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THE MAHDIST WAR AND THE COLONISATION OF THE SUDAN (1881–1898)

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Abstract. The Mahdist War (1881–1898) was among the most significant religiously inspired anti-colonial uprisings in nineteenth-century Africa. This article examines the origins, course, and consequences of the movement led by Muhammad Ahmad ibn Abdallah, who proclaimed himself the Mahdi, and continued by his successor, the Khalifa Abdallahi ibn Muhammad. The study situates the revolt within the oppressive framework of Turco-Egyptian rule, analyses its principal military episodes — the destruction of Hicks Pasha's army at El Obeid, the fall of Khartoum and the death of General Charles Gordon, and the decisive Anglo-Egyptian victory at Omdurman — and assesses the establishment of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium. It argues that the Mahdist state, although short-lived, was at once a genuine indigenous response to foreign domination and a formative episode in the imperial partition of north-east Africa, shaped by the interplay of fiscal oppression, religious mobilisation, and great-power rivalry over the headwaters of the Nile.

Keywords: Mahdist War; Sudan; Muhammad Ahmad; Mahdi; Charles Gordon; siege of Khartoum; Battle of Omdurman; Kitchener; Anglo-Egyptian Condominium; colonialism.

1. Introduction

The conquest and colonisation of the Sudan in the last two decades of the nineteenth century cannot be understood as a single act of aggression. Rather, it unfolded as a chain of revolts and reprisals in which one uprising provoked another. At the centre of this process stood the religious and political movement led by Muhammad Ahmad ibn Abdallah, who proclaimed himself the Mahdi — the divinely guided redeemer expected in Islamic tradition. The eighteen-year struggle that followed pitted the Sudanese Mahdists against the forces of the Egyptian Khedivate and, ultimately, the British Empire, and ended only when the combined Anglo-Egyptian army reconquered the country and transformed it into a condominium that was, in practice, governed almost entirely from London[1].

Contemporaries and historians have referred to these events under several names — the "Mahdist Revolt," the "Anglo-Sudan War," and the "Sudan campaigns" among them. The present article reconstructs the conflict in its successive phases, from the fiscal grievances of the Turco-Egyptian period to the final destruction of the Mahdist state at Omdurman and Umm Diwaykarat, and considers why a movement that briefly expelled a European-backed administration was ultimately unable to withstand the renewed imperial advance.

2. Turco-Egyptian Rule and the Roots of Discontent

[1]Holt P. M., Daly M. W. A History of the Sudan: From the Coming of Islam to the Present Day. 5th ed. – Harlow: Longman, 2000. – P. 88.

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Egyptian dominion over the Sudan began with the invasion launched by Muhammad Ali Pasha in 1820–1821, after which the territory was administered as a province of the Khedivate[2]. The new regime is remembered in Sudanese tradition under the generic label of "Turkish" rule, a term applied to all Muslim outsiders from the north. Its most resented feature was a heavy and arbitrary system of taxation that fell above all upon cultivators and small traders. In northern Sudan the right to collect these taxes was farmed out to the Shaiqiyya, whose methods were widely regarded as harsh and unjust[3].

During years of drought and famine many peasants were unable to meet their obligations. Fearing the collectors, they abandoned their villages in the fertile Nile valley and fled to the more remote districts of Kordofan and Darfur. Discontent was sharpened by the regime's growing financial dependence on Europe. Following the bankruptcy of 1876, Anglo-French "Dual Control" was imposed over Egyptian finances, and in 1879 the powers obtained the deposition of Khedive Ismail in favour of his more pliable son, Tewfik[4]. A further grievance, particularly among the riverine merchant classes, was the suppression of the slave trade, then one of the principal sources of income in the Sudan.

It was in this context that the Khedive's government experimented with European administrators. General Charles Gordon, appointed governor in the Equatorial provinces and later governor-general, campaigned against the great slave-trader al-Zubayr Rahma Mansur and attempted to curb the traffic in slaves[5]. When Ismail was forced from power, Gordon lost his official backing; worn down by years of service, he resigned and left for Britain in 1880, and his policies were largely reversed by the new administration.

