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**Welcome to the February session of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table.** Tonight’s speaker will be John Broich, history professor at Case Western Reserve University and author of *Blood, Oil, and the Axis*. He will discuss the often forgotten Middle East during World War II.

A defining characteristic of the modern Middle East is the intervention of outside powers exploiting and inflaming the domestic tensions of the region. The Middle East at the start of the World War II was in almost continuous turmoil. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, French and British imperialists assumed control or influence over the modern day nations of Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Israel, and Jordan by way of League of Nations Mandates or by installing puppet rulers. During the inter-war period, frustrated Arab and Jewish nationalists were a constant source of disruption. The Mandate territories lacked internal legitimacy, with fractionalized populations and tenuous colonial control.

Strategically, oil-rich regions were of profound importance; control of the Suez Canal and the geographic importance of the area made competition for influence and control a contest with far-reaching implications. The rise of Nazi Germany introduced new variables into Middle Eastern politics even before the war. Arab or Muslim nationalists did not consider Germany an imperialist power and Nazi Germany’s anti-British, anti-French, and anti-Jewish attitudes gave Germany a way to exploit internal divisions among the citizens. After France made peace with the Third Reich the emergence of the Vichy regime made the status of French colonial territories incredibly complex. The famous film *Casablanca* (1942) portrayed the bizarre legal status of French Arab colonial territories. In the movie, the nominally independent French regime governing Morocco (with refugees, neutral Americans and Resistance agents running around) also helped Gestapo agents grab escapees from concentration camps. One can only imagine the intricacies of British policy when there were anti-British Vichy French, anti-British Arab nationalists, anti-British Zionists, and anti-Zionist Arabs and pro-German sympathizers and governments, to name just a few.

A palace coup by pro-German Iraqi officers calling themselves the “Golden Square” in Spring 1941 toppled the pro-British monarchy. The military junta quickly contacted Berlin through Italian channels: in exchange for weapons and Luftwaffe support, they would happily provide the Axis with Iraqi oil

While Britain was losing control of its mandate in Iraq, French Syria would be an outlet to the Mediterranean. The overwhelming majority of the French overseas territories (including Syria and Lebanon) aligned with Philippe Petain and the Vichy regime. When Vichy ordered Syria and Lebanon to provide bases to the Luftwaffe they followed orders. Iraq’s “Golden Square” asked for Luftwaffe support to secure their control of Iraq. This created a remarkable situation: France (formerly a British Ally) arranged to ship French weapons to Iraq for the Luftwaffe to repair and refuel in Syria. Vichy arranged for Iraqi oil to flow via pipeline to the French refinery and port in Lebanon.

With British forces reeling from the German conquest of Greece, and the far more dangerous offensive from Libya towards Egypt by Rommel’s *Afrika Korps*, Britain’s military position was at the breaking point. The possibility of a two-front Axis drive in the Middle East from Libya and Syria was a daunting prospect. At this point, had Hitler committed a tenth of his available strength towards exploiting his position in the Mediterranean theatre from Greece, Libya, and made a serious intervention in Lebanon and Syria the Third Reich might have taken Egypt and the Middle East all the way to the border of Iran. This would have meant a limitless supply of oil for the Reich and placed the Suez Canal in German hands: in essence, the whole of the Mediterranean Sea would have been under Axis control. But the Nazis never dedicated the resources which Rommel begged for – instead, German forces were assembling for *OPERATION BARBAROSSA* in June 1941.

Circumstances in Spring 1941 created one of those seemingly contradictory and confusing wars typical of the Middle East. Not for the first time nor the last time, there would be fighting in the ancient desert region by forces and for reasons from far away as well as by the people who lived there. Great Britain committed several thousand Indian troops to fight their former ally in Syria because of German support for Iraqi nationalists. The May-July 1941 fight in Iraq and Syria saw Indian troops under British command landed at the Persian Gulf port of Basra. Iraqi forces of the “Golden Square” (with Luftwaffe support) then besieged an ill-prepared RAF base west of Fallujah. A mishmash of a few thousand British and Arab Legion troops then invaded Iraq from British Transjordan. A small number of RAF planes, meanwhile, came to help from Egypt against superior Luftwaffe fighter-bombers. The Golden Square junta went into a panic, imagining the British response was much stronger and better organized than it really was. A mere 2,500 Allied troops approached Baghdad and Iraqi resistance collapsed altogether.

After that, the British (reinforced with Australian and Free French troops) turned to ousting the Vichy regime in Syria. This was a far more dangerous threat: a collaborationist force of thirty thousand Vichy French and French Empire troops with about one hundred tanks.

