To what extent was Lawrence of Arabia responsible for the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire (1870-1923)

Extended essay in World History

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A. Abstract

This investigation will attempt to answer the question, “to what extent is Lawrence of Arabia responsible for the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire?” Since the Ottoman Empire has existed for 624 years, this investigation will be restricted to 1880-1922 timeframe, where it will consider other short term events that led to its decline.

The investigation will be broken down into 5 sections; each section will be an event or factor that may have led to the decline. The factors were chosen based on their significance within the set time frame, and that was determined after extensive research on the subject and taking notice of common reoccurring ideas. The factors are: Lawrence’s role, European interests, economic challenges, political changes, and finally, Arab nationalism. This essay will consider the opinions of historians such as Steve Anderson, David Murphy, and others, in order to create arguments for and against each reason. Additional sources such as Lawrence’s book will also be investigated.

The main conclusions reached in the investigation are that despite having significant influence Lawrence could not have led to the decline alone, as factors inherent in the Empire’s decline were the driving force behind Lawrence’s success. Arab nationalism would not have been as concentrated had European interests not been present. Furthermore, Arab nationalism wouldn’t have been as prominent had it not been for the political policies of the Ottoman Empire shortly before the war. So in that sense, many preexisting factors paved the way for Lawrence to turn the Arabs against the empire, thus destroying it from within. The factors that lead to the decline do not stand alone, but are dependent on one another. This overlap was noticed when the themes were separated for thorough investigation.
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B. Introduction

The British government in Egypt sent a young officer, Captain T. E. Lawrence, to work with the Hashemite forces on October 1916\(^1\). He later became an important figure in uniting the overwhelmingly large Arab population, making up 60 percent of the Empire, against the Ottoman Empire, leading to the success of British military campaigns in the Middle East, and destroying the Empire from within. Although the Empire began to decline in the 17\(^{th}\) century, and was known as the sick man of Europe\(^2\), the final blow did not come until 1922.

The question of this investigation is “to what extent was Lawrence of Arabia responsible for the decline of the Ottoman Empire?” The time period 1870-1923 had political, social and economic issues that may have acted as short term causes to the empire’s decline. The investigation focuses on Lawrence, and explores if his role was truly significant or simply romanticized\(^3\). By exploring the extent to which he led to decline, and other causes such as such as European interest, economic, political issues and Arab nationalism a coherent conclusion can be deduced.

The question has current relevance, because understanding the direct reasons for decline of this 624 year Empire will aid in understanding contemporary issues in the Middle East, such as the events and reasons beyond the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as well as the foundation of modern day borders and states.

\(^3\)
C. Investigation

1. Lawrence of Arabia

There are two predominant contrasting views on corporal T.E.’s role in the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. These views will be further explored in order to deduce if Lawrence’s role was significant enough to lead to allied victory, which ultimately meant the destruction of the Ottoman Empire⁴.

According to Scott Anderson, Lawrence was a key player in the Allied cause as he had unique characteristics beyond his military field expertise⁵. Despite not having “a single day of military training”⁶, he led military campaigns that differed greatly from those in Europe, thus nicknamed the father of Guerilla warfare⁷. However, what Andersson notes to be Lawrence’s greatest advantage was his understanding of Arab culture⁸. He was therefore able to rally together the opposing Bedouin tribes and create a unified force suitable to attack the Turkish army. His ability to intertwine himself into their complex culture, where he often wore traditional Arab clothing in an attempt to look trustworthy⁹, created this neutral player who could act as an outside force to unite them¹⁰. His knowledge of the Arabs therefore contributed to the effort,

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⁸ Andersson, 67
⁹ Andersson,92
¹⁰ Andersson,95
enabling him to destroy the Ottoman Empire from within, through successful and well led military campaigns, such as the battle of Aqaba\textsuperscript{11}.

It is important to note that Andersson’s view contains a form of bias, as he relates Lawrence to his father, whom he admired; referring to him as a ‘great man’\textsuperscript{12} and claiming that they were both clintonseque”\textsuperscript{13} in regards to their mannerisms.

In addition, Anderson’s view mirrors that of the British government in the 1920’s. Despite opening its libraries to mass flow of information concerning Lawrence\textsuperscript{14}, many argue that the “information was often shallow, mass produced, and romanticized”\textsuperscript{15}. A painting of T.E Lawrence by Augustus John \textsuperscript{16} was used in 6 publications all over Britain\textsuperscript{17}.

The British government’s use of propaganda at the time has contemporary significance, as information can often be politicized to suit a position. This is seen in how information is presented today; for instance, the way Russia today\textsuperscript{18} covers the Eric Garner case as opposed to Fox News\textsuperscript{19} coverage. The emphasis or exclusion of information may change the emotions felt by people thus altering their perception of the topic.

