British Women in the Middle East:

A Disagreement on Western European Involvement in the Middle East

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The best weapons are the ones one does not see coming. A woman traveling alone in the Middle East in the early twentieth century was rare, and she would undoubtedly have been looked at as being distinctly out of her environment. But no one could have expected that one of Britain's secret weapons of World War II was a British-Italian woman, explorer and travel writer, Freya Stark. How did the encounters of British travelers during and after the first World War shape perceptions of Western European imperialism in the Middle East? This paper will examine prominent British academic, social, and governmental institutions that supported and published written reports by some of these travelers. Freya Stark's writings illustrate the methods by which imperial agendas were transmitted to the Arab world and information about the Arab world was communicated back to Britain.

The Admission of Women in the Royal Geographical Society

The admission of women into the Royal Geographical Society, or the RGS, was a heavily controversial topic, but this change laid the groundwork for women like Freya Stark to begin earning proper recognition for their accomplishments. The RGS was founded in 1830 as both an academic and social institution "to promote the advancement of geographical science," but for the first 83 years of its existence, women were not permitted as members.[1] Articles discussing the admission of women to the RGS argue that, despite the decision marking "the conclusion of a protracted debate extending over 20 years,"[2] it was more of a "symbolic than a practical importance in terms of women's position within the discipline" of geography and expeditions.[3]

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[1] "History of the Society," Royal Geographical Society with IBG, accessed April 26, 2023, https://www.rgs.org/about/the-society/history-and-future/.

[2] Morag Bell and Cheryl McEwan, "The Admission of Women Fellows to the Royal Geographical Society, 1892-1914; the Controversy and the Outcome," *The Geographical Journal* 162, no. 3 (1996): 295, https://doi.org/10.2307/3059652.

[3] Sarah L Evans, Innes M Keighren, and Avril Maddrell, "Coming of Age? Reflections on the Centenary of Women's Admission to the Royal Geographical Society," *The Geographical Journal* 179, no. 4 (December 2013): para. 9, https://doi.org/10.1111/geoj.12051.

Yet it does mark a shift toward drawing attention to women's geographical work, which "are often omitted from or marginalised within conventional histories of the discipline."[4] The admission of women was not, in itself, a dramatic, revolutionary change, but "rather one instant in the longer and more convoluted trajectory of women's geographical work and public presence."[5] Around the time of the RGS's initial debates over the admission of women, "women were already allowed access to the Botanical, Statistical, Asiatic, Hellenic, and Anthropological Societies and to 'every other geographical society in the empire.'"[6] It was not until "after much discomfort, disquiet and disturbance" among the male members for a little over two decades that the decision to omit women from the Society was overturned.[7] But it seems the individual stories of the women pushing that movement remained unheard. More often it was the reactions of the men in the Royal Geographical Society that were mentioned in reports and articles regarding the admission of women, such as "Admiral McClintock, who… wrote to Douglas Freshfield… expressing his outright opposition to women Fellows," and "Douglas Freshfield… a driving force behind the admission of women," who "resigned his position of Honorary Secretary in protest."[8] These articles did not bring forth much of the women's work and perspective when it came to the debate over their own admission, nor the work of the women who explored before and during the debate who were not directly involved in the decision and yet were part of the inspiration to finally admit women to the Society, such as Gertrude Bell. This literature often presented women like Stark and Bell as highly exceptional in comparison to their female peers,

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[4] Evans, Keighren, and Maddrell, para. 9.
[5] Evans, Keighren, and Maddrell, para. 10.
[6] Bell and McEwan, "The Admission of Women Fellows to the Royal Geographical Society, 1892-1914; the Controversy and the Outcome," 296.
[7] Kevin Ward et al., review of *Review of Complex Locations: Women's Geographical Work in the UK 1850-1970*, by Avril Maddrell, *Area* 42, no. 3 (2010): 394.
[8] Bell and McEwan, "The Admission of Women Fellows to the Royal Geographical Society, 1892-1914; the Controversy and the Outcome," 297.

and the "boundaries around what constitutes geographical work as carried out by these women" were heavily contested during the Royal Geographical Society's debate.[9]

Gertrude Bell

Gertrude Bell was an English writer and traveler who was intensely involved in Middle Eastern archaeology. Bell was privileged and wealthy from birth, and at 17 years old, studied history at Oxford University. Her first journey to the Middle East began in 1892 in Tehran, Persia, where she fell in love with the experience. After this first trip, she began to develop her passion for archaeology and languages, and became fluent in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and in many western European languages, as well. She continued traveling to the Middle East over the next decades, finding new friends in her peers of archaeology. In 1909, on a trip to Mesopotamia, she met and befriended T. E. Lawrence, who had also earned a First-Class Honours degree in Modern History from Oxford University, was also fluent in Arabic, and had also extensively traveled the Middle East. T.E. Lawrence's involvement in the Middle East was more focused on the specific objective of enlisting Arab tribesman to align with the British in overthrowing the Ottoman Empire in exchange for British support after, so his travels and writing were far less expansive than either Stark's or Bell's. A few years after first meeting Lawrence, she advocated alongside him for independent Arab states after the Ottoman Empire's collapse in the early 1900s but Bell's breadth of interest in the region and its people was only barely clearer than Lawrence's. [10] Compared to Lawrence, Bell appeared to be more humanist, as Lawrence was very focused on foreign policy objectives. Because of her interest in the political field of the Middle East, she made connections with the influential men of Arabic society during her travels,

