

Khedive Ismail's Army

John P. Dunn

Cass Military Studies

KHEDIVE ISMAIL'S ARMY

This book examines military failure in the age of Imperialism. On paper, the mid-nineteenth-century Egyptian army seems a formidable regional power. It had a tradition of success, modern weapons, and mercenary officers with experience in major wars. Egypt's ruler, Khedive Ismail, hoped to combine the imported technology and brains with native manpower, and establish an Egyptian-dominated Horn of Africa. His soldiers did conquer parts of the Sudan, but they suffered disastrous defeats during the Egyptian–Abyssinian War of 1875–1876.

Although the book provides the first detailed examination of the Egyptian–Abyssinian War in English, it also looks at the root problems that made Ismail's soldiers ineffective. These include issues of class, racism, internal and external politics, finance, and the rapidly changing world of mid-nineteenth-century military technology.

Khedive Ismail's Army is aimed at military historians, and would also interest those studying the Middle East or North-East Africa.

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Many of the sketch maps in *Khedive Ismail's Army* are based on originals from Egypt's *Dar al-Watha'iq al-Qawmiya* (DAW) in most cases, prepared by members of Ismail's *État Major*. Others are the work of contemporary explorers and travellers. Whenever possible, the original cartographer is remembered by the words, 'as per', and the book listed in the bibliography.

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Generosity casts a long shadow. (Arab proverb)

Such shadows cover the pages in front of you, for many individuals helped in their completion. Though hardly even an *effendi* in the study of history, the writer was assisted by many great pashas. It is very fitting that they should be listed before all else.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>IIIA</i>	Georges Douin, <i>Histoire du règne du khédivé Ismail, Tome III: L'Empire Africain, 3e Partie (1874–1876), Fascicule A</i> (Cairo: L'Institut Français, MCMXLI)
<i>IIIB</i>	Georges Douin, <i>Histoire du règne du khédivé Ismail, Tome III: L'Empire Africain, 3e Partie (1874–1876), Fascicule B</i> (Cairo: L'Institut Français, MCMXLI)
£E	Egyptian pound
AMAE	<i>Archives du Ministère des affaires étrangères</i> , Paris
BN	<i>Bibliothèque national</i> , Paris
<i>BSKG</i>	<i>Bulletin de la société khédival de géographie</i>
CO	Colonial Office, London
<i>cor. pol.</i>	<i>correspondance politique</i>
DAW	<i>Dar al-Watha'iq al-Qawmiya</i> , [Egyptian National Archives], Cairo, Egypt
<i>DUSCA</i>	<i>Dispatches from United States Consuls in Alexandria, Egypt</i> , National Archives, Washington, DC
<i>DUSCC</i>	<i>Dispatches from United States Consuls in Cairo, Egypt</i> , National Archives, Washington, DC
<i>DUSMT</i>	<i>Despatches from United States Ministers in Turkey</i> , National Archives, Washington, DC
<i>Fechet mss.</i>	Eugene Oscar Fechet, <i>Personal Notes of a Journey from Cairo, Egypt to Assouan, Abou Hamed and Berber in Soudan, and return from Berber to Edfour</i> , Special Collections, Library, United States Military Academy, West Point, New York
FO	Foreign Office, London
IO	India Office, London
<i>Lockett</i>	Samuel Henry Lockett, <i>Lockett Correspondence</i> , in Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University
MAE	<i>Ministère des affaires étrangères</i> , Paris
NA	National Archives, Washington, DC
<i>PI</i>	<i>Période Ismail</i> , a collection of <i>Dar al-Watha'iq al-Qawmiya</i> , Cairo, Egypt

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>PMAS</i>	<i>Période Mohammed Aly à Saïd, Dar al-Watha'iq al-Qawmiya,</i> Cairo, Egypt
PRO	Public Record Office, London
<i>RE</i>	<i>Revue d'Égypte</i>
rept.	Reprint edition
SHAT	<i>Service historique de l'Armée de la terre,</i> Château de Vincennes, Paris
SHC	Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill
<i>Sherman</i>	General William T. Sherman, <i>Sherman Papers,</i> National Archives, Washington, DC
<i>SNR</i>	<i>Sudan Notes and Records</i>
WO	War Office, London

GEOGRAPHICAL GAZETTEER

Good military history requires a strong connection with geography. Based on originals produced by a host of skilled cartographers, *Khedive Ismail's Army* features sketch maps to bolster this alliance. Most were edited to focus on locations or land forms that figure in the text.