British and Free French leaders believed that Vichy-loyal officers would surrender their positions and change sides. Vichy officers, however, considered themselves loyal to the government of France, and viewed the Free French forces as illegitimate and treasonous. This foreshadowed the utterly bitter fight for Syria and Lebanon in June and July 1941, with about 1,500 dead and many thousands more wounded. The RAF and Australian air forces battled French pilots who a year before had fought the Germans above France. The Royal Navy intercepted Vichy reinforcements in the Mediterranean before they could reach Lebanon. The battle was terribly close, and Indian Army forces crossed the desert from now subdued Iraq to join the fight. The Australian capture of Beirut on July 10 brought the fighting to a halt, with German planes and advisors fleeing just in time.

This fight seems a minor incident when contrasted with the titanic land battles to come, and there are reasons why this area has attracted less attention than it deserves. It highlights the ambiguous if not hostile treatment of France by Great Britain from the British attack on the neutral French fleet at Mers El Kébir, at Oran in 1940 to the wanton destruction of French villages, towns, and cities during the Bomber Offensive. Most histories gloss over the relationship between France and Great Britain and de Gaulle’s post-war mythology of a nation united against the Germans ignores the reality. Furthermore, post-war decolonization movements in the Arab world often contained a strong National Socialist component. The Ba’athist party of Saddam Hussein was ideologically and structurally modeled on the NSDAP. The legacy of Britain and France, the two mandated peace-keeping powers, actually fighting each other over access to oil and control of the region inflamed many Arab and Muslim nationalists and the fire is still burning today.

**Further Readings:**

John Broich, *Blood, Oil, and the Axis* (New York: Abrams Press, 2019

Orit Bashkin, *The Other Iraq: Pluralism and Culture in Hashemite Iraq* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

Robert Lyman, *Iraq 1941*. Osprey Campaign Series 165 (Oxford: Osprey, 2006).

Freya Stark, *East is West* (London: John Murray, 1946).

Norman Goda, *Tomorrow the World: Hitler, Northwest Africa, and the Path toward America*. (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1998.)

Jeffrey Herf, *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

**Announcements:**

Vietnam War Roundtable – *Fall of Saigon* – Covid permitting, May 2021

World War I Roundtable (zoom) 10 Feb. 2021 –

Post-9/11 Roundtable (zoom) TBD –

– rldietrich@mnmilitarymuseum.org

Twin Cities Civil War Round Table – 16 Feb. 2021 – *Decapitating the Union: Plot to Assassinate Lincoln* - www.tccwrt.com - info@tccwrt.com

St. Croix Valley Civil War Round Table - TBD- 715-386-1268 - rossandhaines@comcast.net

Military History Book Club, Har Mar Barnes & Noble *-* TBD *-* [sdaubenspeck52@gmail.com](mailto:sdaubenspeck52@gmail.com)

Civil War Symposium -TBD - [info@tccwrt.com](mailto:info@tccwrt.com)

Minnesota Military Museum, Camp Ripley, 15000 Hwy 115, Little Falls, MN 56345 - 320-616-6050 - <http://www.mnmilitarymuseum.org/>

Minnesota Air Guard Museum - 612-713-2523 - [www.mnangmuseum.org](http://www.mnangmuseum.org/)

8th AF Historical Society of MN, KC Hall Bloomington, Wednesdays at 1130 - [**https://www.8thmn.org**](https://www.8thmn.org/)**.**

Friends of Ft. Snelling - [www.fortsnelling.org](http://www.fortsnelling.com)

World Without Genocide - 651-695-7621 - <http://www.worldwithoutgenocide.org/>

Fagen Fighters WWII Museum, Granite Falls, MN - Air show - TBD - 320-564-6644 - <http://www.fagenfighterswwiimuseum.org>.

Wings of the North Airshow - Eden Prairie - TBD - 952-746-6100 - [www.wotn.org](http://www.wotn.org/)

Winston Churchill Book Club - [lin.hopkins@hotmail.com](mailto:lin.hopkins@hotmail.com)

Alliance Francaise 612-332-0436 - [www.afmsp.org](http://www.afmsp.org,/)

Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser - 651-338-2717 - [crazyjerry45@hotmail.com](mailto:crazyjerry45@hotmail)

CAF - Commemorative Air Force - 651-455-6942 -[www.cafmn.org](http://www.cafmn.org/)

Selim Center for Life Long Learning, UST, https[://www.stthomas.edu/selimcenter/](https://www.stthomas.edu/selimcenter/)

Western Naval Historical Association

[info@wnha.net](mailto:info@wnha.net)

MacArthur Memorial, Norfolk VA, <http://www.macarthurmemorial.gov>

National World War II Memorial, Washington DC, <http://www.wwiimemorialfriends.org>

**We need volunteers to drive our veterans to and from meetings. Please contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or** [**coldpatton@yahoo.com**](mailto:coldpatton@yahoo.com)

**Round Table Schedule 2021**

9 Mar Nazi Art

23 Mar Nazi Scientists in US Space Program

13Apr The Tragedy of Poland: Nazis; Soviets

11 May The “Mighty Eighth” and Victory in Europe

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**Diagram

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