Ottoman history

All the world’s a

stage

The Ottoman Endgame: War, Revolution

and the Making of the Modern Middle East,

1908-1923. By Sean McMeekin. Penguin

Press; 576 pages; $35. Allen Lane; £30

F

EW international relationships are as

volatile and important as that between

the Russians and the Turks. Although they

were a formidable combination when

they occasionally teamed up (against the

French in 1798-99, for example), the tsars

and the sultans were more often at logger-

heads. In fact they clashed in 12 wars be-

tween the 16th and the early 20th century.

Not much has changed since. In the early

21st century Turks and Russians have

veered between warm commercial rela-

tionsand warbyproxyoverSyria.

The last big Russo-Turkish war, which

formed one of the fronts in the first world

war, isa source ofcontinuingfascination to

Sean McMeekin, a history professor at

Bard College north ofNewYorkwho previ-

ously taught at two universities in Turkey.

In “The Ottoman Endgame”, a sweeping

accountofthe last15 yearsofthe Ottoman

empire, the mostoriginal and passionately

written parts concern the fight between

Russiansand Turksin eastern Anatolia and

the Caucasus.

Two things distinguish Mr McMeekin

from many other writers in English about

this period. First, he has a deep empathy

with Turkish concerns, and he hewscloser

to the official Turkish line than to the revi-

sionist, self-critical approach taken by

some courageous Turkish liberals. Second,

he hassome unusual insightsinto imperial

Russian thinking, based on study of the

tsaristarchives.

Mr McMeekin finds it easy to imagine

the world asitappeared to the young mas-

ters of the Ottoman realm, as they and

their Teutonic allies faced the combined

forcesofRussia, Britain and France; and he

brings alive the memory of tsarist com-

manders like Nikolai Yudenich and the ti-

tanicbattlestheyfoughtin wild places like

Van and Erzurum, with ghastly conse-

quencesforcivilianson the wrongside.

The author has a well-founded sense

that traditional theocratic powers which

look ramshackle or even moribund to

Western eyes can still act with ruthless ef-

fectiveness when the strategic stakes are

really high; and he applies that point in

equal measure to the late Ottoman empire

and to the late tsaristone.

Using this lens, he brings some useful

correctivesinto focus. Ithasbecome a com-

monplace to say that the Middle Eastern

boundaries now being challenged by Is-

lamic State are the ones laid down by an

Anglo-French deal, struck in 1916 and

known asthe Sykes-Picotagreement. Actu-

ally, MrMcMeekin insists, itwasan Anglo-

Franco-Russian deal; and he argues, con-

troversially, that the Russians were senior

partnersin the bargain.

Manystudentsofthe period will see in

Mr McMeekin’s approach a barely hidden

agenda. He stressesthe fightingspirit ofall

the forces battling for the tsar, a coalition

which atcertain timesand placesincluded

local Armenians. Whetherwith disgust or

approval, that emphasis will certainly be

interpreted as a way of vindicating or

explaining away the mass deportation of

Armenians, decreed in 1915, which was

reallya death march.

In fact, Mr McMeekin does not play

down the factthatmanyhundredsofthou-

sands of Armenians perished “…whether

through starvation, thirst, disease, simple

exhaustion, or at the hands of execution

squads.” Ashe delicatelyputsit, the choice

of a parched strip of Syrian desert as the

uprooted Armenians’ destination suggests

that “the survival of the deportees was

not…[the] first priority” of Talaat Pasha,

the Ottoman official whom Armenians

regard asthe main perpetratorofgenocide.

To many, such cautious turns ofphrase

will amount to praising, or at least excus-

ing, by faint damnation. But ifMr McMee-

kin’s purpose was merely to exonerate all

Ottoman behaviourand playdown Arme-

nian suffering, he would not have includ-

ed the observation ofa Venezuelan soldier

of fortune who saw on a mountainside

“thousands of half-nude and bleeding

Armenian corpses, piled in heaps or

interlaced in death’sfinal embrace.”