

The Confidence Men:

How Two Prisoners of War Engineered the Most Remarkable Escape in History

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Margalit Fox's *The Confidence Men: How Two Prisoners of War Engineered the Most Remarkable Escape in History* (2022) is a thought-provoking study. United States-born Fox is an accomplished journalist, lecturer and author. This book is a true story about two Allied prisoners of war located in central Anatolian Türkiye and their high-risk plan based upon 'coercive persuasion' and manipulation to escape, win their freedom and return home. Based on historical evidence and memoir, soldiers Elias Henry Jones (1883-1942) and Cedric Wates Hill (1891-1975) devised a long-term confidence plan by pretending to be mediums and, later, claiming to have serious mental illnesses, to deceive their fellow prisoners, prison guards, camp commandant, and mental health doctors.

Fox's analysis covers a significant British military defeat at Kut (Mesopotamia) between December 1915 and April 1916, and the surrender of nearly 13,000 British and Indian soldiers of all ranks to the Ottomans. The book explains the arduous journey the captured soldiers took to the prison-of-war camps in Türkiye, one being Yozgat (see chapters one to four). Most of Fox's study addresses the difficult life for the captured soldiers, the ingenious (if psychologically and emotionally demanding) plan by Jones and Hill to escape (chapters five to twelve) and, ultimately, the release and return of

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Jones and Hill to Allied forces in November 1918 (see chapters thirteen to sixteen). The human-interest element of the story focuses on the close friendship between the middle-class Oxford University graduate Jones, a Welshman, and the Australian mechanic and aviator Hill. The hardships and feats of endurance they faced were indeed profound.

One key factor in understanding their ‘success’ was the early twentieth-century zeitgeist: a time of technical achievements (phonograph, radio, telephone), cultural interest in communicating with the spirits of the dead, and emerging theories about mental illness. Indeed, for some people, the distinction between science, otherworldly beliefs, and local folk customs was blurred. (In Turkish culture, there is the notion of the *jinn* spirits, and the evil eye, a protection from negative energy.)

The account by Jones and Hill, first published in 1919, examines ‘how’ the deception was organised and operated. However, drawing on social science research, Fox reinterprets the story for a twenty-first-century audience. Her book seeks to explain ‘why’ the deception was ‘successful’, and ‘explores the strategy that underpins all confidence schemes: the subtle process of mind control called coercive persuasion, colloquially known as brainwashing’ (p. xvi). Fox reports her central questions: ‘How does a master manipulator create and sustain faith? Why do his converts persist in believing things that are patently false?’ (p. xvi). The author asks the reader to consider these questions in a broader context than Jones and Hill. She asks us to reflect on how advertisers, cult leaders, and politicians deceptively target the masses.

The book has three parts (sixteen chapters) and includes book references, an index and maps. The book highlights negative attitudes (originating in the medieval era) held by Europeans about the multiethnic Ottomans (whom the Europeans collectively label ‘Turks’). Likewise, during the First World War of 1914 to 1918, Turkophobic views were part of the Allied propaganda. Fox’s book emphasises the othering of the Ottoman people; the memoirs express ‘imperialist, exceptionalist, essentialist, Orientalist’ rhetoric (p. xiv).

The book has some weaknesses. For instance, place names on the maps are often illegible because the text is too small. Pages 253 to 312 contain the book’s ‘notes’ (59 pages of 329). However, reading and understanding the notes is slowed because they are ordered sequentially from 1 to 238, requiring the reader to refer back to the source, which can be time-consuming and frustrating as the reader progresses through the study. In addition, for this review I used the paperback edition; the text is set in Walbaum, and while the

text's style is suitable, the small font size made reading difficult at times. Therefore, I recommend the book's hard copy or the Kindle version.

In Fox's book, the character portrayal of the Ottomans is simplistic (soldiers Bekir and Sabit, Moise Eskenazi 'the Pimple', the Cook, Kiazim Binbashi Bey, the camp commandant, and the two military doctors, Major Osman and Captain Suhbi Fahri). The exception is 'Eastern Europe's' expert on mental health, Mazhar Osman Bey; despite his suspicions about Jones and Hill, he signed them off as having serious mental health issues, enabling them to return home. In response, Jones praises him as kind and humane (p. 220). Similarly, Fox does not mention the everyday Ottoman people of Yozgat, nor does she discuss the economic and emotional problems the Ottoman subjects experienced during the total war.

It may be worth questioning Jones and Hill's strategy. In seeking to return home on the grounds of serious mental health, was it worth it to pretend this to be the case and continue with the hoax, putting themselves under immense physical discomfort, anxiety and emotional stress? Their time in an Istanbul mental health ward lasted from May 8th to November 1st 1918. The Ottoman government concluded an armistice with the Triple Entente on 30th October 1918. Thereafter, all surviving Allied captives at Yozgat returned home.

Overall, Fox tells an intriguing story and uses the primary and secondary sources to produce a very readable account of events. The extensive explanation of the long confidence trick and spiritualism, in the context of escaping a prisoner-of-war camp and the treasure hunt, makes for an entertaining story. Including historical analysis alongside academic studies of enchantment, the work of the con artist, the Ouija board, seances, telepathy, and 'spirits' adds intellectual depth to the book's narrative. It makes the somewhat limited material about Jones and Hill's account more understandable. (Inclusion of Ottoman archival sources might have confirmed the story Jones and Hill gave, but unfortunately, this is lacking in Fox's book.) *The Confidence Men* suits readers of history, deception, memoir, and spiritualism.

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