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WWI-Near East

PALESTINE CAMPAIGNS, 1916-18

A Working Bibliography of MHI Sources

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GENERAL SOURCES

Commonwealth (British and ANZAC) forces battled German and Turkish troops from January 1915 to October 1918 for control of Syria, Palestine, and the Sinai Peninsula. The Ottoman Empire was keenly interested in eliminating British colonial rule in the region; their German allies needed as many Commonwealth troops as possible away from the Western Front and otherwise engaged.

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Under British control since 1869, the canal between the Mediterranean and Red Seas was the shortest route between Europe and the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The Ottoman Suez Expeditionary Force (22,000 German and Turkish troops commanded by Djemal Pasha) departed Beersheba on 14 Jan, the advance force attacking the canal on 2 Feb. After two days of fighting and the loss of 2,000 men, Pasha returned to Beersheba. This was the only direct Turkish attack on the canal, but the mere threat was a drain on British forces in the region. It would reduce the number available to support the Dardanelles Campaign two months hence and move the British to force Egypt to enlarge its own forces for homeland defense.

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-Romani

Over a year after the initial Ottoman attempt to capture the canal, German General Kress von Kressenstein led 15,000 Turks toward Suez, but was halted by Allied troops at Romani, a British railhead in Sinai. Again, the Turks retreated across Sinai after two days of fighting.

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After the victory at Romani, Britain saw the wisdom of protecting Suez from a distance. LTG Sir Charles Dobell constructed a railway and waterline through the Sinai, building up troops and supplies in the process. On 23 Dec 1916, his troops captured the Turkish fort at *Maghaba*; two weeks later the ANZAC Mounted Division captured the fort at *Magruntein [Rafa]* on 8-9 Jan 1917, removing all Turkish troops from the Sinai and securing the Suez by a wide perimeter. The new British government (David Lloyd George), however, had its sights set on complete domination of Palestine.

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-Beersheba

A third strike on Gaza, masterminded by Allenby, saw far greater success, largely through a campaign of deception. When Allenby finally attacked, at Beersheba on 31 Oct 1917, the Turks were caught by surprise. He feigned a frontal assault, with the Australian Light Horse flanking Turkish defenders from the east what is often referred to as history's "last successful cavalry charge."

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While decisive, Beersheba was not conclusive because the Turks had redeployed some troops, forcing the British to continue the Campaign. Successive battles at Tel Esh Sheria (6 Nov), into Gaza proper (7 Nov), Junction Station and Mughar Ridge (11-14 Nov) led to the fall of Jerusalem (26 Dec).

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ENDGAME

By early 1918, Turkish troops were under the command of German General Liman von Sanders, who deployed 36,000 troops into the Jordan Valley. Most of Allenby's army had been sent to the Western Front, replaced with recruits from India, who spent the spring and summer of 1918 being trained by the thus-far successful British General.

Allenby received additional support from COL T.E. Lawrence and Enver Faisal's Arab Army of some 6,000 tribesmen. They had been keeping the Turks occupied by a series of raids that disrupted the Hejaz Railway and communication in general, and included the capture of the port city of Aqaba. Lawrence convinced Allenby to allow the Arab Army to form the British right flank in the march through Palestine to Damascus. Allenby chose to attack north through the Jordan Valley, through von Sanders' army. Through a succession of battles, the Turkish Army essentially ceased to exist; Megiddo (westernized as Armageddon, 19 Sep), Damascus (1 Oct), Beirut (2 Oct), Homs (16 Oct) and Aleppo (25 Oct). Allenby occupied Beirut and Homs, while Lawrence, after making a ceremonial entrance into Damascus, continued north to the Turkish-Syrian border. The Turks signed an armistice on 28 Oct; with their formal surrender two days later, Ottoman rule in the Middle East came to an end.

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