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NEW MIDDLE EASTERN REVIEWS

The Middle East in Modern World History

Ernest Tucker

Boston, Pearson, 2012, xxix + 396 pp., \$48.20 / £28.99, Paperback

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As the demand for introductory texts on the modern history of the Middle East is soaring in parallel to the recent advancements in the field of Middle Eastern studies, more and more books of this nature have been published. The challenges to writing a comprehensive historical survey of the region are quite compelling as the author must address the question of the geographical and chronological boundaries of the modern Middle East, and produce prose that is as stimulating as it is impartial and as interpretive as it is succinct.

Ernest Tucker, a professor of Middle Eastern history at the United States Naval Academy, tackles these challenges to a great extent in his balanced, lucid, and thought-provoking new book entitled *The Middle East in Modern World History*. The author clearly accomplishes his goal, which is to put the Middle East in its rightful place in modern world history, as the title of the book suggests. Consisting of 23 chapters and covering the period from the pre-Islamic civilizations to the Arab Spring, the text is designed as a political narrative of the region's history with a focus on the past two hundred years.

Tucker uses the term Middle East "to refer to the region of the world between the Nile River in Africa and the Oxus (Amu Darya) River in Central Asia (from west to east), and between the Balkans (in southeastern Europe) and the Indian Ocean (from north to south)" (p. xix). It is clear from this geographical definition that North Africa except Egypt is left out of the Middle East, which is not unusual in introductory surveys catering to non-professional readers and students. Nevertheless, this reviewer considers this exclusion regrettable as the contemporary changes in the region, particularly the Arab Spring, have shown that North Africa is an organic part of the Middle East. Moreover, despite the definition suggesting that the text will cover Afghanistan and Pakistan, neither the modern history of these states nor the Mughal Empire are examined with the exception of the period from the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan to the U.S. plans for withdrawal in 2011.

The author's perusal of the Ottoman and Safavid empires offers a new perspective compared to previously written historical surveys. What renders this chapter valuable is that Tucker incorporates the latest paradigms and debates in the fields of Ottoman and Iranian studies into his narrative. The perils of inadequate treatment of the Ottoman Empire and its institutions in introductory texts focusing on the modern history of the region is especially obvious in survey courses on Middle Eastern history. In my own experience as a pedagogue, I have come to realize that when reading the Ottomans from other introductory texts, students tend to construe that the Ottoman Empire emerged in the Middle East and established non-military contact with the West only in the late eighteenth century. This portrayal of the Ottomans is erroneous, considering that

the centre of the empire was the Balkans (*Rumeli*) before it became a power to be reckoned with in the Middle East proper and that commercial and cultural exchanges flourished between the Middle East and the West during the early modern period. Tucker, on the other hand, skillfully presents the Ottoman link connecting the early modern and modern Middle East. Nevertheless, in certain places, his examination of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries echoes some arguments that have been discredited. For example, referring to the era of the sultanate of women, he states that in the long run incompetent sons of these women weakened the empire (p. 46).

Tucker devotes more than four-fifths of the book to the history of the region in the past two centuries when “the Middle East regained its traditional importance as a strategic conduit between East and West” (p. xix), oil was discovered, and the process of the region’s incorporation into the world economy began. One can argue that the Middle East had been a conduit between East and West under the Ottomans and Safavids prior to the nineteenth century, and as such, early modern history is as important as the last two centuries in order to understand the complexities of the Middle East. Understandably, however, the author prioritizes the past two centuries based on his aforesaid premises and for the targeted readers who are mostly interested in exploring the modern history of the region.

The treatment of the period from the late eighteenth century to the present day is brilliant. Tucker eschews a tedious narrative and manages to elucidate the region’s modern history insightfully. First, he always demonstrates multiple dimensions and historical dynamics surrounding the significant events and changes in the history of the Middle East. A good example of his approach can be seen in the chapter on the Tanzimat, where the author elaborates this period of reform from personal, domestic, regional, and international perspectives. To illustrate further, while discussing the dethronement of Selim III, he states that Selim’s defeat by the Russians in 1806 was one of the reasons for his deposition besides his zeal for reforms and plans for establishing a new army (p. 61). Similarly, while describing Abdülhamid II’s rule as despotic, the author does not fail to mention the subtle continuation of the Ottoman modernization movement during his long reign (p. 100).

Moreover, Tucker weaves interesting details such as the conversation between the Saudi Prince Sultan and Osama bin Laden (p. 308), and certain personalities that are usually understudied in Middle Eastern history such as Ibn Khaldun (pp. 33-4) into his historical prose. Third, he sheds light on some of the previously unexplored aspects of the region’s history; for instance, the discussions on the abolishment of slavery in the Ottoman Empire (p. 82) and women’s involvement in Middle Eastern political milieu (p. 123-4). Lastly, the author does not forsake the chronological integrity of the text in order to explain certain relevant events under a thematic title. Unlike other historical surveys on the modern history of the Middle East, for example, he does not jump from Egypt’s invasion by Napoleon in 1798 to Muhammad Ali’s takeover of Egypt but focuses on Selim III and his reform projects first (p. 63). In the same manner, he examines the Zionist movement in the nineteenth century under the chapter entitled “Indirect European Influence in the Middle East,” not as part of a separate chapter on Zionism.

The reader finds discussion questions and a list of suggestions for further reading at the end of each chapter. The questions are particularly helpful to instructors in sparking discussions among students in a classroom setting. Reflecting the author’s grasp of the secondary literature, the suggested readings are up-to-date and contain new publications printed in the last decade as well as seminal works pertaining to each chapter. Notwithstanding the fact that Tucker is polyglot and capable of consulting works in the languages of the region, he cites only a few

sources in Turkish and the suggested readings consist of works only in English. The text is enriched with a comprehensive chronology section at the beginning (pp. xxi-xxxviii), a glossary at the end (pp. 369-87), and maps and illustrations that may assist the reader in visualizing some of the issues and personalities discussed.

Overall, the author accomplishes his goals of showing “how broad global trends during this period [the past two hundred years] both shaped the modern Middle East and were shaped by it” (p. xix) and of “enabl[ing] readers to put this region in a more accurate context” (p. 367). The strengths of *The Middle East in Modern World History* by far outweigh its shortcomings. It is an impartial, engaging, and solid work that addresses the complexities of the region and its history in well-written prose. As such, it is an excellent contribution to the genre of historical surveys of the Middle East and can be used as a textbook for survey courses on the modern history of the region or as an introductory book for non-professionals eager to understand the modern Middle East.