

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 191

“1919 – The Near East I”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the Great War left Britain, France, and Italy greedily eyeing Ottoman dominions. They already had a tentative agreement to divide the Empire’s lands among themselves.

But the decisions taken at the peace conference would have implications not only across the Arab world, but across the larger Muslim world. And those peoples would not be content to allow their futures to be determined by a handful of Europeans in faraway Paris.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 191. 1919: The Near East, part one.

The entry on “Turkey” in the 1911 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* catalogs no fewer than 22 “races” living within the borders of the Ottoman Empire. *Race* is the word they used back then; today we would be more likely to say *nationality* or *ethnic group*. It goes on to note, however, that “no such thing as an Ottoman nation has ever been created. It has been a juxtaposition of separate and generally hostile peoples in territories bound under one rule by the military sway of a dominant race.”

The Turks had come roaring out of central Asia and over a period of about four centuries had extinguished and replaced the once-mighty Byzantine Empire as the dominant power in the region. The Ottomans had won their empire by conquest, but had never welded it together into a single nation...or even shown much interest in such a project. In this respect, the Empire resembles Austria-Hungary, except that the Habsburgs had won their empire through wily diplomacy rather than conquest. The problem both empires faced in the nineteenth century was the rising tides of liberalism and nationalism which made them seem archaic and gave voice to the discontent of their minorities.

The Ottoman Empire certainly seemed archaic to Europeans. Not only for its autocratic system of government but for its very structure. Although we call it an “empire,” it was in no way the highly centralized, iron-fisted sort of state that word evokes. In fact it was more like a loose collection of nations occupied by Turkish soldiers but only partly controlled from Constantinople. Yes, the Turks had military units stationed across the Empire, but many of those places enjoyed considerable autonomy. In some of them, Constantinople ruled only the cities; the countryside was controlled by the locals, organized by community or by clan. Population statistics for the Ottoman Empire are unreliable, but it appears the population of the empire was about 40% Turkish and 40% Arab, with the remainder made up of various minority groups, principally South Slavs, Greeks, Jews, Armenians, and Kurds.

The Sultan in Constantinople traditionally was not only absolute ruler but also the Caliph, the successor to the Prophet, at least for Sunni Muslims, making the Empire in some sense a theocracy. Islam was the state religion and the closest thing the Empire had to a unifying principle. But even here, the Empire was not united. About 25% of the population was Jewish or Christian, and then there were the Shiites. For the past century, the Empire’s treatment of its Christians in particular was a recurring sore spot in its relations with the European powers. Russia, the Third Rome, took upon itself the mantle of protector of the Empire’s Orthodox subjects and France the role of protector of the Empire’s Catholics, who mostly lived in the region we know today as Lebanon.

These Russian and French self-insertions into domestic Ottoman affairs were, of course, partly motivated by territorial ambitions. The Russians in particular coveted Constantinople and the Straits, something I talked about repeatedly in the Belle Époque days of this podcast. Russia had been moving into the Muslim world throughout the nineteenth century, occupying the Turkic regions of central Asia, chipping away at Persian lands and Ottoman territory in Europe and the Caucasus in multiple wars. That the Ottoman Empire lasted as long as it did was partly attributable to support from Britain, which did not want to see Russian control of those straits or a Russian navy in the Mediterranean, so close to the Suez Canal.

The year 1908 saw the Young Turk revolution, episode 65, and the transformation of the Empire into something more of a constitutional monarchy with legal equality for all of the Empire’s subjects, but this was a case of too little, too late. Soon afterward, the Empire was humbled first by the Italians and then in the Balkan Wars. When the Ottoman Empire joined the Central Powers in 1914, it lost whatever degree of support it might have expected from the British. In the dark days of the conflict, when it was not at all certain the Allies would prevail, the British government assented to substantial Russian territorial claims on the Empire, including the straits, as well as French and Italian and Greek claims, as well as assenting to a Jewish homeland in Palestine and an independent Arab kingdom, to be ruled over by Hussein, the Sharif of Mecca.

I’m going to set aside the Turkish portions of the Empire; we’ll come back to that topic later; for now we’ll focus on the Near East, which I am going to define broadly as everything between, but

not including, India to the east and Italian Libya to the west. And let's begin by talking about the Arab lands in the middle.

