

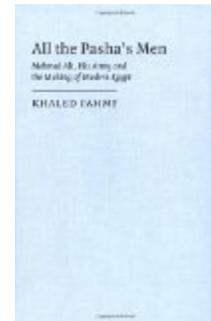
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Khaled Fahmy.** *All the Pasha's Men: Mehmed Ali, His Army and the Making of Modern Egypt.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. xviii + 318 pp. \$100.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-56007-8.

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## Modern Army? Modern State?

Review editor's note: Although Doctor Ufford first read this material in the form of the author's dissertation, she was not a member of the reviewing committee.

### Modern Army? Modern State?

This is a solidly researched and documented book that no student of Egyptian history can ignore. For military historians, however, it may prove disappointing. Rather than describing how this admittedly modern army worked—its command structure, deployment on the battlefield, and leadership—Khaled Fahmy is interested in portraying the great gap between the rules regulating that army and their implementation. And he is interested in attacking the Egyptian nationalist historians who credit Mehmed Ali Pasha with creating Egypt as a modern state.

Fahmy describes the increasing controls that Mehmed Ali placed on his recruits and on Egyptian society in order to obtain the manpower required for his army and its many campaigns outside of Egypt. He seeks to deepen our understanding of what was taking place in Egypt by turning first to Foucault and then to Tim Mitchell's *Colonizing Egypt*, where the ordering, labeling, and surveillance required to control the resistant recruits is put in a theoretical framework that names these methods as a "subtle" projection of power.

Because Fahmy is using the Egyptian army only as a means to deconstruct the spectacle of Mehmed Ali's power and vaunted good intentions, he begins with a

long introduction and first chapter analyzing the Pasha's actions and intent in transforming his military forces. Fahmy criticizes the most respected books about Egypt, Dodwell's classic *The Founder of Modern Egypt*, as well as Abdel Rahman al-Raf'i's *Asr Muhammad 'Ali (The Reign of Muhammad Ali)* for their inability to resist the Pasha's charm and his self-portrayal. He attacks their anti-Ottoman attitude and their lack of reference to the precedents for Mehmed Ali's actions—in particular, the idea of a *nizam al-jadid*, or "new organization" for his military institution. He attacks their attributing the failure of Mehmed Ali's efforts at economic self-sufficiency to malign foreign influence—especially that of Lord Palmerston, British Foreign Secretary. He attacks their explanations that seek to justify the Pasha's expansion out of Egypt. Above all he disputes any claim that Mehmed Ali created Egyptian nationalists by creating a victorious army.

Having proved that the Pasha's only motives for the build-up of his great army were personal ambition and self-preservation, Fahmy goes on to describe Mehmed Ali's expanding needs and means to control the thousands of reluctant conscripts. He concentrates in particular on the Egyptian conquest of Syria in 1832. This campaign arose from the free choice of Mehmed Ali, whereas his wars in Arabia and Greece had been at the Sultan's demand.

Because this book is directed against the use that nationalist historiographers have made of Mehmed Ali's

reign, Khaled Fahmy devotes most of the first and last chapters to giving the broad picture within which the Pasha's army carried out its duties. Chapter 2 deals with conscription, chapter 3 with discipline and training, while most of chapter 5 is devoted to medical care as one more means of controlling the bodies of recruits.

While it is true that Mehmed Ali's system of conscription was particularly cruel and devastating to the families and farms of Egypt, at the end of the chapter on recruitment, Fahmy is correct to refer the reader to Alan Forrest's footnotes.<sup>[1]</sup> The subjects of the *Levee en Masse* also suffered. Fahmy compares the French recruiting officers with their guidelines for selecting soldiers to those of Mehmed Ali who "would descend upon any given village and seize as many men as could be found" (p. 98). This arbitrary and wasteful method appears to have continued during the whole of the Pasha's reign. On the other hand, neither French nor Egyptian recruits enjoyed the training camps.

