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REVIEW ARTICLE

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RECORDING WORLD WARS

GLENDA ABRAMSON, *Soldiers' Tales: Two Palestinian Jewish Soldiers in the Ottoman Army during the First World War* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2013).

CONDE DE BALLOBAR, *Jerusalem in World War I: The Palestine Diary of a European Diplomat*, ed. Roberto Mazza and Eduardo Manzano Moreno (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011).

KIMBERLY KATZ, *A Young Palestinian's Diary, 1941–1945: The Life of Sāmī ʿAmr* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 2009).

SALIM TAMARI, *Year of the Locust: A Soldier's Diary and the Erasure of Palestine's Ottoman Past* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2011).

SALIM TAMARI and ISSAM NASSAR, EDS., *The Storyteller of Jerusalem: The Life and Times of Wasif Jawhariyyeh, 1904–1948*, trans. Nada Elzeer (Northampton, Mass.: Olive Branch Press, 2014).

World War I inspired countless artists, poets, novelists, and even soldiers across the world to record their unimaginable experiences and to reject the millennial lie: *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* (it is sweet and appropriate to die for one's country). Early 20th-century European writers like Wilfred Owen, Virginia Woolf, Erich Maria Remarque, and Henri Barbusse have become household names. Less well known are the Arab civilians and soldier writers who struggled on the edges of the war's fronts.

In anticipation of the centenary of World War I, several scholars have translated and edited diaries and memoirs of men who lived in and beyond Ottoman Palestine through the harrowing years of 1914–18 and/or during World War II. These Arabic, Hebrew, Ladino, and Spanish memoirs and diaries are appearing in English for the first time.

Unlike most records of the Middle Eastern experience of World War I, the authors were not political or military leaders but rather regular soldiers, diplomats, and private citizens. Their unfiltered writings indicate how class, religion, and nationality affected individual experiences. Most of the editors note that the diaries should not be read for their literariness but for the invaluable insight they provide on how ordinary people lived the calamities and dailiness of the two World Wars.

The writers describe how the introduction of electricity, cinema, the radio, mass-circulating publications, mass literacy, and the phonograph transformed their world. Societies not yet used to the new ease of communication across great distances, to the increased mobility that the airplane, train, and car allowed, and to women's active

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participation in the public sphere, witnessed the end of a multiethnic empire. In its stead, multiple nationalisms, including Zionism, with their new norms, rhythms, and values, appeared. Some memoirs touch on the accelerating influx of Jews, especially from Eastern Europe, into Palestine and the consequent politicization of the Arabs. Some authors welcome these developments while others deplore them.

These five books present an intricate, intimate, and complex history of Palestine during the first half of the 20th century. The men strew their war memoirs and diaries with vivid details and invaluable archival information about life in Palestine between the dying of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the Jewish State of Israel in 1948. In the Palestinian writings, the personal overshadows the political role of international players and events that are highlighted in the diary of the Spanish diplomat.

In *Year of the Locust,* Salim Tamari—who either introduced or edited three of the five books under review—discusses the diaries of three Muslim soldiers in the Ottoman army who did not know each other but whose lives "encapsulate the three major ways in which the Great War transformed the lives of its citizens" (p. 13). ʿArif Shihada spent most of the war in a Siberian prison camp where "he developed a separate Arab political identity, unlike the amorphous Arabist consciousness that he experienced in Istanbul" (p. 82). Second Lieutenant Mehmet Fasih from Mersin was an Ottoman loyalist. Private Ihsan Turjman, whose text Tamari translates, writes, "I am Ottoman by name only, for my country is the whole of humanity . . . I hold a drop of my blood to be more precious than the entire Turkish state" (p. 133). They were conscripts in the Ottoman *seferberlik*, the forced mobilization of mostly Arabs when Turkey entered the war on the side of Germany against the Allies. Tamari notes the emergence of these men's "modernist sensibilities of intimate individualism, romantic love, . . . possibilities of professional advancement, and movement away from the family sphere" (p. 85). Using Shihada's and Fasih's writings for historical context, Tamari focuses on Turjman's short manuscript, written between 28 March 1915 and 8 August 1916, a few months before he was killed.