At the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, the British were faced with the challenge of untangling their multiple and sometimes contradictory wartime pledges they had made over the future of Arab lands, not to mention a certain amount of greed. The end of the war found British forces in control of the region. The geography of the Arabian Peninsula, with its long coastlines and its strategic position, nestled between the Suez Canal to the west and the Persian Gulf and India to the east made it naturally a region of British interest. Britain already exercised varying degrees of *de jure* or *de facto* control over numerous enclaves all around the Arabian coast, including Aden, Oman, the Trucial States, Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait.

The Arab lands most coveted by the British government were the Ottoman provinces of Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul, what the British were calling "Mesopotamia." Why is that? You can answer that question in two words: irrigation and oil. It was the most productive land in the Arab world, and Mosul was sitting on top of what was known at the time to be sizable oil deposits. Some speculated they could be the largest oil reserves in the world. By now it was becoming clear that oil was the fuel of the future. Now consider Britain's existing petroleum interests nearby at the head of the Persian Gulf and the attraction of Mesopotamia becomes obvious.

Only, in the Sykes-Picot agreement Britain had already agreed that Mosul would be French territory. That's because the late Mark Sykes, who had negotiated the agreement on behalf of the British, had failed to appreciate the significance of the petroleum. I say "late" because Sykes passed away in his hotel room in Paris during the peace talks in February 1919, a victim of the influenza pandemic. He was 39 years old.

But never say never. British troops occupied Mosul. They had violated the terms of the Armistice of Mudros in order to occupy Mosul. They say possession is nine-tenths of the law, so Lloyd George made a pitch to Clemenceau for the British claim on Mosul, and Clemenceau was agreeable to it. For him, the most important matter under consideration at the peace conference was French security in Europe, and if handing off Mosul could buy British support for French security goals closer to home, that made it a deal worth taking.

This went over not at all well in the French foreign ministry, where they reacted, well, much the same way that officials in the British Foreign Office had reacted a couple of years ago to the news that Mark Sykes had promised Mosul to France. This forced Clemenceau to raise the issue again; in the end the British and the French agreed to a deal under which Britain would control Mosul but France would get a 25% cut of the oil production.

This left only the Levant—what we today would call Syria and Lebanon—to the French, with the rest of Arab lands under the control of the British. At least as far as the British and the French and Sykes-Picot were concerned. As for what the Arabs thought of all this...well, we'll come back to that.

The hardliners in the British government in 1919 found themselves loathe to grant the French even the Levant, though these were the Arab lands least interesting to the British. Why shouldn't Britain simply absorb the whole region into its empire? It had been taken by British soldiers and British arms. The French, as always, pointed out that the French Army had been engaged against Germany, the Allies' greatest mutual threat, and it had only been because of that French commitment that Britain had troops to spare for the Near East.

But the hardliners also had strategic concerns. Now that Germany and Russia had been neutralized, the greatest threat to the British Empire going forward was likely to be France, a nation that was a colonial rival just twenty years ago. What if the entente didn't hold in the postwar world? Giving the French control over strategic ports like Tripoli and Beirut, could put a French naval base barely 250 miles from the strategically crucial Suez Canal.

Besides, Britain was better suited than the French to rule over Arabs. Only Britain had the resources to rule over the Near East. And the Arabs loved the British. Absolutely loved them. Just look at Egypt, an Arab nation that Britain has ruled over for decades now. And the Egyptians couldn't be happier about it.

Yeah...about that...? Britain, we need to have a talk.

[music: "Rah Wilfy"]

Egypt has come up before in the podcast. In the 19th century, it had technically been part of the Ottoman Empire, although it had its own ruler, who claimed the title *khedive*, roughly equivalent to "viceroy," which is why this period is often referred to as the Khedivate of Egypt. Despite the titular submission, in practice the Khedive ruled as he pleased. Over the course of the century, Egypt followed the path of many non-European nations into indebtedness to European powers, principally Britain and France, followed by increasing European demands for a say in the management of the country. The construction of the Suez Canal only increased European interests in Egypt until 1882, when the British took outright control over the country, and later over Sudan.

The British took control in response to political violence in Egypt that threatened European interests. Everyone expected this arrangement to be temporary, including the British. Then in 1914, when this temporary British occupation was in its fourth decade, the Ottoman Empire entered the Great War. Britain responded by breaking the nominal link between Egypt and the Empire, dethroned the current Khedive, and replaced him with his brother as the new Sultan.

These changes were mostly welcomed among Egyptians, who saw them as steps on the path to a fully independent Egyptian nation, although there were certainly some Egyptians who were quietly rooting for a Turkish victory. Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points were celebrated in Egypt, where most people read them as endorsing self-determination for Egyptians as well. The

war brought to Egypt the same sorts of problems it brought to many other nations. Food shortages, strikes, political unrest, high prices, an influx of rowdy Australians...