[9] Sarah L. Evans, "*Terra Incognita*: Women on Royal Geographical Society-Supported Expeditions 1913-1970" (University of the West of England), 49, accessed April 19, 2023, https://uwe-repository.worktribe.com/preview/835070/Sarah%20L%20Evans%20Thesis%20Terra%20incognita.pdf.
[10] Janet Wallach, *Desert Queen* (New York: Anchor Books, 2005), 165.

and inevitably involved herself in the 1919 Paris Peace Conference and the 1921 Cairo Conference, in which Bell and Lawrence helped to decide territorial boundaries and governments for the Middle East. During Freya Stark's travels through the Middle East, she often noted reading Bell's works and noticed that they traveled similar routes, though not necessarily intentionally. Stark could feel Bell's sharp focus on archaeology and politics over culture and daily life in the Middle East, and so Stark took a wholly different approach to writing her accounts of her travels. Stark's words reflect how she really feels admiration for the Arabic people, and how she really feels about western Europe's involvement in Middle Eastern affairs, particularly the results of the European conferences.

Freya Stark

As one of the first British non-Arabs known to travel alone through the Middle East, and especially as a woman, Freya Stark's story is one worth telling in the context of her own time, and in ours as well. And tell it, she did, for she wrote more than two dozen books, autobiographies, and articles of her adventures in the Middle East. Stark was born in 1893, was raised among art and artists in Asolo, Italy, and worked as a flower farmer in northern Italy, before choosing to study languages at university. At thirty years old, she moved from Italy to London where Stark studied Arabic and Persian at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies. After serving as a nurse in World War I and her sister's death after a miscarriage, Stark was inspired to leave her old life behind and begin exploring the part of the world she had studied. She began her first trip to the East in 1927 and made accounts of the regions she explored in her books, each published shortly after their respective trip. With World War II erupting in Europe, in 1939, Stark offered her expertise and mastery of Arabic and Persian to the British Ministry of Information. She was sent quickly to Yemen to spread British

propaganda, and continued making connections with locals and writing her accounts as she had before the start of World War II. Because of her work to build relationships with the locals of the Middle East prior to and during World War II, she became an unexpectedly efficient tool for the British government to spread its propaganda in the part of the world that did its best to remain neutral in the World War. Freya Stark is a shining example of an unpredicted adventurer and explorer, inspired by her few predecessors, like Thomas E. Lawrence and Gertrude Bell.

Gertrude Bell's Middle Eastern Journeys

There is a strong sense of separation between Gertrude Bell and the people within the regions she studied, made clear through her reports published by the Royal Geographical Society which focus entirely on academia. When Gertrude Bell travelled among the Arabic people, she was entirely self-funded and used her wealth to keep herself starkly separate from the common people. Her published works, in the RGS's Geographical Journal, make her scientific, non-orientalist, anti-social voice evident. While Stark published with an artist's eye and took care to include her interactions with locals in order to bring life to her orientalist version of the Arabic world, Bell published strictly for the academics at home in Britain. Bell wrote about her destinations and the details of her travels, but her reports were kept strictly to geographical data, and nothing of personal interactions or personal thoughts. For example, one of her articles for the Royal Geographical Society detailed her 1913 journey from Damascus, Syria, to Nejd. She wrote of her "intention of reaching Nejd," though it was "probable that [she] be stopped or turned back," of her "first object" to "visit certain ruins south-east of Damascus" and many others in the following weeks, and of archaeological finds she made, such as "two important inscriptions" in Burqa.[11] But in the entire article, the most she spoke of the people there was her comment about

[11] Gertrude Lowthian Bell, "A Journey in Northern Arabia," *The Geographical Journal* 44, no. 1 (1914): 76, https://doi.org/10.2307/1778786.

the Bedouins, as the region she wished to travel into needed "careful exploration," as the nomads there "are not true Beduin" and "more difficult to tackle than countries where the traveller can rely" on "the observance of the Beduin code of hospitality and courtesy."[12] She had not even made mention of any interaction with them, but rather her assumption of them, and without even using the name they actually use to define themselves. All readers would know of these people from Bell's report are that they are not true Bedouins, and that they are in a "volcanic region" which lies "to the east of the Jebel Hauran."[13] She had little interest in the lives of the locals and made no effort to humanize the people she travelled among by including personal details. Her other writing samples reflect the same separation from fellow humans, the focus remaining solely on her academic field of study. Her articles reveal no orientalist light to the Arabic regions, nor any attempt at spreading propagandistic views to her British readers.

Comparing Gertrude Bell and Freya Stark

A comparison of Freya Stark and Gertrude Bell could begin in a number of different direction, but one of the most important is funding, which had the potential of affecting their writing style for their particular audience. Initial analysis of Freya Stark's life reveal that while traveling through the Middle East during World War II, Freya Stark was funded by the British Ministry of Information, which had hired her for her expertise in Arabic. But her earlier explorations seem to have been self-funded, having been an "unattached woman with very little money" and without "local protectors or powerful family connections."[14] She wrote and published for the Royal Geographical Society in London, particularly their Geographical Journal, and her books were published by the John Murray publishing house, and yet she seemed to have

[12] Bell, 76.
[13] Bell, 76.
[14] Malise Ruthven and راثفنماليز, "A Subversive Imperialist: Reappraising Freya Stark / إمبريالية بثورية مبطنة: إعادة تقييم فريا ستارك," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 26 (2006): 148.

little to no financial support from either group. Her exploration of the region of Luristan in western Iran during 1931 earned her the prestigious Back Memorial Prize from the Royal Geographical Society in June 1933, which gave her a minor grant, further "social respectability," and more importantly, led to her first book contract with the publishing firm, John Murray.[15] Then, after her more famous trips to the Middle East in 1942, she received the RGS's highest distinction, the Founder's Gold Medal, which seemed to come with another small cash prize but, again, the focus was on bringing her "literary recognition" rather than financial gain.[16] While she did receive grants, they appear to have been minor, leaving her to still self-fund her travels and expeditions, prior to being hired by the British Ministry of Information during World War II. Thus, it seems, her writing was written for herself, by herself, with very little push from outside sources to sway her toward or away from more orientalist writing or propaganda for British readers to convince them of European success in the Middle East. She was free to write her truth and the reality she perceived in the Middle East because of this.