Editing raises issues of place naming. Like the Arabic-to-English debate over *pasha* or *basha* discussed in the Glossary, this can simply be an argument over how best to convert local pronunciation into a different language, for instance, *Qallabat* vs. *Gallabat*. Editing, however, is not just a question of linguistics, but sometimes politics, or nationalism. Take Abyssinia, the traditional name given to a highland Christian polity of north-east Africa. Today, some scholars prefer Ethiopia. Abyssinia, though, is the author's choice, not as an insult to the people of Ethiopia, but rather to assist this book's intended audience.

Most military historians do not read Amharic, Somali, or Arabic, and thus, if interested, will delve further by reading primary sources produced by nineteenth-century American, French, Italian, or other Western writers. With this in mind, Abyssinia seemed a better choice. For the same reason, this book employs Cairo, not al-Qahirah, or Gura rather than Gura'e.

Some readers may wish to view modern maps for places like Bogos or Equatoria. The worldwide web features numerous options, some based on GPS technology. In such cases, a list of alternative spellings seemed a good ideal and may assist readers travelling from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century.

Abbasiyah Abasiyah, today a Cairo suburb

Abyssinia Ethiopia

Acre Akko, Accho, Acco, Aka, or St Jean d'Acre, in modern Israel

Adi Qala Adi Quala, Adi Kuala, Adi Kwala, or Adi Huala, a city in modern Eritrea

Adua Adwa, Aduwa, or Adowa, a town in northern Ethiopia

Aksum Axum, a town in northern Ethiopia

Alexandria al-Iskandariyah, a major Egyptian port on the Mediterranean

- Alexinatz** Aleksinac, on Morava River, about 17 miles north-north-west of Nis, Serbia
- Algenden** Alghenden, a town in modern Eritrea
- Amideb** a town in modern Eritrea
- Anfile** a coastal village in modern Eritrea
- Apokorona** a region in western Crete
- Arkadi** Moni Arkadiou, monastery near Iraklion, Crete
- Arkiko** Arqiqo, Hargigo, or Hrigigo, a port in modern Eritrea
- Aroge** the name of battlefield near Magdala, Ethiopia
- Assab** Asab, Asseb or Aseb, a port in modern Eritrea
- Assam** a river crossing and site of 1871 battle near Adua, Ethiopia
- Aswan** Assouan or Assuan, important city in southern Egypt
- Awsa** Aussa, a region in modern Ethiopia near Djibouti and Eritrea
- Bahr al-Ghazal** South-western Sudan, a region of rivers and low swampy grounds
- Bardera** Bardere, Bardhere, or Baardheere, village in southern Somalia on Juba River
- Benadir** Banadir or Banaadir, name for southern Somali coast
- Berber** Barbar, on the Nile, in northern Sudan
- Berbera** Berbeera, Somali port on Gulf of Aden
- Blue Nile** Bahr Arzaq, which starts in Ethiopia, where it is the Abbay, and ends at Khartoum
- Bogos** Senhit, district near Red Sea, north of Hamasen, today part of Eritrea
- Brava** Barawe or Barawa, Somali port
- Buganda** Baganda, provides name for modern Uganda
- Bulaq** Buluq, or Bulak, Nile port, now a suburb of north-west Cairo
- Bulhar** Somali port
- Bunyoro** now part of northern Uganda
- Cairo** al-Qahirah, Egypt's capital
- Cotaxtla** a small town 30 miles south-west of Vera Cruz, Mexico
- Dabarki** Egyptian fort in eastern Sudan during the 1840s
- Damietta** Dumyat, a town on Egypt's Mediterranean coast
- Dar Fur** Darfur, former Sultanate, now divided into several provinces in the western Sudan
- Daym Idris** Deim Idris, a large merchant encampment in nineteenth-century Equatoria
- Daym Zubayr** Deim Zubeir, capital of Zubayr's merchant/slaver empire in southern Sudan
- Dobar** Somali village, water source for nineteenth-century Berbera
- Dongola** Dunqulah, a province and city in the northern Sudan
- Equatoria** al-Istiwaiya or Istiwaiyyah, a province in southern Sudan
- Eupatoria** Yevpatoriya, a small Crimean town, now part of the Ukraine
- al-Fasher** al-Fasir, Fashir, or Fasher, Sudanese town 500 miles west-south-west of Khartoum