Remember back when Roger Casement and the Germans identified the weak spots in the British Empire, episode 126? Ireland, India, and Egypt. By 1919, resistance against British rule was rising rapidly in all three places. We'll have to save Ireland and India for future episodes, but let's take a moment to look at Egypt.

On November 13, 1918, two weeks after the Armistice of Mudros ended the war against Turkey, a delegation of Egyptian politicians met with the British High Commissioner in Cairo, Sir Reginald Wingate. The delegation was led by a 59-year-old former minister named Saad Zaghlul, and they wanted to represent Egypt at the Paris Peace Conference for the purpose of discussing a plan for Egyptian independence. Zaghlul noted that the British were already talking about mandates for Syria and Palestine and Mesopotamia, mandates that were supposed to develop into independent Arab states. The British were already recognizing Hussein of Mecca as King Hussein of the Hedjaz, and his youngest son, Faisal, would be leading a Syrian delegation to Paris to make the case for Arab independence. Egypt was an ancient nation with a glorious past, one that was obviously far better prepared for self-rule than someplace like Syria or Hedjaz. Egypt had been loyal to the Allies during the war, and had contributed more to Allied victory than the Sharif of Mecca. Why should they be permitted a delegation and not Egypt?

The very British response was that an Egyptian delegation to Paris would "serve no good object."

The British believed they were dealing here with a handful of retired politicians whose views were of no great significance, but Zaghlul and company did not take no for an answer. They reached out to various groups across Egypt, inviting them to be part of this proposed Egyptian delegation, which also had the effect of building a broad base of support for the idea. Zaghlul and his supporters formed what was called simply the "Delegation Party," or the Wafd Party, to use the Arabic word.

British officials tried to counteract this by organizing their own Egyptian delegation made up of more pliable Egyptian officials, like ministers in the current Sultan's government, but those ministers did not want to look like British puppets, and so responded to the invitation by regretfully informing the British that they would not be able to participate in any such delegation unless Zaghlul and his associates were also invited.

By January 1919, Zaghlul and the Wafd Party began openly calling for full independence from Britain. The British responded by banning Zaghlul from speaking in public; Egyptian government ministers resigned in protest. Zaghlul and three of his most important colleagues were arrested by the British and deported to the island of Malta.

Egyptians rose up at once in a series of strikes and demonstrations across the country. First students, then railway and telegraph workers. Rail lines were torn up. British soldiers and civilians were attacked. These protests included the religious and the secular, Copts and Muslims, men and women, all marching together, which was very unusual in Egypt. Hundreds died in the violence that ensued. Egyptians call this period the Revolution of 1919. The British called it Bolshevism.

Yeah, expect to hear a lot of protests dismissed as Bolshevism or communism for roughly, oh, let's say the rest of the twentieth century. The British recalled General Allenby to Egypt to restore order, which he did, though an important part of his plan to end the violence was to order the release of Zaghlul and the other Wafd Party leaders. They got their delegation to Paris, although the Allied leaders in Paris were unsympathetic to Egyptian pleas, and political agitation against British rule continued.

The British Colonial Secretary, Lord Milner, headed a commission to investigate the situation in Egypt and propose a solution. The Milner Commission concluded that Egypt's current status as a British protectorate was intolerable to the Egyptians and unsustainable for Britain. It recommended a new relationship, to be negotiated between the two countries. These negotiations continued into early 1922 with no resolution in sight. The Sultan and his government and the other leading political figures in Egypt wanted independence. Full stop. They would settle for nothing less, and this much Britain was unwilling to grant. The British even tried deporting Zaghlul again, this time to the Seychelles, but it didn't help.

On February 28, 1922, with the negotiations deadlocked, the British government issued a unilateral declaration of Egyptian independence, but reserving to Britain the right to defend Egypt against foreign threats, protect foreign interests in Egypt, meaning principally the Canal, maintain communications, and retaining a British role in the governance of the Sudan. The Egyptian government did not accept the British reservations, but it did accept the independence, and by 1924, Saad Zaghlul was the Egyptian Prime Minister.

