Lawrence of Arabia

Thomas Edward Lawrence was born in Wales, U.K. in 1888, and later moved to England with his family. Lawrence studied architecture and archaeology, for which he made a trip to Ottoman controlled Syria and Palestine in 1909. In 1911, he won a fellowship to join an expedition excavating an ancient Hittite settlement on the Euphrates River. He worked there for three years, and in his free time traveled and learned Arabic. In 1914, he explored the Sinai Peninsula, near the frontier of Ottoman-controlled Arabia and British-controlled Egypt. The maps Lawrence and his associates made had immediate strategic value upon the outbreak of war between Britain and the Ottoman Empire in October 1914.

Lawrence enlisted in the war, and because of his expertise in Arab affairs, was assigned to Cairo as an intelligence officer. He spent more than a year in Egypt, processing intelligence information to aid in military planning. In 1916, after the death of his brothers on the Western Front, he requested a more substantial role in the war effort. Lawrence accompanied a British diplomat to Arabia, where Hussein ibn Ali, the emir of Mecca, had proclaimed a revolt against Turkish rule. Lawrence convinced his superiors in the British military to aid Hussein’s rebellion, and he was sent to join the Arabian army of Hussein’s son Faisal as a liaison officer.

With Lawrence’s guidance, the Arabians launched an effective guerrilla war against the Turkish lines. He proved a gifted military strategist and was greatly admired by the Bedouin people of Arabia. In July 1917, Arabian forces captured Aqaba near the Sinai and joined the British march on Jerusalem. In November, Lawrence was captured by the Turks while exploring behind enemy lines in Arab dress and was tortured before escaping. He rejoined his army, and Arabia was liberated from the Turks, but Lawrence’s hope that the peninsula would be united as a single nation ended due to factionalism among the Arabs.

After the war, Lawrence lobbied hard for independence for Arab countries and appeared at the Paris Peace Conference in Arab robes. But Lawrence’s advice was largely ignored, as the British and French established the Mandate System. In protest against this policy, T.E. Lawrence refused his medals earned from his war service and resigned from the military. He died in 1935, at the age of 47, from injuries sustained in a motorcycle accident.
The Treaty of Sèvres

Britain and France had already decided what would happen to the area generally referred to as the ‘Middle East’. Britain took effective possession and control of the territory of Palestine, while France took over territory in modern day Syria, Lebanon and some land in southern Anatolia. This had already been decided some three years before the Treaty of Sèvres in the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1917. Britain also took over Iraq. Armenia was recognised as a separate sovereign state.

The Treaty of Sèvres failed to deal with the issue of a Kurdistan. There was an initial agreement on the boundaries of a Kurdistan but nationalist Kurds rejected this as it failed to include a region called Van. The issue ended with some Kurds living in Turkey and some in northwest Iraq.

Like the other defeated Central Powers, the Ottoman Empire had military restrictions imposed on it. The Ottoman Army was limited to 50,000 men. An air force was forbidden and the navy was limited to thirteen boats – six schooners and seven torpedo boats. The Treaty of Sèvres also contained clauses that allowed the Allies to supervise these military terms.

The financial consequences of the Treaty of Sèvres equalled those of the Treaty of Versailles in terms of severity, with the Ottoman Empire having control of its finances and economy taken away from her and handed over to the Allies. This included the control over imports and exports, control of the national budget, control over financial regulations, requests for loans and reform of the tax system. The Allies controlled even debt repayments. One of the terms of this was that only France, Italy and Great Britain could be debt bondholders. The Ottoman Empire was also forbidden from having any economic collaboration with Germany, Austria, Hungary and Bulgaria and all the economic assets of these four states were liquidated within the Ottoman Empire.