- Fazughli** Fazogli, Sudanese town near Ethiopian border
- Gara** a small town in the southern Sudan
- Ghinda** Ginda, Guinda, or Ghinda'e, a town in modern Eritrea
- Gildessa** Jildessa, in Ethiopia
- Godofelassie** Gudufalassie, town in modern Eritrea
- Gojjam** an important kingdom within the nineteenth-century Abyssinian Empire
- Gondar** Gonder, in western Ethiopia
- Gondokoro** a village on White Nile in southern Sudan; 5 miles north of modern Juba
- Gundet** Gundat or Gudagude, town in modern Eritrea
- Gura** Gura'e or Gure, a town in modern Eritrea
- Hamasen** Hamasien, a province in modern Eritrea
- Harar** Harer, a trade centre and old Muslim principality, today in Ethiopia
- Hijaz** Hejaz, a region in Arabia containing the holy cities of Mecca and Medina
- Homs** Hims, a large Syrian town
- Iddi** Ed, Edd or Idi, a town in modern Eritrea
- Iftur** Aftouh, pass west-south-west of Harar, in modern Ethiopia
- Igu** Ego, closer pass west-south-west of Harar, in modern Ethiopia
- Iraklion** Heraklion, chief city of Crete
- Ismailia** Isma'ilyah, in Egypt, base of operations for Suez Canal Company
- Juba** Jubba, a river in Somalia; called Gande when it crosses into Ethiopia
- Kaka** a small village in south central Sudan
- Kassala** Kasala, a city in north-eastern Sudan
- Keren** Karan, Cheren, a strategic town in Bogos, today in modern Eritrea
- Khartoum** al-Khartum, al-Hartum, capital of the Sudan
- Khaya Khor** K'eyih Kor, Kaya Khor, a mountain pass close to Gura in modern Eritrea
- Kismayu** Kismaayo or Chisimaio, Somali port
- Konia** Konya, Iconium, in Turkey
- Kosti** Kusti, Sudanese town on White Nile
- Lado** a village in the southern Sudan
- Liche** Licce, important town in Shewa, Ethiopia
- Magdala** Mekdala, Maqdala or Amba Mariam, the temporary capital of Abyssinia in 1867
- al-Manawashi** a battlefield in Dar Fur, western Sudan
- Mareb** Guda Giddi, a river in modern Eritrea, which passes close to Gundet and Gura
- Mareb Mellash** 'This side of the Mareb', a vague Abyssinian description for land claimed in what is today Eritrea. Sometimes also called Bahrmerder (sea land)
- Masindi** a town in west-central Uganda

- Massawa** Massaua, Massowa, Massoua, Mesewa, Mits'iwa or Mits'iwa'e, a major port in modern Eritrea
- Medellin** Medellin de Bravo, a small town 11 miles south of Vera Cruz, Mexico
- Mogadishu** Mogadisho or Muqdisho, Somali port
- Nezib** Nisibis, in southern Syria
- No** a papyrus-filled lake in southern Sudan
- al-Obeid** al-Ubayyid, town in central Sudan
- Obock** Obok, Red Sea port in modern Djibouti
- Omdurman** Umm Durman, a suburb of modern Khartoum
- Phokies** Phokis, town in Crete
- Port Said** Bur Said, Egypt, the Mediterranean entrance to Suez Canal
- Qallabat** Gallabat or Metema, a Sudanese town right next to Ethiopia
- Ras Hafun** a finger of land jutting into Indian Ocean near Somali city of Handa
- Rethimnon** Rethymnon, an important coastal city in Crete
- Roheyta** Raheita, Rehayto, or Rahayta, a town in southern Eritrea
- Rosetta** al-Rasid or al-Rashid, an Egyptian town on the Mediterranean
- Saati** a town in modern Eritrea near Massawa
- Saganeiti** a town in modern Eritrea
- Sanhit** Sanhit, the region about Keren in what is today Eritrea
- Sennar** Sannar, Sennaar, or Sinnar, Sudanese town on the Blue Nile
- Shewa** Shoa, or Showa, an important kingdom within the Abyssinian Empire
- Silistria** Silistra, a city in modern Bulgaria
- Sinope** Sinop, on Turkey's Black Sea coast
- Soledad** Soledad de Doblado, a small town south-west of Vera Cruz, Mexico
- Sphakia** Sfakia, an administrative district of western Crete
- Stylos** a small town in western Crete
- Suakin** Sawakin, Suachin, Red Sea port of Sudan
- Sudd** a collection of rivers, swamps and marshes in southern Sudan
- Suez** a major Red Sea port and entrance to the canal
- Tadjoura** Tadjoura, Tadjourah, Tajurrah, or Tajura, a port city in Djibouti
- Taka** a Sudanese town
- al-Teb** a small town in the Sudan
- Tel al-Kebir** Tall al-Kabir, a town east of Cairo, Egypt
- Tigre** an important region in Northern Abyssinia
- Toura** a suburb of Cairo
- Tsazzega** a district in Tigre
- Tylissos** Tilissos, Tylisos, a village in Crete
- Um Kulu** Umkulu, a town in modern Eritrea
- Vafe** a small village in Crete
- Vryses** Vrisses, a town in western Crete

GEOGRAPHICAL GAZETTEER

Wad Medani Wad Madani, a Sudanese town on the Blue Nile

Wadi Haifa Sudanese town on Egyptian frontier

Wello Wallo, Wollo, or Welo, important province within the Abyssinian Empire

White Nile Bahr Abyad, which originates in the southern Sudan

Woreilu an important Shewan town, today part of Ethiopia

Zeila Seyla or Audal, Somali port

Zula a small port south of Massawa, in modern Eritrea

DIAMONDS IN THE ROUGH

Princes engage foreign soldiers to accomplish results, and not to prove why they could not do so.

(Pierre Crabites)

Alexandria's Hôtel d'Europe included a popular Greek restaurant. Although gunfire was not on the menu, two groups of angry Americans provided this 'special' on 11 July 1872. In what *The Times* of London headlined, 'An American Fracas in Egypt', pistol shots were exchanged between the American Consul General, and his fellow countrymen serving with the Egyptian army.¹

Ending with a minor injury, this shoot-out could serve as a metaphor for a failed mercenary venture. Between 1863 and 1879, Egypt's ruler, Khedive Ismail, hired several hundred European, American, and Ottoman soldiers of fortune. These mercenaries were supposed to provide his armed forces with leadership, training, and technical expertise. Most were unable, unwilling, or incapable of meeting their contractual obligations. Instead, they produced cliques, division, and, in this extreme case, violence. Ismail's mercenaries also helped launch Egypt into imperial ventures that ruined both the armed forces and the economy.

Using the American contingent as a focal point, this book hopes to open a debate on the role of imported talent and technology in nineteenth-century Egypt. The US mercenaries certainly included brave, skilful, and intelligent men, but others were drunkards, deadbeats, and racists. Collectively, the Americans, and indeed most of Ismail's *condottieri*, were failures.

