

SORBY, Karol Jr. *Dejiny irackej monarchie, (1918 – 1941)* [The History of the Iraqi Monarchy, 1918 – 1941]. Bratislava: Slovak Academic Press, 2017. 339 pp. ISBN 978-80-89607-54-9.

Next autumn (2018) many states and world communities will commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the Great War that entered in history as the “first” of two, which in both cases started in Europe, although some of its chapters took place outside of Europe. The First World War was in reality the closing chapter of the lengthy geopolitical conflict, which was running through the modern history under the name the “Eastern Question”, at least since 1774. The signing of the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarja, which was disastrous for the sultan, marked the slow but unstoppable decline of the Ottoman Empire. Within this broad context of international politics places the author his narrative of Iraq. Without comprehensive explanation of that development he would hardly be able to analyse the history of Iraq in the years 1918 – 1941. The Middle East in general and regions which were until 1918 an integral part of the Ottoman Empire in particular, became booty of the victorious powers, Britain and France. While the conquest and occupation of the Mesopotamian provinces was taking place, the first rudiments of a British administration were being introduced. The British invasion of the three Ottoman provinces of Mosul, Baghdad and Basra and their subsequent consolidation into the new state of Iraq under a League of Nations Mandate administered by Great Britain radically changed the situation of the inhabitants of these territories. The administration imposed on Iraq was overwhelmingly the work of men seconded from the India Office and was modelled largely on Britain’s imperial structure in India. The philosophy guiding this group was largely based on a predilection for direct rule, and a distrust of the ability of local Arabs for self-government. This attitude deterred in the first phase the appointment of local Arabs to positions of responsibility.

Mesopotamia was divided into political districts, each under the charge of a British officer, and administration at the highest levels was kept in British hands. A new civil and criminal code based on Anglo-Indian laws replaced the old Ottoman laws; the Indian rupee became the medium of exchange, and the army and police force were increasingly staffed with Indians. In the summer of 1920 armed revolt broke out in the mid-Euphrates region, which the British had to subdue by force of arms. The Iraqi revolt had cost the lives of thousands of people and it had a number of important consequences. The British needed and found subjects to constitute the order which they believed best suited the idea of the Mandate and the protection of their interests.

The book is divided into two parts. The first describes the period of British rule and mandate (1918 – 1933) and the second is dedicated to the period of formal independence (1933 – 1941). The first part is divided into five chapters: 1. Direct colonial rule and the Iraqi uprising (1918 – 1920); 2. Iraq and the new British policy in the Middle East (1921 – 1922); 3. The British effort to rule through a treaty (1923 – 1924); 4. Formation of Iraqi statehood (1925 – 1928); 5. A thorny way to the League of Nations (1928 – 1933). The second part is divided into four chapters: 6. Adverse (unfavourable) beginning of the independence (1933 – 1936); 7. The first military coup in the Middle East (1936 – 1937); 8. Iraqi politics in the shadow of the military (1937 – 1939); 9. Iraq after the outbreak of the Second World War (1939 – 1941).

In the Introduction the author gives a vivid portrait of this politically complex and geopolitically manifold area on the eve of the war, where clashed the interests of the colonial powers – mainly of Great Britain and France, and since the close of the nineteenth century the interests of the German Empire as well. As the Germans in the period before the unification in 1871 missed the opportunity take a cut of a greater territorial slice in Asia, they tried afterwards to catch up with that handicap and make up for it by their involvement in the Ottoman economic-military projects.

The introduction represents a concise but clear explanation of the complex development of the Ottoman Empire since the Young Turks Revolution of 1908. The Young Turks, who seized power, were adherents of an ideological combination of chauvinistic pan-Turanism and a purpose-built pan-Islamism – a trend which was widely criticized by supporters of secularism. The author puts the development of that period in connection with the politics of the Central Powers – Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy – which aimed at redistribution of the existing colonies. The Turks at last decided to enter the Great War on the side of the German Empire.

Victory in the war brought the British Empire to its zenith: with the addition of the territories it had occupied in the Middle East and elsewhere, it had become larger than it had ever been before. At the peace conference in Paris the key problem – rightly assumed by the author – was the establishment of new states in the former Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire, according to the newly invented mandate system. The enforcement of this system in the Arab countries was met with hard opposition, even with active resistance. The creation of “national” states turned out to be a quite difficult task in a society that was divided along a long-standing (sometimes pre-Islamic) tribal allegiance, traditions and ethnic-confessional and religious criteria.

Under a mandate from the League of Nations the administration of Iraq was entrusted to Great Britain. The author correctly points out that British interest in this part of the world was both economic and strategic. It lay in the use of the territory of Iraq as the shortest communication line between the Eastern Mediterranean and India via the Persian Gulf, and to keep the territory as a permanent ground, namely two air bases for the British army. Iraq had to be used as a commercial transit route from East Asia to Europe. As the third strategic asset, the newly discovered oil fields in Iraq, the British realised that they must not lose this strategic raw material found in Iraq and Kuwait. They witnessed that in the Arab Peninsula the Americans had got ahead of them. However, the representatives both of the old political establishment of Iraq and the young nationalist generation refused the mandate system as not functional, humiliating and forced from the outside.

The gist of the monograph under review lies in the detailed analytical explanation of historical events. The author guides the reader through the political history of the area in the years 1918 – 1941 with intimate knowledge of the facts. Owing to many years of the author’s research work, the book contains a vast amount of information put in a logical narrative. In several places we can find facts which are new and others that are exposed in a different light than they are commonly presented in many similar works. The result is that the reader can witness the complex social and political dynamics of Iraq during the interwar period.

The author of the book is a Slovak Arab of the younger generation, whose subject of research is modern and contemporary Middle Eastern history. After publishing in the past decade a series of articles on the historical development of modern Iraq in the 1920s and 1930s, he concentrated his interest on the crucial formative period of the Iraqi state in a comprehensive monograph. In his research he relied both on British published documents and on works of Iraqi historians who had the possibility to exploit the Iraqi archives and the Iraqi press of the studied period. The author uses a wide heuristic base: the list of used sources and literature points to a high level of understanding of all issues related to the subject. During his relatively long sojourn in Baghdad in the mid-1990s where his father was head of Slovak diplomatic services, he put together a respectable collection of books written in Arabic. It is also important to appreciate the precise and very reliable scientific transcription of proper Arabic names.

The book *The History of the Iraqi Monarchy, 1918 – 1941*, fulfils all the criteria placed on a monograph of this kind: it is relatively concise, but at the same time it gives an answer to all cardinal problems which characterized the development in Iraq in the given period. It means that with following all the high scientific requirements, the author in an understandable way is treating the complex local and international problems not only to university students, but also to wider academic circles, and those interested in this troubled region. Various aspects of international politics are stressed in every chapter dealing with political development in Iraq.

Dr. Karol Sorby Jr. sensitively linked together the analytical and synthetic methods and exploited consistently the chronological approach. The monograph represents for the Slovak and Czech expert as well as reader a qualitative enrichment of specialized literature in history and in international relations. It will also certainly be helpful for everybody who would like to understand better the course of events in the contemporary Middle East.

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