In chapter 3, Fahmy describes the increased need to control the recruits: giving them each a number, demanding they have passes (*teskere*) to leave the camp, and printing papers for roll-call on which "missing" was an established category. And he stretches imaginatively to note the great need for scribes able to handle all this new ordering of men. This long chapter is more interested in describing the controls and their implementation than in giving us an idea of the actions in the foreground. For instance, Fahmy points out that the training of troops conjured up the idea of order, that life was no longer random and that precise punishments followed precise misconduct (p. 156). Yet we know little else about what the Pasha might have had in mind. We do not know how the recruits were distributed, who was chosen for what service, where all the training camps were found and any comparison among them, or what else the Pasha might have had in mind besides increasing the number of his fighting men and keeping them under control. It is hard to understand why Fahmy would put this chapter about battle performance before his description of life in the camps. He declares it a theme of discrepancy between military laws and how they were applied but it includes the issues of shell shock and homelessness, of syphilis and prostitution.

Chapter 4, "Beyond the Façade of Order: The Performance of the Army," begins with the battle of Konya, described by the nationalist historian al Raf'i in what Fahmy critiques as an outdated "battlepiece," where all is in order as lines of troops move briskly into position,

etc. Once again he seizes the opportunity to point out the gap between blueprint and reality. Here he makes use of a single document from a military tribunal inquiring into the conduct of a high cavalry officer during the battle. The lines he quotes, such as "horses were trembling," and "the colonel was late in ordering the trumpeter to issue the call to take the line formation," as with other documents quoted in the book, give us the insight into reality which Fahmy so often notes, but rarely lets us see for ourselves. The rest of the chapter describes, for the most part, issues of promotion and of the bureaucracy needed to back up the army and fulfill its logistical needs. Here again, it would be nice to have a closer touch with reality, with requirements of horses, donkeys, or camels, depending on where the fighting was done, for instance, or how provisions were organized in Syria and with which areas contributing what. To learn that the bureaucracy was inefficient and corrupt is not enough.

For instance, in chapter 4, we are told to look first at the penal codes and military laws which "assume that what is out there is programmable and hence they carry within themselves an impressive element of power" (p. 167). The laws and codes can be the basis for a study of "mentalit=s" writes Fahmy, but for now he wishes to show the gap between blueprint and reality. He declares that he will show us "the gap that separated the officer's view of the battle from the soldier's manner of actually fighting it" (p. 167). In truth, this is not what he gives us. He shows, rather, victory parades used by the Pasha to impress foreigners or a conquered city and describes situations where the need for obedient manpower led, on the one hand, to exemplary executions or, on the other, to the overriding of court-martial decisions (pp. 172-173). It is in chapter 3, "Discipline and Training," that Fahmy describes the orderly way in which the Egyptian army made its final assault on the fortress of Acre and its behavior on the battlefield of Homs.

As for the leadership of the army, outside of Ibrahim Pasha, Mehmet Ali's son and army commander whom Fahmy seems to admire, almost no other officer has a presence. Indeed, when some of their names are given in a footnote, they seem hardly relevant (p. 66). However, Fahmy does deal at length with the most important issue in the Egyptian army, the great gap between the Egyptian, Arabic-speaking soldiers and their Turkish-speaking officers. This issue Fahmy largely leaves to near the end of the book, in chapter 6, where he discusses it in deserved detail. Unfortunately, however, he does not explore further the ethnic division of labor. He does not analyze the use of Maghribi (North

African) soldiers, or tribal irregulars used in the Syrian campaign, although he mentions that Mehmet Ali's army made use of the Bedouin as policemen at one point. He writes of the difficulties connected with employing Albanian mercenaries from whose ranks Mehmed Ali himself had arisen but does not discuss their continued use as free-wheeling infantry in the mountainous terrain of Greece and Lebanon. Indeed, when we learn from Charles Napier (*War in Syria*, 1842) that during the final conflict between Ottomans and Egyptians in 1840 among ridges north of Beirut, Albanian troops on both sides were yelling at their opposites to desert, we realize how much more needs to be said about the use of particular ethnic groups.

At the conclusion of the book, the author returns again to the relegation of Egyptians to the lowest military ranks and to the usurpation of leadership both in society and in the army by the Turkish-speaking elements in Egypt. It was exasperation at this injustice that led to the 'Urabi revolt in 1881 and the subsequent occupation of Egypt by Great Britain.