Glenda Abramson's *Soldiers' Tales* introduces the handwritten Sephardi Hebrew and Ladino diaries of Yehudah Amon and Haim Nahmias, two observant Sephardic Jewish soldiers from Jerusalem conscripted into the Ottoman army. Although the diaries trace a trajectory through the war years, they rarely comment on the global situation, and they are randomly dated. As Jews, Amon and Nahmias were not trained by the Ottomans to fight but were sent to army support units in Western Anatolia where although they were not exposed to danger, they were subjected to the extreme hardships of labor camps. Abramson writes that both men's "narratives are given a redemptive shape: from trial to deliverance" (p. 47). Whereas Amon may write about his tribulations in an ironic tone, Nahmias consistently struggles and weeps. Abramson characterizes Amon's language as elegant and eloquent, "with frequent quotations from the biblical text and from other sources in Hebrew and Aramaic" (p. 63). Yet, she is often impatient with the "overwriting and repetition and the often tiresome imaginary encounters and excursions" (p. 62). In the translation, she summarizes passages too long, convoluted, incomprehensible, "sickeningly clinical," or annoying to include, because Amon, writing after the war, prefers to tell a good story than provide "an accurate chronicle of his experience" (p. 118). Nahmias' spring 1917 to fall 1918 testament of despair chronicles the cruelty of the officers, the corruption and petty crime rife in the camps, the constant hunger and unbearable filth. Abramson points out usefully that this diary mirrors the experience "of

other Jewish soldiers as recorded in their memoirs and diaries" (p. 190). She emphasizes how the performance of religious rituals allowed Jews to hold on to some sense of dignity and identity even in the direst moments.

Before the outbreak of World War I in 1914, Jerusalem was home to communities of Christians, Jews, and Muslims who lived in close proximity to each other. Even under duress, Amon calls upon Allah, not God or Jahweh, to save brothers in suffering, and these brothers were the Ottoman Christians, Jews, and Muslims from England, France, Greece, Italy, Romania, and Russia. All of them, he believed, would help "to defend our precious homeland" (p. 85). However, the war changed everything. The Jewish community had depended on external support and funding that dried up. By 1915, ten thousand Jews had left for Egypt and at the end of the war the "community in Jerusalem had lost half its population" (p. 13).

The Greek Orthodox civil servant and amateur musician Wasif Jawhariyya, subject of *The Storyteller of Jerusalem,* was seventeen when the world went to a war. However, beyond noting in four pages Turkey's entry into the "Great War" in July 1914 and the ravages of the Ottoman army in Palestine, he omits the first three years of the war, years that others record as unbearably harsh and violent. In Part 1, covering the years 1904–14, he praises a city of shared religious education and festivals that allowed people, especially musicians, to party for most of the year. In 1917, however, alarm spread when the British occupied Jerusalem and Jews were seen to consort with them. After Balfour declared that Palestine should become a national home for Jews, Jawhariyya's ribald narratives of all-night Dionysian gatherings virtually oblivious to the turmoil engulfing Europe gave way to sober chronicling of the political changes in the region. His text continues through the thirty years of British rule. The British, whom he first thought to be better than the unjust Ottomans, soon reveal their true colors. Jawhariyya traces the growing segregation and insularity of religiously defined neighborhoods, the strengthening of British and Zionist relations during the 1920s and their subsequent deterioration during the 1930s, the division of Jerusalem into three zones, and eventually the disastrous partition of Palestine in 1947. Even after fleeing Jerusalem in 1948, he continued to hope that the Arab states would come to the rescue. The catastrophes—the *seferberlik,* the shelling of Jerusalem, the Holocaust—are glossed. His move into the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate as a result of his marriage to the adopted daughter of the Patriarch takes us to Nicoforia with its spectacular views of Jerusalem's pilgrimage sites. He tells in vivid detail of his first trip outside Jerusalem at age twenty-five when he visits Haifa, Beirut, and Damascus. Salim Tamari calls Jawhariyya's memoirs "one of the most valuable records of Palestinian urban life that exists anywhere" (p. xviii).