These events reverberated far beyond the borders of Egypt itself. They took the air out of the claims that Britain had a particular expertise in governing Arabs or Muslims, that Britain had a special role to play in the Near East, or that Arabs welcomed British governance. As for the other argument, that Britain was the only country with the resources to maintain and expand its already globe-spanning empire, despite the enormous costs it had incurred during the Great War, that argument was also being undermined in 1919 over two thousand miles away. Let us journey now from Cairo to Kabul.

[music: "Rah Wilfy"]

The Emirate of Afghanistan has come up a couple of times before in the podcast as well. Back in the 19th century, when the British regarded Russia as the greatest strategic threat to their empire and the so-called "Great Game" was on in central Asia, Russia and Britain competed for

influence in the region. Afghanistan took on great significance because of its position, wedged between Russian Asia and British India. The Russian Empire was expanding southward, swallowing up Muslim regions in the Caucasus and central Asia, places like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Might Afghanistan be next? And if it were, would that open an invasion route into India?

But Afghanistan proved impossible to subdue. The British tried. After two unsuccessful wars with the Afghans, the British and the Emir worked out a *modus vivendi*: in exchange for British subsidies, Afghanistan could conduct its internal affairs as it pleased, but would allow its relations with other nations to be managed by the British government. Afghan interests abroad would be represented by the British Foreign Office and especially, particularly no deals with Russia, please.

The Russian government naturally would have preferred this not be the case, and would have liked it even better if they could have gotten Afghanistan to give them control over its foreign affairs, but in 1907, when Russia and Britain worked out their entente, the Russian government found it expedient to consent to British control over Afghan foreign affairs, in exchange for British guarantees in the event of war with Germany. I touched on this back in episode 41.

Now, twelve years and one Great War later, things are about to change. During the war, emissaries from Germany and Turkey had made their way all the way to Kabul as part of their efforts to promote the Sultan's call to jihad. The Turks and the Germans hoped to convince the Afghan Emir Habibullah to invade India as part of an effort to provoke a Muslim uprising there against British rule. With so many British and Indian soldiers sent overseas to fight in the Great War, the garrisons in India were understrength, which presented a tempting opportunity.

Only, it wasn't tempting enough for the Emir, who astutely pointed out that Afghanistan was wedged between two much larger Allied nations, Russia and India, while Germany and Turkey were very far away and their ability to assist Afghanistan in any military confrontation with the Allies was dubious at best. Nothing concrete came of these meetings, and Afghanistan remained neutral throughout the Great War. But the Turks and the Germans had planted a seed. Though the Emir had not been persuaded, some other members of the royal family had been, including the Emir's son, Amanullah.

The British were fully aware of what the Germans and the Turks were up to in Kabul, not least because Habibullah was passing news of these discussions along to them, and relations between Afghanistan and Britain remained quite friendly during the war.

The Great War ended in an Allied victory, including an Allied occupation of the Ottoman Empire. By 1919, Sykes-Picot was common knowledge and it seemed entirely possible that the Allies would simply divide the Ottoman Empire among themselves. With the Ottoman Empire extinguished, the only independent, self-governed Muslim nations in the world would be...let's see...Iran...and that's it. And the British would soon begin their effort to impose the "Anglo-

Persian Agreement” on Iran, which would have given Britain some control over Iran’s internal affairs.

And then there’s Afghanistan, more or less independent, though the British control its foreign relations.

If you were a Muslim during this time, you could be forgiven for wondering if events were moving toward a world in which every single Muslim on the planet would be governed by a Christian monarch. That certainly seemed to be where things were headed. And if that became the case, could the Islamic faith even survive?

On February 20, 1919, Emir Habibullah was assassinated during a hunting trip into the eastern part of his country. He was 46 years old. His brother was the logical successor and claimed the title, but a week later he was deposed and imprisoned by Amanullah, the late Emir’s son.

Amanullah was just 26 years old at this time, and was regarded by many Afghan elites as too young, too callow, and too liberal to be a suitable ruler. And it was widely rumored that he had had a hand in the assassination of his father. So in order to secure his position, Amanullah needed to do something appropriately...emir-ish...? Something to prove himself worthy.

The early months of 1919 had seen building political unrest in India, culminating in the brutal killing by British soldiers of hundreds of unarmed Indians in the city of Amritsar on April 13. I’ll have a lot more to say about those events in a future episode, but they played a role in the decision by Emir Amanullah just six days later to renounce the agreement with Britain. Two weeks after that, on May 3, Afghan troops crossed the Khyber Pass into India. The Third Anglo-Afghan War had begun.

