Cambridge Middle East Studies

All the Pasha’s men

While scholarship has traditionally viewed Mehmed Ali Pasha as the founder of modern Egypt, Khaled Fahmy offers a new interpretation of his role in the rise of Egyptian nationalism, firmly locating him within the Ottoman context as an ambitious, if problematic, Ottoman reformer. Basing his work on previously neglected archival material, the author demonstrates how Mehmed Ali sought to develop the Egyptian economy and to build up the army, not as a means of gaining Egyptian independence from the Ottoman empire, but to further his own ambitions for recognized hereditary rule over the province. By focusing on the army and on the soldiers’ daily experiences, the author constructs a detailed picture of attempts at modernization and reform, how they were planned and implemented by various reformers, and how the public at large understood and accommodated them. In this way, the work contributes to the larger methodological and theoretical debates concerning nation-building and the construction of state power in the particular context of early nineteenth-century Egypt.
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“Troops of the Egyptian army”
All the Pasha’s men

* Mehmed Ali, his army and the making of modern Egypt

Khaled Fahmy

Princeton University
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For
my parents and
Kouross Esmaeli,
with respect and gratitude
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Preface

Although this book is a study of the army that was founded in Egypt in the first half of the nineteenth century, it does not offer a straightforward account of military history. While dealing with Egypt's history during the reign of Mehmed Ali Pasha (1805–48) by closely studying the army the Pasha founded midway through his long career, it does not follow the generals and officers of this army whilst they trained their men in camps, commanded their troops in battle, or basked in their military victories. Rather, this is a book that is primarily interested in the men who did most of the “dirty work” of this army, those thousands of Egyptian peasant-soldiers who were conscripted to serve in this army: it follows the soldiers from the time they were recruited, to the time they were sent to the training camps, then to the bloody sites of pitched battles, and finally back to their barracks where they recuperated from past battles and prepared for future ones.

The purpose of following the soldiers of this army so closely is not only to document their unprecedented experience and to check their reactions to what were novel and unfamiliar practices and institutions; it is also, and primarily, to check the validity of the common belief that this army was instrumental in raising Egyptian national consciousness and, indeed, in founding modern Egyptian nationalism specifically by giving these thousands of men the opportunity to bear arms and to defend their nation, a “right” that they were denied for centuries, if not millennia.

By closely studying this army – how it was fed, supplied, and medically cared for, and more importantly, how its soldiers were conscripted and trained, how they reacted to their officers’ commands, and how they resisted the military authorities – this book argues that this army was, indeed, instrumental in founding the modern Egyptian nation. This it did, though, not by enlightening Egyptians regarding the essential truths of the “nation,” but by instituting novel practices of surveillance, control and management that radically altered the nature of the government in Cairo and fundamentally changed the manner in
which it dealt with the Egyptian population. This army was also a
crucial element in changing the ethnic and linguistic configuration of
Egypt's middle and upper classes in a manner that unwittingly gave rise
to “nationalist” sentiments among the soldiery who were mostly Arabic-
speakers and who resented being ruled and dominated by a Turkish-
speaking military/bureaucratic elite.

This book, then, is not a biography of Mehmed Ali; it does not follow
him from the time he arrived in Egypt in 1801 till his death nearly half a
century later, tracing his wonderful deeds; nor does it give an account of
this long period as if seen from his perspective. Rather, its subject is the
army he founded and the men who fought in it. Instead of looking at the
army as the national institution that gave those conscripts the “right” to
bear arms and to defend their nation, or of writing its history in a
manner that the Pasha himself would have liked, this book sees it as an
institution of power that forced these tens of thousands of men to carry
arms and to fight for Mehmed Ali and his family, and in the process
changed the nature of Egyptian society and affected the lives of the men
who served in it. The book tries to investigate how these men resisted
and/or accommodated this most powerful of the Pasha's institutions, an
institution which was unrivaled in the way in touched their bodies and
sought to control their minds.

Besides being a study of nationalism and nationalist historiography,
therefore, this is a book on power and resistance. Looking at the army as
the modern institution of power par excellence this book attempts to see
how power with its modern manifestations and institutions is perceived,
accommodated and resisted by its subjects. While finding Michel
Foucault's notions of power useful and insightful, this book critiques a
particular reading of his work that stresses the monolithic nature of the
institutions of power and accepts the inevitability of its forms. Instead of
an impressive and consistent picture of how modern power objectifies
its subjects, what is offered below is an attempt to present a more
complex, and – intentionally – more blurred picture of power, one that
can incorporate fractures, dissonance and resistance. By highlighting
the small acts of defiance and resistance undertaken by the soldiers in
this army, the intention is to undermine the impressive representations
of power and its unceasing desire to silence its subjects. These small,
every-day acts of resistance, while not grand or heroic, were still
effective in challenging the attempts of power to control and manipulate
the soldiers' lives and bodies, and alarmed the military authorities
precisely by showing them that, through these small acts of resistance
the soldiers managed to distance themselves from the Pasha and his
grand projects.
Preface

This obviously leads to the question of whether it is feasible to write a history of an institution of power in a manner that not only avoids reproducing its own narrative but which can also incorporate the dialog that it constantly has with resistance. Given that the overwhelming majority of the people with whom this book is concerned were illiterate and did not leave behind written accounts which could inform us of what it was like to be objectified in this insistent manner, the question is whether it is still possible to include them as subjects and not merely as objects of power. Fortunately, the documents that this book relies upon made possible the incorporation of the soldiers’ perspective in narrating the history of Mehmed Ali’s army.