In seeking a motivation to fight among soldiers subject to so much neglect and cruelty, the author mentions the religious one in the wars against the Wahhabis (Islamic fundamentalists) in Saudi Arabia, and the Christians in Greece. When it comes to Mehmet Ali's campaign against the Sultan's forces in Syria, however, he admits that motivation is a "difficult question" and an important one "that needs to be raised if the nature of that army, and indeed of the Pasha's regime in general, is ever to be assessed" (p. 241). After proving that there was no national language, national army, or military institution capable of inspiring loyalty, and that the soldiers referred only to the name of Pasha in battle, Fahmy states categorically that "the way the army functioned as an institution could not have allowed the soldiers to think of it in a proud manner" (p. 253). Yet he has not explained how it was that they continued to fight.

If one turns to the battle of Nizib which took place between the Ottoman and Egyptian armies near the Euphrates on July 24, 1839, one learns that soldiers on both sides were trying to desert to the opposite camp the previous night. The Ottoman army, unlike that of Mehmet Ali then, was well-fed and paid. But it was made up of many raw recruits and of Kurds who had recently been at war with the Sultan. Its soldiers, with a military tradition and an historic dynasty to defend, seemed as reluctant as any of the Egyptians.

Based on his Oxford Ph.D. dissertation, which I read,

Fahmy's book shows his effort to blend postmodern theory with the nineteenth-century Middle East. He is largely successful, but at the cost of repetitive attention to Foucault as well as Mitchell's point that labeling and ordering is a form of power. He does write effectively of the Pasha's extraordinary eyes, making much of his "gaze" as a well-supported entry for these words in his excellent index.

There are eleven well-chosen illustrations in the book, and one on the cover. Four are products of the imagination: the two photographs of bas reliefs on the pedestal of Ibrahim's statute in Cairo which celebrate his victories at Acre and Konya, and the paintings of the Massacre of the Mamelukes and paper cover reproduction of "Scene of Recruitment under Mohammed-Ali," painted in 1879. It is hard to know what to make of Prisse d'Avennes' "Le Serment du Drapeau" (p. 240). The uniforms appear to be of a later date and the flag, which Fahmy tells us bore the name of Mehmed Ali, seems in this case to carry only lines invoking Allah. It would have been nice if Fahmy had taken Bartlett's "Encampment of Ibrahim Pasha, near Jaffa" (p. 227), and used it as a guide to camp life. However, then he would be obliged to describe tents and uniforms and other matters that might not lend themselves to the discrediting of Mehmed Ali's efforts which appears to be the main goal of this book.

*All the Pasha's Men* is a convincing and critical survey of Mehmed Ali's reign and is historically reliable. Fahmy gives us precise facts such as the Ottoman government forbidding Egyptian Arabs to carry arms and that Mehmed Ali's flags carried only his name. He tells us that the Pasha was influenced not only by French but by Ottoman precedents and preferred Sultan Selim III's military organization to that of Napoleon (pp. 80-82).

He mentions that Mehmed Ali, his son Ibrahim, and others of his family continued the tradition of possessing mamlukes, slaves bought in the Caucuses and brought up as loyal members of their households. These mamlukes, converted into Turkish-speakers, automatically would become part of the officer corps. Most valuably, he brings before our gaze the largely unknown documents of Mehmed Ali's military establishment. These, when quoted at length, are embedded like jewels in the flat exposition of Fahmy's arguments. The reality to which he refers so often by footnotes, finally becomes alive.

There is much exciting work for a military historian with knowledge of Ottoman. For the nineteenth century, the military archives in Istanbul have barely been touched while those in Cairo, used by Fahmy, demand

further attention. Both Sultan and Pasha sought to modernize their armies, both relied on a combination of tradition and foreign influence, both made use of distinct ethnic forces. They fought together in Greece and against each other in Syria over a period of fifteen years. A comparison begs to be made. It is a grand topic and Khaled

Fahmy's *All the Pasha's Men* is a solid and inspiring first step.

Note

[1]. *Conscripts and Deserters: The Army and French Society during the Revolution and Empire* (1989).

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