Afghanistan had an army of about 50,000. They were poorly trained, poorly equipped, poorly paid, and morale was low. But the British military in India had its own problems. The Great War had just ended. The garrisons were still understrength. British soldiers in India wanted to go home. Indian soldiers were resentful of how they and their fellow soldiers had been treated during the war and distressed by the wave of political violence.

Amanullah claimed that his motive had been merely to prevent the violence in India from spreading into Afghanistan. In India, the British authorities believed this was just the first step in a coordinated effort with Indian Muslims to overthrow British rule. British forces attacked Afghan units along the frontier, with inconclusive results. The war was unpopular and Indian soldiers distinctly unenthusiastic about going into combat against Afghans under British command.

The good news for the British was they had a few airplanes, which could be used to strafe and bomb Afghan positions. The British used airpower to disperse Afghan formations and harry

Afghan retreats. The sight of these newfangled flying weapons was unnerving to Afghan soldiers who had never before seen a flying machine.

The British also resorted to air raids on the Afghan capital, Kabul. These attacks likewise struck blows to Afghan morale out of all proportion to their limited military significance, but there's quite an irony here. The German Navy had shelled English seaports during the war, and the Germans had experimented with bombing England from Zeppelins, including a raid on London. I didn't even bother to talk about those Zeppelin raids during the war because their military significance was slight, but the British used them in their anti-German propaganda as evidence of the depraved barbarism of the "Huns." The Emir couldn't resist noting the irony that "the throwing of bombs by Zeppelins on London was denounced as a most savage act and the bombardment of places of worship and sacred spots was considered a most abominable operation, while now we see with our own eyes that such operations [are] a habit which is prevalent among all civilized people of the West."

The war lasted three months. It ended with the signing of the Treaty of Rawalpindi on August 8, under which Britain agreed to acknowledge the full independence of Afghanistan, in exchange for an end to the British subsidy payments. Aerial warfare had shaken the Afghans, and the British took note of how useful it was in colonial wars, when your opponent didn't have any airplanes. On the other hand, the cost of the war, more than £14 million, had shaken the British government, already heavily in debt from the Great War.

So who won the Third Anglo-Afghan War? You be the judge. £14 million may not sound like a lot of money in our time—about the price of hiring Adele to write and record the title song for the next James Bond picture—but in 1919, it was expensive enough to make the British Cabinet sit up and take notice. That amount of money had been just enough to push the Afghans out of India, but wasn't nearly enough to teach them a proper lesson, the way the British would have done in the days of Queen Victoria. I've spoken repeatedly over the course of this podcast about how expensive modern warfare has become. Consider this another warning sign that the cost of maintaining the British Empire may be increasing beyond what Britain can now afford.

We'll have to stop there for today. Thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Jim for his donation, and thank you, Matthew, for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Jim and Matthew help make it all happen, for themselves and for all of us, so if you have a few bucks and would like to help out, visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com, and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

While you're there, you can leave a comment and let me know what you thought about today's show. I also post playlists of the music used on the podcast, along with composer credits and other information, so if you hear a piece of music you'd like to know more about, that's the place to look. Most of the music I use here is free and downloadable, and you'll also find links to sites where you can download it, if you like.

And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century* as we look to the Arab lands of the Ottoman Empire and the Allies' post-war plans for them. The Near East, part two, next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I can't talk about Egypt without mentioning the importance of modern archaeology. Archaeology as the scientific, academic vocation we know today developed in the 19th and early 20th centuries and it revolutionized thinking about ancient civilizations. Within the field of archaeology is the specialty we call Egyptology, which really began with the Napoleonic expedition to Egypt at the turn of the 19th century and the translation of the Rosetta stone in the years that followed.

In November 1922, just months after the British unilateral declaration of Egyptian independence, a British archaeologist named Howard Carter discovered a previously unknown tomb in the Valley of the Kings, a location where pharaohs and other Egyptian nobles were buried from roughly the 16th to 11th centuries BC. Carter summoned his patron, Lord Carnarvon, before opening the tomb. When Carnarvon arrived and Carter finally opened the door and peeked inside, Carnarvon asked him, "Can you see anything?"

Carter famously replied, "Yes. Wonderful things!"

Howard Carter had just made the most famous archaeological find in the history of the field: the tomb of Pharaoh Tutankhamun. The meticulous Carter spent the next decade carefully removing and cataloging 5,398 items from the tomb, including a stunning multi-colored golden death mask, with lifelike eyes of inlaid quartz and obsidian. This mask is surely the single best-known archaeological artifact ever discovered. I hardly need describe it to you; you probably already know what it looks like, but I've posted a picture of it on the website, in case you forgot.