Conde de Ballobar's war memoir, *Jerusalem in World War I,* archives the war from the perspective of a Spanish consul whose country's neutrality gave him an unusual perspective and extraordinary opportunities to fraternize, if circumspectly, with men (and women?) from both sides. Political developments during World War I affect him as the representative of a neutral Spain trying to balance allegiances while tending toward the German–Austrian–Turkish allies, but also hoping to play some part in any peace process. He writes of his friendship with Jamal Pasha, the ruthless military governor of Ottoman Syria. A thorough colonialist, de Ballobar despises the natives, in this case the Bedouin, and, far from praising them for their cultivation of "great fields of wheat," he claims, "in other hands, that country would be a paradise" (p. 161). As is to be

expected from a diplomat, he writes of all political events large and small—Allenby's triumphant entry into Jerusalem on 11 December 1917, and then on 29 July 1918 the "placing of the first stone of the future Hebrew University of Mount Scopus" alongside the exodus of German and Austrian prisoners of war to Egyptian internment camps (p. 199). His Palestine diary ends abruptly on 27 May 1919 with the arrival of an official telegram refusing his resignation and granting him two months' leave to return to Spain to "reflect" (p. 245). The charm of the pilgrimage to the Holy Land is long past and he is anxious to move on to new adventures.

Kimberly Katz has translated, edited, and introduced Sami ʿAmr's diary, which was written between 1941 and 1945. Although Sami did not fight, much to his shock and disgust his brother enlisted in the British army at a time when it was clear that the British were supporting the Zionist project. His brother once again shocks him when he deserts and the British jail him. The war is otherwise on the edge of his consciousness as when he notices military camps and air-raid shelters on his way to a wedding. He is much more engaged with his family and the girls he longs to know better. Although Sami dates his entries, they sometimes read like reflections long after the events recorded. Why else give each entry a title like "A Wave of Compassion," "Mentalities, Spiritualities, and Materialities!?" or "Groaning"? Moreover, what young man ruing his lack of success with women will actually write that he has "many years ahead of me to satisfy myself" (p. 87)? His diary records the growing presence of Jews who, he fears, will destroy the Arabs' economy and drive the Palestinians from their homes. On 15 March 1943 he warns "these insane people that we will not leave our country ... we entered Palestine by the sword and would only leave it, God forbid, by the sword and take our last breath trying to save it" (p. 117).

Most of the narratives include portraits of the city's various neighborhoods, festivals, and religious sites. For example, Jawhariyya's verbal memory maps the contours of the city, gate by gate, quarter by quarter, street by street, and even house by house, allowing us a century later to visualize the urban landscape at a time when the emblems of modernity made their first appearance. We experience first-hand how technological modernity was lived at its inception. Long lists of the rich and famous, including the immortal Umm Kulthum and important representatives of warring European powers like Lord Balfour, General Allenby, and François Georges-Picot, former Consul General for France in Beirut, with whom some of the authors associated, provide a goldmine of information about some of the key players from the period.

Jawhariyya may have omitted the first three years of World War I, but others concentrated on that period, with its bombings, famine, diseases, lice, soldier maltreatment, and locusts. For example, the March to October 1915 plague of locusts figures in de Ballobar's diary, Tamari uses it to title his book, Tarjuman describes its devastation in detail, and Abramson paints graphic images of creatures crawling everywhere, exuding noxious odors and substances that she gives a biblical dimension. It is as though Jawhariyya could not bear to write of the catastrophe that befell Jerusalem, ending religious *convivencia* in one of the world's most iconic cities.

