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Egyptian Invasion of Ethiopia

By CZESLAW JESMAN

IN April 1876 contradictory news appeared in the European press regarding a strange war in Africa. Descriptions of a resounding Egyptian victory over the Ethiopians were printed side by side with reports of the occupation of Massawa (an Egyptian possession at the time) by an Ethiopian Army; of the capture of Prince Hassan, the third son of Khedive Ismail, by the Ethiopians and of his ransom. Tales of barbarian heroism were mixed with tales of equally barbaric cruelty.

At that time the Dark Continent was beginning to draw the attention of the West, but although the Suez Canal had been in operation for some years, little was definitely known in Europe about the north-eastern corner of Africa. Thus, the reading public was rather incredulous. Doctor Livingstone and Henry Stanley and the fabulous Kingdom of Buganda were fascinating and incredible enough, but the story of a full-scale Egyptian invasion of Ethiopia looked suspiciously like a leg-pull. Mildly derisive cartoons on the subject appeared in the Parisian press. But unexpectedly enough, the lurid news which came in at this time was completely authentic; it described—inaccurately—a hotly contested engagement on the plain of Gura, some eighty miles inland from Massawa in Northern Tigre, the northernmost kingdom of the ancient Ethiopian Empire, part of which later became Eritrea.

In the actual fact there were two battles fought on the plain of Gura—on the 7th and 10th March, 1876—and both were the consequence of an earlier battle between the Egyptians and the Ethiopians in November 1875 at Gundet, a nearby locality on the River Mareb. This encounter ended in the complete annihilation of an Egyptian expeditionary force led by Colonel Arrendrup, a Danish officer in Khedivial service, and in the death of its commander. About 2,000 Egyptians perished with him and his two six-gun batteries and six rocket-stands fell into the hands of the enemy. Only a small detachment commanded by Major Dennison, an American stationed at Adi Quala, managed to extricate itself and retreat to Massawa after several hours.

The ostensible cause of this expedition was contained in the letter which Colonel Arrendrup sent on behalf of his employer to Yohannes IV of Ethiopia on October 19th, 1875, on the eve of his marching inland. He informed the Ethiopian Emperor that he aimed to restore tranquility on the turbulent border between Ethiopia and Egypt around Keren, and to fix the boundary line between the two states. Khedive Ismail was less modest; he freely admitted that “in these enlightened days the world is acquiescing in the extension of progressive powers”. Among the latter he, of course, included himself. Arrendrup's expedition was hopelessly inadequate for the tasks it set out to do. It amounted to scarcely more than some 4,000 troops and had

no cavalry. Its leaders were, apart from the already mentioned Danish artilleryman and Major Dennison, an American, Major Durholz, a Swiss, late of the Papal army, and Major Rushdi Bey, a Turk. Arakel Bey, the young nephew of Nubar Pasha (the Christian Armenian Premier of the Khedive) joined the expedition and was killed in battle. Count Zichy, a Hungarian nobleman and the brother of the Austrian Ambassador in Constantinople, acted as the expedition's Adjutant-General; he thought it would be far more exciting than big-game hunting. But some weeks later, having survived the battle with appalling wounds, he was slaughtered in cold blood by some Ethiopian marauders. There were very few supplies and the lines of communication were very weak. The force moved on, practically without preparations, to Asmara, Adi Quala, Debaroa, Adi Mugunta and Godoflassie on the River Mareb, some 160 miles from Massawa, and three weeks later met its doom.

The Egyptians withdrew to Massawa on the coast and then to Keren, garrisoned since 1872 by some 1,200 Egyptians. But Ismail could not leave the matter there, it was absolutely essential to regain the lost prestige. At all costs his European creditors had to be impressed, he also had to overawe the fractious and rebellious Sudanese. In 1874 he occupied Darfur but his hold over this vast territory was very uncertain. All the while the Khedive disclaimed publicly any hostile intentions against Ethiopia. When asked what he intended to do about the absorption or annexation of the whole or part of this country he used to say that as Nature was already sending him down the best part of Ethiopia with each flood of the Nile he had no desire for the residue. Furthermore, he let it be known that the quarrel between Egypt and Ethiopia was not concerned with frontiers—stretches of wilderness were of no consequence to either party. The Khedive however had to put a stop to the incessant raids by the nomadic and warlike Ethiopians upon the peaceful and timid peasants of Egypt.

Thus, when the new Egyptian expedition which fought at Gura against the Ethiopians sailed from Suez on January 31st, 1876, its object, as declared in the open instructions to the Commanding General, was to engage and defeat the Ethiopian Emperor in battle. Immediately upon the accomplishment of this he was to leave the country and fall back to Massawa. Should he fail to bring the enemy into an engagement in the coastal vicinity, the instructions contemplated an effort to do so by marching upon Adua, the Ethiopian capital, and, possibly, Macalle, the Imperial residence. If both attempts to engage the Ethiopians failed, the Egyptian army was to retire from Adua, take possession of the plateau in the hinterland of Macalle, and await more definite instructions.