3. The Rise of the Mahdi and the Outbreak of the Revolt (1881–1883)

In the 1870s a Muslim teacher named Muhammad Ahmad began to preach religious renewal and the moral purification of the land. In 1881, amid mounting resentment of the "Turkish" administration, he proclaimed himself the Mahdi, the promised deliverer of the Islamic world, and called upon the faithful to wage jihad against the oppressors[6]. To legitimise his authority he consciously modelled his movement on the life of the Prophet Muhammad: his followers were named the Ansar, after the supporters who had received the Prophet at Medina, and he appointed lieutenants whom he styled after the early caliphs, designating Abdallahi ibn Muhammad as his principal deputy and eventual successor.

In August 1881 the governor of the Sudan, Rauf Pasha, sent two companies of soldiers to arrest the Mahdi on Aba Island in the Nile, promising promotion to any who captured him. Approaching from separate directions, both detachments were ambushed and destroyed by the Mahdi's small but

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[2]Holt P. M., Daly M. W. A History of the Sudan. Op. cit. – P. 89.

[3]Holt P. M., Daly M. W. A History of the Sudan. Op. cit. – P. 90.

[4]Collins R. O. A History of Modern Sudan. – Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. – P.118.

[5]Holt P. M., Daly M. W. A History of the Sudan. Op. cit. – P. 92.

[6]Holt P. M. The Mahdist State in the Sudan, 1881–1898: A Study of its Origins, Development and Overthrow. 2nd ed. – Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970. – P. 124.

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resolute band[7]. The Mahdi then withdrew towards Kordofan, far from Khartoum, a move that allowed him to consolidate his forces and won him the support of numerous Arab tribes. A further Egyptian expedition was annihilated in December 1881, and in 1882 a column of some four thousand men under Yusuf Pasha was overwhelmed; the insurgents captured large quantities of rifles, ammunition, and equipment.

Alarmed by these reverses, the Egyptian government — now advised by British officers — assembled a larger force at Khartoum in 1883 under the retired Indian Army officer William Hicks. Churchill later described this ill-trained and disaffected force as "the worst army that ever went to war."[8] On 3–4 November 1883, at the Battle of El Obeid (Shaykan), the Mahdist host, by now well armed with captured weapons and numbering in the tens of thousands, destroyed it almost completely; only a few hundred men survived[9]. The catastrophe left the Mahdi master of much of the interior and forced the question of whether the Sudan could be held at all.

4. Gordon, the Siege of Khartoum, and British Withdrawal (1884–1885)

In the wake of the El Obeid disaster, British advisers pressed the Egyptian government to abandon the Sudan and to evacuate its scattered garrisons, several of which — at Sennar, Tokar, and Sinkat — were already besieged. To organise this withdrawal the British government, despite the misgivings of its agent in Cairo, Sir Evelyn Baring, again turned to Charles Gordon, dispatching him with Colonel John Stewart[10]. Gordon reached Khartoum in February 1884 and at once recognised the difficulty of his task: the capital alone sheltered some seven thousand soldiers and a far larger civilian population, while the routes to the other garrisons were cut.

Rather than evacuate, Gordon resolved to hold Khartoum, unwilling to abandon the garrisons or to concede the Sudan to the Mahdi. In March 1884 the Mahdists secured the support of the tribes north of the city and severed the telegraph line to Cairo, isolating the capital[11]. Protected on three sides by the Blue and White Niles and by old fortifications, and provisioned for several months, Gordon held out as the Mahdi gathered tens of thousands of warriors before the walls. Under sustained pressure from public opinion, the British government finally sent a relief expedition under Sir Garnet Wolseley, but the low level of the Nile and the time required to organise the river column delayed it fatally.