The discovery of the last resting place of the boy king captured imaginations worldwide. There was a fad in Western countries for anything Egyptian, and Tutankhamun himself, the "boy king" or "King Tut" as he was often called, became the most famous of all the pharaohs, though his actual role in Egyptian history is miniscule. Future US President Herbert Hoover named his dog "King Tut."

There was already by this time talk of curses associated with mummies. Ancient Egyptian tombs do sometimes include inscribed curses directed against grave robbers. In 1827, the English author Jane Loudon published *The Mummy! Or a Tale of the Twenty-Second Century*, a proto-science fiction novel, obviously inspired by Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*, that imagines an ancient Egyptian mummy revived by future technology. That mummy proves to be friendly, but afterward stories would be written about mummies come to life to exact revenge on those who dared desecrate their tombs.

On the very day that Carter opened this tomb, a cobra was discovered in his house, which some took as a sign of Tutankhamun's royal displeasure at the disturbance of his resting place. Six

weeks later, Lord Carnarvon died unexpectedly at the age of 56 after he cut himself shaving, which led to a fatal infection. In the years that followed, several others involved in the excavation also died unexpectedly, though not including Carter himself. Still, it was enough for people to begin talking about the “curse of the pharaoh.” A more scientific explanation was proposed: perhaps there had been some unknown bacteria or fungus lurking in the tomb that was released when it was opened. But no such microorganism was ever discovered.

A popular song, titled “Old King Tut,” appeared in 1923 and was recorded by Sophie Tucker. I already told you about the success of Universal Pictures’ two 1931 films, *Dracula*, starring Bela Lugosi, and *Frankenstein*, starring Boris Karloff. The success of those two films and the interest in Egypt and mummies inspired Universal to follow up with 1932’s *The Mummy*, also starring Boris Karloff. Mummies have been staples of supernatural horror stories ever since, right alongside vampires and zombies, and many other Hollywood films have explored the topic, more than I care to list here. *The Mummy* itself was remade twice, first in 1999, in a film starring Brendan Fraser, and second in 2017, that film starring Tom Cruise.

The artifacts from Tutankhamun’s tomb became the property of the Egyptian government, and they have been kept ever since at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. That in itself was a victory for Egyptian independence; if this find had been discovered just a few years earlier, it surely would have gone straight into the British Museum, no questions asked.

In the 1960s, a few of the artifacts were taken on a tour of museums in the United States, Canada, Japan, and France. They were also displayed at the 1964 World’s Fair in New York City, where millions of people took advantage of the opportunity to examine them.

In 1972, a larger collection of artifacts, dubbed *The Treasures of Tutankhamun* were shown first at the British Museum in London, where they were seen by over a million Britons. The profits went to fund temple preservation projects in Egypt. There followed a Russian tour, and then, from 1976 to 1979, an extended American tour. Afterward the artifacts visited Canada and Germany before returning to Egypt.

The American tour attracted more than eight million visitors and became a cultural phenomenon, as Americans spent amounts of money and waited patiently in long lines to a degree previously more associated with rock concerts or blockbuster films than museum exhibitions.

At this time, the most prominent comedian in the United States was the then-32-year-old Steve Martin. In 1978, Martin released his second comedy album, entitled *A Wild and Crazy Guy*. It went double platinum and won that year’s Grammy award for Best Comedy Album. The final track of the album was a novelty song, titled “King Tut,” performed by Steve Martin and the Toot Uncommons. (Get it?) The song lampooned the popularity of the *Treasures of Tutankhamun* exhibition, and it sold over a million copies as a single, reaching number 17 on the Billboard Hot 100, and became a national earworm. A sample lyric goes, “Now, if I’d known/they’d line up just to see him/I’d taken all my money/And bought me a museum.”

Martin also performed the song on *Saturday Night Live* in April 1978. The show put together a pretty spectacular production for the number, perhaps the most expensive single sketch the show had attempted to that point. I will post a video of that performance on the website.

The Treasures of Tutankhamun exhibition forever changed the business of operating museums. They went from being dusty places exhibiting a permanent collection everyone had already seen and no one cared about into hosting what came to be called “blockbuster exhibitions” that represented major cultural events and drew huge crowds, not to mention selling tons of posters, T-shirts, tote bags, and trinkets of all kinds. Pretty impressive for a guy who lived 3,500 years ago and died when he was still a teenager.

[music: Closing Theme]