

# The British Invasion of Egypt, 1882

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DAVID J. MENTIPLY, MAR 23 2009

*Liberal fire-brand William Gladstone launched his election campaign to become British Prime Minister in 1880 during what was being described by contemporaries as the 'Great Depression'.<sup>[i]</sup> The 'People's William' was elected primarily on the back of his promise to reverse the Conservative Party's jingoistic, imperialist foreign policy under Benjamin Disraeli's tenure. The parallels between Britain at this time and the position the United States currently finds itself in – severe economic depression and a newly elected charismatic leader intent on reversing years of aggressive foreign policy – are striking. This is not to imply that the trajectory of the United States will mirror that of the British Empire – for there is never a predetermined historical path. The purpose of this paper is to examine the processes that conflicted with and ultimately undermined Gladstone's pledge to end British expansion overseas, which resulted in the invasion of Egypt just two years after his election. It is the unravelling of these processes that will perhaps be of greatest relevance for today's reader.*

Five years after the Suez Crisis of 1956, Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher published their groundbreaking work on British imperialism, *Africa and the Victorians*.<sup>[ii]</sup> Here, they argued that the British occupation of Egypt in 1882 had 'inflated the importance of trivial disputes between European powers and set off a 'Scramble for Africa.'<sup>[iii]</sup> For these authors, foreign bailiffs had antagonised Egyptian 'proto-nationalist' sentiments by knocking on their gates at the onset of a world economic downturn. Indeed, European financiers demanded prompt repayment of their state loans at markedly high rates of interest, at times reaching 27%.<sup>[iv]</sup> The subsequent pressure levied upon the Egyptian people by the Khedive Ismail's<sup>[v]</sup> administration in the form of increased taxation, was said to have united disparate and discontented factions under the nationalist umbrella of Urabi Pasha. Alarmed by the potential hostility an Egyptian nationalism posed, Prime Minister Gladstone reluctantly agreed to commit troops to rescue the deteriorating situation. Thus, a 'crisis on the periphery' precipitated a British presence in the region to restore order, secure property rights, protect 'Christian' life from harm's way and safeguard the strategically important passage to India.

It is worth considering why, by 1882, Egypt was so central to British policy-making decisions that a vast naval contingent led by General Wolseley began to fire on the port city of Alexandria and then launch a land-invasion. At this point a brief context of Egypt's developmental path is necessary.

### State-building

The Khedive Mohammed Ali, ruler of Egypt 1811-1849, had initiated a process of modernisation to his governmental apparatus in the first half of the nineteenth century. He also set about building a professional army and securing spheres of influence in Sudan, Syria and the Persian Gulf, all measures designed to loosen the grip that the Ottoman Empire had over Egypt. Yet these changes did not affect the majority of Egyptians and there remained a class of agricultural labourers and peasants – *Fellahin* – who continued to live according to the fluctuating levels of the Nile and the four seasons, just as their ancestors had done millennia's back.<sup>[vi]</sup> Despite Ali's reign often characterised as being one of extensive state-building, Egypt remained a relatively backward country in comparison to most European industrial powers of the time. Nevertheless, there were some important signs of progress. For instance, trade in Egyptian raw materials such as cotton, in exchange for British manufactured goods increased rapidly from the 1850s – no doubt spurred on by Britain's decision to adopt free trade as official economic policy from 1846.