This was contrary to tradition. Muhammad Ali, Ismail's grandfather, retained numerous western mercenaries. The dynastic founder once told a confidant that he expected 49 out of 50 to be 'false stones', but the last would be a 'genuine diamond'.² Maybe he was referring to Joseph Sève, a veteran of Napoleon's army who trained officers, and led Egyptian forces in Greece and Syria. Sève went on to become Sulyman Pasha *al-Faransawi* [the Frenchman], a wealthy and influential member of Egypt's ruling class.³ His students became the officer corps of *al-Nizam al-Jadid* [the New

Regulation], a western-style army, with European weapons and organization, that won a string of victories in the 1820s and 1830s. Other foreign mercenaries assisted in this process, and were vital for its success. Their record established a tradition of such employment well into the twentieth century.⁴

The man behind this idea, Muhammad Ali, was both innovator and copyist. Ruler of Egypt from 1805 to 1848, he broke with tradition in the mass employment of European Christians, and purchase of modern weapons. On the other hand, in hiring mercenaries, he simply followed a tradition dating back to the Pharaohs.

Mamluks were a recent model, one which provided Egypt with high quality troops for nearly 1,000 years. The term Mamluk implied one who was 'owned' by a master. These soldiers started as young bondsmen, but were educated, trained, and then released to serve as professional fighting men. Egyptian Mamluks transcended national boundaries, and featured Muslim warriors from all over the Middle East. The result was an elite fighting force. Mamluks defeated the previously 'invincible' Mongol army at Ayn Jalut in 1260, and went on to conquer the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem. For 250 years after, they represented one of the most powerful armies in the region. Even after their heyday, these soldiers held considerable local power, until Napoleon Bonaparte defeated them at the Battle of the Pyramids (1798).⁵

Although Muhammad Ali spent most of his early years attempting to destroy the leaders of this martial caste, he recognized its significance. Indeed, he and his sons had no hostility for rank-and-file Mamluks, offering positions to all willing to break with their former masters. Considering Muhammad Ali was Albanian, and had started his military career as a free-lance, retaining these foreign troops does not seem peculiar at all.

European mercenaries could be viewed as an extension of the old Mamluk tradition. Certainly they did not begin as 'slaves', and very few embraced Islam. On the other hand, they had no ties to the previous regime, and belonged completely to Muhammad Ali. In addition, they carried a bonus value of being pre-trained, and having experience in the major battles of the Napoleonic Wars. In a sense, such men were Neo-Mamluks, both a continuation of the Egyptian tradition of employing foreign soldiers, and this new concept of hiring experienced non-Muslims.

With Neo-Mamluks to advise, and sometimes lead, his soldiers, Muhammad Ali created an empire and established a dynasty. They assisted his importation of modern firearms, artillery, and the know-how to build such. Neo-Mamluks helped construct an Egyptian navy, launching hundred-gun ships-of-the-line, the 1820s' equivalent of twentieth-century battleships. When Muhammad Ali's troops went to war, their victories over Arabs, Sudanese, Greeks, and Turks confirmed the value of these men.

Egypt's new western-style soldiers were not only muscle to secure Muhammad Ali's rule, but also a means of modernization. The concurrent

requirement of support systems, i.e. armament plants, uniform factories, etc., pushed Egypt towards an industrial revolution and a stronger economy. For some Egyptians, the military revolution of Muhammad Ali established a government infrastructure, improved medical facilities, and created greater educational opportunities. Thus the new armed forces played an institutional role far beyond the narrow confines of the battlefield.

Even from a purely economic viewpoint, Muhammad Ali's accomplishments were impressive. He created an Egyptian military-industrial complex. This allowed him to exclusively supply all but the most sophisticated equipment to Egypt's armed forces, and while lower costs figured into the scheme, equally important was the idea that military self-sufficiency freed Egypt from outside influence, and advanced her to the status of a regional power.

