last Crusade*, 66.

Palestine. He missed both the Hundred Days Offensive that ended with the collapse of Germany and the Allied breakthrough at Salonika that forced the surrender of Bulgaria. And in trying to answer the question of what his soldiering had done for the war effort and, more broadly, the world at large, Gilbert could only find proof of a just, righteous war in Palestine. Before he turned to the edifying effects of British governance, he catalogued at length the horrors of “Turkish misrule and oppression”. Whatever qualities the Ottoman *effendi* possessed, argued Gilbert, and there were many – “charming manners”, “highly educated and most hospitable”, “overbearing, suave, extortionate and conscienceless” – the backwardness of Palestine was undeniable proof that Ottoman rule had stifled civilization. Overtaxation, deforestation, and neglect of social works had made twentieth-century Ottoman Palestine no better, if not worse, than first-century Roman Palestine. At least under Roman rule, wrote Gilbert, aqueducts carried fresh water right into Jerusalem. Under Ottoman administration the inhabitants of Palestine had no other choice but to “catch the rain that fell during the winter months on the flat roofs of their houses and store it in tanks in the cellars, where it became foul and polluted as the summer advanced.”⁵⁰

Gilbert concluded his memoir with the passage quoted at the beginning of this article about his final days in Palestine. From atop the Umayyad White Mosque he watched as Ramla’s multiethnic and multi-confessional populace tilled the field together, a sure sign of the religious freedom guaranteed by the British Empire; the faint sound of a military band was a reminder of the stabilizing force that was the British Army; and the Arab boy tending his flock signaled a return to individual economy and freedom of movement. For Gilbert, it was the pacifying hand of the British Army, a *Pax Britannica* of sorts that made Palestine’s return to glory a real possibility. Unlike the Western Front, the war in Palestine was one worth fighting.

Even those ambivalent toward the campaign as a crusade did not reject fully the notion that they had fought to free Palestine. At first, Cecil Sommers’ preface to his published diary, *Temporary Crusaders*, addressed to his infant daughter, seems like an insightful and sober response to the cultural reach of British propaganda. A closer inspection reveals a far more complex and often contradictory opinion of what being a crusader actually meant. “As you grow

⁵⁰ Gilbert, *Romance of the Last Crusade*, 229.

up you will find that the world in which you live is full of very ordinary people – the butcher, the baker, the man who comes to see about the drains, the gardener, and your father.” He continued,

It will be hard for you to realize that these men and the soldiers who fought in the war are the same. They are so very ordinary, aren't they? Everybody will be leagued against you to deceive you. Your grandmother, who is apt to sentimentalize, will tell you that Daddy was a Crusader. Fresh from the exploits of Richard Coeur de Lion, you will try to picture him in shining armour with a large red cross somewhere about him. And you will fail. Try to picture him bathing at Alexandria while the guns roar and thunder two hundred and fifty miles away. Ah, I thought that would be easier! Books, too, will mislead you. The atmosphere in which heroes move is so much more enthralling – profitable – than the stale tobacco of the ordinary man. Nor are you likely to get the whole truth by questioning the butcher or any of the other man of whom I have spoken. Distance lends enchantment to the view, and I am afraid that in ten years' time they, like the soldiers of Henry Vth, will “remember with advantages, the deeds they did that day.”

...

The butcher, the baker, the man who comes about the drains, and the rest of them, are all Temporary Crusaders now, whether they are in Palestine or France. But they are in every way the same men that you will know later on, and very ordinary men at that. Remember this, and when in days to come Daddy strafes Mummy because the porridge is burnt you won't be tempted to think to yourself, “How poor Father must have deteriorated since he was a Crusader.”⁵¹