We are vouchsafed insights into the lives of all sorts of people. With de Ballobar we consort with Ottoman commanders, Germans, Greeks, and Italians, and with Jawhariyya, a Palestinian British civil servant from 1919 to 1948. We also meet musicians and artists of various nationalities. Before the "Zionist gangs" swing into full action, he writes

admiringly of Jewish Arab musicians; post-1948 hindsight does not color his respect for their talent. However, and without contradiction, he is careful to point out that from 1917, the Arabs had not shied away "from their sacred struggle" against both the British and the Zionists (p. 221). Tarjuman writes of earnest conversations about the need to reform Arabic to lessen the gap between written and spoken languages and also about the veil, polygamy, and the importance of women's education. "Women's misery," he opines, "is caused only by men" (p. 114).

Some characters, like Jamal Pasha and Ronald Storrs, appear in several of the texts. For Arabs like Ihsan Tarjuman and Jews like Amon and Nahmias, Jamal Pasha was a hypocrite and coward and also the butcher responsible for the cruel extermination of any, but especially Arab, opposition to Ottoman rule. Tarjuman contemptuously refers to "his cowardice on the Egyptian front . . . When the battle was heated on the front, he went to the outlying trenches and started playing with his beard while trembling . . . His ignorance is limitless" (pp. 105, 116). For Ballobar, on the other hand, Jamal Pasha is a dear friend who lavishes him with invitations and attention; he may even stop by unannounced for a cup of coffee. When the American consul throws a dinner party in the pasha's honor, the German, Austrian, Greek, and Italian consuls accompany de Ballobar to the festivities. What others consider Jamal Pasha's systematic brutality de Ballobar may refer to in passing as a necessary measure to maintain law and order. Discussion of Armenian disloyalty in the fall of 1916 and promises that others like the Greeks will suffer their fate if they do not prove themselves loyal to the Ottomans is set in a bucolic scene where guests of a convent sip aperitifs "beneath a stately walnut tree" (p. 109). There is something eerie about de Ballobar's text.

The British Mandate representative and military governor of Jerusalem, Ronald Storrs, appears in two diaries. Jawhariyya calls him "beyond all doubt one of the greatest men of the British Empire in the East" (p. 192). A frequent guest at Storrs' home, Jawhariyya admired his genial host's taste in Middle Eastern antiques and credited him with developing his own as he turned the patriarchate that became his home for a while into the museum he was compelled to leave in 1948. De Ballobar also admired Storrs' musical and literary interests, even though he mocked his British hubris.

The styles vary from impressionistic to systematic quotidian. In *Year of the Locust,* Tamari writes of the three styles characterizing the diaries: concerned to record his role in military operations, Fasih's "writing is precise, matter of fact, and telegraphic in style. Turjman, by contrast, is mainly reflective, discursive, and meandering," and Shihada's style is journalistic (p. 17). Despite his apparent commitment to a linear account, Jawhariyya's circular narratives continuously double back on themselves. It is as though he has just remembered something and writes it down before he forgets without placing it in proper sequence. De Ballobar dates each of his entries, which were at first daily, then only a few days apart, and finally in late 1918 and 1919 months apart. His journal reads like diplomatic dispatches full of news and rumors that may be contradicted later. He includes odd scenes that have caught his attention, occasional weather reports, and long paeans to the natural beauty of Palestine. Jawhariyya writes with hedonistic pleasure of his life of debauchery and leaves little room for the violent and ugly events that he must have witnessed but refused to record. Sami ʿAmr writes self-consciously as though not for himself but for another. His inclusion of poems,

which is less typical of a diary, further indicates his literary aspirations and awareness of a reader.