\textsuperscript{15} Crawford, 47
Anderson’s view differs from that of the British government (1918) because it acknowledges Lawrence’s use of deceit to turn the Arabs against the Empire\(^{20}\). He was also leading on the Arabs, in that he did not inform them of the Sykes-Picot agreement (1916)\(^{21}\), which aimed to split the land promised to the Arabs during the Macmahon-Hussien correspondence between France and Britain\(^{22}\). Even Lawrence discusses this with guilt, referring to himself a “charlatan”\(^{23}\). However, “his half lies and discreetness”\(^{24}\) are what allowed him to succeed. His aspiration for the Arabs was bounded entirely within British policy\(^{25}\) and this allowed him to forego any loyalty he felt towards the Arabs and focus on achieving British goals.

Historian David Murphy on the other hand claims that “Lawrence was just one out of many British and French officers serving in Arabia, but historians often write like it was Lawrence alone who represented the Allied cause in Arabia”\(^{26}\). Murphy further pushes the notion that unlike the terrible war that was fought in Europe, including scenes like the trenches that could not be romanticized, T.E Lawrence expedition was a romantic view of the war that led to the release of films and novels that over emphasized his role and made him out to be a war hero.

Furthermore, while he was a respected general within the army, he had little impact on what was happening in the courts\(^{27}\), and was even discarded from the role of advisors, banned from the

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20 Andersson,55  
21 Andersson,56  
23 Lawrence,93  
24 Andersson,65  
26 Murphy,28  
Paris conference, and was not allowed to console the king of Iraq, Feisal\textsuperscript{28}. He was dubbed a traitor by the leaders for demanding what was promised to the Arabs during the Macmahon-Hussein correspondence\textsuperscript{29}. He was a household name in the 1920’s\textsuperscript{30}-which highlighted the significance of his role, but merely as another literary work of art rather than a catalyst for change.

In order to support Murphy’s argument and find out more on whether T.E Lawrence was simply regarded as literary work by Britain, my cousin Maryam in Birmingham, England was interviewed, and asked of her opinion on Lawrence. She based their knowledge off what she’d been taught in school, claiming that Lawrence was an ‘inspirational and educated person’, citing that “[He] graduated top of his Oxford class”, and ‘helped greatly in the creation of peace and unification of the Arabs post war’\textsuperscript{31}. Based on my how her response mirrors that of the the British government in the 1920’s\textsuperscript{32}, it is safe to conclude that the British government continues to glorify Lawrence of Arabia, and thus possibly overemphasize his role in the war.

\textsuperscript{29} Andersson,99
\textsuperscript{30} Andersson,103
2. European Interests and alliances

On the outbreak of War on July 28, 1914, the Ottoman Empire aligned with Germany. It could be argued that the collapse of the Ottoman Empire was a direct result of allied victory, and more specifically their interests. Essentially, the argument is that the complex relationship of European colonial powers interests either with or against the Ottoman Empire between the years 1870-1914 set the groundwork for the Empire’s dissolution.

In the book, *The Great Powers and the End of the Ottoman Empire*, Marian Kent suggests that the Europeans worked together against the Ottoman Empire for their interests and that weakened the Ottoman’s position. For instance, when France had occupied Tunisia in 1881, and Britain occupied Egypt in 1882, they both agreed, that Italy should acquire the Ottoman Province of Tripolitania (now Libya) as ‘compensation’. Germany and Britain in 1914 also reached an agreement on where their spheres of influence lay in the Middle East.

European interests can also be analyzed from an imperialist lens. The imperialist period focused on the essence of maintaining power without breaking war. In dividing up the empire, they were directly leading to its dissolution while maintaining peace with one another. It should also be noted that the Ottoman Empire was resourcefully and geographically important to the

35 Kent,135
36 Kent,137
European empires\textsuperscript{38}. Furthermore, considering European policy regarding the scramble for Africa, the Ottoman Empire could be weakened to serve as the “great loot”\textsuperscript{39}.

In a polar opposite view, the Europeans sometimes worked with the Ottoman’s against one another to protect their interests. This led to the strengthening of the Ottoman Empire’s position, as it acted as a stabilizing force in the area and created a desire within the European nations for its continued existence, out of fear of geographical conflicts\textsuperscript{40}.

However, it can also be argued that when the Europeans worked with the Ottoman Empire against one another, the Empire was in danger. For instance, Germany in particular took specific interest in the Ottoman Empire and signed the Ottoman-German alliance in 1914\textsuperscript{41}. This is important because it “caused [Britain] to sit on a fence”\textsuperscript{42}. Moreover, plans for building the Baghdad-Berlin railway threatened Britain’s empires\textsuperscript{43}, and raised tensions within Europe that could have contributed to the outbreak of war, which ultimately led to the dissolution of the Empire.

