

Crossroads of War

Ian Barnes with Malise Ruthven. *Crossroads of War: A Historical Atlas of the Middle East*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014. 224 pp. \$35.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780674598492.

Attempting to understand the Middle East, especially its military history, and explain that history to the general public might be considered an insurmountable task. And yet this is exactly what Ian Barnes sets out to do in his newest historical atlas, *Crossroads of War*. According to the introduction provided by scholar Malise Ruthven, this endeavor was undertaken because of the current and historical importance of the Middle East resulting from the complex religious interactions of the region. Ruthven writes, "Unlike other historical conflicts, the wars that took place in this arc of territory acquire universal, even theological, resonances. Conflicts originating in local disputes or rivalries were etched, by religious propaganda, into the consciousness of peoples far removed, in time and space, from the places where they actually occurred. This cultural feedback, in turn, added symbolic, even transcendental, significance to the local conflicts in which they originated" (6).

Barnes, Emeritus Chair in the Department of History and International Studies at the University of Derby, attempts to cover the complete history of the region in 224 pages. After a brief overview of the geography of the Middle East, Barnes begins with the section he designates "Ancient Times" and proceeds in primarily linear fashion (except for the brief 'Biblical Interlude,' 78-102) through to the recent Arab Spring. The book offers an interesting visual narrative of the conflicts along the timeline from 8000 BCE to the present. However, although the maps are visually impressive, the text is choppy. Barnes works hard to convey a great deal of information in a fairly small space. Hence he must resort to rather simplistic "lists" of information. There is so much ground to cover that the text often becomes a litany of "this, then that, then this." Every once in a while, Barnes throws in an interesting and different sentence structure, but most of the time his prose is simple and methodical. The writing style leaves the reader with the impression that the author is trying to squeeze too many facts into too small a space.

As this is an historical atlas, the maps should do the primary "talking." Inexplicably, there are five sections with no maps at all: "Ancient Times," "Biblical Interlude," "Clash of Faiths," "European Intervention," and "Technology and Society." It is unclear why Barnes chose not to use maps in these instances. For the most part, however, the maps are clear, detailed, and colorful. Unfortunately, there is some inconsistency with regard to the marking of elevation and the various colors and symbols used, although each map has its own key which is clearly labeled. The exception is a key to the military maps, which is located at the back of the book after the glossary. Not only might this key be difficult to find, it uses a confusing combination of NATO military symbols and unexplained modifications. Furthermore, the use of modern maps to illustrate earlier time periods leads to confusion due to anachronistic features. For example, the map on page 146 clearly shows the Suez Canal. Unfortunately, this is a map representing 1798-99, while the canal was not built until 1869.

This reviewer's greatest concern vis-à-vis this atlas is the lack of any type of citation. As there are no citations used in the text, there is no way to determine which materials were used to cite particular facts or to support specific assertions. Consequently, it is difficult to assess the author's choice of facts, statistics, or bias. Although Barnes appears to maintain a middle-of-the-road approach despite the difficulties of the political issues, he occasionally makes assertions the reader might want to verify. Unfortunately, without citations it is nearly impossible to know how the author reaches his conclusion. For instance, Barnes states, "Several historians have asserted that expulsion by the Haganah and IDF was deliberate. This was not government policy, but local Israeli commanders acting in their own interests" (184). Which historians made this assertion? What did the others say? Furthermore, as this is an atlas chronicling the history of warfare, troop numbers and casualty numbers are continually noted. Barnes writes, "By the 4th November, the Israelis

had taken their objectives but suffered 231 dead and 899 wounded. Egyptian casualties are estimated at some 2,000 dead and 4,000 wounded” (188). Again, “The exact number of Crusaders is unknown but evidence suggests a total of 35,000, of which between 3,000 and 4,000 were knights” (118). Due to the lack of citation, there is no way to check Barnes’s numbers for accuracy. Even more concerning, sometimes the author makes assumptions, presumably to make the prose read more fluently or to make it interesting for the reader. For example, “In 1980 Saddam thought it would be a good time to attack” (204). How does the author presume to know these thoughts of Saddam Hussein? This type of sensationalism is summed up in the very last sentence of the book: “The battle continues” (211).

As demonstrated by both the lack of citation and the sensationalistic language described above, this book is clearly meant to be informative and entertaining, not academic. The language of the text is informal, such as the chapter title “Napoleon’s Egyptian Adventures.” Is bringing an entire army to Egypt really an adventure? Furthermore, it appears to be aimed at readers from the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic tradition, as Barnes draws on numerous parallels with biblical texts. For example, “A legend concerning Sargon has him, as a baby, placed in a basket, sealed with bitumen, and placed on the surface of a river, just like the Biblical tale of Moses” (24), or “These were influenced by the previous Code of Ur-nammu of Ur and they all bear a resemblance to the Covenant Code of the Bible, described in Exodus Chapters 21-23” (28).

The physical book itself is quite pleasing. It is large enough to include some good-sized maps but not large enough to be unwieldy. The print is an adequate size for easy reading. Unfortunately, however, the glossary is very weak. Less than two pages long, it offers simplistic and inconsistent definitions. For example, contrast the definition of “Imam” as “Leader of a Muslim community” with the definition of “Pharisees” as “They were, at various times, a political group and social movement, later a school of religious thought. After the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 BCE, their beliefs formed the ritual basis for a Rabbinic Judaism.” Even more concerning, there are inaccuracies, such as in the definition of *Jihad*: “War against unbelievers in accordance with law of Islam. An internal process to reduce base instincts.” This definition is confusing and misleading, as the second meaning of *jihad* is a very complex notion of an individual’s internal struggle against sin. Furthermore, it appears that many of the items from this list of definitions (such as “Dardana” and “Trucial States”), although deemed important enough to be included in the glossary, were neglected in the index.

In fact, the index is wholly inadequate. It includes cities mentioned only once in passing or briefly in a list and yet ignores other items and places of significance. For example, Bishop Aldhemar (mentioned very briefly on page 119) is included, but the Crusades and Crusaders are conspicuously missing. Montgomery and Rommel, who are mentioned on the book jacket, are not even listed. Furthermore, there are errors such as the listing of Edom, which is marked as being on pages 84 and 90, but which also appears on page 100. Also, as this is an atlas, an index created especially for the maps would have been helpful.

Although the bibliography is fairly extensive, with approximately 200 items, it consists only of books. Very few of them are primary sources. There are no journal articles, essays, or websites listed. Furthermore, the division into six alphabetical sequences by time period makes it clumsy to use. Max Rodenbeck, an American journalist and author based in Cairo, Egypt, who is quoted extensively in the introduction, is not listed in the bibliography. This is true also of author and Islamicist Bernard Lewis. Although information from the writings of two Roman historians, Tacitus and Josephus, is mentioned in “Siege of Jerusalem 70 CE,” neither of these authors is noted in the bibliography. Thankfully, considering that Xenophon has his own two-page spread, the Rex Warner translation of Xenophon’s *The Persian Expedition* does make it into the bibliography. However, Xenophon still doesn’t make it into the index. Josephus does, but Tacitus does not.

This book is suitable for general audiences. It provides an interesting visual journey through the history of military power struggles in the region of the Middle East. However, by necessity this is an overview, and clearly is not intended for academic purposes. This reviewer would recommend this book for someone interested in an outline of the military history of the region but not for the academician.

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