These non-violent orders were only a camouflage for the true intentions of the Khedive. Preparations were made for the occupation of the country with a view to future military operations and permanent administration. The whole expansionist policy of Khedive Ismail, and his other encroachments on the Ethiopian territory, pointed to a design of permanent conquest.

Mohammed Ali Pasha, the first ruler of modern Egypt, and all his succes-

sors, invariably aimed at the territorial aggrandisement of Egypt. Egyptian expansion had already begun in 1820 when an invasion of Nubia was ordered with an eye to gold mines and precious stones. Egyptians fought against the Greeks during their War of Independence and against the Wahabis in Arabia and, between 1830 and 1841, but for the intervention of Western Powers, they would have looked very much like becoming the dominant power of the Moslem world. They also steadily, though with great difficulties, extended their dominion in the Sudan ; and they held some of the islands in the Aegean.

When Ismail, the grandson of Mohammed Ali, became Viceroy of Egypt in 1863 Egyptian conquests acquired a distinctly imperialistic tinge. Furthermore, Egypt suddenly became rich in cash. As a result of the American Civil War the prices of Egyptian cotton rose fivefold. Some £25m. sterling flowed into Khedivial treasury from this source.

Ismail, at least externally, was a thoroughly westernised prince. He had been brought up in France and had graduated from the French Staff College. During the rule of his uncle and predecessor, Said Pasha, he was kept abroad, travelling on missions to the Pope, to the Sultan and to Napoleon III. He was a staunch friend and admirer of the Emperor of the French and he wanted to join his future with the destinies of Imperial France ; he even lent a contingent of Egyptian troops for the French expedition against Mexico.

After Sedan, Ismail could no longer hope for the part of the principal ally of the foremost European power. He had to look for fields of expansion nearer home. He needed them badly : the public debt, in ten years of his rule, rose from £3m. to £100m., and his Suez Canal shares were in jeopardy. The obvious direction of his plans led towards the heart of the Dark Continent and along the Red Sea. Just like the Egyptian extremists of today he was inflamed with the idea of the unity of the Nile valley from the great lakes to the delta under the green flag of Egypt. Sooner or later this would have meant the conquest of Ethiopia, the hereditary Christian menace (from the South) to every modern ruler of Egypt. Already Mohammed Ali had designs on Ethiopia. He was stopped only by a formal declaration from the British Minister that his country could not endure a wanton attack to be made on this Christian state.

The first steps in this direction had already been made during the reign of the immediate predecessors of Ismail : the region of Taka in the Sudan near the Ethiopian border was occupied in 1840 and Kassala, an Egyptian outpost, was founded at that time. In 1853 John Petherick established trading posts under the Egyptian flag on the upper Nile. An Egyptian military garrison was set up at Fashoda in 1865 and on the 26th May, 1870, already under Ismail, Sir Samuel Butler announced the annexation of Equatoria to Egypt. General Gordon slowly extended the Khedivial towards the lakes and in 1874 reached the confines of Uganda.

Meanwhile, in 1866, Turkey transferred to Egypt her interest in the island port of Massawa, the maritime gateway to Ethiopia. An Egyptian garrison of 4 guns and 20 soldiers was set up in nearby Arkiko.

In 1872 Munzinger Pasha, a Swiss adventurer in the Egyptian service, an Egyptian governor of Massawa (and both the French and the British Consul there) captured Keren, the capital of the Ethiopian province of Bogos and turned it into an Egyptian stronghold. Egypt has always maintained that the Ethiopians used Bogos as a base for their attacks against Egypt. Most of Bogos was wrested from Ethiopia by Mohammed Ali. However, only the Egyptian borders of it were forcibly held. The Ethiopians denied that they ever relinquished their rights by acquiescing in the seizure.

Soon afterwards the district of Ailet and the strong points in Annesley Bay became Egyptian. The Egyptians also tried to occupy the province of Hamasien. Emperor Yohannes IV was engaged at the time in a desperate fight with the Wollo-Gallas, and while the interior of Abyssinia was in a disorganised state the Moslems were slowly creeping up the Christian highlands. Ethiopian border chieftains, Moslem and Christian alike, began to transfer their allegiance to Egypt. The Akkele Guzai district, largely Catholic, was up in arms against their Coptic brethren. The religious fanaticism of the Ethiopian Emperor made their lives most uncomfortable. They expected better treatment from the Moslems. French Lazarist missionaries were very influential amongst them and Abbe Duflot, the head of the mission, toyed with the idea of an Akele Guazai Republic under Egyptian protectorate. In any case frontier clashes and Egyptian encroachments were endemic along the whole border from Kassala to Gallabat, for many years. Already Teodoros II, the unfortunate usurper of Ethiopia strove to redress the situation there.

