

Mesopotamia

A long, drawn-out campaign in appalling conditions that was initially about protecting British oil interests but later gave rise to visions of glittering prizes in the capture of Baghdad and the crushing of the Turkish Empire in conjunction with the Russians.

Why here?

Mesopotamia was part of the Turkish Ottoman empire. Germany had for many years before the war assiduously developed Turkey as an ally, which it saw as an important part of the *Drang nach Osten* (The Thrust towards the East: Germany wanted new lands, new markets, *lebensraum*). The Turkish army was led by German 'advisors', as was much of its trade and commerce.

For centuries before the Great War, this land had been part of the Turkish Ottoman Empire. Lying along its eastern border was Persia, generally friendly to the British. The Arab Sheiks of Kuwait and Muhammerah also supported Britain; the Arab tribes of coastal Mesopotamia often changed sides.

Britain relied heavily on oil to keep its dominant navy at sea. It determined very quickly on the outbreak of the war with Germany to protect its interests by occupying the oilfields and pipeline near Basra. Later, after an early string of cheap successes, British eyes fell on Baghdad. Victory over the Turks was believed by some - notably David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill - to be a less costly way towards defeat of Germany than the painful battering at the [Western Front](#).

After the oilfields were secured, there began a series of attempts to move north along the rivers to the ancient city. Pushed by Germany - which also tried to encourage a Jihad (Muslim Holy War) against the British forces - Turkey was to strongly resist the British incursion. Baghdad fell in 1917, after which the campaign became much more wide-ranging.



What happened?

It was the Indian Army, which included a number of British units (initially of the **Regular Army** but soon joined by **Territorials**), that supplied the 'British' fighting forces ordered to Mesopotamia. This army had been under-invested for decades, and it showed in the quality of equipment and in training. Guns, shells, small arms and ammunition - of which there was never enough - were often literally museum pieces or considered not good enough for the Western Front and other areas. The Army command also failed to realise the difficulties of supplying an army that moved

further upstream from the Gulf. There were never enough shallow-draught boats, nor enough mules or camels, to adequately supply the fighting forces that were to be up to 500 miles away from port.

Like **Gallipoli**, conditions in Mesopotamia defy description. Extremes of temperature (120 degrees F was common); arid desert and regular flooding; flies, mosquitoes and other vermin: all led to appalling levels of sickness and death through disease. Under these incredible conditions, units fell short of officers and men, and all too often the reinforcements were half-trained and ill-equipped. Medical arrangements were quite shocking, with wounded men spending up to two weeks on boats before reaching any kind of hospital.

The early successes in the river delta were misleading; more and more troops were sent to the Mesopotamia theatre, for operations towards Baghdad which stretched the supply lines to the limit. There was a serious difference of opinion between London, India and the Commander of the force, regarding the role of the army. The former saw it as defensive; the latter two as offensive with a view to capturing Baghdad. The campaign was muddled: the attitudes and complacency disastrous. The advance plodded on, until a resounding defeat in November 1915 in front of Ctesiphon led to headlong retreat to Kut-al-Amara. The army in Kut became surrounded and besieged; eventually 9,000 (3,000 British and 6,000 Indian troops) surrendered five months later - the greatest defeat and loss in British military history up to that point.

Following the fall of Kut, the British ordered Major-General Stanley Maude to take command of the British army in Mesopotamia. He introduced new methods, which culminated in a decisive defeat of the Turks in February 1917, and the capture of Baghdad in March 1917. On this day, the Berlin-Baghdad railway was captured, and German schemes for Turkey were finished.

British forces (and Russians, advancing from the north and east) closed in on the Turks throughout the autumn of 1917, and into the Spring of 1918. Despite making great advances, however, and the additional pressure coming from the north-west, where British forces in Palestine defeated the Turks, no decisive victory was gained. An armistice was signed by the Turks in Mesopotamia on 1st November 1918.



Landscape for battle

Mesopotamia is an ancient land, through which run the great Rivers Tigris and Euphrates. At the southern end, this is a complex river delta. The two rivers meet at Qurna, 40 miles north of Basra, where they come together to form the Shatt-al-Arab, which flows into the Persian Gulf. The land is for the most part desert, and is very flat. The rivers flood the plains to a great extent, when the winter snows in the northern mountains thaw. The small towns and villages that existed along the river banks in 1914 were generally constructed several feet above water level. There is virtually no water in this land, except that from the rivers. There were no roads, so all transport had to be by boat along the rivers. The major centre of population was Baghdad, almost 570 miles upstream from the Gulf.

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Today the land where the British forces were active in 1914-1918 lies in Iraq.