Despite her success in travelling with very low funds, doing what her predecessor would never have considered acceptable by assimilating to the local Arabs, Freya Stark still could not escape being compared to Gertrude Bell by academic peers. The traveler Wilfred Thesiger told Stark's biographer, Molly Izzard, that "It was derogatory even to think of a person like Freya as being in the same category" as Bell, for there was "nothing else in the same class as the last arduous and dangerous 3-month camel journey she made" across the Nejd desert.[17] But unlike Stark, Bell was incredibly privileged, as she came from "a wealthy aristocratic English family."[18]

[15] Ruthven and نفثار, 148.
[16] Ruthven and نفثار, 148.
[17] Molly Izzard, *Freya Stark: A Biography* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1993), 18.
[18] Ruthven and نفثار, "A Subversive Imperialist," 150.

She travelled with at least "three baggage mules, two tents, and three servants,"[19] while Stark's "relative poverty made it necessary for her to share meals with her fellow travels."[20] Bell believed that "natives should know that one came 'from a great and honoured stock,'" and "travelled with her cook, [and] her train of mules or camels," while Stark, "on her initial journeys" was a "little Miss Nobody", who was "often short of cash" and "had nothing to sustain her beyond her native wits… charm, resilience, and enthusiasm."[21] Stark even fell ill three times during her journeys, "her life at the mercy of local doctors or folk remedies," but this was because she was insistent "upon eating local food and sleeping alongside the women and their sometimes-infected children, in the harems," and on "sharing the flies, the smells, the squalor, and the dignity of their lives," so unlike anything Gertrude Bell would have considered acceptable.[22] Despite getting sick so many times and doing what her predecessor never would have considered, Stark proved her devotion to the people of the region, to learning their culture and building personal connections not just with the influential leaders of the region, but the common people, as well.

But perhaps the most important difference was their skill as writers, explained by their childhood upbringing and education, and intentions. Unlike Bell and their male peers, who "focused on the objectives of their journeys," Stark's goal was far less important to her "than the encounters she had on her journey."[23] This is made evident in their writing. Bell was an "accomplished scholar of Persian and Arabic" with a "serious interest in archaeology," but there is a "scholarly detachment about her writing" that reflects her "intellectual outlook and her

[19] Freya Stark, *Letters from Syria*, 1st ed. (London: John Murray, 1942), 187.
[20] Ruthven and نفڈار, "A Subversive Imperialist," 151.
[21] Ruthven and نفڈار, 151–52.
[22] Ruthven and نفڈار, 152.
[23] Ruthven and نفڈار, 155.

situation as the 'grande-dame' traveling in the desert."[24] In comparison, scholars found Stark's writing to be "lively, interesting and significant, not because of the places she saw," but "the people she encountered on her way."[25] She was a romantic orientalist, who wrote with an artistic eye for details of culture, but this should come as no surprise, as she was born and raised in an artistic household. Her father, Robert Stark, was a sculptor, and her mother was a pianist, and while Stark never formally studied any art form, there is no doubt she was knowledgeable in art from her upbringing. Her parents, considered "bohemians,"[26] believed that "intellectual skills were not to be forced on a child" but "fostered if they manifested spontaneously in the course of its development."[27] Stark, as a child, made up for a lack of formal education by "reading voraciously," and there is no doubt she learned her creativity in her writing and reports of her travels made from her favorite authors, and her passion for the "English romantics, especially Keats and Wordsworth."[28] Gertrude Bell and Freya Stark certainly had some similarities, particularly in their fascination of the Arabic world, but their differences, in regard to travel incentive, financial aid, and writing styles make them in many ways incomparable. They both wrote with obvious imperial mindsets, but the visions of the Arabic world which each woman cast give insight to two different aspects: one of archaeology and academics, and the other of orientalist culture and life.

The absence of orientalism in Gertrude Bell's work reveals that there was no need for British propaganda, or no room for it, as her travels took her through the Middle East between 1905 and 1913. By the time Stark arrived in the same regions, it was the late 1930s and early

[24] Ruthven and نفثار, 151.
[25] Ruthven and نفثار, 155.
[26] Ruthven and نفثار, 156.
[27] Izzard, *Freya Stark: A Biography*, 251.
[28] Ruthven and نفثار, "A Subversive Imperialist," 156–57.

1940s, the world was preparing for world war and the Ottoman empire was gone. This drastically different world only two to three decades after Bell explored it was just as much a part of Stark's freedom to write with an orientalist perspective as her creative, artist's mind allowed. Despite a lack of strong evidence pointing toward an orientalist point of view from Bell, a recent publication defined Gertrude Bell and Freya Stark, among their male counterparts such as T. E. Lawrence, as all in the category of "'Orientalist-as-agent,'" essentially people who traveled into the Middle East "as European imperial rivalries mounted" in the "1880s and 1890s, and into the first decades of the twentieth century."[29] In a chapter of his book, *Travel Writing in the Nineteenth Century*, Geoffrey Nash confronted the "significant types and metaphors of quest" which motivated these traveler's journeys into the Middle East.[30] Nash wrote that many travelers, including Freya Stark, were "prone to the promotion or sponsorship of specific 'races', nationalities and classes in the Orient," such as the "English romance with the Arab Bedouin."[31] In particular, Nash defined this phenomenon as "Romantic Orientalism, influenced by the *Arabian Nights*," a book which Freya Stark mentions multiple times in her writing as part of her inspiration.[32] However, his mention of Gertrude Bell or T. E. Lawrence are limited to a short mention of the results of their travels, rather than their travel-inspiring "quests."