In July 1875 Ismail bought the port of Zeila from the Sultan of Turkey, its nominal sovereign, for £15,000 yearly tribute. On the 18th September of the same year an Egyptian corps under Rauf Pasha, starting from there, took Harrar. Six weeks later yet another column of Egyptian troops, some 3,000 strong, under Munzinger Pasha landed at Amphila Bay on the Eritrean coast and struck towards the salt plains of Arrho. They were ambushed on their way by the Danakil tribesmen and massacred almost to a man.

In October 1875 an Egyptian force from Massawa ran up the Khedivial flag at Ghinda.

The Somalis, hitherto practically independent, were now paying heavy duties to the Egyptians in all their ports.

Finally, Ismail decided to establish a permanent route from the great lakes to the Indian Ocean. In the autumn of 1875 an expedition of some 700 men with their families landed at the mouth of Juba at Port Durnford and Kisimayu. It was led by an English naval officer, McKillip Pasha, by Federigo Pasha and two American colonels—Ward and Long. The disembarkation point was selected by mistake. General Gordon had advised Ismail to land an expedition at Mombasa and to proceed inland along the Tana River. In any case the territories of the Sultan of Zanzibar, an ally of Britain, were invaded and as a result the British interfered on his behalf. Ismail recalled the expedition and all the Somali ports were declared free with the exception of Zeila by the Khedive whilst his territorial rights

were in turn acknowledged by the British cabinet to extend as far as the tenth degree of northern latitude.

Against the background of these events the Egyptian army which was to fight at Gura began to disembark in Massawa early in February 1876. It consisted of 11,120 men. Together with the remnants of Arrendrup's contingent its strength was estimated at 12,000. It constituted a considerable portion of the standing Egyptian army which at the time mustered some 32,000 men.

In spite of this imposing array of manpower and weapons—it was provided even with batteries of Krupp guns—it was a sorry expedition. Its commander-in-chief was Ratib Pasha, a Circassian negro and an ex-slave of the late Said Pasha, the viceroy of Egypt.

Ratib's military qualifications were negligible. He was a lethargic little man. According to one of his American officers he was "shrivelled with lechery as the mummy is with age". His chief of staff and co-commander was an American, General Loring. Furthermore Prince Hassan, the son of the Khedive, had joined the expedition in an indeterminate position and with vast possibilities for mischief. He was young, vain and presumptuous. The American officers attached to him were of the opinion that because of his pride of birth and obstinacy of ignorance he should never have been sent to the army. His presence there forced the staff to divide their attentions between him and the enemy with equal apprehension. As an Honorary Officer of the Prussian Hussars Hassan had to obtain special leave from Emperor William I to join the expedition. It required a transport force of 225 mules to carry the Prince and his entourage.

There was no unity of command in the Egyptian army. No cohesion existed either between various parts of it or between the staff and the units in the field. The staff itself was a composite affair: General Loring apart, there were five more Americans on it, a number of Turks, some Egyptians (largely illiterate), Major Turnheysen, an Austrian cavalry officer who had served with Maximilian in Mexico, an Italian civilian volunteer by the name of Testaferrata and Nib Mohammed, a renegade Ethiopian Moslem. It was an interpreter's paradise since practically none of the senior officers could speak Arabic. The interpreters were few and inefficient. The field commanders were Egyptian and the means of transport were hopelessly inefficient and inadequate.

After a pointless stay in and around Massawa the Egyptian army moved inland by easy stages. Khaya Khor pass, one of the easier routes into the highlands, was secured by them; supply dumps and forts were erected amidst constant bickerings between the foreign-born staff and the Egyptian commanders, for ever suspicious of the Christians. Finally, in the first days of March the plain of Gura was reached and a fort constructed there. It was to serve as a base for future operations. The services of Ethiopian "Quislings" were secured. They were Ras Wolde Mikael of Bogos, promptly given the rank of Pasha, and Dedjasmach Beru, a chief of Adi Quala district

recently deposed by Yohannes IV. As it turned out both were of little practical value to the invader.

By this time the Ethiopian army was on the move. The Emperor mobilised it at the last possible moment since Ethiopian troops lived off the land and Commissariat services were unknown to them. It was more of a tribal host travelling with women and children than an organised force. It numbered some hundred thousand. About 50,000 of them were combatant troops with perhaps ten thousand rifles. At no time were more than 15,000-20,000 Ethiopians in action at the same time owing to the nature of the battlefield.

