

Napoleon's Occupation of Egypt:

By

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Abstract:

The research article traces the French occupation of Egypt by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1798. The initial French aspirations were of building a French Empire in the Middle East. Napoleon as a young General embarked on the conquest of East which had a profound impact on Middle East and Europe. The French expedition was a massive failure but it paved the way for future European invasion of Middle East. The French intellectuals that Napoleon took with him to Egypt had the most lasting impact. The Research mostly used secondary sources.

Keywords: Colonialism, Empire, Expedition, Egypt, Pyramids, Rosetta stone

Introduction:

Napoleon's invasion of Egypt was the first great incursion of a modern European power in the Middle East. The occupation led to the eventual Colonialism of Middle East and shaped the perceptions of West with regard to the Middle East. Militarily the expedition as it was called (not occupation) was a colossal and expensive blunder. As we have read Napoleon's campaigns had many outstanding successes and big failures. The failures of Russian Campaign in 1812 and the defeat at Waterloo in 1815 were much bigger in terms of numbers but the Egyptian campaign carried an important episode of Middle Eastern history. Politically it was a watershed for Europe and for a shaken Muslim world (Binyon).

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It was in fact a collision of a modern and ancient world. Europe had been transformed by the Renaissance, scientific revolution and Enlightenment and the Europeans were exploring the far corners of the world, whereas Egypt belonged to the ancient world where things changed according to their own mechanical laws. However, Napoleon founded the Institute of Egypt with libraries and laboratories and carried out geographical and historical surveys, etc. As a whole it was a collision between old and new which transformed the Middle East in many ways.

Causes of the French Occupation:

Mamluks were the slave boys of the thirteenth century Egypt who had overthrown their masters. They had been defeated by Ottoman Sultan Selim the Grim in 1517 but had managed to survive. The Mamluks tyrannical rule had alienated the Egyptians and Napoleon thought that the French would be welcomed as liberators. The last years of the Mamluk rule was disastrous for Egypt and the constant infighting with outrageous taxes ruined Egypt's trade (History of War).

Napoleon Bonaparte, only twenty eight years old had already made a name for himself in his exploits in Italy in 1797. The ruling Directory in France asked Napoleon to invade Britain. Napoleon being a shrewd planner knew defeating the largest naval power in the world would be practically impossible. He proposed to attack Egypt, to harm the British Empire at her weak under belly, in her colonies (especially India). In India Tipu Sultan of Mysore was waging his own strategic struggles against the British. Napoleon envisaged joining Tipu Sultan in the fight against the British in India.

Napoleon was only twenty eight years old but had visions of following his hero, Alexander the Great. He wanted fame and glory and had said that this tiny Europe' was a molehill and that all great men have gone to the East.

The nineteenth century witnessed the further Colonization of Asian and African countries by the European powers. The French were long traditional rivals of British and they wanted nothing less than an empire of their own. The French were also planning to build the Suez Canal that linked the Red Sea with the Mediterranean. The Suez Canal would be eventually realized and built by a French engineer Ferdinand de Lesseps in 1869. The French were also fancying a large African market for the export of French goods. They sought nothing less than an empire that would rival that of British Empire in India and the Americas.

Occupation:

On July 1st 1798, Napoleon embarked on the conquest of Egypt with 400 ships and an army of 36000 soldiers and 1600 sailors. The utmost care had been taken to ensure the secrecy of the mission. Once at Sea, Napoleon disclosed the aims of the expedition to the troops en route to Egypt, Napoleon occupied Malta and the forces helped themselves to the plunder of the city.

After a six months journey, Napoleon's forces landed at Alexandria. The French narrowly missed the British fleet commanded by Admiral Nelson. The defenses of Alexandria were decrepit and the garrison small (History of war). Napoleon's forces had no difficulty in overpowering the Mamluks at Alexandria.

From Alexandria, Napoleon's forces marched inland towards Cairo. On the way, the stifling heat, diseases debilitated the enthusiasm of the French forces, while the French impression on seeing the cradle of civilization was uninspiring. By the time the French arrived, prosperous towns such as Damietta and Rosetta had lost over half of their population, Cairo had shrunk by 40,000 people.

The Mamluks in Cairo had been informed by the British of the advancing French forces and they were confident that they could repel the French. However, in reality the Mamluks, were no match for a superior, modernized army and for a military General who was on the verge of making history. It was a battle of old and new, A Europe transformed by intellectual and scientific movements against a Civilization of the bygone era.