The Royal Geographical Society's Transition to Wartime Patriotism

As World War I began, the Royal Geographical Society began to support wartime efforts, starting within itself and its own network of members. A collection of lantern slides belonging to the RGS before and during World War I, were studied and revealed the shift in RGS's purpose

[29] Geoffrey Nash, "Politics, Aesthetics and Quest in British Travel Writing on the Middle East," in *Travel Writing in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Tim Youngs, Filling the Blank Spaces (Anthem Press, 2006), 57, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1gxpbpw.9.
[30] Nash, 57.
[31] Nash, 59.
[32] Nash, 59.

through its inclusion of "illustrated war propaganda lectures" in the Society's "popular evening meetings," as well as the relevant full admission of women to the Society in 1913 as participants in this shift of RGS's purpose.[33] This transition started with the 1915 President of the London branch of the Royal Geographical Society, Douglas Freshfield, and his involvement in overseeing the "redeployment of the Society's building, staff and collections to the war effort," and "witness the renewal of both the Society and geography's national and imperial utility."[34] The RGS was founded in 1830 with the aim to promote "geographical exploration and science," then slowly transitioned in the later nineteenth century into a "platform for the hegemonic communication of British imperialism, theories of racial hierarchy… and international humanism."[35] In the early twentieth century, beginning in 1914, the lantern slides were a form of "communication and propagandizing of imperialism and war," and would "bring to light further aspects of the geographic art of war."[36] The evening lectures of the RGS held an "increasing number of speakers with both academic and military credentials" for "intentionally scheduled" lectures addressing "aspects of the war," and used lantern slides as supplementary to the lectures. This legacy of supporting British wartime efforts inevitably carried on into Freya Stark's time, likely inspiring the next generation of explorers, Freya Stark included, to adventure into distant lands potentially useful to the British and report their experiences back to England.

Freya Stark and the Middle East

Freya Stark's time in the Middle East was spent learning about the culture and daily life of the locals and befriending them as she went, allowing her to eventually become the example

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[33] Emily Hayes, "'No Branch of Science Enters More Closely than Geography into the Art of War': The First World War, Lantern Slides and the Royal Geographical Society, London," *Early Popular Visual Culture* 12, no. 4 (October 2, 2014): 434, https://doi.org/10.1080/17460654.2014.984950.
[34] Hayes, 434.
[35] Hayes, 434.
[36] Hayes, 441.

of successful symbiosis as a Western European among Arabic people. There is no doubt that Freya Stark participated in the spread of propaganda prior to and during World War II. In 1939, Freya Stark went to London to offer help in World War II and by the second day of the war, on September 4th, she was already at work for the British Ministry of Information's Foreign Office. As an employee of the British Ministry of Information, she traveled to the Middle East to counter Axis propaganda. By using conversation and connection with the locals, pamphlets and leaflets, and films provided by the Ministry, she worked to sway the Arabs toward remaining neutral, if not outright supporting the Allies. She enhanced British influence in "Aden, Yemen, Egypt, Iraq", and many other countries.[37] Stark conveyed much of her experience travelling and working in the Middle East within two of her books, *Letters from Syria* (1942) and *East is West* (1945). Her book, *Letters from Syria*, was a collection of her letters sent to family, friends, and peers while travelling from Turkey, through Syria, to Jerusalem prior to the breakout of World War II, in which her efforts of orientalism were made clear. It was an easy read meant for a general public, and the letters gave the book a personal insight into life and culture in Arabic countries through the eyes of a British woman. *East is West*, in comparison, was a much less approachable read for the general public. It was less focused on orientalism, and more heavily on the politics and work involved in spreading propaganda and British communication in Arabic countries through World War II. In *East is West*, Stark's intentions for writing went a step further than the previous book had, as she finally made herself a clear example of how to achieve success in reaching the locals of the Middle East as a European.

A previous study on Stark focused closely on her transition from anti-imperial instincts to aiding in wartime efforts, analyzing her achievements in life through reports from the Royal

[37] Claudia Roth Pierpont, "East Is West," *The New Yorker*, April 18, 2011, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/04/18/east-is-west-claudia-roth-pierpont.

Geographical Society and reviews of her books to encourage a deeper analysis into Stark's place among her peers. It studied her position as a travel writer, gauging "the extent of Stark's achievements as a writer and photographer,"[38] as well as her "human and artistic instincts," which "ran in the opposite direction to the imperialism" she would come to "espouse at a formal level."[39] She transformed from seemingly anti-imperialist, because of her bohemian background, into an imperial propagandist. This analysis of Stark's life and writing shifted the focus away from a broad view of women travelers getting involved in the Royal Geographical Society and Middle Eastern politics, and toward a more narrowed focus to the specifics of her life that led to her choice of writing style to record her involvement. This source provided a detailed history of Stark's life through the perspectives of others, who reviewed her life and her published writings, and yet did not give a deeper analysis of her writing, itself. Instead, it gave the power to define her to those who made comments of her achievements, the majority being men reading and judging her works after her travels or after her death, rather than to Freya Stark to reveal for herself within her own writing.