Sommers' plea addressed multiple concerns, none of which rejected outright his identification as a twentieth-century crusader sent to free Jerusalem. First, the saccharine musings of British society were not to be trusted. Family and stranger alike would distort the truth with fanciful embellishments to make the past more palatable. Sommers was not a knight of medieval England. Second, what concerned him most, what Sommers could not accept, was the *expectation* of righteous action, the forming of a moral pedestal that would be hard if not impossible to reach once he returned to domestic life. The war had spawned a code of conduct that was unlivable. Sommers' transformation from ordinary civilian to extraordinary crusader was only temporary, a distinction made clear in his memoir's title. This tension was borne entirely out of the uncertainties of domestic life. Without the mockery of his preface, Sommers had often referred to himself as a crusader in his diary entries: “it's hardly the sort of send-off

⁵¹ Cecil Sommers, *Temporary Crusaders* (London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1919), v-vi.

one would expect for Crusaders. Would Richard Coeur de Lion have been satisfied with it, for instance?"; "What will soldiers be like in two thousand years? – will discover the remains of our labours, and think of the Last Crusaders"; "So far I have been on a Cook's tour. Now, I suppose, I become a Crusader."⁵² In fact, Sommers was even left disappointed when his transfer from France was too late to take part in the advance to Jerusalem, "as we had all hoped to take part in its capture."⁵³

If British soldiers believed that the war in Palestine was one of liberation, a release from the clutches of Ottoman misrule, who exactly had been liberated? Just as Prussianism had trapped helpless Belgians under the boots of the German Army, so too, argued British soldiers, had Palestine's Arab and Jewish populations been oppressed by the Ottomans. Lieutenant-Colonel E.D.M.H. Cooke of the Royal Field Artillery, an Etonian who had also fought in France, wrote that the capture of Jerusalem had freed "both Syrians and Jews" from the Ottomans.⁵⁴ However important was the freeing of the Arabs, and few soldiers, if any, doubted that the Ottomans had devastated Palestine, others felt that the liberation of the Jews had been the war's crowning achievement. Edwin C. Blackwell and Edwin C. Axe of the Essex Battery thought it was no coincidence that the capture of Jerusalem occurred on the same date that Judas Maccabaeus had liberated the Holy Temple "from the heathen Seleucids" in 165 BC. Much to the satisfaction of the Jews of Palestine, Blackwell and Axe wrote, "After four centuries of conquest the Turk was ridding the land of his presence in the bitterness of defeat".⁵⁵

Indeed, British soldiers found a number of Middle Eastern peoples in desperate need of liberation from the Ottomans. In addition to freeing the Holy Land "from the ambitions of a modern Herod", Antony Bluett of the Camel Transport Corps suggested that Britain's victories over the Ottomans had kept Egypt politically free and independent. Of course, Bluett's fantasy of Egyptian sovereignty completely ignored the fact that Egypt had been under British suzerainty since 1882, and that the declaration of martial law in 1914 had led to *de facto* British rule. Bluett, nonetheless, was certain that the Ottomans had designs on Egypt and would turn it into an

⁵² Sommers, *Temporary Crusaders*, 13 & 75-7.

⁵³ Sommers, *Temporary Crusaders*, 16.

⁵⁴ Arnewood, *Guns East and West*, 74.

⁵⁵ Edwin C. Blackwell and Edwin C. Axe, *Romford to Beirut: Via France, Egypt and Jericho. An Outline of the War Record of "B" Battery, 271st Brigade, R.F.A (1/2nd Essex Battery R.F.A.) with Many Digressions* (Clacton-on-Sea: R.W. Humphries, 1926), 123-4.

economic backwater like Palestine.⁵⁶ Donald Maxwell's chance meeting with an Armenian, possibly a political exile, on a train from Taranto to Egypt convinced him that to defeat the Ottomans was to free the Armenians. Lodged together in the same carriage, the Armenian traveller lectured Maxwell on Armenia's Christian past, its role in supporting medieval European crusaders, and convinced him that the Ottoman Empire had brought nothing to civilization except destruction. "For this war is a Crusade of Crusades", Maxwell recalled the Armenian shouting, "and it has overthrown the unspeakable Turk and liberated a subject people." Maxwell seemingly agreed and provided in his memoir a lengthy catalogue of Ottoman misdeeds such as its expansion into Europe and the enslavement of Slavs along the Black Sea.⁵⁷

