



Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain's Covert Empire in the Middle East

Priya Satia

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At the dawn of the twentieth century, British intelligence agents began to venture in increasing numbers to the Arab lands of the Ottoman Empire, a region of crucial geopolitical importance spanning present-day Iraq, Jordan, Syria, and Saudi Arabia. They were drawn by the twin objectives of securing the land route to India and finding adventure and spiritualism in a mysterious and ancient land. But these competing desires created a dilemma: how were they to discreetly and patriotically gather facts in a region they were drawn to for its legendary inscrutability and by the promise of fame and escape from Britain?

In this groundbreaking book, Priya Satia tracks the intelligence community's tactical grappling with this problem and the myriad cultural, institutional, and political consequences of their methodological choices during and after the Great War. She tells the story of how an imperial state in thrall to the cultural notions of equivocal agents and beset by an equally captivated and increasingly assertive mass democracy invented a wholly new style of "covert empire" centered on the world's first brutal aerial surveillance regime in Iraq. Drawing on a wealth of archival sources--from the fictional to the recently declassified--this book explains how Britons reconciled genuine ethical scruples with the actual violence of their Middle Eastern empire. As it vividly demonstrates how imperialism was made fit for an increasingly democratic and anti-imperial world, what emerges is a new interpretation of the military, cultural, and political legacies of the Great War and of the British Empire in the twentieth century.

Unpacking the romantic fascination with "Arabia" as the land of espionage, *Spies in Arabia* presents a stark tale of poetic ambition, war, terror, and failed redemption--and the prehistory of our present discontents.

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