More than just an ambitious enterprise, this was a revolutionary scheme that sought to graft a modern arms industry onto a pre-industrial society. Like-minded rulers from Abyssinia, China, and Japan followed similar strategies, in the belief that imported technology could create an adequate defence against European aggression. Except for the Japanese, these ventures failed to take root. In all cases, the main problem was lack of infrastructure. Without it, the imported technology could only be maintained through heavy outlays of money and scarce resources.⁶

Still, the predatory world of the nineteenth century allowed little time for contemplation, and many developing states accepted these limitations. Speed was all important, with resulting levels of waste and failure being preferable to a perception of military impotence. For a few, the process was successful enough to allow for entry into the imperialist club of colonial powers.

Muhammad Ali took this path in 1820, when he launched his forces into the Sudan. During the 1830s and the 1840s, his soldiers conquered a vast empire that included significant portions of modern Ethiopia, Eritrea, and the Sudan. Although expansion slowed in the 1850s, new conquests seemed inevitable a decade later.

Ismail, who came to power in 1863, took his country back onto the imperial road. He saw a chance to emulate his grandfather's achievements, and during the 1860s, opted for a significant build-up of Egyptian military power. Ismail envisioned his army as a means of dominating the Horn of Africa, a region deemed to have great economic and strategic value. If Muhammad Ali's *al-Nizam al-Jadid* conquered vast territories, why should Ismail's experience be any different?

In 1875–1876, several Egyptian armies marched into Abyssinia. Despite modern equipment, and the advice of American Neo-Mamluks, all with Civil War experience or a West Point diploma, these invasions were defeated. Failure here marked the end for any dreams of empire, and sowed seeds for the Urabi Revolution, plus the subsequent British occupation of Egypt.

What caused this rather rapid and disastrous reversal of fortune for Khedive Ismail's army? Several answers present themselves. Some point to

the limitations of imported technology and foreign advisors. Others include a failure of leadership, morale, and Egyptian politics.

Military defeats are like the skin of an onion, and peeling off one layer will often reveal another. Battlefield leadership comes to mind first, and Abyssinian generals were simply better than their Egyptian counterparts. They utilized terrain and tactics to negate the Egyptians' superior firepower, and secured notable victories at Gundet (1875) and Gura (1876).

A case of good luck maybe? Hardly, and here we get to a deeper problem, one that involves serious flaws in the organization, training, and morale of Ismail's armed forces. Comprised of mistreated, unenthusiastic, native-born enlisted men, and a foreign multi-ethnic officer corps, this army was poorly prepared for war. In the words of an American mercenary, 'it was too timid to fight, and too stupid to run.'⁷

Technology was not a substitute for poor training and morale. Despite sharp uniforms, Remington rifles, Gatling guns, and Krupp artillery, Egyptian soldiers were poorly prepared for modern war. The most serious weakness, however, was at the top. Together with Turks and Circassians, Egypt obtained numerous officers from England, France, Italy, Germany, Switzerland and the United States. Americans played a key role in the 1870s. Indeed, General Charles Pomeroy Stone was Chief of the *État Major* [General Staff] until 1882. By then, Stone almost certainly would have agreed with another Neo-Mamluk, who wrote, 'It was my fortune, good or bad – it is hard to say which – to have been an officer in the Egyptian Army.'⁸

These men were 'strangers in a strange land' – all white, all Christian, serving an African Muslim state. Despite this peculiar dichotomy, Egyptians expected them to repeat an earlier success story, when Sulyman and his colleagues had trained *al-Nizam al-Jadid*. American mercenaries, however, were quite different. Despite experience and training, far superior to Sulyman and his contemporaries, these Neo-Mamluks failed in their primary mission. Some conducted exciting, and scientifically valuable explorations of the 'Dark Continent'. Others performed well on small, individual tasks. As a group, however, they were fractionalized and insubordinate. Finally, when called to deliver victory in Abyssinia, they failed.