Propaganda Made Among the Locals

When Stark finally began to work for the British Ministry during World War II, she utilized her connection to the locals and ability to assimilate to them to learn how best to earn the Arabs trust toward British propaganda. Stark's first position with the British Ministry was in Aden, Yemen, where she worked alongside locals to write and then translate propaganda in the form of Arabic prose. One young man, Ali Muhammad, stood out to Stark during this period, for he "made it a labour of love to build Arabic prose out of the daily news which I picked… and

[38] Ruthven and نفثار, "A Subversive Imperialist," 147.
[39] Ruthven and نفثار, 154.

wrote."[40] Stark would gather news of the war from the British Ministry of Information, and Muhammad would then "discuss English meanings and Arabian cadences" and together they would build "sentences that were to counter Italian propaganda" and "give to the people of Aden their only real news of the war" as "no other Press as yet existed."[41] Stark was essentially in charge of sharing every bit of news the people of Aden, and as she argues, the entirety of South Arabia, would at first receive.[42] Stark made note that "if the news we distributed had been intended to deceive," Muhammad would not have put so much of his heart into it.[43] She believed it was Muhammad's faith in the British government that led him to "accept such a standard of propaganda."[44] He "*believed* in what we were fighting for" as the "words of the innumerable pamphlets whose meaning we," the British, normally "took for granted were living words to him."[45] She argued that because "The Arab has not yet had time to think of words from an advertisement angle," they will "still vaguely [connect] them with the presence of God."[46] Stark learned from this information and used it to her and Britain's advantage in future propaganda.

It was likely unintentional, but Muhammad did not just help Stark write and translate news for the locals of Aden; he also made it possible for her to learn what the Arabs *needed* to hear about the war, thus providing her a better foothold into the minds of the Arabic people than the French had attempted. Already, near the beginning of the war, "Pamphlets, posters, everything with which London Information had hitherto supplied" "was either becoming uselessly inappropriate or unattainable" due to the "closure of the Red Sea."[47] And by chance, at

[40] Freya Stark, *East Is West*, 1st ed. (London: John Murray, 1945), 13.
[41] Stark, 13.
[42] Stark, 13.
[43] Stark, 13.
[44] Stark, 13.
[45] Stark, 15.
[46] Stark, 15.
[47] Stark, 15.

the same time, Stark was reading William Wordsworth's sonnets from 1801 to 1806, from when the poet was faced with the invasion of England. Stark wondered if Wordsworth's sonnets would "appeal to the Arabs of Aden" and gave them to Muhammad, who took them home, and then came to their office the next morning "with the same bright light in his eyes and two sonnets already translated into Arabic verse."[48] "'This,'" he had then told her, "'is for Arabs. It is *brave*.'" And thus, Stark learned firsthand, in thanks to Muhammad, the kind of propaganda that the Arabic people needed to hear. And by chance, it happened to be English culture, the beloved British poet's writings, which she inserted into Arabic culture successfully, compared to the earlier failures by the French to insert their own culture among the Arabic. Stark and her peers thought that "through Aden and the small coast towns, where readers are few," and so they expected they would sell at most "500 copies," but they "printed 2000," and to Stark's surprise, "every copy was sold and more were asked for" almost immediately.[49] While Stark never purposefully and outwardly put the French to shame beyond using them as an example of poor involvement practices, she was able to use her position as a more favorable British citizen to spread the same news her French allies may have attempted. Her announcements to the locals of the Middle East were going to be better received because she had a better foothold to be trusted by her readers, than someone French would have been able to achieve.

Propagandistic Film from the British Ministry

Freya Stark began to introduce other types of propaganda into her repertoire, but in doing so, she began to fall into the practice of glorifying the war, and thus going against her initial, anti-imperial instincts. Stark's next practice in propaganda included film, a practice very similar to the RGS's introduction of lantern slides in their lectures. In February 1940, "with a portable

[48] Stark, 15.
[49] Stark, 15.

cinema packed among [her] clothes," Stark traveled through Yemen, which had, until her intervention, "only heard Italian news" and "thought Democracy was losing the war."[50] She claimed her "cinema is very innocent," only portraying three news-reels of the Army, Navy, and Air Force with extreme care to avoid any display of the "grimmer side of war."[51] Not even something as "basic as a dead soldier" would be shown for months to come.[52] At the same time, she also was provided pictures by the Ministry of Information, which it thought would be "helpful to British prestige," including "Sheep-farming in Yorkshire and Ordinary Life in Edinburgh."[53] Stark seemed unsurprised by the Yemenis disinterest in the sheep-farming image, seeing as they already did similarly without any fuss about it, but the picture of life in Edinburgh and the war films had "caused a small revolution in the feelings of the town."[54] They had been at war for six months at this point, and the "Fascists and Berlin radio had found it easy to persuade" the Yemenis that "British arms had vanished" from the war, but the films and images made the British side of the war come to life in a manner the Axis had yet to attempt with the Yemenis.[55] Stark seemed proud of the results this type of propaganda had on the people of Yemen, but did not go much in depth about the lasting effects. All that can be surmised from the rest of Stark's commentary regarding the films is that the Yemenis were now better informed and given a better glimpse into both sides of the war, not just what the Fascists wanted them to know but what Britain and the Allies wanted them to know, as well. From the modern perspective, what Stark did was equally as unacceptable as what the Axis was doing to the Yemenis in glorifying the war

[50] Stark, 27.
[51] Stark, 33.
[52] Stark, 33.
[53] Stark, 33.
[54] Stark, 33–34.
[55] Stark, 34.

and avoiding its grim realities, but this pattern of propaganda seems inevitable when combatting sides are trying to include another, neutral party.