And the fact that the Western Front seemed to have a monopoly on the notion of a just, moral war was a worrying problem. To Major C.S. Jarvis of the 60th (London) Division, this problem continued long after the war's end. After touring the Commonwealth War Graves cemetery on Mount Scopus after the war, he was angered by the thought that the British public had not properly understood the colossal efforts of its manhood outside the Western Front. Seeing the endless rows of white headstones lining the cemetery, Jarvis lamented, "We imagine always that most of our soldiers were killed in France or Flanders and forget that thousands lost their lives fighting their way through the mountains of Palestine to free Jerusalem from the Turk."⁵⁸ Like other British soldiers, Jarvis saw an emerging imbalance in post-war Britain and the Empire that had weighed the sacrifice of British and Dominion soldiers who died on the Western Front more heavily than those who had died in Palestine.

In *Kilts Across the Jordan*, Bernard Blaser took this argument even further. He went as far as to dismiss entirely the moral imperative of the war on the Western Front. Britain fought not for the safety and security of the Belgians, he claimed, but most contemptibly to extend its economic sway in Europe. The war in Palestine was fought for different, more pure reasons.

Here in Palestine there could be no empty and fallacious reasons for the war we were waging against the Turks, no selfish aims for commercial supremacy, no 'Remember Belgium' and other shibboleths which had so sickened us that they became everyday jokes, but the purest of all motivations, but the purest of all

⁵⁶ Antony Bluett, *With Our Army in Palestine* (London: Andrew Melrose, 1919), 64 & 72.

⁵⁷ Donald Maxwell, *The Last Crusade* (London: John Lane, 1920), 9-10.

⁵⁸ Major C.S. Jarvis, *Through Crusader Lands* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, 1939), 65.

motivations, which was to restore this land, in which Christ lived and died, to the rule of Christian peoples.

It was only in the Middle East, in Palestine, that the war was fought for a just cause. “To free the Holy Land”, Blaser explained, “from a policy of organized murder, tyranny so awful and despicable as to cause the hearts of the most apathetic to revolt in disgust, was in itself sufficient to urge us to great efforts, to suffer increased hardships without complaint.”⁵⁹ Blaser was not fighting, though, to subject Muslims to the holy authority of St. George. Although he referred to the benefits of Christian government, by this time Christian rule and the British Empire had started to shift closer toward a secular and enlightened, although perhaps nominally Christian, definition of governance. He was instead fighting to allow for the transmission of British liberal imperialism – civics, democracy, and enlightenment – to flourish in the Middle East.

Conclusion

This article has argued that British soldiers who fought in First World War Palestine did not look back at the war as a religious crusade. Although some British soldiers unquestionably saw the fight between Christian Britain and the Muslim Ottoman Empire as a clash of religions, perhaps even as a continuation of the medieval crusades, more put stock into the rhetoric of the Ottoman Empire as an enemy of civilization. And to this extent we may conclude that *The Turk Must Go* campaign, conducted by the Department of Information, proved far more successful than the slip-of-the-tongue references to the crusades made by popular media outlets. Guided by the principle that the backward Turk had corrupted Palestine, British soldiers were confident that their victory heralded a new dawn grounded in religious freedom, ethnic pluralism, and political democracy. This repositioned the war in Palestine as evidence of the civilizing worth of the British Empire and, at times, suggested that the fight to free Palestine was a more noble enterprise than the war to liberate Belgium.

⁵⁹ Bernard Blaser, *Kilts Across the Jordan: Being Experiences and Impressions with the Second Battalion “London Scottish” in Palestine* (London: H.F.G. Witherby, 1926), 97-8.