Because these are personal narratives, we get to know the authors' characters. Nahmias is a whiner for whom no crude detail is too much to share. Jawhariyya is a good-natured bon vivant who wants to believe that all will work out in the end even when the reality of a grim future stares him in the face. Conde de Ballobar is very self-confident; after living in Jerusalem for only three years, he declares confidently, "I understand a lot of things" (p. 115). His humor can be cutting: sardonic vignettes of well-known personalities, snide comments about nationalities he does not admire—"the lack of musical taste the British have is notable. You should hear them when some regiments parade by" (p. 235). He loves hunting, fun, and luxury—"I'm all for banquets!" (p. 97)—and mocks pretensions, as when he laughs at his friend Jamal Pasha's empty claims of a great victory at the Suez Canal in spring of 1915 and his Islamic credentials despite his enthusiastic consumption of champagne. Tarjuman contemptuously elaborates on Jamal Pasha's military failures, his marriage to a Jewish prostitute, and his religious hypocrisy; he and his men swim "in debauchery and drunkenness" (p. 110). Tamari attributes the Ottoman defeat in Suez to combined poor Turkish intelligence and underestimation of the British fighting forces. The disaster unleashed Jamal Pasha's "campaign of repression against the Arab nationalist movement" (p. 32).

The deeply religious nature of Jerusalem and its surrounds shape the experiences of its inhabitants, both permanent and temporary. Imams, monks of various orders, clerics, patriarchs, and rabbis make their appearance. The Palestinian Jewish soldiers hold tight to their religion in order to retain a sense of dignity and humanity. With few hotels outside the city, de Ballobar stayed in the many monasteries and convents that served as a sort of caravanserai but sometimes also as military barracks. De Ballobar often presents his posting as a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, anticipating that he will some day "end up feeling the most irresistible nostalgia for the land of Jesus, of the Crusades, of the Prophets: for the land where the most interesting human history has developed" (p. 60).

The editors comment on the role of diary writing in the life of these men. For some, like Nahmias, writing became an act of resistance, a "refusal to succumb to an incomprehensible and murderous environment and, above all, to keep a grip on identity" (p. 194). Although Nahmias also complains of the pain of writing that dredges up terrible memories, he insists on the importance of continuing so that his family and friends learn what had happened to him. For Sami ʿAmr, writing was cathartic—"I have come to have complete faith that I was not created to be happy in this life, rather I will be an example of eternal sadness and misfortune" (p. 152)—but also aspirational. Katz believes that when he is addressing "my friend" he means his diary, but I would suggest that, like many Arab writers, he is intending the reader with the trope. The occasional literariness of the diary might well indicate his hope that in its publication its author might move out of the banality of his life as a villager, then lowly British civil servant, and then a welder, and into the sophisticated world of someone like Jawharriya. The latter wrote first with pleasure about the bacchanalia of early 20th-century Jerusalem and then somberly witnesses the degradation of his beloved city.

A crucial question to ask is: where have these diaries been languishing and how have they come to be translated in some cases almost a century after they were written? Tamari

and Abramson tell the story of serendipitous discoveries of three war diaries. Tarjuman's chronicle disappeared after an Ottoman officer shot him in 1917. During the 1970s, the manuscript appeared in the Abandoned Arab Property section of the Hebrew University library. Tamari narrates his intriguing discovery in 2005 not only of the manuscript but also of its author's identity. Like the recent discovery of Tarjuman's diary, Amon's 1,146-page diary was found by a family member "in a small leather satchel in May 2010 [and] handed to the Yad Ben-Zvi Library and Archive in Jerusalem" (p. 58). Although it is not clear when this happened, Nahmias' exercise book filled with his war memoirs was also found by chance in the cellar of the family home, and Avner Peretz deciphered, transcribed, and translated the Ladino text into Hebrew. Kimberly Katz interviewed ʿAmr's son and was given permission to translate, edit, and publish a text that the family had long cherished.

These translated texts come with extensive academic apparatus—forewords, prefaces, introductions, glossaries, and, in some cases, hundreds of endnotes. Tamari provides eighty-five prefatory pages and twenty-four pages of endnotes to contextualize Tarjuman's seventy-page diary. Abramson's introduction to the Amon and Nahmias diaries is over eighty pages. Katz's sixty-three-page introduction to ʿAmr is as long as the diary that she has heavily footnoted.

These nonelite war stories take the reader back to a pre-Israel/Palestine, when the conflicts that now tear the region and the peoples apart were scarcely imaginable. These texts can be read at several levels: historical archival material and fascinating first-hand accounts of life in Palestine at crucial junctures in its history.