Shaming Imperialism

Each of Freya Stark's letters within *Letters from Syria* expanded upon her opinion of Arabic life, surprising her British audience not just with an orientalist perspective of the Middle East, but also a commentary of shame on Western Europe's failing attempts at intervention and involvement in the Middle East. She was thoroughly enchanted with the Arabic world, describing the scene of Antioch, Turkey as "Streets of red leather shoes… carpenters, blacksmiths, weavers at their looms with the goat whose hair is being woven into saddlebags" and "Every kind of costume and colour worn with… casualness."[56] Right away she makes the comparison of the country, the city, and the "men who travel with their donkeys," to "*Arabian Nights*."[57] Even the Damascus markets, with the "merchant in his long gowns" spreading silks for purchase before her, were connected to her vision of *Arabian Nights*.[58] She claimed that she "can see where the civilized fringe ends," and described to her friend, Venetia Buddicom, who would shortly join her in this journey, that they would see "lovely country inhabited by jackals and Druses."[59] She wrote of the land's "barbaric glory," in which "life and death [are] side by side with a suddenness which gives a good barbaric flavour."[60] In a similar letter, she explained why she found the region so fascinating. Her conclusion was that "it is the feeling of a life not merely primitive… but genuinely wild" that she loved so much.[61] Her writing made the Arabic people she saw exotic and enchanting, a clear orientalist's view of the Middle East. But also

[56] Stark, *Letters from Syria*, 20.
[57] Stark, 20.
[58] Stark, 95–96.
[59] Stark, 24.
[60] Stark, 32–33.
[61] Stark, 30.

among her descriptions of the enchanting scene before her were little comments, revealing much deeper thoughts than the initial obvious. Among orientalist details of the Damascus markets, glorifying the merchants and their colorful wares, she pointed out the "corrugated iron roofs riddled with bullet holes of two years ago and filled with semi-European shoddiness," making an association of shoddiness to European intervention. [62] In another letter, she includes another vivid description of the villages and their people. She wrote of the "peasants" who "come down… with gay beaded mules, sitting in baggy clothes on embroidered saddles, with a white cloth round their tarboosh," and most importantly, "the rifle which the French have carefully eliminated obviously missing from their natural outfit."[63] She made such a beautiful description of the scene, and yet still ended it with another comment of what more the Europeans – in this case, the French – had taken away from the locals.

Stark's vision of Arabic life certainly exacerbated the orientalist view that western Europe so enjoyed, inspired by *Arabian Nights* as she was, but at the same time, she believed the Middle East to be sufficient without intervention and involvement of western people and tools. She added personal touches of character to the Arabic people around her, mentioning, for example, how she "helped the owner to retrieve his chickens which… had escaped off the back of his mule where all worldly goods here are carried."[64] She could have left it at the fact that she helped him gather his chickens, not something entirely uncommon for a more rural region. But instead, she made the point that these people transport their goods by mule, rather than car. What is interesting is that later in her journey through Syria, she does travel by car, and so readers do know that Syrians have cars as well, but in a letter to her father, she wrote that "there are lots of

[62] Stark, 95–96.
[63] Stark, 30.
[64] Stark, 24.

cars here, but only for passengers," and then again reiterated that "all the transport seems to be mule or donkey," and should anyone have something to sell, "he just puts them on his animal and goes crying them through the villages."[65] The people were satisfied with their methods and lifestyle, and made no great effort to change them, despite having access to western European tools, like cars.

Stark's experience in Syria revealed the failure of Christian missions to make western education practices more popular than Arabic education, and by doing so, she pushed forward her anti-imperial instinct that the western world should back off from the Arabic people, rather than push harder. Western European ideas also seemed to have failed to spread among the locals of Turkey and Syria. Neither western practices of religious nor academic spread as European missions had hoped. When she first arrived in Brumana, Syria, for example, her host told her, with pride, that "there was 'quite a lot of Society in Brumana'" such as "'Bible classes, Y.W.C.A., and Reunions for Improving one's Mind.'"[66] And yet Stark wrote that she was "appalled" by this description, because her host's description did not match reality, except for a "Quaker service on Sunday, hymns and sermon all in Arabic," and as she vaguely describes, "improving though possibly not in the manner intended."[67] She speaks of the Arabic people as so different from the British, especially when it comes to their Christian religious practices, and she seems especially surprised by their education. Based on a less appealing consequence of orientalism, namely the degradation of the people being studied to the belief that they are uncivilized and uneducated, it would be understandably hard for someone from a western European background to believe, without any further knowledge, that the Arabic people would

[65] Stark, 40.
[66] Stark, 25.
[67] Stark, 25.

have such a great handle on many languages. And yet Stark's greatest difficulty in learning Arabic was not how difficult the language itself was, but rather "to prevent the kind people here from practising all the European languages on" her.[68] Even the children were capable of handling quite a few languages. She gave an example of a visit she made to the Christian Mission school in Brumana, Syria, where she stayed for three months to practice her Arabic before diving deeper into her journey. She wrote that she attended a show put on by the children of the school, of which she said it would show "what a jumble of scholars it is."[69] And yet in this show, they had eleven boys stand in a half-circle, and each boy, in a different language, "repeated a sentence to say that the world is one great family."[70] According to her letter, each boy spoke "English, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Greek, Hebrew, Armenian, Turkish Arabic, Egyptian Arabic, [and] Syrian Arabic."[71] These missions seemed to be successful in aiding the education system of the Middle East, but local opinions still told a differing story from what one might initially assume. In reality, despite some level of success in teaching children languages, the locals still held Arabic culture and literature on a higher pedestal than anything the missions' schools provided.

