



Aerial Photography of Palestine: A spying mission produced valuable documentation

By Tamara Hodali



uring World War I, during the operations of the German-Ottoman alliance the German air force had a number of aircraft in Palestine. Early in 1916, the Prussian air squadron FA 300 arrived on a mission aimed to eliminate ground targets, and by the second half of 1917, German air power in the region consisted of three Prussian air squadrons, AF301, AF302 and AF303, and of the Bavarian air squadron AF304b, the presence of which was considered a substantial German triumph.

Flight lieutenant with the commander of the Army Group F aviator Captain Konrad Weyert ahead of an aircraft.



Jerusalem, the Old City with the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa Mosque.

Towards the end of the war, exploratory military flights were performed in the region by these squadrons, as the Germans were aiming to obstruct communications between England and India. They attempted to extend the theatre of war from Palestine to Egypt because they sought to prevent British troops and material from passing through the Suez Canal in order to disrupt the supply of goods from Asia, mainly from India. This would have seriously weakened the British industry and also reduced pressure on the German western front. Between 1915 and 1917, the Germans had made several attempts to cross the Suez Canal but had been foiled by the British who had managed to maintain their control over it. When in late September 1917, General Allenby's forces captured the Negev, the German air forces stationed themselves further north, with headquarters in Nazareth.

Being faced with an unfamiliar climate and harsh geographical conditions, also receiving limited supplies, it became important for the Germans to monitor their surroundings very closely. The only means available to maintain an overview of the area of operations – between Damascus and the Lebanese coast and from the Sea of Galilee to Cairo – was to monitor

these areas from above, and that was the mission assigned to AF304b. Aerial photographs were considered a good resource to complement the sparse maps available to the German-Ottoman forces and vital in order to provide an overview of not only the topography of the region, but also of its infrastructure and of British military movement.

The squad leading the mission of AF304b settled in Iraq al-Manshiyah, thirty-two kilometers northwest of Gaza, and between October 1917 and August 1918 was able to take 2,872 photographs that covered Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, Cairo, and the Pyramids of Giza. Although the main goal of the air squadrons was to follow the movements of the British army in the area and monitor military operations on the ground, the pilots were asked, by Theodor Wiegand¹ of the German Archaeological Institute, to also take photographs of the ancient historical sites in the area. During its four missions, AF304b covered the coastal plains, the mountains extending from Lebanon to Hebron, the Jordan Valley, and the eastern part of the Jordan River. These missions resulted in an outstanding archive that documents the condition and details of the landscape of Palestine during the years 1917 and 1918.



Funeral of Lieutenant of Künsberg and motorists in Nazareth, June 1918.

Aerial images of Jerusalem, Jericho, Caesarea, Akko, and the Dead Sea were among the targets of this documentation operation, and images of churches and other Christian religious sites in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Nazareth attest to the aerial-archaeological mission that AF304b was assigned to perform in Palestine and around. Since 1919, the 2,872 aerial and ground photographs have been preserved at the Bavarian War Archives. Recently, they have become available on the website of the Central State Archive of the Bavarian State Office for Surveying.

These photographs constitute an important tool for the study of the urban landscape of Palestine, as they document the existence and conditions of the majority of towns and villages at the end of the Ottoman period. Also, they serve as a baseline for a topography that compares these images to the conditions of today, and they are extensively referred to in studies on the development of historic city centers; they constitute the earliest detailed record of their size and morphology. Furthermore, they can be used to show the urban fabric and the buildings that existed before the British Mandate period; the high resolution of the images makes a close examination of the urban landscape possible, which leads to a better understanding of the details of Palestinian towns and villages. Comparing the AF304b aerial

photographs with the cadastral British maps, the archives of the municipalities (or village councils), and later maps and aerial photographs allows urban historians to draw thematic maps that display in detail the development of these city centers. Another way in which these aerial photographs can be used is to map the sizes of the different towns and villages and the relations and connections between them; a comparison of the result with their condition today will reflect the dramatic change that has taken place in the Palestinian landscape over the last century. Perhaps the most dramatic role of these aerial photographs would be in mapping the villages that were depopulated, their inhabitants expelled from their homes, after the Israeli occupation of Palestine both in 1948 and in 1967. Proper scholarly use of these aerial photographs will surely lead to further research and to the re-evaluation of previous studies in various fields; it will result in more accurate, or even radically different, conclusions regarding the Palestinian cultural landscape.

This article is based on a research paper by Nada Atrash, “Mapping Palestine: The Bavarian Air Force’s WWI Aerial Photography.”

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¹ Theodor Wiegand (1864-1936) was a German archaeologist who led excavations in Turkey, Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon.