Making of Modern Egypt – **16POLS01C**

**The French expedition on Egypt: orientalist military incompetence.**

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The French expedition on Egypt in 1798 has raised many controversies around its impact; such as the rise of modernity in Egypt, and the beginning of its Europeanisation. However, it is equally important to discuss the course of events within the expedition itself to determine why these polemics came into discourse in the first place. An important aspect, that isn’t being considered often, is the strategic militarily strength of the expedition. Questions arise whether it was a scientific expedition, or a blunt invasion, with viable arguments on both sides. It is due that credit be given to the failure –or rather, cultural success- of the expedition on the military incompetence of the French; which came quite surprising considering the Napoleonic wars that took place shortly before the French entered Egypt. One could say that perhaps the French were unused to Middle Eastern weather and terrain, among various other reasons, and were therefore stronger in Europe than they were in Egypt. British intervention is also a prime factor in the departure of the French forces from Egypt only 3 years after their arrival, in 1801. Thus, this paper aims to argue that the failure, or quick departure, of the expedition was due to their military incompetence and unpreparedness, which is perhaps a result of orientalism. The paper will discuss some of the French’s strategies, and what they were expecting upon their arrival. Then, it will examine some of the glitches that faced them military-wise, and how that aided the English in defeating them and, as a form of causality, forced the French to retreat in 1801.

Since the paper is centered on the idea of orientalism and how it affected the French expedition, it is crucial to define what orientalism is to provide a conceptual framework to base the paper on. Edward Said (1978) discussed the term rather extensively in his book *Orientalism,* and aided the emergence of post-colonial studies. Briefly, however, it is a “tradition” of how the West, Europe specifically, define the Orient based on their own experiences. This tradition also encompasses many dichotomies: Europe as the center, the Orient as the “Other,” rational and irrational, modern and barbaric, and several others that present the demeaning stance the Europeans took on the Middle East North Africa region. This also includes the European colonial ambitions: what came to be known as the White Man’s Burden. Europeans took it upon themselves to educate the illiterate Orient and bring modernity forth- regardless of the more economic reasons to invade these areas (Said, 1978). These condescending views were not original of the late 19th century: but were rather existing since the rise of Islam and particularly prominent in the crusading era (Asbridge, 2010). A question remains unanswered of whether orientalism fueled imperialism: the MENA region was unfamiliar ground that held different civilizations that were not quite familiar and were deemed barbaric; or the other way around: these imperialists invaded lands whose language they do not speak and whose culture they do not understand and therefore developed a certain continuum of patronization.

Before proceeding to how orientalist Napoleon was in his expedition to Egypt, it must be discussed how and why Napoleon headed there originally. After the infamous revolution in France of 1789, a series of wars broke out in Europe that were named the French Revolutionary Wars. The French army was one of the main institutions that were reconstructed and framed around the ambition of a French Empire greater than that of the Britons or the Ottomans. The Grande Armée brought forth many successes around Europe, expanding the French Empire. These successes are proof of how strong the rebuilt military was, and how resilient of a strategist Napoleon was. There was little doubt of how fearful the Europeans were of him, an evidence of his forte, so much so that they formed coalitions to fight against him. France had managed to conquer areas from Italy to Belgium to the Netherlands, among many other wars (Harris, 1980; Vincent, 1993). The expedition to Egypt then was merely a further expansion of the Empire, and a highlighting of the conflict between itself and the British Empire. If for nothing else, the French were attempting to cut the line of communications between Britain and its colony in India. Therefore it comes slightly as surprising that Napoleon was not fully prepared military-wise when he headed for Egypt in the same manner he was whilst fighting in Europe, aware as he may be that he would face the British (de La Jonquiere, 1899-1907; Dykstra, 2008). However, the shock is diluted when we consider the strategies Napoleon undertook during the expedition.

There are two possible explanations as to why Napoleon did not fully enhance his army. He was under the impression that the Egyptians would be rather welcoming (Abul-Magd, 2012), sending them proclamations speaking in the name of religion, and focusing on the division between the Mamluk leaders (Dykstra, 2008). One of which reads as follows:

"Peoples of Egypt, you will be told that I have come to destroy your religion ... Do not believe it! ... I worship God more than the Mamluks do, and ... I respect His prophet Mohammed and the admirable Koran ... Tell the people that the French also are true Muslims… All Egyptians shall render thanks to God for the destruction of the Mamluks, saying in a loud voice, 'May God preserve the glory of the Ottoman Sultan! May God preserve the glory of the French army! May God curse the Mamluks and bestow happiness on the Egyptian nation!' " (Dykstra, 2008, p. 119)