Missing was the vital quality of leadership. Muhammad Ali, his son Ibrahim, and their iron-willed lieutenants, were a far cry from Ismail. The grandson of Muhammad Ali, Ismail led a soft life, and never commanded his soldiers, except for a parade. As historian Richard Hill puts it, 'a military ruling class was becoming a clique of pot-bellied *rentiers*. Egypt civilized them and took their swords away.'⁹

This was far from evident at the start of Ismail's reign. Like Muhammad Ali, the Khedive imported massive quantities of western technology and know-how. On paper, these made the Egyptian armed forces seem a regional power. Missing, however, was a dedicated corps of officers. In addition,

Ismail's army never connected with the ways soldiers were encouraged to risk their lives for a cause. Indeed, there was absolutely no incentive for enlisted ranks to do anything, except maybe to run away.

Ismail's ambitious schemes fell apart on the Abyssinian battlefields. These defeats, combined with a simultaneous financial collapse, partially brought about by massive military spending. Revolution followed in turn, with foreign invasion, and, finally, occupation by England that lasted until 1946.

The overall picture of Ismail's armed forces is one of mismatched ends and means. Investigation will reveal a military with potential, but one so bereft of good leadership, that failure was almost guaranteed. There were also problems in how the soldiers were conscripted, trained, equipped, and compensated. If employed in a defensive stance, the army was probably sufficient to protect Egypt from regional enemies. But if used as a tool of empire, as happened in the 1870s, this force was doomed to failure.

Since Ismail's Neo-Mamluks encouraged imperial ventures, and thus bear some responsibility for the *débâcles* of the mid-1870s, they deserve special attention. How were they hired? What was their function? What results can be attributed to their training and leadership? How did they interact with their native superiors? What problems resulted from the intermixing of West and East, Christian and Muslim? The mercenary community answered many of these questions in their articles, books, and unpublished papers. Combine these with clues from other eye-witnesses, and one has to concur with Judge Crabites, whose comment starts this chapter.

CREATING A MILITARY MACHINE

Muhammad Ali and his Neo-Mamluks

Achievements will inscribe your name in the pages of time.
(Muhammad Ali)

An Albanian nobody, whose intelligence and iron will made him *Wali* [Viceroy] of Egypt, Muhammad Ali established a dynasty. Doing so required tremendous effort plus a good deal of violent force directed against a cast of enemies that included Mamluk *Amirs*, British generals, and Ottoman pashas. In 1815, after ten years of conflict, Muhammad Ali sought to secure his position with a radical change.¹

This was *Al-Nizam al-Jadid*, a collection of Egyptian soldiers and sailors quite different from their predecessors. With them, Muhammad Ali secured control of Egypt and created, albeit temporarily, one of the largest empires in that nation's long history. What made these troops so unique? Why were they so much more successful than other regional forces?

One answer involves leadership. From top to bottom, the new armed forces had effective commanders. Nowhere was this more evident than at the apex of Egypt's new government. Noted historian Afaf Marsot succinctly defines this in her description of the *Wali* and his son and heir, Ibrahim:

Muhammad Ali and Ibrahim worked together as a team. Muhammad Ali supplied caution and a brake on rash movements, while Ibrahim supplied strategy, military prowess and the cement that kept the Egyptian army together and made his men fear and love him.²

These were central themes throughout their long careers. Both men recognized the importance of leadership in military affairs. Both fought with their men in the field, and thus from experience, were aware of what makes an army and its leaders successful.³

Leadership, however, was only part of the story. Muhammad Ali also inaugurated a 'military revolution'. As defined by Geoffrey Parker, this combines four steps:⁴

- 1 Massive growth in manpower.
- 2 Profound changes in tactics and strategy.
- 3 Intensified impact of war on society.
- 4 Significant alterations in government structure and policy.

While Parker applied this model to explain Europe's dominant position in past centuries, it also works for early nineteenth-century Egypt. By the 1820s, Egyptian armies, much larger than their eighteenth-century counterparts, included vastly greater numbers of trained infantry and artillery. Conscription provided the manpower, and as it focused on peasants, a group previously considered poor material for military service, definitely impacted on society. Also, increased military expenses forced Muhammad Ali to alter his government, significantly enhancing its capabilities for raising revenues.

