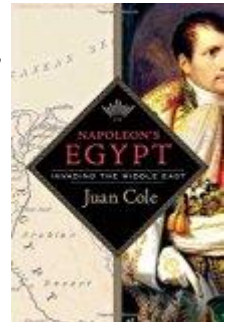


Juan Cole. *Napoleon's Egypt: Invading the Middle East.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Illustrations, maps. xi + 279 pp. \$16.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-230-60603-6.



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Death on the Nile

Juan Cole's *Napoleon's Egypt* tells the story of revolutionary France's attempt to conquer Egypt and the cultural interchanges that resulted. Although various aims drove the effort, the main motive was a prerevolutionary one, namely, the desire to gain the upper hand in the longstanding Anglo-French rivalry that had dominated the eighteenth century. The French hoped to strike a blow against the British by depriving them of key access routes to south Asia, and perhaps even regain lost possessions in India.

In May 1798, more than thirty thousand troops under the command of General Napoleon Bonaparte left France along with twenty-one thousand other French men and a few women. Their secret destination was Egypt. Initial successes en route at Malta were followed by a landing in Egypt in early July, and by victories at Alexandria and beyond within a few weeks. By the end of the month, the French held Cairo. A major naval defeat at the hands of the British at the Battle of

Abuqir in August and fast-growing resistance within Egypt meant that by year's end the French not only were bored and sick, but also cut off from France and facing uprisings. As is well known, Napoleon left for Paris in 1799, and by 1801 local and British forces compelled the remaining French forces to leave.

Despite the book's title and the fact that the occupation lasted into 1801, Cole's retelling addresses only the latter half of 1798, with but a few paragraphs dedicated to events between 1799 and 1801, and only brief glances at the period leading up to 1798. At the outset, he introduces some general themes, all of which he says can be addressed by looking at events that occurred in late 1798. The work concludes with a brief historiographical epilogue tracing changing interpretations of the invasion. In between is a narrative of the invasion and occupation that focuses on French military operations and armed resistance to them, with accounts of cultural exchanges in the interstices.

There is no development of the scientific aspect of the French conquest.

According to the author, this account is valuable because “it is the first extended treatment in English by a Middle East specialist such that the French sources have been read through the lens of Egyptian realities” (p. ix). It becomes clear that one of his unstated goals is to retell this well-known story in gripping fashion for a general readership based on his own reading of numerous firsthand accounts of the events. Yet another unspoken objective is to tie this important interaction between Europe and the Middle East to recent events by drawing novel parallels between the 1798 invasion of Egypt and the 2003 conquest of Iraq.

As to whether his story is engaging, it must be said that I had high expectations thanks to the marketing department at Palgrave Macmillan. Cole is the uncommon academic historian who not only is a prolific writer and blogger on current affairs but also has crossed over into other media, contributing to Salon.com and the PBS Newshour with Jim Lehrer, among others. In fact, while reading Cole’s book I coincidentally heard him interviewed for NPR’s Morning Edition on February 24 about Al-Jazeera English. Palgrave Macmillan plays up Cole’s prominence for all it is worth, setting high expectations by declaring on the book’s cover that he not only is a “world-renowned” and “internationally respected” historian—no small feat—but also a “celebrated blogger,” a “Middle East expert,” and a “master storyteller.”

Although the tale told might not fully meet the cover’s promise, the fluid prose and Cole’s sense of timing generally propel the reader along. Writing a narrative directed at a general audience, Cole wears his learning lightly, despite the occasional use of words like “caracole,” “plangently,” “xebec,” and “odalisque.” He explains his arguments succinctly at the outset and nimbly revisits them throughout the book, unlike a monograph that might return to its thesis in a more heavy-handed

manner. Thus he manages to intersperse the narrative with insights and interpretations derived from the sources without hampering the flow. That the book is directed not at an academic audience but a general one is indicated by the light endnotes as well: only 22 pages of notes for 279 pages of text.