Furthermore, as the war dragged on, so did the overwhelming costs(200 billion francs)\textsuperscript{44} placed on the British and French. Consequently, they became more eager to make up the losses, in the form of imperial possessions and financial tradeoffs. The Sykes-Picot agreement gave

\begin{small}
\textsuperscript{38} Kent,188  
\textsuperscript{39} Kent,189  
\textsuperscript{40} Kent,190  
\textsuperscript{41} Kent,117  
\textsuperscript{42} Kent,123  
\end{small}
contradicting promises to the Jews and Palestinians, in what historian James Barr called, “a shamelessly self-interested pact”\(^45\).

3. **Economic issues within the Empire**

The Turkish ambassador Paris Rifat Pasha advised that neither side would hesitate to dismantle the Empire\(^46\) if both sides viewed the Ottoman Empire as a “prawn”\(^47\) why did the Ottoman Empire not stay neutral?

The minister of interior Talat Pasa stated “Turkey needed to join one of the great powers so that it could organize its domestic administration, strengthen and maintain its commerce and industry, expand its railroads; to survive and to preserve Its existence”\(^48\). So he believed that if the Ottoman Empire aligns itself with the victorious side, it would forge a swift victory and avoid imminent disintegration. The empire had been exhausted by the Italo-Turkish war and the Balkan war 1911-1913 and was economically exhausted\(^49\).

According to Donald Quataert, author of *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire* the Ottoman Empire had an agrarian economy\(^50\). The railroads built by European investors not only improved rural and urban relations\(^51\), but also employed 13,000 workers from


\(^{47}\) Kent,237


\(^{49}\) İnalçık, Halil, and Donald Quataert. *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. 33+. Print.

\(^{50}\) Quetraet,35

\(^{51}\) Quataert,63
within the empire. European trade ports made many Ottoman ports stronger, leading to increased business and employment. There was an increase in Ottoman shipping and trade with Europe, increasing Turkish shipping from 4.5 million tons in 1873 to 10 million in 1900.

However Quataert was accused by the institute of Turkish studies of being “anti-Turkish” for encouraging students to research the Armenian genocide. As a result, he had to resign as board chairman. This Anti-Turkish bias may contribute to his generally positive view of Europe during the war.

On the other hand, the close relations with the European countries were not necessarily good for the Empire. According to Bruce Masters, rerouting and British intervention made many Syrian ports weaker, which angered the locals and resulted in hostility towards the government.

Lastly, foreign investment meant that Ottoman Empire was exposed to European intervention, especially since those investors employed a large number of locals (est. 13,000) as well as controlled essential aspects of daily life such as food transportation.

The Ottoman Empire’s dependence on foreign allies to modernize placed was dangerous for the Empire because it increased Ottoman involvement with European affairs, as the railways, spanning from Damascus to Medina, gave the Europeans a strong sense of financial control in the region.

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52 Quataert, 59
53 Quataert, 62
56 Geyikdağ, 28
57 Geyikdağ, 27
58 Geyikdağ, 31
Some believe that the Ottoman Empire joined Germany simply because it needed an ally due to its economic vulnerability\(^{59}\). It makes us question the course of many political decisions made today; whether joining alliances would solve problems. In the Ottoman Empire’s case, this proved disastrous; dragging it into a war that would eventually mean it’s end.

4. Political changes

Although the young Turks did not gain control until 1908\(^{60}\), they had extended their control through the CUP (Committee For Union And Progress) where they forced the Sultan to restore the constitution\(^{61}\). The argument then arises, to what extent did the new constitution cause war?

Historian William Cleveland argues that the constitution improved the army, economy and led to better understanding of the military\(^{62}\). The Ottoman Constitution represented more than the immediate effect it had on the country, it provided clear evidence of the extent to which European influences operated among a section of the Ottoman bureaucracy\(^{63}\). It was therefore more than a political document; it was an assertion that the Empire was capable of resolving its problems and had the right to remain intact as it then existed\(^{64}\).

On the other hand, despite aims to modernize the Empire, the Young Turks followed many nationalistic policies, such as standardizing Turkish as the official language which created many

\(^{59}\) Geyikdağl,51
\(^{60}\) Geyikdağl,144
\(^{61}\) Geyikdağl,46
\(^{63}\) Cleveland,27
\(^{64}\) Cleveland,37
tensions within the Empire, most notably an Arab outrage\textsuperscript{65}. Despite what the Young Turks motives may be, they also lead and lost three wars in the Balkans (1911-1913), which further damaged the social status of the Ottoman Empire, since the land lost was of strategic importance\textsuperscript{66}. So at the dawn of the war, many Ottoman units had limited supplies and outdated military weapons\textsuperscript{67}, leaving the Empire unprepared to fight a war.

