

Murray, Archibald James, Sir

By [Justin Fantauzzo](#)



Sir Archibald James Murray (1860-1945)

An immediate postwar portrait of Archibald James Murray, a British army officer and commander of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force.

Stoneman, Walter: Sir Archibald James Murray, bromide print, n.p., 1919; source: © National Portrait Gallery, London, NPG x31060,

<https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/use-this-image.php?mkey=mw167464>

Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London.

Murray, *Archibald* James

British Army Officer

Born 23 April 1860 in Kingsclere, Great Britain

Died 21 January 1945 in Reigate, Great Britain

Summary

Sir Archibald James Murray was Chief of the Imperial General Staff from September 1915 to December 1915 and Commander-in-Chief of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force from March 1916 to June 1917.

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Introduction

General Sir Archibald James Murray (1860-1945) was Chief of the Imperial General Staff from September 1915 until December 1915, Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force (MEF) from January 1916 to March 1916, and, after the merging of the Force in [Egypt](#) with the MEF, the [Egyptian Expeditionary Force](#) from March 1916 to June 1917. Murray, a professional soldier educated at the Royal Military College, Sandhurst and the Staff College, Camberley, had previously fought in the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879 and the Second Anglo-Boer War from 1899 to 1902. He was appointed Inspector of [Infantry](#) in 1912 and sailed to [France](#) in August 1914 to act as the [British Expeditionary Force's](#) Chief of Staff.

First World War

Following the British army's retreat from [Mons](#) in August 1914, Murray was removed from his role as Chief of Staff. Not only had the British army and its staff performed poorly, but also Murray was tagged as petulant, indecisive, and lacking physical fitness and stamina: after hearing of the BEF's defeat at Le Cateau, Murray had fainted at an inn in St. Quentin. In his new position as Deputy Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Murray presided over the raising and training of the New Armies. Elevated to the role of Chief of the Imperial General Staff in September 1915, Murray's character flaws were once again exposed. Too often he allowed himself to be persuaded by others. When Murray warned the Dardanelles Committee about the futility of landing British and [Dominion soldiers](#) at Salonika to come to the aid of the Serbs and a continued Anglo-French push for the Straits, pressure from Lord [Horatio Herbert Kitchener \(1850-1916\)](#) changed Murray's position.

By January 1916, Murray was in command of the MEF, which, after merging with the Force in Egypt and given the blessing of the War Cabinet to cross into Sinai, was re-named the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF). Murray's performance as Commander-in-Chief of the EEF was at best uneven. While Murray quickly dealt with the revolt of Sufi Senussi tribesmen in western Egypt, effectively ending the threat at the Battle of Agagia in February 1916, he was lukewarm to the [Arab Revolt](#). Murray's bureaucratic feud with the [Arab Bureau](#) in Cairo certainly coloured his attitude to [Thomas Edward Lawrence \(1888-1935\)](#) and the Arab cause, but so, too, did his concerns about the fighting mettle of irregular Hashemite Arab forces and the strategic value of pulling Ottoman soldiers into the Hejaz.

Yet Murray, rightly so, never swayed from his belief that victory would come on the [Western Front](#) against the German army, a position he shared with the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Sir [William Robertson \(1860-1933\)](#), and the Commander-in-Chief of the BEF, Sir [Douglas Haig \(1861-1928\)](#). He “[thought] imperially”¹, to quote one of his officers, and understood that the needs of the Entente war effort superseded those of Egypt, and that victory anywhere in the Middle East, Africa, or [Macedonia](#) would not bring [Germany](#) to the negotiating table. To that end, Murray looked to reduce his manpower needs in Egypt so that as many men as possible could be sent to France and Flanders. As a result, he championed a forward defence of Egypt and the Suez Canal that called for the occupation of Sinai to the border of Ottoman Palestine. Aware of the logistical problems that hampered the Indian army’s war in [Mesopotamia](#), Murray oversaw the construction of a water pipeline capable of pumping over 1.5 million gallons of fresh water a day to newly-built reservoirs. He also oversaw the construction of a standard-gauge, single-track railway, hundreds of miles of wire-netting roads for infantry to march on, and a Western Front-worthy trench system that crept inland from the [Mediterranean coastline to Beersheba](#), albeit built out of necessity, after the botched First Battle of Gaza.

While Murray was a capable logistician, on the battlefield, in command of tens of thousands of men and forced to make tough, spur-of-the-moment decisions, he struggled as he had done at Mons. Officers at [GHQ](#) maligned Murray’s dithering as the Ottoman army occupied and entrenched around Ogratina. Although Murray proved competent in his handling of small operations, such as the captures of Romani, El Arish, and Rafah, these successes were offset by his inability to plan and command the type of complex and lengthy pitched battles that marked the fighting on the Western Front, and, in his own theatre, the two failed attempts to capture Gaza in March and April 1917. Subordinates criticized Murray’s handling of both the First and Second Battle of Gaza, including his command of the First Battle from a railway carriage at El Arish and his inadequate use of [artillery](#) and [poison gas shells](#) prior to the Second Battle. Worse, still, was the fact that Murray was prone to exaggeration if not outright fabrication. Even though Murray confided in his diary that the First Battle of Gaza was “disappointing”, he had informed the War Cabinet that he had secured the safety of the Suez Canal and grossly overestimated the extent of the [Ottoman army’s casualties](#). The First Battle, owing much to Murray’s misleading report, was hailed in the [press](#) as a triumph; on the cover of the *Illustrated London News* Murray was dubbed “The Victor in Palestine”, and congratulations were wired by [George V, King of Great Britain \(1865-1936\)](#). Impressed by Murray’s report, the War Cabinet ordered him to launch another assault on Gaza. Following the Second Battle, an unmitigated disaster, the EEF had suffered over 10,000 [casualties](#) trying to take the town. Murray, whom [David Lloyd George \(1863-1945\)](#) had wanted to replace for some time, was removed by the War Cabinet in a unanimous decision and sent

home to act as the General Officer Commander-in-Chief at Aldershot from October 1917 until November 1919.

Post-War

Murray's tenure as Commander-in-Chief of the EEF became a matter of considerable debate in the inter-war period. Politicians, including Lloyd George, attacked Murray as an obstinate, narrow-minded commander who lacked the imagination and leadership of his successor, General Sir [Edmund Allenby \(1861-1936\)](#). Lawrence charged that Murray's short-sightedness and jealousy had endangered the Arab Revolt. One ex-serviceman, formerly of the Camel Transport Corps, likened the failed Second Battle of Gaza to the [Battle of the Somme](#); a failure that had made him and his comrades feel "the utter futility of war." Early on, Murray had tried to defend his command. But in June 1917, shortly after his dismissal, his final despatches were barred from publication by the War Cabinet. Nearly three years later, in January 1920, Murray's despatches were published privately. He retired from the British army in November 1922, overshadowed by the successes of Allenby and the adventures of Lawrence, and died in January 1945.

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Notes

1. Johnson, Rob: *The Great War and the Middle East: A Strategic Study*, Oxford 2016, p. 115. [↑](#)

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External Links

- [Fenton, Damien: Palestine campaign, Overview, 3 November 2017 \(New Zealand History\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Murray, Archibald James, Sir: Sir Archibald Murray's despatches \(June 1916-June 1917\) With specially prepared maps, and portraits, London and Toronto 1920 \(Internet Archive\) \(Book\)](#)
- [World War I in Palestine and the Sinai \(Library of Congress\) \(Database\)](#)

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