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The accession of the Khedive Ismail to the throne in 1863 is often regarded as a watershed in Egyptian history.[vii] Ismail's drive to create a strong, centralised state according to a European model saw significant changes to Egyptian society as a whole. Not only did this new Egypt participate in the Paris World Exhibition in 1867, thus demonstrating its modernising credentials, but it also witnessed the opening of the great mechanical feat of the Suez Canal in 1869. Ismail's Egypt was showing outward signs of its intentions to open up and embrace an age of increasing cultural, political and economic integration. Rapid infrastructural changes also emerged at this point – railroads, telegraphs, harbours, schools and land irrigation projects were built and a dramatic expansion of the export economy began. For the *fellahin* however, these developments meant even harsher conditions of forced labour, taxation, debt and interest payment increases. Yet, even the new tax burdens exerted upon ordinary Egyptians did not suffice to cover the costs of Ismail's grand projects. Egypt therefore became increasingly reliant upon foreign loans to fund modernisation. It is at this juncture that the histories of modern Egypt, Britain and other European states became intertwined.[viii] The city of Alexandria evolved from a strategically important coastal enclave into a thriving, 'polyglot capitalist community'.[ix] Between the years 1876-1890, the traffic between Europe and the Eastern world multiplied threefold, highlighting the impact that the Suez Canal had on connecting previously detached economies.[x] According to Colin Newbury, the Khedive Ismail went as far as to claim that Egypt was becoming a 'part of Europe' during this transitional period.[xi] On the eve of occupation, as many as 100,000 Europeans lived in Egypt.[xii]

By 1882, 37% of Gladstone's personal wealth was invested in Egyptian stocks. It is difficult to quantify whether or not he forsook his strong liberal convictions and 'treasury principles' for personal gain as Peter Cain and Anthony Hopkins have argued.[xiii] As Alexander Scholch has relayed, on numerous occasions and even as late as June 26<sup>th</sup> 1882, Gladstone made proclamations in the Houses of Parliament over his continuing opposition to sending troops into Egypt.[xiv] And as 'men-on-the-spot' such as Auckland Colvin and Edward Malet provided lurid reports warning of the repercussions in allowing an authoritarian Egyptian nationalism to take power, there continued a significant section in the Liberal Party who were committed to a pacific foreign policy. It remains unclear how far the threats of splitting the Party, as intimated by leading figures such as the staunch Unionist, the Marquis of Hartington, and a desire to present a patriotic image of the Liberal Party to the British electorate contributed to Gladstone's 'U-turn'. Interestingly, Eric Stokes claimed that Lenin, political heir to Marx's historical materialism, perceived many components of the late nineteenth century 'new imperialism' to be part of a wider 'non-economic superstructure'.[xv] Party-political considerations and issues of national prestige can then be seen as fundamental in the way that decision-making processes in this era evolved.[xvi]

## Desperate Times in Egypt

In the so-called 'periphery', Egypt had reached a 'condition of disaster' as early as the 1870s. For Benjamin Kidd, an early British sociologist, a situation of 'misgovernment, extravagance, and oppression without example' had been reached by this time.[xvii] A 'reckless, ambitious, and voluptuous ruler' had created a climate where all of the elements of national bankruptcy and ruin could prevail.[xviii] In 1875, Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli had purchased cut-price government shares in the Suez Canal (funded by the banking magnate Lionel de Rothschild) that amounted to 44% of its total stock. Subsequently, when Egypt was declared bankrupt in the following year, Britain was its principal creditor.[xix] Furthermore, up to 80% of Egyptian exports went to Britain by 1880 and 44% of all its imports originated there.[xx] For Cain and Hopkins the eventual occupation was a 'moment of conjuncture arising out of long-term interaction between the expansion of British interests and the aspirations of Egyptian rulers.'[xxi] However, Alfred Milner, later under-secretary of finance in Egypt, claimed at the moment of invasion that British objectives were solely to install 'honesty, humanity and justice' in Egypt.[xxii] Both accounts may possess elements of truths regarding the reasons and motives behind the invasion, but equally, both fail to address a far more pertinent question – why did the moment of conjuncture happen when it did and how was the rhetoric of war (under the guise of humanitarianism) able to achieve such widespread and popular support?

