
Fabian Stremmel

In this well-researched and theoretically robust monograph that developed out of his Ph.D. thesis at the School of Oriental and African Studies, Daniel Neep explores the role of a military force during a colonial occupation with the example of the French forces in Greater Syria during the Mandate period (1920-1946). Based in the British Institute in Amman and formerly Lecturer in Middle East Politics at the University of Exeter on secondment to the Council for British Research in the Levant as Research Director (Syria), Neep analyses how the armed conflict between French forces and insurgents influenced understandings of Syrian population and society as well as Levantine geography. In addition to military coercive techniques, Neep shows that the French administration used civilian technologies such as urban planning and engineering to quell the advance of rebel groups. This had consequences on a social and spatial level that still shapes the region long after the French occupation. Neep defines three conceptual arguments that permeate the historical examination in his book: first, that through the perpetration of such violence modernity is produced. ‘Colonial violence’ is therefore not simply the instrument of the state to secure its rule but also one of the many ways in which the French state colonised the social construct of violence with the power characteristics of the modern world. Neep opposes with this argument one trend of social theorists who believe that the use of violence is an anachronistic and puzzling exception. This develops further with Neep’s second argument, that the specific case of the French Mandate offers valuable insight into state-building outside the colonial context. As is sometimes forgotten, the colonial state is not only ‘colonial’ but also a ‘state’ that has to perform its functions. This translates into the analysis of micro-practices of violence that, as Neep’s third argument goes, contains an understanding of the workings of power that is not adequately addressed elsewhere in macro-studies or in more abstract analyses.

Neep begins the discussion with an analysis of how colonial violence has been studied in Historical Sociology and Postcolonial Studies. He argues that blind spots of the two disciplines – the omission in the field of Historical Sociology of the relationship of violence to state-building outside Europe and the rare analysis of colonial violence as a tool of imperial structure in Postcolonial Studies – need to be further studied in order to better understand French Mandate Syria and to open new avenues for what Neep calls *postcolonial historical sociology*. He puts this approach into practice in the subsequent chapters, building on his three core arguments. After an overview of the Mandate’s history, Neep analyses how French colonial violence was shaped by the institutions, forms and practices through which it was channelled, but also through the encounter with armed Syrian resistance. This discussion continues in the assessment of the political rational of colonial violence and the justification of its use.
Neep traces the history of specifically French colonial violence from Algeria via Indochina and Morocco to Syria. He argues that Mandatory Power does not necessarily use punitive measures as a display of sovereign power, but rather as a strategy of modern governance to bring the colonial population into a docile and pacified subject’s position.

Building on this analysis, the text moves to the practice of colonial violence in different fields starting with an assessment of how French troops and Syrian insurgencies tried to order their acts of violence. These attempts to order the micro-practices of violence reveal particular understandings of time, space, and science. The construction of space proves to be the most resourceful source for analysis. Both sides understood, employed and moved through space very differently. These differences resonated in the wider social fields of control and knowledge and finally culminated in the Great Syrian Revolt. The revolt and its actors on both sides (the Syrian ʿīṣāḥāt and the French Service des Renseignements) give Neep the possibility to analyse the implementation of the conceptual understandings of both sides as well as the micro-level logics and practices of violence.

The relationship of violence and space is also visible in the transformation of physical, static space. The Mandatory Power’s reshaping of urban space of Levantine towns like Aleppo and Damascus mostly followed logics of military purposes that characterises its results with a complex and uneven order that is juxtaposed to the smooth flows of modern governance and the harsh discipline of pre-modern sovereignty. This understanding of colonial state power and the uneven spread of colonial state-space is most eminent in Neep’s last example of the Mandatory peripheries. Neep is able to show that the conceptual boundaries of modern and non-modern, settled and nomadic space on the fringes and peripheries are even more entangled and blurred than in the centre that caused the creation of these very same peripheral dynamics.

Basing the research on French and Syrian documents and archives, the book gives a new understanding and approach to the Mandatory policies of pacification and state building in French Syria. In addition, Neep is also able to trace the origins of some social and identity transformation that still haunts Syria until the present day.

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