The reason these sources disagree so strongly because politics is generally a complex area of study. The previous government before the Young Turks had accumulated 110,000,000 Euros worth of debt\textsuperscript{68}. It is understandable why the Turks came into power and thus their attempts at reform and occasional failures may be criticized less harshly.


\textsuperscript{66} Cleveland, J.


5. Arab Nationalism

Arab nationalism, the belief that there should be unity among the people of Arab nations\textsuperscript{69}, began in the late 1850’s however it only intensified after the rise in Turkish nationalism\textsuperscript{70}. The main argument that arises is that Arab nationalism led to the dissolution because of the need for revenge as a result of Ottoman actions: the removal of old governments, construction of the Hejaz railway or European intervention.

The Arabs looked at the nationalist movements of the post Slavic countries which had mostly won their independence\textsuperscript{71}. This was a direct mistake of the Turkish failures in the war, which fueled Arab nationalism. However these ideas of nationalism were fostered by the educated Arab elite and secret societies. The ideas did not spread very far\textsuperscript{72}, and are therefore regarded as insignificant.

The Hejaz railway is another factor that may have contributed to dissolution. The Arabs generally enjoyed limited Ottoman intervention up until it’s construction, which connected Medina to Damascus\textsuperscript{73}. The train could bring over 1,000 tax collectors or military officials overnight\textsuperscript{74}. This outrage caused the influential Sheriff Hassan bin Ali of the Hashemite tribe along with the Islamic Wahhabis, to brand the Young Turks as “Anti-Islamic”\textsuperscript{75}. This alienated

\textsuperscript{70} Fawcett,218
\textsuperscript{72} Fawcett,223
\textsuperscript{73} Fawcett,224
\textsuperscript{75} Lawrence,53
the Turks and would later build nationalism to estrange the Arabs so that any crimes committed by the Arabs against the Empire are ethically justifiable.

The Young Turks made mistakes in how they dealt with the revolution. For instance in Britain, the monarchy has no political significance, however it remained intact to ensure the loyalty of the subjects as well as create patriotic and historical familiarity within the British population\textsuperscript{76}. By removing the Sultan, the Young Turks lost the loyalty of the Arabs, since Islamic law dictates that Arabs should follow their designated Khalifa\textsuperscript{77}, and if he doesn’t exist then the next leader would be the Hashemite tribe. For this reason, the Arabs were very responsive when the Hashemite tribe called for war against the Empire.

Furthermore, another way that Arab nationalism leads to dissolution is that it aided in achieving British goals. Britain’s promise of an Arab independent state, as well as the constant supply of weapons and equipment in 1915 from Egypt to Arabia, gave the Hashemite tribe the means to form alliances with the tribes around them\textsuperscript{78}. By combining the nomadic Arabian clans’ ability to field large numbers of fighting men with the pan-Arab nationalist agenda of al-Fatat, Hussein Ibn Ali ensured that the revolt he started would have far-reaching consequences\textsuperscript{79}.

However, viewing the situation from hindsight, it is highly unlikely that the Arabs would have revolted had they known of the Sykes Picot agreement of 1916. When asked about it, the Arabs

\textsuperscript{77} Fawcett, 224
interviewed\(^{80}\) all condemned the actions of the Hashemite tribe and called it a form of “treachery” which led to the decline of the last all-encompassing Muslim Empire of the time. The flag of revolution was designed by British diplomat Mark Sykes, in order to fuel Arab nationalism\(^ {81}\). The British realized that it was impossible to conquer the Middle East and defeat the Empire without the help of those who knew the region. Therefore, British planning in the Arab revolt (1916-1918)\(^ {82}\) can be regarded as the epitome of military genius.

Nonetheless, interviews are subjective. Those interviewed were not historians, but rather modern day Arabs with a sense of political awareness. Their views may heavily rely on emotion; this may be useful as it gives an idea of the general sentiment felt by the Arabs today.


D. Conclusion:

The evidence and arguments considered suggest that despite having a large amount of influence on the events that occurred during war, it is impossible to blame a single man for the dissolution of an entire Empire. While Lawrence of Arabia did play an irrefutably huge role in the war effort, the correspondence between the Hashemite and the British in Cairo was already in progress. However Lawrence did water an existent seed and that is Arab nationalism. But there were other factors completely out of his control such as the administration of the Turkish Empire and the economic situation of the Empire that led to its desperation and motivation to join the war. Furthermore, he was mainly an initiator of British commands; he did not control European interests. Nonetheless, it shows that there are clearly problems with reaching a final answer to the question because, by stepping back and looking at the big picture, interconnections between the themes exist, making many dependent on one another. This investigation assumes that the dissolution of the Empire is a direct result of its loss in world war one, and therefore investigates the factors that caused it to join or resulted in its loss during war. The question then produces different answers even within the time frame of 1880-1923, as plentiful evidence is found to support these different angles.
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