

and comprehensible, at times the reader may feel overwhelmed by quotes and side-stories that are a little bit redundant and superfluous. What Satia really achieves in this first part is to profoundly analyze the exploits of the British intelligence community and to see how these have been employed in the long term. The exploitation of intelligence gathering in the formation of the covert empire is the focus of the second part of the book. Satia opens this part discussing how the understanding of Arabia turned into conspiracy theories and how contemporaries made sense of those events. (p. 203) Using the tools of a deep cultural analysis, Satia exposes the ways in which British officials and media tried to explain Arab rebellions against the same British rule. Conspiracy theories came to be official theories supported by the same agents, who operated in the region during the war and remained the expert ears and eyes in the Middle East. This environment, according to Satia produced and immanent paranoia, which was partly defied through a new technology of surveillance: air control. This new means of surveillance was not only cheaper and more convenient but as Satia explains, its development also had cultural reasons, as agents on the ground defined Iraq as a suitable place for

aerial surveillance. (p. 240) Air control was intended to be driven by intelligence and to provide the basis of an empire's hold by agents and not military troops. Clearly air bombardment was very much a regime of terror, which proved very difficult to defend vis-à-vis public perception, though Satia shows how paranoia remained a very strong rationale to defend covert colonial power. (p. 277)

"Spies in Arabia" clearly points the finger at the British and exposes how state led terror campaigns were the byproduct of the culture produced in war-time Britain and the Edwardian mentality. Satia's work, though lacking a discussion on the recipients of British policies, clearly not the focus of *Spies in Arabia*, persuasively tells us of how Arabia and more precisely Iraq was exploited as a guinea pig in the new business of covert empire building. Though Satia closes the book reminding the readers that history does not repeat itself, she clearly suggests that in light of current events in the region it would be wise to draw some lessons from playing imperialism in Arabia.

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Gatekeepers of the Arab Past: Historians and History Writing in 20th Century Egypt

By *Yoav Di-Capua*

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To study historiography as a prism that elucidates a society's wider developments has experienced a remarkable upsurge

over the last decades and has produced a number of fascinating works. In the Middle East, it is especially history writing in

modern Egypt that has been studied by authors such as J. Crabbs, Y. Choueiri, and I. Gershoni. Consequently, the work under review raises the question of why we need yet another study on this subject. And, indeed, the author sometimes embarks on a well-trodden path and repeatedly discusses material that is all too well known. However, he succeeds in producing a unique and original account of the field by setting this material into a sophisticated framework and by integrating the relevant theoretical scholarship into his analysis.

The first chapter “Historicising Ottoman Egypt, 1890-1906” deals with the formative period of modern Egyptian historiography and outlines the book’s main argument. The author proposes ‘historicism’ as the single explanatory framework for the disparate trends that started to emerge during this period. Historicism – or as he repeatedly describes it – the mode of “thinking *with* history,” revolutionised historical thinking and changed the perception of time, space, and subjectivity in society at large. In this period, traditional forms of history writing (such as chronicles) came to an end and the nation became a central concept. Closely intertwined with the rise of the nation as the subject of historical inquiry, the “founder paradigm” was developed, which set Muhammad Ali’s reign as the starting point of modern Egypt.

This transformation of historical thinking is traced in more detail in Chapter 2 (bearing the rather enigmatical title “Talking History, 1906-1920”). With the de-Ottomanization of the Egyptian-Ottoman elites, writers created a firm link between the concepts of nation, history, and modernity. Based on a new political language and acting within a new semantic field, influential historical works favoured Repub-

licanism, undermined the monarchy and set new rules for the politics of historical representation.

The third chapter on the ‘Abdīn archive in Cairo focuses on the crucial space for royalist historiography in the 1920s and 1930s. This is one of the book’s most fascinating sections and it shows in detail how the archive was represented as the metaphor of a modern Egypt. At the same time, it served as a workshop for the massive royal project of producing an authoritative account of the emergence of modern Egypt. The author convincingly argues that the organisation of the collections, the daily working processes and the underlying assumptions all fed into the production of historical knowledge that prioritised European influences and royal agency. Concomitantly, the exclusion of specific sources (such as endowments records) mirrored a view of history where subaltern groups played no role.

The following chapters discuss the period from the 1930s up to the end of the monarchy in 1952. Here, the author discusses the intense rivalry between royalist and nationalistic interpretations of history centred on the figures of Shafīq Ghurbāl and ‘Abd al-Raḥman al-Rāfi‘ī. Despite the fierce conflicts – often accompanied by state intervention in terms of censorship and restricting access to sources – the two ‘schools’ shared the basic assumptions of the ‘founder paradigm’. In this period Ghurbāl was able to control the emergence of a professional historiography with its nexus of university departments, libraries, conferences, specialised journals etc.

From the 1940s onwards historiography became – also due to a more radicalised political landscape – increasingly politicised. This politicisation found its expression in

the rise of Marxist historiography and the increasing tendency of historical texts to function as “national allegories.” Chapters 7 and 8 deal with historical writing under Nasser’s regime. After the 1952 revolution history turned into a practise of justifying and celebrating the political present. Within a historical field that reduced the Egyptian past to a series of key events (1798, 1882, 1919, 1952) and that was not able to develop a pan-Arabist past, Marxist historiography became the most innovative approach. This historiography was able to fill to some extent the void left by the dismantling of liberal networks of historiography and at the same time successfully kept its distance from Nasserite historiography. When the rather sterile Nasserite historiography entered into crisis in the 1960s, it was consequently Marxist-orientated approaches that were able to step in. In his final chapter “Authoritarian Pluralism, 1970-2000” the author argues that new and previously marginalised groups could insert themselves into Egyptian historiography. However, the regime’s practices led to a historiographical field that was methodologically poorer and culturally more provincial.

This is a well-written book that is in most parts convincingly argued. At some points the author tends to ascribe too much importance to his chosen field of study. Many historians certainly would wish that history writing was for instance, “the foremost medium through which [modernity] was articulated,” but the author does not offer convincing proof for such assertions. Slightly irritating is as well the focus on historical works that study the modern period. A large part and arguably the most important part of Egyptian historical scholarship was devoted to pre-

modern periods (the author himself cites the overwhelming number of MA and PhD theses on premodern subjects in the first half of the 20th century). The reader wonders why the author does not turn to these works that have yet not been studied in detail.

As the historians, who are studied, wrote in the 20th century many of them are still alive or at least their family members and students would have been available for interviews. However, considering the author’s background it might have proven difficult for him to gain access. Another of the book’s weaknesses is that it remains in some places strangely abstract and often lacks detail that could have been filled with fieldwork. My final quibble is that the author shows in much detail the schematic periodization of many historians that subscribe to a top-down view of history. At the same time, the periodization that Di-Capua himself adopts follows the main political events of modern Egyptian history. This leaves very little room for historiography and other fields of intellectual activity as autonomous rooms of human activity. Rather, the periodization implies that historians and history writing developed in dependence on political developments.

However, Di-Capua has produced a challenging and highly informative account of modern Egyptian historiography. He makes an interesting set of arguments that will be of interest for students of the modern Middle East and for students of intellectual history more particularly. The author deserves special praise for his wide reading of secondary literature, especially in Arabic, that he puts to very good use.

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