The lumping together of multiple references in order to shorten the notes makes it hard to follow what source is being quoted when, which is unfortunate considering that one of the book’s greatest attributes is its extensive use of firsthand accounts. Cole has mined a number of memoirs, some of which he returns to again and again, such as those of French captains Jean-Honoré Say and Joseph-Marie Moiret; the Cairene Muslim chronicler ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti; and dedicated republican and Enlightenment rationalist François Bernoyer, a quartermaster in Bonaparte’s forces. Through a close reading of firsthand evidence—not to see what it can tell us about the French invasion but rather interactions between the French and Egyptians—Cole would like to contribute three things to the historiography of the 1798 invasion, besides another interesting narrative account: first, uncover neglected aspects of this history; second, show the complexity of the colonial situation; and third, tell us how this past encounter can inform current affairs.

In terms of previously overlooked aspects of this history, Cole adds to our knowledge of little-understood but important facets of the invasion and occupation. For instance, he provides a nuanced portrait of the role of women from all sorts of backgrounds, including Egyptians, French, Georgians, and Sudanese. He often places women at the center of the story to discuss their productive roles, the tradition of veiling, resistance to occupation, or the increased demand for prostitutes caused by an influx of tens of thousands of male soldiers. Another example is how his close attention to various Egyptian groups unveils the autonomy of the lake people of Manzala, some-

thing traditionally neglected in both Egyptian and French sources. He shows how these people managed to “form alliances to keep the state out and maximize their retention of resources,” no matter who was in charge (pp. 166-167).

Cole also succeeds in revealing the nature of the colonial situation and its intricacies, especially that this was not a meeting of so-called Western civilization and Oriental backwardness. He notes how women’s property rights were better protected in Muslim societies than in Western Europe. He downplays the “conquest” by showing how, despite demographic and military superiority, the French position in Egypt was almost always precarious, partly because of the defeat at Abuqir and the British blockade, but mainly because of the resistance of various locals. Although the French ostensibly liberated the Egyptians from despotic Mamluk control, they turned right around and engaged in a severe imperialistic rule themselves. French fears of uprisings led them to conduct numerous reprisals, commit mass killings, execute untold numbers by beheading, and show off severed heads to intimidate the population. They burned villages and impressed children into military service. Lack of funds made them rapacious administrators who taxed heavily and confiscated property, such as camels from Bedouins. Many of the ostensibly republican, revolutionary soldiers even bought and owned slaves, a practice just outlawed in France. Complicating the picture is the fact that these actions revealed divisions among the occupiers, or as quartermaster Bernoyer put it: “What mortified us most ... was that Bonaparte used the same methods as the Mamluks” (p. 174).

Napoleon’s willingness to abandon revolutionary ideals to achieve power also was reflected in his attitude toward religion, and Cole reveals Napoleon’s cynicism in this regard. In short, the Corsican used Islam as a political tool to achieve his goals by “playing the role of a Muslim sultan” (p. 125). In this sense, the Egyptian conquest presaged an approach that would culminate in the cynical

yet effective 1801 Concordat between France and the papacy.

Although Cole glimpses briefly forward in the case of the Concordat, more often he casts his eye even further into the future to the present, repeatedly making connections with the 2003 war and occupation in Iraq. Before discussing this aspect of his work, however, it bears noting that the book often reminds the reader of an earlier French invasion of the “Middle East,” that of Louis IX, who led a crusade to the Levant 550 years prior. Certain passages are strikingly similar to John of Joinville’s account of Louis IX’s experiences in Egypt as well as those of his troops. Joinville’s account tells us of the same places that would much later again be occupied, precariously held, and ultimately lost, such as Damietta. French troops in 1798 suffered devastating attacks in the middle of the night just as their forebears did more than a half-millennium earlier. Cole’s depiction of sickness spreading among the ranks of Napoleon’s troops recalls the horrific scenes of decrepitude among Louis IX’s soldiers because of illness.[1] Although any link with this earlier crusade is not Cole’s subject, he does admit that it was on French minds in 1798 when they feared being viewed as crusaders.

