

Winner of the 2007 Article Prize

Priya Satia, "The Defense of Inhumanity: Air Control and the British Idea of Arabia," 111, no. 1 (2006)

Priya Satia's *American Historical Review* article, "The Defense of Inhumanity: Air Control and the British Idea of Arabia," demonstrates that cultural history can be used to marvelous effect to recast more traditional approaches to British military and diplomatic roles in the Middle East. She argues compellingly that, in the years immediately after the First World War, British intelligence agents in "Arabia" (present-day Iraq) developed a policy of aerial surveillance based on their own romantic constructions of the region as a realm of chivalric fighters and Biblical literalists. This policy, which had little empirical basis, was used to justify indiscriminate bombardments that often did not distinguish between civilians and hostile agents. Bombs from the sky would be interpreted as signs of God's wrath, and destruction of towns would accord with the "warrior" ethos of the tribes under attack – indeed, anything less would be an insult. The intelligence agents helped convince British military officials that massive bombing was actually "humane," justifying the British presence in the region through the 1950s. Satia's lucid analysis represents the best form of interdisciplinary history, adroitly bringing together different approaches, such as cultural and diplomatic history, which are often pursued separately. Her work on the multi-causal factors underlying state-sanctioned violence is both timely and beholden to time-tested modes of historical inquiry; it is a tour-de-force on many levels.

PRIZE COMMITTEE

Michael Saler, UC Davis (chair); Anita Guerrini, UC Santa Barbara; Retha Warnicke, Arizona State University