A History of the Dar’a-Haifa Branch of the Hijaz Railroad


Reviewed by William Ochsenwald

According to the author, the chief purpose of this book is to discuss in detail the hitherto unstudied economic, social, and cultural importance of a branch of the Hijaz Railroad that extended from Dar’a in what is today Syria to Haifa in what is today Israel (p. 15). The author also promises readers a work featuring archival documents not previously utilized, as well as newly-published photos and charts illustrating the history of that section of the Hijaz Railroad.

In order to reach these goals Juni Mansur begins with a review of the development of British and American railroads, emphasizing the way they provided crucial linkages between coasts and interior regions—a important theme throughout the book. A second theme is that railroads provided a means for the extension of European imperialism throughout the world, including the Middle East and, in particular, the Ottoman Empire. The author asserts that imperial Germany chose to advance primarily its own interests by constructing the Berlin-to-Baghdad project. In chapter 2, after a somewhat cursory account of the history of transportation in Bilad...
al-Sham, Mansur discusses Sultan Abd al-Hamid II’s political goals and his use of military centralization, Pan-Islam, and claims to the Caliphate. In the next three chapters the author looks in considerable detail at various railroad schemes in Ottoman Palestine, centering on two in particular: the Jaffa-Jerusalem Railroad built under French auspices and opened to traffic in 1892, and the abortive Haifa-Damascus Railroad, whose British sponsors ultimately failed in the 1890s to construct more than a small portion of the line.

It is only with chapter 6 that Mansur finally begins his close discussion of the Hijaz Railroad. He states that the chief Ottoman goals for the project were a desire to reinvigorate the state, to improve its faltering prestige as a defender of Islam versus Europe, and to improve its military capacity in Syria, Jordan, and Arabia. Ottoman publicists appealed to the Muslim world for donations to pay for building the pilgrimage railroad. Subsequently, the Ottomans employed the German engineer Heinrich Meissner, who oversaw the speedy construction of the line from Damascus to Madina.

Meissner Pasha encouraged the building of a branch railroad to the Mediterranean so as to link the interior of the empire with the coast, promote the shipment of Hawran wheat, and decrease the influence of the French-owned Damascus, Hamah and Extensions Railroad, which linked Beirut to Damascus. The story of the Ottoman construction and operation of the branch line is followed by an able recounting of the complicated history of both Ottoman and British railroads in Palestine during World War I.

Perhaps the most valuable sections of Mansur’s book are chapters 9, 10, and 11, in which the author analyzes various features of the Haifa-Dar’a line during the British Mandate of Palestine. Mansur raises a number of contentious issues, including the alleged waqf status of the Hijaz Railroad. The author discusses especially the role of the branch railroad in the economic and social development of Haifa, and the role of the railroad in assisting the development of Zionist agricultural settlements in northern Palestine. Mansur argues that the British administration of the Palestine Railroads favored the Zionists. Ironically, the Ottoman-built railroad that had been designed in part to foster the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca and Madina ultimately became a significant factor in creating the Jewish State of Israel.

The book ends with a lengthy description of the various railroad stations along the Haifa-Dar’a line followed by a conclusion in which the author re-examines his two key themes of linking the coast to the interior and evaluating the impact of foreign imperialism acting through the railroad upon the inhabitants of Ottoman- and Mandate-Palestine. Mansur suggests that while the branch did improve the economy of Syria and Palestine, its chief effect on the region was to advance the interests of Zionism.

Juni Mansur consulted a wide variety of sources, including the Israel railroad archives, the Haifa city archives, and Hijaz Railroad sources in Amman. He used many published books and articles, issued mostly in Arabic, Hebrew, and English. The author also utilized sources on the Web, particularly Nabataea.net. Unfortunately, several important Turkish and German works were not cited, most notably Ulrich Fiedler’s Der Bedeutungswandel der Hedschasbahn (1984). Primary research in the Ottoman, British, and Zionist archives would have contributed substantially to the value of the book.

The book is carefully written and copiously illustrated. The author’s judgments are, for the most part, both sound and useful. However, certain sections are somewhat repetitive; this is particularly notable in chapter 10 on Haifa, which seems to have been written separately from the rest of the book. In the first half of the book Mansur gives perhaps too much weight to the role of Meissner Pasha while neglecting the role of Ottoman-Arab engineers and personnel. A great deal of information is provided in various appendices, but a lack of details on the sources of some of the documents and photos contained in the appendices detracts from their value for researchers.

This work will be most useful to scholars interested in topics such as the history of transportation in Bilad al-Sham, the economic development of northern Palestine, and Ottoman and British administration in the region. Mansur’s book can also be seen as a work of remembrance, part of the Palestinian project to recapture and recall a now-erased element in the history of Palestine before the creation of Israel in 1948.

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