To judge from press coverage, the emergence of Islamic State has brought about a cartographic revolution in the Middle East. With the borders of Syria and Iraq in flux, journalists have resurrected the legend of Sykes-Picot, wherein Britain and France are said to have divided up the Ottoman empire between them in an agreement signed 100 years ago, in May 1916. Russia’s intervention in Syria, by upstaging the United States and her allies, seems in this view to be completing the rout of western influence in the Middle East, putting the final nail in the coffin of ‘Sykes-Picot’.

Rarely has history been more thoroughly abused. In reality, none of the contentious post-Ottoman borders of the Middle East was settled by Sykes and Picot in 1916: not the Iraq-Kuwait frontier notoriously crossed by Saddam’s armies in 1990, nor those separating the Palestinian mandate from (Trans) Jordan and Syria, not the highly contested and still-in-flux Israeli/Palestinian partition of 1948, nor, in the most relevant example from today, those separating Syria from Iraq.

To take an obvious example from recent headlines, Mosul, the Iraqi city whose capture in June 2014 led Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi of Islamic State to proclaim himself Caliph Ibrahim, was actually assigned to French Syria in the 1916 agreement.

Journalists are even more spectacularly wrong in describing the Ottoman partition agreement as exclusively (or even primarily) a British-French affair, omitting the driving role played by Tsarist Russia and her Foreign Minister, Sergei Sazonov.

The final terms of what should more accurately be called the Sazonov-Sykes-Picot agreement were actually hashed out in the Russian capital of Petrograd in the spring of 1916, against the backdrop of crushing Russian victories over the Turks at Erzurum, Erzincan, Batum, and Trabzon (the British were reeling, having been humiliated at Gallipoli and in Iraq, where an expeditionary force would shortly surrender).

The conquest of northeastern Turkey in 1916 left Russia, unlike her grasping allies, in possession of most of the Ottoman territory she was claiming—barring only Constantinople (called ‘Tsargrad’ by the Russians), which still needed to be taken.

At the dawn of 1917, Tsarist Russia was poised to inherit the crown jewels of the Ottoman empire, including Constantinople, the Straits, Armenia, and Kurdistan, all promised her in the Sazonov-Sykes-Picot Agreement. Along the Black Sea coast, Russian engineers were building a rail line from Batum to Trabzon, with the latter city a supply base for the Caucasian Army, poised for a spring assault on Sivas and Ankara. With Russia enjoying virtually uncontested naval control of the Black Sea, preparations were underway for an amphibious strike at the Bosphorus, spearheaded by a specially created ‘Tsargradskii Regiment’.

‘After watching her allies try, and fail, to seize the Ottoman capital, Russia was now poised to seize the prize for herself’

After watching her allies try, and fail, to seize the Ottoman capital during the Dardanelles/Gallipoli campaign of 1915 (when Sazonov had first put forward Russia’s sovereign claim on Constantinople and the Straits), Russia was now poised to seize the prize for herself—weather permitting, in June or July 1917.

Of course, it did not turn out that way. After the February Revolution of 1917, mutinies spread through the Russian army and navy, including the Black Sea fleet, just as it was poised to strike.

In a remarkable and little-known coincidence, on the very day the Foreign Minister of the Provisional Government, Pavel Milyukov, first aroused the anger of the Petrograd Soviet and the Bolsheviks by refusing to renounce Russia’s territorial claims on the Ottoman empire—April 4, 1917—a Russian naval squadron approached the Bosphorus in ‘grand style,’ including destroyers, battle cruisers, and three converted ocean liner-carriers which launched seaplanes to inspect Constantinople’s defences from the air.
The 1916 agreement drawn up by Sazonov, Sykes and Picot

The map envisaged three ‘independent’ states:
A under French tutelage;
B under British tutelage;
C under Italian tutelage
The amphibious plans were not abandoned until fleet commander Admiral AV Kolchak threw his sword overboard on June 21 during a mutiny. Even after ‘revolutionary sailors’ had taken control of the Black Sea fleet, a Russian amphibious strike force landed on the Turkish coastline as late as August 23, 1917, in one last sting by the old Tsargrad beast.

After the Bolsheviks took power, Russia collapsed into civil war, which left her prostrate, at Germany’s mercy. By signing a ‘separate peace’ with the Central Powers at Brest-Litovsk in March 1918, Russia forfeited her treaty claims to Armenia, Kurdistan, Constantinople, and the Straits, throwing the Sazonov-Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 into chaos, even as new claimants were appearing on the scene, such as Italy and Greece – not to mention local actors: Jewish, Arab, and Armenian troops were attached as national ‘Legions’ to General Allenby’s mostly British army as it rolled up Palestine and Syria. These forces, along with French, Italian, and Greek expeditionary forces sent after the war, and the Turkish nationalists who regrouped under Mustafa Kemal in Ankara to oppose them, would determine the final post-Ottoman borders in a series of small wars between 1918 and 1922, with scarcely a nod to the Sazonov-Sykes-Picot Agreement.

While Russia’s forfeiture of her claims in 1918 was welcome, in a selfish sense, to the other players vying for Ottoman territory, it was not necessarily a positive one for the region. In the absence of Russian occupying troops to police the settlement, the Allies, in 1919, offered Russia’s territorial share, now defined (in deference to Woodrow Wilson) as the United States – only for the Senate to vote down the Versailles Treaty, rendering the arrangement moot. Lacking Russian or American troops as ‘muscle’, the Allies leaned on weaker proxies such as the Italians and, more explosively, local Greeks and Armenians, which aroused the anger of the Muslim masses and spurred the Turkish resistance led by Kemal (the future Atatürk). Armenians, Greeks and Kurds, too, could only lament the vacuum left behind by the departing Russians, which left them to face Turkish wrath alone.

Soviet Russia re-emerged as a player in the Middle East fairly quickly, not least as Mustafa Kemal’s key diplomatic partner during his wars against the West and its proxies from 1920-22. In a reminder of the enduring prerogatives of Russian foreign policy, the Cold War kicked into high gear when Stalin made a play for Kars, Ardahan, and the Ottoman Straits in 1946: these moves, along with the British withdrawal from Greece, Turkey, and Palestine, inspired the Truman doctrine.

In an eerily similar replay of the history of 1917-18, the collapse of Soviet power in 1991 led Moscow to turn inward, withdrawing from the Middle East and inaugurating a period of US and western hegemony in the region, which turned out no less well than the Middle Eastern free-for-all of 1918-22. A prostrate and impoverished Russia put up no objection during the First Gulf War of 1991, and did little more than sputter during the Iraq War of 2003. Russia’s recovery of strength and morale in the Putin years led, almost inevitably, to her return in force to the Middle East – from which, in reality, she never truly left.

The Russian return to the region, along with Turkey’s increasingly overt hostility over her Syrian intervention, resurrects historical patterns far, far older than Sykes-Picot. For centuries, the Ottoman empire was the primary arena of imperial ambition for the Tsars, even as Russians were the most feared enemies of the Turks. In many ways, the Crimean War of 1853-56, which saw western powers (Britain, France, and an opportunistic Piedmont-Sardinia) unleash an Ottoman holy war against the Tsar to frustrate Russian ambitions in the Middle East, is a far more relevant analogy to the present crisis in Syria than the pseudo-historical myths of 1916. It is time we put the Sykes-Picot legend in the dustbin where it belongs.

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