Rather than discuss earlier French invasions, Cole uses the past to illuminate the present, in particular, recent events in Iraq. He tips his hand early on when he comments on a misjudgment by Talleyrand: “He was the first, but by no means the last, Western politician to overestimate the gratitude that would be generated among a Middle Eastern people by a foreign military occupation” (p. 14). When Cole later discusses language barriers between French soldiers and Egyptian shopkeepers that forced them to resort to rudimentary sign language one cannot help but think of verbal communication problems that bedeviled Western soldiers and Iraqis beginning in 2003. He unveils how when the French realized that torturing people for information was undermining their

cause, they reversed course and outlawed it, with exceptions. He points to French ideas about liberating Egypt by conquering it and French blindness to their own imperialistic goals in order to comment on recent Anglo-American actions in Iraq: "Clearly, 'liberty' could not be an entirely voluntary affair in late Ottoman Egypt. It had to be imposed and bolstered by a free metropole" (p. 172). Celebrations in Egypt to commemorate republican values did not convince Egyptians of French ideals as much as they reinforced the French delusion that they were not imperialists: "The greatest use of Republican ideology appears to have been precisely to hide that fact from themselves" (p. 175). His open reference to Iraq's 2005 elections makes it clear he is concerned with the present, which he confirms when he casts Napoleon as a pioneer "of imperialism that deployed Liberal rhetoric and institutions for the extraction of resources and geopolitical advantage.... The similarities of the Corsican general's rhetoric and tactics to those of later North Atlantic incursions into the region tell us about the persistent pathologies of Enlightenment republics" (p. 247).

Despite his fine reading of the sources and sound storytelling, at times Cole stretches the evidence and makes numerous suppositions that may or may not be supported by the evidence. A good example is when he points to French willingness to incorporate local soldiers into their armed forces to argue that the revolutionary idea of *égalité* was stronger than French racism. Yet the text shows that the French position in Egypt was hazardous and that they readily abandoned revolutionary ideas toward slavery and secularism. The reader cannot but wonder if the underlying motivation for recruiting locals was desperation rather than any belief in the fundamental equality of humanity.

Although the book almost ineluctably gets bogged down at times by the many names, details, numbers, place names, and references, Cole generally succeeds in creating a compelling narrative.

He draws the reader in by capturing the drama of the occupation as set down in a range of memoirs, such as the one written by quartermaster Bernoyer. In a not untypical passage in which he conveys the feeling of events, Cole writes, "On 9 July Bernoyer marched along with the soldiers again during the day, the sun beating down on their heads, their knees trembling, thick phlegm on their lips and in their throats, their lungs barely able to draw a breath" (p. 40). Yet his desire to grip the reader's imagination leads to dubious claims here and there. Take, for example, when Napoleon declared to the people of Cairo that any Muslim leaders who opposed him would "have no refuge in this world or in the next" in an attempt to halt growing Cairene opposition to the occupation. Cole probably makes the declaration out to be more than it was when he exclaims that Napoleon "was claiming supernatural powers to determine the fates of others even in the Muslim afterlife!" (p. 216). It might very well be that Napoleon was damning his opponents figuratively to make a point rather than actually claiming god-like powers.

Such rare instances of hyperbole aside, *Napoleon's Egypt* is a well-written book informed by first-rate scholarship and excellent firsthand sources. It gives the reader a solid overview of French military operations in Egypt and the opposition they caused. More importantly, Cole reveals the complexity of the colonial situation in the eastern Mediterranean at the end of the eighteenth century. The work demonstrates how we can understand Napoleon's complex, difficult, and painful attempted colonization of Egypt as an event that foreshadowed future military incursions of liberal, Western regimes into the Middle East.

Note

[1]. Joinville and Villehardouin, *Chronicles of the Crusades*, ed. and trans. Margaret R. B. Shaw (London: Penguin, 1963).

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