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Malcolm BROWN: Lawrence of Arabia: The Life, The Legend,**
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„I suppose we have changed history in the Near East.“

Members of secret intelligence services usually work in secrecy. Only some become known, only few of them become famous - though even then their true identities often remain in the shadows. Thus little is known about the individual behind the myth. In World War I two such exceptions came into being. While Mata Hari in Europe became the apparently most famous female agent, the legend of Lawrence of Arabia was created in the Near East.

When Margaretha Zelle was executed in October 1917, Thomas Edward Chapman, major of the British military intelligence service, led troops of Arabic tribes against the Turks. They had just taken Akaba and were aiming towards Jerusalem and Damascus.

On the basis of carefully selected documents Brown describes sensitively how Thomas Edward, born in Wales in 1888, developed into the remarkable personality of T. E. Lawrence. As a schoolboy he already took an extensive interest in medieval fortresses. It led him to study archaeology and later on Arabic, excursions were made to the Near and the Middle East. Because of his manifold qualifications he was recruited by the intelligence service of the British Armed Forces in 1914. He was attached to a mission to Cairo to reconnoitre Turkish troops and their intentions.

The young officer quickly recognized the weak spot of the Arab tribes in their struggle against the Ottoman rulers: they were absolutely disagreed. So he wanted “to concentrate them all” to fight Turkish power. Together with the influential Faisal Ibn Hussain he succeeded in doing just that. They organized the so-called Arabian insurrection and liberated Turkish occupied territory. In this period until 1918 the legend of Lawrence of Arabia was created.

But already on their march to Damascus Lawrence was in deep emotional trouble. In Turkish captivity he had been brutally mistreated. Almost at that same time (November 1917) the Balfour-Declaration had been announced. Lawrence realized painfully that he and his fighters for the Arab cause were not more than pawns in the great game of global politics. Major Lawrence had to be loyal to the British policy favouring a Jewish homeland in just that region. As an officer he was ordered to use his troops accordingly. But Thomas E. Lawrence had worked for Arab independence. While General Allenby triumphantly took rule of Jerusalem, Lawrence suffered from his conflict. Because of the “two-facedness” imposed on him he later described himself as the “greatest crook” within the British military and political administration in the Near East.

Therefore, as member of the War Cabinet's Eastern Committee, as consultant at the Paris Conference deciding over the world's post-war order and to Winston Churchill when he acted as Colonial Secretary, Lawrence constantly pursued the cause of the Arabs. But his

inner tension remained. He withdrew from being part of great politics and concentrated on his famous book „Seven Pillars of Wisdom” and its more adventurous version “Revolt in the Desert”.

He always tried to evade the public attention imposed on him by the media. He hid out with units of the Royal Tank Corps and the Royal Air Force as a low ranking soldier and adopted officially the name T. E. Shaw. But journalists and photographers pestered him there and even in Clouds Hill, his remote hut in the forests of Dorset. “They threw stones on its roof to make him come to the door”. Until the end he was unable to escape the myth that had been created long ago. So for the newspapers it was not Thomas Edward Shaw who died on May 19, 1935. Instead the headlines called out “Lawrence of Arabia dies” (Oxford Mail), of course.

Malcolm Brown succeeded to add a brilliant illustrated biography to the enormous amount of publications about Lawrence. With great care Brown chose contemporary documents, photos, drawings and autobiographical statements of T. E. Chapman/Lawrence/Shaw. Along with his appealing explanations Mr Brown arranged a knowledgeable and very respectful portrait of the extraordinary character, far beyond all clichès of the movie starring Peter O’Toole that left its indelible mark until today.

„I suppose we have changed history in the Near East. I wonder how the rulers have treated the Arabs since”, Lawrence wrote once. Brown leaves this question unanswered so at the end we only might imagine what Arabia would be like today if the ideas of T. E. had become reality. His friend Faisal was proclaimed king of Iraq in 1921. As Faisal I. he, too, died in 1935. Faisal II. was killed and the Iraqi monarchy abolished in 1968 among others by the Bath-Party. Their regime was taken over by Saddam Hussain eleven years later. Only one year after that the series of Gulf Wars started.

In March 2004 the London Times published “lessons of Lawrence of Arabia with regard to the war against Iraq”. We can still learn a lot from this outstanding man.

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