On the 4th March Ratib Pasha called the Council of War. He was advised by General Loring to concentrate his forces, which were strung along the lines of communications, and to attack Yohannes : owing to the superiority of weapons an Egyptian success was a certainty. This Ratib refused to do for no obvious reasons except that the move was suggested by the Chief of Staff.

On the 7th March 7,700 Egyptian troops were at Fort Gura and 5,000 at the Khaya Khor Pass. Three additional battalions had just landed at Massawa. Yohannes decided to strike to prevent the joining up of all these detachments.

At the sight of Ethiopians suddenly appearing in vast numbers on the mountain slopes surrounding the Gura plain the Egyptians left the fort and faced the enemy some distance from it to facilitate manoeuvring. Prince Hassan remained in the fort guarded by the whole battalion of infantry.

Ethiopian cavalry charged from several directions at the same time. In spite of their superior fire power the Egyptians were overwhelmed and retreated in confusion back to the fort. An Egyptian brigade under Osman Pasha, which had in the meantime arrived from Khaya Khor, did not participate in the battle although the Ethiopians had not suspected its presence and it could easily have turned the scale. Osman Pasha congratulated himself later on on the shrewdness of his concealment : he at least did not expose his soldiers to a defeat; the possibility of victory never dawned upon him.

The battle was fought with great ferocity. The Egyptians lost about 600 killed, 1,000 wounded and 2,300 prisoners. The Ethiopian losses in killed were probably higher.

The fighting ceased while the Ethiopians opened a plunging fire on the fort from a captured battery. At night burial parties went out. The Egyptians trampled and desecrated the bodies of the fallen Ethiopians out of pure spite.

On the next day the siege of the fort began. It went on for two days. In the evening of the 9th of March the Ethiopians discovered the grave containing the mutilated bodies of their comrades. Early next morning about 1,000 Egyptian prisoners were slaughtered in retaliation. By now both sides were killing the wounded, burning straw on the breasts of the prisoners and chopping off their hands. Both corpses and prisoners were hideously mutilated.

About midday of the 10th the Ethiopian army attacked the fort in

strength. This time the Egyptians held fast and the onslaught was beaten off.

Early next morning the Ethiopian hosts vanished into thin air. Emperor Yohannes retreated by forced marches some 30 miles towards Adua. His troops lacked food ; a large number of them deserted home for Easter celebrations, and in any case the chances of a successful attack had vanished since both Gura and Khaya Khor forts were now reinforced. A brigade of fresh Egyptian troops, 5,000 strong, was also approaching and in fact arrived at the pass on the 15th March. Furthermore, Yohannes feared complications with his vassals and particularly with Menelik of Shoa.

Still Ratib refused to budge. It must be admitted that his losses were high. In three days fighting he had lost 1,014 killed, 1,607 wounded, and 2,186 prisoners of whom only 130 eventually survived.

No further hostilities took place.

Towards the end of March Yohannes asked for peace. His offer was seized so eagerly by the Egyptians that the Emperor thought that the negotiations were set on foot mainly to facilitate the withdrawal of the Egyptian army. All the while Ethiopian rebels were being encouraged by the Egyptians and supplied with arms and money. Oriental diplomacy ran its usual course.

Prince Hassan had been out of Ethiopia for some time already. On the 5th April he had embarked on the Khedivial yacht " Mahroussa " and proceeded to Egypt.

In Cairo he was given a high decoration and promoted to the rank of honorary major in the Prussian Army. A statement of his victories was issued to the press. Yet his opinions on the campaign were pessimistic. He informed his father that if he had ever had any confidence in Egyptian soldiers he had lost it at Gura ; that all the officers in the units must be either Turkish or European if the troops were to be expected to fight, and finally that it would be quite hopeless for the Khedive to try the conquest of Ethiopia with the existing forces.

On the 12th April Ratib Pasha was instructed by the Khedive to conclude peace with the Ethiopians on the best terms that could be obtained and to evacuate the country.

On the 19th Ratib suddenly left the Fort of Gura and hurriedly retreated with his army amidst scenes of great confusion.

Of course scapegoats had to be found for this costly failure. Foreign officers and particularly the numerous American staff officers were the obvious choice for this part. They were ordered to stay in Massawa until further notice while Ratib's expedition sailed home on the way to Turkey whither they were despatched as the Khedivial contingent of the Ottoman Army.

The Americans lingered on through the hottest months on the Red Sea and then proceeded to Cairo to endure endless frustrations and humiliations for almost two years. Thus ended for them one of the more incredible episodes of Khedive Ismail's imperialist policy—the employment of a large number of American military in his service.