It can be further inferred that Napoleon depended on the weakening rule of the Mamluks due to their division within themselves over power, and therefore they would be unable to mobilize and organize troops to fight the French, which proved reasonably correct. The Mamluks did not come together to fight the greater enemy and were therefore easily defeated; Murad Bek fled to Upper Egypt and Ibrahim Bek to the Levant (Dykstra, 2008). What Napoleon did not take into account is that although there were no British Navy in the Mediterranean, his fleet was still at risk. In the battle of Abu Qir, the British commander Nelson easily destroyed the French marine forces, cutting off their access to their sources in France (Dykstra, 2008) and somehow sieging the expedition. What proved to be even less fortunate for the French was their loss of the guerilla wars in Upper Egypt: they were unfamiliar with the terrain, unlike ethnic Egyptians, and their clothes –tailored to fit European weather- were rather a discomfort in the desert heat (Dykstra, 2008; Abul-Magd, 2012; Parker, 1964). This is a recurring theme in French history, when they made the unwise decision to invade Russia in the winter of 1812, and the Grande Armée lost its dominance since. Although there were other factors contributing to the French loss, such as the Russian strategy to burn its own land and the army’s continuous retreating, it cannot be denied or undermined that the Russian winter had had a massive effect on ending the legacy of the Grande Armée (Harris, 1980).

Earlier, however, the French occupation was forced to leave Egypt in 1801 after vehemently losing to the British and the Ottomans. The British had seized Alexandria, the Ottomans were attacking from the Levant, headed by Ahmad Pasha Al-Gazzar, and there were more naval attacks in the red sea headed from British India. There was an attempt at a peace treaty conducted through the Convention of Al-Arish: Kleber, second in command after Napoleon left Egypt before the expedition was over, had wanted to evacuate. The ottomans were to provide ships, the French were to leave honorably with their weapons and arms. There were also talks about ending the 2nd Coalition (part of the war France was fighting in Europe). However, British commander Lord Keith stated that Britain is not part of the Arish convention, would not allow the safe-conduct of the French’s evacuation, and would only allow them to return as prisoners of war. Although he managed to reconquer Cairo, and control Murad Bek in turn also controlling Upper Egypt, Kleber was assassinated (Holt, 1990; Dykstra, 2008). Jacques Menou, his successor, attempted at making amends with the Egyptians by marrying from them and changing his name to Abdullah, but it was to no avail as the British attacked Abu Qir once more and the defeat that followed made the French surrender (Dykstra, 2008). Menou’s attempt at integrating himself within Egyptian society must be tackled within the framework of orientalism. Although it is not debatable that he intended to stay, it does say quite a lot about how he viewed the Egyptians. Rather than being a supremacist, he tried to incorporate himself within the society –even if only for colonial purposes. Menou’s loss that followed and the eventual evacuation however, were a result of militant losses that were due to the initial orientalist lens that Napoleon entered Egypt with.

What further adheres to this argument is that although the French army has proved fruitless fighting in the Middle East, it did not stop Napoleon from rampaging more wars in Europe: a continent definitely stronger than Egypt at the time. For a little under a decade, France fought wars against many alliances led against it by the British. Also named the Coalition Wars, France was victorious in the largest part and transformed warfare in the continent as much as it altered views on the republics and kingdoms (Harris, 1980). As a continuation of the Revolutionary Wars that took place before the expedition on Egypt began, and having remained solid for a long period of history and conquered vast patches of land, the Napoleonic wars are an extension of the claim that the French army was invincible for quite some time. Up until the invasion of Russia in 1812, this claim proved to be accurate, even more so with the realization that the kingdoms of Europe needed to form coalitions in order to stop the revolutionary French from crawling and spreading throughout their territories.

Therefore, there is no absolute military explanation on its own that can justify their loss in Egypt, except that of a deficiency in pre-expedition planning. History has also proven that Napoleon was a resilient strategic man who knew how to conquer and win at wars, as stated earlier in this paper, so it does not provide that he was not wise enough to calculate risks he would undertake in Egypt. Unless, however, these plans were based on a presumption, a tradition of sorts, that caused him to miscalculate the perils. This tradition, as old as the rise of Islam, is what the paper earlier referred to as orientalism. Napoleon had undermined the Egyptian society, as weak and under occupation as it was, and therefore he did not summon the proper army needed to fight. As Napoleon himself stated later in exile, Egypt was a three-battle war, that of the British, that of the Ottomans, and that of the Muslims. Why this guidance was not earnestly implemented in his strategy remains a question unanswered except with the definition of orientalism.

Hence, this paper concludes with its argument that the French expedition’s loss and early departure was caused by military incompetence and unpreparedness, which was a result of the European tradition of orientalism: defining the Middle East as a lower, inferior other and the West as the superior center of the world. This has led Napoleon Bonaparte to not take enough military precautions which eventually led to massive losses of French troops against the British and the Ottomans on Egyptian land. The paper reached its argument through discussing Napoleon’s great victories in Europe both before and after the expedition, spanning from the revolution in 1789 till the French invasion of Russia in 1812. The paper also poses the question of how orientalism is still prevalent today in the third millennia, through forms of neo-imperialism such as the American war on Iraq in 2003. Orientalism, although having only been given a term in the post-colonial era, is as defined a tradition, meaning it has always existed for hundreds of years and will continue to exist for hundreds more.

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