

Chapter Two
NAPOLEON'S INVASION

Colonial European Power in the East.

We must bear in mind that the West Asia was the cradle of civilization, and that the civilization of the Middle East is several times older than that of the West Europe. At a time when Western Europe was sunk in the Dark ages, the Arab world was sophisticated and prosperous.

But at the time of Napoleon's invasion of Egypt as I stated in the previous chapter, the condition of the Western Asia was not the same. For three and a half centuries behind the shield of the Ottoman Empire, the Egyptians in their

isolation had not realized the changed circumstances. The most significant difference between the West and the Middle East during the time when modern industry was developing was a difference in political climate. The West offered great incentives to private enterprises and a security of property and person while the Middle East was stagnating and oppressed under the Ottoman rule.

Advent of Napoleon.

The French revolution, which started in 1789 was regarded by the European monarchs to be a threat to the established orders. A great coalition of European powers, therefore, attempted to suppress the Revolution, but by 1798 the armies of the French Republic had triumphantly overthrown the coalition and forced all the continental enemies of France to make peace; Britain alone, secure on her island behind the shield of the Royal Navy, remained in arms against France. (1)

(1) Walter N. Birks: A Short History of Islamic Egypt, p.80

To Portuguese belong the honours of pioneers. In the great Western movements for world trade they were the first Europeans to make contacts. (1) These days saw their penetration into the Persian Gulf. By the seventeenth century the British and Dutch traders had appeared upon the scene to share with the Portuguese trade. In the Indian Ocean the French next came to share the Dutch trade, but in the eighteenth century both were eclipsed by the British in the race for the great market of India.

Realising the impossibility of striking a direct blow at his enemy due to British sea power, Napoleon Bonaparte, conceived the plan of an expedition to Egypt as a means of establishing a sphere of French cultural and commercial influence in the Middle East, of reopening the old direct trade route to the Far East and of threatening the British position in India. (2) In this sense, Napoleon's invasion was an attempt

(1) Bertram Thomas: The Arabs, p.255

(2) 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Rāfi'ī: Tārīkh al Harakat al 'Asmiyya, p.62, vol.I.

to gain the upper hand in this imperialistic contest by hitting directly at the English economic and strategic interests short of invading the British Isles.

Another cause of invasion was that the East always fascinated Napoleon. He used to say: "Only in East can one do great things." The historian, al-Rāfi'ī says: "Reading and reflection had convinced him that Egypt was one of the keys of the world. He planned to strike the power of England through Egypt and the route to India, and to move the imagination of his own country-men." (1)

The Egyptian expedition was thus indirectly to be the means of forcing the British Government to recognize the territorial acquisition of the Revolution. The weakness of this plan, weakness inherent in the whole struggle with England, was that France had no navy. (2)

(1) al-Rāfi'ī: Tārīkh al-Harakat, p.56, Vol.I

(2) Dr. Mustafā al-Hafnāwī: Qanat al-Su'iz wa Mushkilataha al-Misriyya, p.56, Vol.I.

Moreover the condition of the Middle East, which has already been described, encouraged his idea of invading Egypt. "He sensed the situation well." (1) In destroying the military power of the mamluks, Napoleon was anxious to stabilize his occupation of Egypt. On the next day of his occupation of Alexandria, Napoleon issued a proclamation in Arabic: "..... the Turks have ruined Egypt by their greed. Now the French nation have come forward to free Egypt from her

(1) *Ibd.*, p.56

Hitti: The Near East in History, p.431

The great historian, al-Jabartī (1753-1825) was living in Egypt when Bonaparte's army landed, and in his description of the French we can see clearly the whole ambivalent relationship of modern Egypt and modern Europe. He describes how one day English ships arrived off Alexandria. A small boat was lowered and ten Englishmen came ashore. They met the notables of the city and told them they were searching for the French fleet. "You will not", they said, "be able to drive them off. We shall stay here with our fleet to defend your port, and we want nothing from you except water and food." But the notables replied, "This is the Sultans's country, neither the French nor any other people have any right in it. Please go away." Their defiant spirit was echoed by the Mamluk Amirs when the news came to Cairo. They received it with indifference, saying: "Let all the Franks come; we shall crush them beneath our horses' hooves."

al-Jabartī: (Aḥb̄ al-Āḥār fī al-Tarājīm wa'l-Aḥbār, p.2 Vol.III.

present state and give her people rest from the oppression of this government." (1)

The main appeal was mixed with religious sentiments: "It has been said to you that I have only come to this country in order to destroy your religion. This is a clear lie; do not believe it I worship God far more than the Mamluks do, and respect His Prophet and the glorious Qur'ān O shaykh, judges and imams, officers and notables of the town, tell your people that the French also are sincere Muslims." (2)

"..... On landing in Egypt in 1798, Napoleon said that he was there to punish the Mamluks, who were not as good Muslims as he and his fellow-men were and to restore the authority of the Sublime Porte." (3)

Whether his real purpose was to strike a mortal blow at the British Empire by interrupting

(1) al-Jabartī: op.cit., p.23

(2) al-Jabartī: Ibid., p.4 Vol.III

(3) Hitti: The Near East in the History, p.431

her communication with the Orient or to fight his way through western Asia into Constantinople and the Balkans remains undetermined.

In Cairo he demanded from the Shaikh of al-Azhar a fatwa enjoining submission to his rule. The Shaikh requested prior submission to Islam to which Napoleon offered only two objections: lack of circumcision and addition to wine. (1)

Napoleon framed laws which are still in operation, and led his country to wonderful heights of glory. He was well versed in the knowledge of art and literature. "The unparalleled amount of literature that surrounds his name teems with concise, vivid sentences on every conceivable subject," says Ruciman. (2)

End of French Occupation.

The French occupation of Egypt was very brief. Napoleon's ultimate aim was the colonization of Egypt for the benefit of France.

(1) Hitti: The Near East in the History, p.431

(2) Sir Walter Ruciman: Drake, Nelson, and Napoleon, p.124.

Certain harsh measures of taxation to raise funds for the support of the French occupation forces were taken. The rebellious mood of the Egyptians was encouraged by the proclamations emanating from the Ottoman ports against the "infidel" French. The Ottoman government condemned French revolutionary doctrine as anti-religious and evil. (1)

An Albanian soldier named Muhammad 'Alī, came to Egypt, as an officer, in 1799 to put an end to Bonaparte's invasion. He was then a young man of thirty. The French were driven out in 1801 by an alliance of British and Turkish forces and a short British occupation followed. Muhammad 'Alī remained after the British defeat (1805) and withdrawal to seize supreme power in Egypt, to eradicate the tyranny of the Mamluks, and to be recognized by the Sultan as Viceroy of Egypt.

The French occupation of Egypt was perhaps disappointing in its consequences to France.

(1) Bernard Lewis: "The Impact of the French Revolution in Turkey." Journal of World History, Vol.1, 1 July 1953.

None of its objectives were fulfilled. Yet their brief occupation left a permanent mark upon Egypt. French invasion had influenced Egypt for the next hundred and fifty years in as much as to form the basis of her cultural renaissance and national development.