While some of the British Foreign Office documents housed in the Public Record Office, London, were of some value in understanding how the army functioned, these offer mostly an outsider’s view of the events and personalities touched upon in this study and, therefore, they have been used only minimally. Similarly some accounts by contemporary travelers and military observers are used, but again only to give further descriptions to material gathered elsewhere. More substantially, this book relies on material collected from the Egyptian National Archives and, to a lesser extent, from the Egyptian National Library, both in Cairo. Broadly speaking, these are of three different kinds. On the one level, there are the numerous letters and regulations issued by the Pasha and his top officials. These include the correspondence between Mehmed Ali and the Commander-in-Chief of his forces, his son Ibrahim Pasha, letters to and from the Sublime Porte and various notables in Istanbul, as well as the numerous letters of the top officials issuing regulations to make sure that the army was well trained, well fed and regularly paid. The various military laws and training manuals which were the earliest publications of the Bülâq Press and which are housed in the Egyptian National Library make up the second group of contemporary documents that this study relies upon. In contrast to the very monolithic picture of power that comes across from reading these sources, the Archives, fortunately, also contains very valuable information in the form of the “journals” (veyamiyyet, lit. daily accounts) from the military camps and war fronts that include such documents as roll calls, inventory lists, courts martial, pay rolls and descriptions of marches and of battles. By relying on this diverse array of official documents it is possible to present an integral view of the army which not only avoids the usual concentration on the person of Mehmed Ali that often characterizes the historiography of Egypt during his reign, but also allows one to have a closer look at the every-day performance of that army and the manner in which the soldiers reacted to their officers’
Preface

commands and orders. While this book does not claim to have “captured the voice” of the soldiers, given that the sources it relies on are still the sources of power itself, it attempts to challenge the monolithic picture that is usually offered of the performance of such an impressive institution of power and provides instead a more fractured, and, for this reason, a more telling image of that army.
Acknowledgements

This study is the result of several years of work in Cairo, Oxford and Princeton and has benefited greatly from the help and guidance of various people to whom many thanks are owed. Foremost are my professors at the American University in Cairo, and especially Galal Amin and Enid Hill to whom I am grateful for their unmatched generosity with their time and assistance as well as for showing me an example of dedication to teaching and encouragement of young scholars that I have rarely seen elsewhere.

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Note on transliteration, dates and references

Both Arabic and Turkish words are transliterated using the conventions of the International Journal of Middle East Studies. Names of Arabic-speaking persons are transliterated as if they were Arabic names, while those of Turkish-speaking persons are transliterated as if they were Turkish.

Hijri dates mentioned in the notes are always cited with their Gregorian equivalents. The Ottoman abbreviations for the names of the months, which were used in the original documents, have been adopted here. These are:

M: Muharrem (Arabic Muḥarram)
S: Safer (Şafar)
Ra: Rebiülevel (Rabīʿ al-Awwal)
R: Rebiülhîr (Rabīʿ al-Thânî)
Ca: Cemaziyülevel (Jumādā al-Ulâ)
C: Cemaziyülhâr (Jumādā al-Ākhirā)
B: Receb (Rajab)
S: Şaban (Sha'bân)
N: Ramazan (Ramadân)
L: Seval (Shawwâl)
Za: Zilkade (Dhū al-Qi'dâ)
Z: Zilhice (Dhū al-Hijjà)

As mentioned in the comprehensive bibliography at the end of this study, material from Dâr al-Wathâʾiq al-Qawmiyya, the Egyptian National Archives, are either from sijūlät (bound registers) or mahâfiz (boxes). The latter are referred to in the notes by name of the archival heading, then box number, followed by the document number within that box. For example, Sham 2/45 is document no. 45 of the 2nd box of Mahâfiz al-Shām. References from the sijūlät, on the other hand, use the system devised by Dâr al-Wathâʾiq in its mimeographed subject heading list, Qawâʾim bi-Nizâm Turâb Sijūlät al-Dâr. Accordingly, S/5/51/2/4 refers to letter no. 4 of the 2nd sijîl (register) of the 51st sub-division of
Note on transliteration

Siţlāt ‘Abdīn, which is given the code S/5, S/1: Ma‘īyya Sanīyya (Viceregal Department), S/2: Diwān Khedewī (Department of Civil Affairs) and S/3: Diwān al-Jihādiyya (Department of War) are some of the other codes.

In both the mahāfīz and the siţlāt, the documents were overwhelmingly Ottoman and it is to these originals, rather than to their Arabic translations, that reference is made.