Battle of Pyramids:

On the 21ST of July 1798 the battle of Pyramids was fought between the French and the Mamluks. The battle was slightly far away from the Pyramids but the battle got an imposing name as the 'battle of Pyramids'. The Mamluks costumes were exotic, armed with daggers, pistols and axes (Gadway). Napoleon always had the feelings of destiny and inspired his men by saying, "Forty centuries look down upon us...." The battle was close to the Pyramids, and all the history of thousands of years and a sense of being part of that great age, it was a time to make immortals of ordinary men. Napoleon knew he was making history by following his hero (Alexander the Great).

Napoleon tactically formed his army in squares and the Cannon could be protected inside the squares. The Mamluks were fierce cavalrymen and they charged the French infantry. The French unleashed a response with devastating force and the Mamluks were routed by Napoleon's cannons. The French lost a meager thirty men while the Mamluks' losses were more than three thousand. However, the battle of Pyramids was not the end of the Mamluks, many of their leadership resurfaced after the French rule until it was annihilated by Muhammad Ali in the early nineteenth century.

Triumph and Disaster:

Napoleon was aware of the sensibilities of religion and being a sly tactician he issued a proclamation to the Egyptians before entering Cairo. He portrayed the French as liberators and even devout Muslims with the following statements:

“That I have come to restore upon rights, which have been invaded by usurpers

- That I adore God more than the Mamluks and that I respect the Prophet

Muhammad and the Noble Koran” (Armstrong p-112)

The declaration did little to satisfy the Egyptians and the Ulema, however, they had very little options left but to accept the French rule. The same themes of moralizing, enlightening, liberating will be played out in the occupied countries during much of the proceeding centuries by the Colonial powers. In 2004, during the occupation of Iraq, President Bush mistakenly said that they were bringing civilization to the Iraqi masses. The aftermath of the battle saw Napoleon in command of Cairo and with it most of Lower Egypt (History of War).

On Aug 1st, 1798 disaster struck the French fleet anchored at Abu Kir Bay in Alexandria, Admiral Nelson had been searching desperately for the French ships and found them at AbuKir. Without any delay Nelson launched an assault that quickly destroyed the French fleet. Nelson had destroyed the French fleet, leaving Bonaparte, his soldiers and scholars trapped in Egypt (Tignor, p-201). The British had in fact destroyed Napoleon's dream of conquering India. It was the single largest naval disaster of the time for the French. When news of the destruction reached Cairo, it was met with absolute disbelief.

In October, 1798 the French faced a severe revolt by the Egyptians. The Egyptians disliked the behavior of the French soldiers, occupation of their houses and Napoleon's imposition of taxes. Napoleon responded with brutal efficiency and the revolt was quickly put down.

Despite the setbacks and the French losing their whole fleet, Napoleon decided to occupy Syria. An army of 13,000 was assembled but the undertaking proved to be a disaster. The French were constantly attacked by the Ottoman and British forces and the final defeat occurred at the siege of Acre. Napoleon's dreams of occupying vast tracts of the East for a French Empire were in ruins.

French Intellectuals:

The most outstanding nature of the French expedition to Egypt was the 167 French Savants (intellectuals) that Napoleon took to Egypt. Among the Intellectuals were mostly young men from varying fields of Archaeology, Botany, Engineering, art etc. Napoleon had regular discussion with the intellectuals and he founded the Egyptian Academy. The work carried out by this academic expedition probably had the most long term impact, at least in Europe (History of War).

The biggest success of the academics was the discovery of Rosetta stone. It is a piece of stone on which were found writings in ancient Egyptian and Greek languages. It led to the discovery of ancient Egyptian history and an interest in Egyptology in Europe. The works of the intellectuals were published in multi-volumes in 1829. Al- Jabarti, an Arab Historian of the time, had mixed emotions about the French rule in Egypt. He was impressed by the advancement in Science and Scientific equipment of the French. But the inner agenda and ventures of French were mostly for the military necessities.

Conclusion:

Napoleon remained in Egypt over a year and in hindsight we can say that the expedition was a colossal disaster. Napoleon's dream of going to India and establishing a French colony in the Middle East were utter failures. Although later on the French continued to occupy many African and Middle Eastern countries in the nineteenth century. Napoleon left his forces in Egypt and some of his close associated went back with him to Paris, where much greater events and victories awaited them. After losing Egypt to Britain, it was turned into an expedition for glory and adventure and terrible defeat was sold as a great victory. The French forces remained

in Egypt for three years until they were finally defeated in 1801. They claimed that their presence had a civilizing effect on natives. The occupation of Egypt led to a series of Western intervention in the Middle East which continues to our present day in different forms such as direct military presence, by proxy and Neo-Colonialism.

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