European Missions and Religious Tensions

Stark knew religion was a delicate point and brought this to light in a personal way through her letters, as she talked about the Christian missions' attempts to improve life in Syria, and the hostility between the locals of different religions. Stark was "received with great friendliness" in the Syrian village of Brumana particularly because she came "neither to improve

[68] Stark, 25.
[69] Stark, 26.
[70] Stark, 26.
[71] Stark, 26.

nor to rob, but with a genuine liking for their language."[72] Once the people realized she did not come to "turn people into Presbyterians, or anything else," they were happy to speak to her and involve her in their lives and culture.[73] In sharp contrast were the missions, which Stark explained were not in "any real touch with the people here," and "manage to share" very little of the "life of the place."[74] She argued that the missions could have done much better "by just existing as a Christian school with no pretension to improve the heathen."[75] Based on her language around religious issues in the region, it is not a stretch to assume that while Stark does not approve of how the missions are working, she still wishes to see Christianity pushed further into the Arabic culture. According to Stark regarding a conversation with a local of Brumana about the missions, the man said that "instead of being centres to produce native missionaries," "discourage every native development" and end up "surrounded by a small clique of their own with no outside influence at all."[76] Stark agreed with this, and yet, during a discussion about religion and politics with her Sheikh, she made note that he believed the Koran to be superior to the Bible and Arabic poetry to European literature, which she found interesting to hear from someone who "has been in the hands of the missionaries for the whole of his education."[77] It reveals that, although the missions have almost completely taken over the education system of the region, it has not wholly changed the opinions of the locals. The Arabic people still felt their culture to be better, proving that the missions were unsuccessful. She often made note of the shabby states of churches and Christianity in the region. In a letter to her friend during the start of her journey into Syria, Stark wrote that she "saw nothing of Christianity except one quiet

[72] Stark, 30.
[73] Stark, 69.
[74] Stark, 44.
[75] Stark, 43–44.
[76] Stark, 53.
[77] Stark, 104–5.

square with the Greek church," which she further described as "very plain and whitewashed inside and out," and "not remarkable."[78] She made similar commentary throughout her book of letters and was clearly quite disappointed by the state of Christianity within the Arabic country. She did not seem to outright dismiss that involvement was necessary, but rather that involvement was being done in the entirely wrong way. Rather than proposing the entire removal of western influence in the Middle East, she seemed only to mention what they were doing wrong in their attempts at involvement. A few years later, in her next book, *East is West* (1945), she would use herself as an example of what *to* do, instead, to reach the locals of the Middle East.

The reality behind the religious conflicts in the Middle East were another inspiration for her anti-imperial mindset, as Stark was made aware of just how tense communities were after being pushed together by European interference. The religious conflicts were painfully obvious to Stark, as she wrote many times in her letters that the division among the locals is not one of economic class but of religion.[79] But when religious troubles often became politics in these regions, she more often answered with shock and a sense of disdain, rather than appealing to the region's history of being forced together by European forces. She began her thoughts with an anecdote of a conversation with her host. When she asked about someone in the village of Brumana, her host had answered that they "'don't know her'" because "'she is Greek Orthodox,'" proving Stark's next point of shock regarding the "capacity for hatred" these people must have "to live for centuries in the same village and still feel like this about the next door neighbour."[80] Although the "village is kind," especially the "Christian part," Stark made note of how everyone lives "in separate compartments and have little to do with" those of other

[78] Stark, 20.
[79] Stark, 37.
[80] Stark, 37.

religions, even as they "may live next door."[81] Hostility did not remain within villages, but spread into violence between sects. After months in Brumana, Stark still had yet to come across a "spark of national feeling," and all she saw were "sects and hatreds and religions."[82] The country was "divided into fierce and venomous little sects," where she quickly realized that one was "English, or Christian, or Protestant, or anything but your individual *you*," and one was always "burdened with whatever misdeeds… your predecessors may have committed" under that label.[83] It is no surprise, however, that religious tensions would be so high. In her lessons about Arabic culture, Stark read about the Druse massacres of 1860, of which she wrote that it was a "bloody affair" which ended with a "Moslem massacre of Christians" with a total of over "11,000 dead."[84] The region has a history of religious violence, and Stark's time traveling through Syria was no exception. She used this to her advantage when compiling her book, *Letters from Syria*, as British readers were likely to grow more concern for the Arabic people if they knew how tense and dangerous the region was, a feeling that British people most likely were unfamiliar with at home. But from a historical standpoint, the groundwork for these tensions were not laid by the Syrians, or any other nation of that region. France and England had invented and mashed together, by their colonial powers, Syria and Lebanon, and Iraq and Palestine, respectively, all without consulting the locals. As victors of World War I, the British and French empires divided up the remains of the Ottoman Empire, which had the misfortune of siding with the eventually losing side of WWI. Thus, in the early twentieth century, it was not just religious conflict, but European powers and disagreements over their place in the Arabic world which brought further tension. While journalists and historians after the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 tried to convey

[81] Stark, 41.
[82] Stark, 60.
[83] Stark, 65–66.
[84] Stark, 107.

that "force and amorality are a rotten foundation for states," European leaders freely applied force to carve up and redraw the region and to build the foundations of the Middle Eastern countries that have been the centers of conflict for the hundred years since.[85]