## France and West Africa

As the Great Depression began to set in from 1873, it was France, more than any other industrialised nation that was affected most negatively.[xxiii] Paradoxically, the opening of the Suez Canal, a project that Napoleon had once

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encouraged and French capital funded, affected its trade interests in West African 'legitimate commerce' considerably.[xxiv] This was due to the fact that the Suez now connected the Mediterranean with the Red Sea, making new markets in the East more readily accessible for European states in search of vegetable oil.[xxv] Thus, this shift towards a 'single global economy'[xxvi] facilitated not only integration, but economic crisis for regions such as West Africa. With the rates of profits for French merchants falling and the ascent of new industrial powers such as Germany and the USA, motored by steel and electricity, public opinion in France was said to have been agitating for the reestablishment of a French global status.[xxvii] Such feelings were exasperated by the recent and humiliating military defeat to Prussia in 1871 and increasingly protectionist policies that both Washington and Berlin were implementing throughout this decade. Eventually, in 1879 France invaded Senegal, seeking to incorporate its territory within a French tariff system.

## International Rivalry

It is within this context, of a global economic downturn and heightened international rivalries that Britain's shift in foreign policy manifested itself in the form of the invasion of Egypt. If this newly intensified international competition influenced British plans to invade, then Robinson and Gallagher's 'crisis on the periphery' thesis in relation to Egypt appears to disintegrate. In the words of Cain and Hopkins, 'the tail did not wag the dog.'[xxviii] By asserting the role and machinations of City of London financiers and their political brethren in Westminster, Cain and Hopkins' analysis has at times stymied attempts to forge a broad interpretation of the Scramble for Africa. Critiquing the Hobsonian 'Bondholder thesis' as being crude and conspiratorial, they claim that it was rather an 'organic connection' between statesmen and capitalists that finally compelled action.[xxix] They fail to adequately attend to the reason why their metaphorical dog became so aggressive at the specific time it did. It is no coincidence that Britain *reacted* to earlier French excursions into the West African interior rather than initiated a military campaign itself. After all, Britain remained the only major power committed to the system of free trade (the operations of the City of London depended on the unfettered movement of capital) and so only when this was threatened by the prospect of heightened tariff barriers being imposed by a rival such as France did industrialists and financiers actively court government intervention.[xxx] In short, concerns over the consequences that the growing network of French protectionist territories may have had on Britain's industrial and speculative finance sectors led Britain to consider a pre-emptive strike on Egypt in order to safeguard its 'sovereignty' and readdress the international balance of power .

## Role of the Press

Fuelling these concerns over the safety of overseas investments were groups including the influential Rothschild dynasty that had substantial financial holdings in Egyptian shares. In addition, the Egyptian based Corporation of Foreign Bondholders, worried by the increasingly popular Urabi nationalist movement, began to mobilise the financial press and British Members of Parliament who had personal investments in Egypt, behind military action. The extent to which the daily press was involved in the debate over British foreign policy can be seen by looking at the coverage of *The Times* newspaper at this time. In October 1881, *The Times* made an impassioned plea for British intervention in Egyptian financial affairs and later called unequivocally for a full-scale invasion.[xxxi] Of course, it would be a gross overestimation to claim that the press persuaded ministers and public opinion wholesale to their side and portion responsibility for the military campaign onto Fleet Street. However, the role of the press in regards to the invasion can be seen as a contributory one that helped consolidate different factions behind one objective. This objective, to 'protect' the economy of Egypt in order to suit the needs of substantial British investments, was the culmination of different elements that had fused together over several decades.

## Conclusion

By 1900, approximately 90% of the African continent had been annexed and was under some form of European control. Precisely because of this unprecedented process in world history, it would be detrimental to view one case study, such as the British invasion of Egypt, in isolation from the wider cultural, political and economic climate of the nineteenth century. As this essay has illustrated, the motivations, rhetoric and actions of individuals and groups (both in the metropole and periphery) all contributed to the 'new imperialism' of the late nineteenth century. Consequence it would seem seldom ran parallel with original intention. For just as the process of modernisation tied Egypt into the