Al-Nizam al-Jadid was the centrepiece in this Egyptian military revolution. A product of Muhammad Ali's willingness to experiment with imported ideas, it provided him with powerful armed forces. Egypt's tremendous economic and manpower resources helped create this new system, but equally important was the employment of western mercenaries, the *Wali's* 'Neo-Mamluks'.

The employment of Europeans with Egypt's armed forces dates back to the time of the French invasion. Deserters from Napoleon's forces joined several Egyptian leaders in this period. Most provided artillery or other technical skills, but some served as front-line fighting men. Though small in numbers, the French mercenaries had skills valuable to all sides of a confusing struggle that lasted until Muhammad Ali took over in 1805. Just like his rivals, the new *Wali* hired these men, and by 1807, may have retained up to 400 throughout his army.⁵

Neo-Mamluks were important because they were trained in the European ways of war. Muhammad Ali wanted his troops quickly converted to this model, but conservative attitudes, prejudice, and an antiquated educational system made Egypt less than the perfect laboratory for such a radical experiment. The greatest problem was that starting from scratch, Egyptian officers had but a superficial knowledge of western strategy and tactics. Many were poorly educated. For example, General Pierre Boyer, writing in 1825, claimed that few company leaders could even read or write. The rapid pace for transition offended another critic, Captain Jules Planat, who argued that too many captains, some only 16 years old, were promoted, 'without examination, and without passing through the ranks of ensign and lieutenant'.⁶ Four years later, Edmund Cohorn found 'the principal vice of the new army' was its lack of men trained for high command.⁷ General Henryk Dembinski echoed this view in 1833, saying that a French-style general staff, or *État Major*, was 'indispensable'.⁸

Muhammad Ali recognized these flaws reduced the value of his new army. How could this be remedied? One solution involved European study

tours for officers. Starting in 1809, selected men visited France, Italy, Austria, and England. They toured armaments plants, and were temporarily attached to military academies. By 1826, the Egyptian Military School was established in Paris. Although successful graduates could proceed to official French military academies, some did not get that far. Cultural displacement was intense. Young Arab or Turkish students found France an alien society, one so strange that much of their instruction was untranslatable; their native tongues simply possessed no words for the finer details of western military science. These language difficulties, along with overly generous allowances, distracted them from their study. As one inspector complained, 'if they carry anything away from Paris, it is its vices and not its virtues'.⁹

Muhammad Ali's ambitions did not allow for the gradual process of education to take place, so a concurrent strategy was to hire foreign mercenaries. Unlike the French deserters, the *Wali* intended his new employees to maintain a far more significant and visible presence in the army. This was a radical experiment by Egyptian standards, as the men in question were not only outsiders, but also non-Muslims. Previous employment of western military experts was very limited. On the other hand, Egypt's Mamluk tradition had proved foreigners could make very effective soldiers. Another argument favouring this programme was the marketplace. Demobilization, along with political changes in post-Napoleonic Europe, put many veteran officers out of a job. Their need for employment fitted in nicely with Muhammad Ali's goal of modernization. One might also note that expanding armies with plans for war sometimes attract men who simply enjoy fighting and adventure.¹⁰

Thus, via the offers of good pay, or an exotic change in pace, Muhammad Ali attracted French, Italian, Polish, Spanish, German, English, and American soldiers-of-fortune. While obviously difficult to coordinate, this motley collection was a purposeful choice. Future events might produce war with one of the mercenaries' homelands. In such a case, it would be dangerous to have 'all the eggs in one basket'.¹¹

Despite this desire for variety, French and Italian officers were most numerous. Captain James MacKenzie, Bengal Light Cavalry, explained why in his report on the Egyptian Army:

From my experience abroad, I should say that the English do not adapt themselves to the manners and customs of a foreign country and indulge in the humours and prejudices of the people, as readily as the French and Italians – hence the preference shown, in Egypt particularly, to natives of the above countries.¹²

A perfect example of this can be seen in Egypt's most famous western recruit, Joseph-Anthelme Sève (1788–1860), who fought for Napoleon on land and sea. Captured, freed, wounded several times, he was awarded the