The French in Their Syrian Mandate

French culture did not seem to spread as thickly and thoroughly as the western European power might have hoped, and Stark made excessive commentary on this, making an example out of the French as to what kind of European intervention does *not* work. France was assigned to occupy Syria through the League of Nations' mandate system, beginning in 1923, and both then and now, the Arabic locals' opinions of France and the French never recovered. It was essential, as Stark said in a letter to Buddicom, that as they make their journey, they use enough Arabic to "make it clear that we are English and not French" so that "there should be no trouble."[86] In a description of the buildings she saw in Turkey, she wrote that "it is a funny mixture of primitive life and of French culture spread thin," and that the reason for this was that "the French have been… setting up a small class of townsmen" in full control of governing, but with "no training at all in common with the people they have to look after."[87] Meanwhile, Stark has been making an effort, as a British woman, to stay involved with the locals, even living among them and avoiding the European hotels. Her connection to the locals of Turkey and Syria would thus have a lasting effect on their lives and culture with which the French were failing to compete. But beyond her own personal connection to the locals, she also argues that their culture is not one to be easily erased. As she wrote in a letter, "the Druse… no doubt still fills his winter evenings

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[85] "Editorial: The Conference of Paris," *Manchester Guardian*, January 20, 1919, https://www.theguardian.com/world/from-the-archive-blog/2019/jan/09/paris-peace-conference-first-world-war-1919.
[86] Stark, *Letters from Syria*, 28.
[87] Stark, 29.

with tales of the Old Man of the Mountain" because "no amount of French education can cover this up."[88] The Europeans had no understanding of the Arabic people, and so no amount of effort by the French seemed to cure the "glance of hatred from some white turban passing by" anyone speaking French, even if it is Freya Stark speaking the language.[89] During an evening spent with her Syrian host, the French teacher of Brumana, and her Syrian teacher, the four spent much of the evening arguing about Syria, and again she made a harsh critique of French intervention. The French teacher, she wrote, was "one against three," and he was "finally told that it is only the English who always take an interest in the life and language of the countries they inhabit."[90] Surprisingly, Stark does follow this comment in her letter by admitting that she listened to this "enormous untruth," aware that the English do not have a history of doing so with their imperial conquests, but the issue remains that she sat and listened "in noncommittal silence."[91] She seemed surprised by her acceptance into Syrian local life, while at the same time the French were actively disliked. But from a historical context, this makes perfect sense. The French would inevitably be disliked by the places they colonized, and the English where they colonized, but they would not be disliked in each other's colonies. Her silence was the first sign of her propagandistic behavior, prior even to her job with the British Ministry of Information, for which she was explicitly hired to spread propaganda during World War II. By using the French as an example of what not to do, and herself and her own actions as an example of what *did* work, she proved to the English exactly what they should have been doing all along. Getting involved and inserting herself into the lives of the locals, and even bringing them into her fold, made her a success story during World War II.

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[88] Stark, 30.
[89] Stark, 30.
[90] Stark, 35.
[91] Stark, 35.

Conclusion

By taking a closer look into what initially appears to be an orientalist's writing, readers could find Freya Stark's hidden message that the methods of involvement utilized by Western Europe were failures and were creating deeper fissures of tension among the Arabic people. Gertrude Bell and Freya Stark portrayed two entirely different versions of the Arabic regions, only decades apart, but split entirely because of the lasting effects of the 1919 Paris Peace Conference and the 1921 Cairo Conference. Because Freya Stark was personally sponsored, she was free to aim at breaking down any British perception of success in the Middle East after the European conferences of 1919 and 1921, which forced the Arabic populations into countries that were meant to be more manageable. Stark built personal connections with common and politically influential people, men, women, and children alike, *unlike* Gertrude Bell, and thus Stark's perspective of Arabic culture was much wider. She was able to see the lasting, deeply damaging effects of the work done at the European conferences after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, done by Gertrude Bell, Lawrence of Arabia, and many others who had not involved themselves on a personal level among the many unique peoples of the Middle East like Freya Stark had. Gertrude Bell wrote with an academic eye, focusing on archaeology and the destination of each journey, giving little attention to the local and common people who made her journeys possible, and this emotional distance from the Arabic people certainly did not help when it came to her involvement in the European conferences. In comparison, Freya Stark was so involved in local lives that she was able to bring her books to life, glorifying Arabic culture and sharing with her British audience the reality of tensions brought upon by European involvement. Stark was critical of Britain's major ally in World War II, not just her enemies, and indicated that the Arabs were so poorly bonded with the French that working through that

alliance of the French to the Arabic people was not going to be helpful. Instead, she used herself as an ideal, proving that involving oneself among the people being colonized is a must. She revealed the failure of Europe, particularly the French, to succeed in influencing Arabic culture, by not involving themselves like Stark had. Stark was fighting the German Axis in the Arabic countries, and she had effective strategies on how to build stronger relationships with the Arabs, and essentially used herself to prove those strategies. She focused on being an intermediary between the British ministry and the Arabs, manipulative and empathetic, and working in service for the British without going all out in cultural conversion, and she made it clear that that was exactly what the Arabic people needed from Europe all along. Without consulting the Arabic people, Europe had pushed together tribes of peoples and religions so vastly different, and then failed to involve themselves effectively, resulting in constant tension and aggression and a lack of any feeling of nationality within each of those forced countries. Europe wanted a more manageable region, a Middle East made up of proper countries that could be swayed and pulled under Europe for utilization, and instead, as Stark makes clear, they made life in the Middle East impossibly more difficult and complicated, an issue in which Europe and the United States have grown increasingly involved ever since.

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