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economic orbit of its future occupier, Britain, so the opening of the Suez Canal proved to be the bane of the French Empire. And as 'Gladstonian liberalism' swept to power at the 1880 elections on the back of denouncing aggressive Conservative Party foreign policy, a change in political and economic conditions made it conceivable that Gladstone would lead Britain into invading Egypt just two years later. The Scramble for Africa and the many events contained within it cannot be treated as a neat, chronological process then. Its uneven edges continue to inflict sharp reminders to historians seeking to extract a master narrative. If one thing is clear from studying the invasion of Egypt, it is that a spirit of optimism over Britain's role as a global force for good continued to permeate throughout society. Writing in 1906, Lady Lugard captured both the spirit and legacy of this time perfectly. 'The work done by England in Egypt is another proof of our capacity for autocratic rule. We are justified therefore in thinking ourselves as a people who may face with reasonable hopes of success still vaster questions of tropical administration.'<sup>[xxxii]</sup> The invasion of Egypt, as unlikely as it had seemed upon Gladstone's election victory in 1880, set the tone for British foreign policy well into the twentieth century.

[i] From 1873 until at least the middle of the 1880s world export prices fell dramatically.

[ii] R. Robinson and J. Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism* (1961)

[iii] Quoted in W.M. Louis, *Imperialism: The Robinson and Gallagher Controversy* (New York, 1976), p.33.

[iv] H.L. Wesseling, *Divide and Rule: The Partition of Africa, 1880-1914*, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans (1996), p.44.

[v] *Khedive* is a title bestowed upon Egyptian rulers – approximately equivalent to the position of a King within a European society.

[vi] Wesseling, *Divide and Rule*, p.38.

[vii] *Ibid.*, p.43.

[viii] The humiliating back-down during the Suez Crisis in 1956 after pressure from the United States marked a turning-point in Britain's pursuit of a formal role in Egyptian affairs.

[ix] A. al-Sayid-Marsot, 'The Occupation of Egypt', in A. Porter (ed), *The Oxford History of the British Empire: The Nineteenth Century: Volume III* (Oxford, 1999), p.652.

[x] Geoffrey Barraclough, *An Introduction to Contemporary History* (Harmondsworth, 1967), p.53.

[xi] Colin Newbury, 'Great Britain and the Partition of Africa', in A. Porter (ed), *British Empire, Volume III*, p.632.  
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[xii] Wesseling, *Divide and Rule*, p.38.

[xiii] P. Cain and A. Hopkins., *British imperialism, 1688-200*.

[xiv] A. Scholch, 'The "men on the spot" and the English occupation of Egypt in 1882', *Historical Journal*, 1976, p.773.

[xv] E. Stokes, 'Late Nineteenth-century colonial expansion and the attack on the theory of economic imperialism: A case of Mistaken Identity?', *the Historical Journal*, 1969, p.292.

[xvi] By the time of the bombardment of Alexandria, Malet delighted in the 'new lease of popularity and power' afforded to the Liberal government. See Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism*, pp.336, 337.

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[xvii] Benjamin Kidd, in *The Archives of Empire*, p.218.

[xviii] Kidd, in *The Archives of Empire*, p.219.

[xix] Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism*, p.364.

[xx] *Ibid.*

[xxi] *Ibid.*, p.363.

[xxii] Alfred Milner, in *The Archives of Empire*, p.219.

[xxiii] Primarily due to the fact that France had not yet embraced the 'Second Industrial Age' as many of its competitors had.

[xxiv] 'Legitimate commerce' as opposed to the illegal practice of the slave trade.

[xxv] A source that could be attained from cocoa trees and ground nuts, vegetable oil powered internal combustion engines – vital for the new industries that relied on fast and reliable movement of goods.

[xxvi] Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital: 1848-1875* (1987), pp.64-87.

[xxvii] C.W. Newbury and A.S. Kanya-Forstner, 'French Policy and the Origins of the Scramble for West Africa', *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 10, No.2 (1969), pp.264-273.

[xxviii] Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism*, p.361.

[xxix] P.J. Cain, *Economic foundations of British overseas expansion, 1815-1914* (1980), p.37.

[xxx] Ian Phimister, 'Unscrambling the Scramble for Africa', *South African Historical Journal*, 1993, p.71.

[xxxi] *The Times*, 19 October, 1881.

[xxxii] Flora L. Shaw (Lady Lugard), Excerpts from 'A Tropical Dependency', in *Archives of Empire*, p.461

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