After a siege of nearly a year — from March 1884 to late January 1885 — famine and disease had broken the defenders' morale. On 26 January 1885 the Mahdists stormed Khartoum; Gordon was killed and the garrison massacred[12]. Wolseley's advance guard, having defeated the Mahdists at Abu

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[7]Holt P. M. The Mahdist State in the Sudan. Op. cit. – P.93.

[8]Churchill W. S. The River War: An Historical Account of the Reconquest of the Soudan. Vols. I–II. – London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1899. – P. 245.

[9]Holt P. M. The Mahdist State in the Sudan. Op. cit. – P. 94.

[10]Holt P. M., Daly M. W. A History of the Sudan. Op. cit. – P. 95.

[11]Holt P. M. The Mahdist State in the Sudan. Op. cit. – P. 96.

[12]Churchill W. S. The River War. Op. cit. – P. 246.

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Klea, reached the city only two days later, to find it already fallen. The Sudan was, in effect, abandoned to the Mahdists, and British and Egyptian authority there came to an end.

5. The Mahdist State and Its Regional Wars (1885–1896)

Muhammad Ahmad did not long survive his triumph: he died in June 1885 and was succeeded by the Khalifa Abdallahi ibn Muhammad, who consolidated the new theocratic state, the Mahdiyya[13]. The Mahdist regime was soon drawn into conflict with its neighbours. Under the Hewett Treaty of 3 June 1884, Ethiopia had agreed to assist in evacuating the beleaguered Egyptian garrisons in the south; in September 1884 Emperor Yohannes IV and his general Ras Alula reoccupied territory and relieved Egyptian posts. At the Battle of Kufit on 23 September 1885 the Ethiopians inflicted a decisive defeat on the Mahdists[14].

Border warfare with Ethiopia continued for several years, with raids and counter-raids across the frontier and shifting fortunes on both sides. Throughout this period Egypt did not renounce its claim to the Sudan, and the British authorities continued to regard that claim as valid. Under firm British supervision the Egyptian economy was restored and the Egyptian army reformed under British officers, so that conditions gradually became favourable, both politically and militarily, for an eventual reconquest[15].

6. The Anglo-Egyptian Reconquest (1896–1899)

The immediate occasion for renewed intervention came from the wider scramble for Africa. After Italy's heavy defeat by Ethiopia at Adwa in 1896 weakened its position in the region, and as French designs on the Upper Nile grew more threatening, the British government judged it expedient to advance into the northern Sudan[16]. Command of the Anglo-Egyptian army was given to Sir Herbert Kitchener, who began his methodical advance in March 1896. His force was equipped with the most modern military technology of the day — magazine rifles, Maxim machine-guns, and quick-firing artillery — and supported by a flotilla of gunboats on the Nile and by a railway built to carry troops and supplies.

The advance was deliberate and well prepared. After defeating the Mahdist garrison at Ferkeh in June 1896 and the army of the Amir Mahmud at the Atbara in April 1898, Kitchener's force — some twenty-six thousand British, Egyptian, and Sudanese troops — reached the Mahdist capital of Omdurman in September 1898[17]. On 2 September 1898, at Kerreri near Omdurman, the Khalifa's army of perhaps fifty thousand men, lacking modern arms, charged the Anglo-Egyptian lines and was mown down by rifle and machine-gun fire. Mahdist losses ran to tens of thousands, against only a few hundred on the Anglo-Egyptian side.

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[13]Holt P. M. The Mahdist State in the Sudan. Op. cit. – P.96.

[14]Holt P. M., Daly M. W. A History of the Sudan. Op. cit. – P. 96.

[15]Collins R. O. A History of Modern Sudan. Op. cit. – P. 235.

[16]Collins R. O. A History of Modern Sudan. Op. cit. – P. 235.

[17]Churchill W. S. The River War. Op. cit. – P. 250.

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The Khalifa escaped Omdurman and fled south. Within days Kitchener was dispatched up the White Nile to Fashoda, where the presence of a French expedition under Major Jean-Baptiste Marchand provoked a tense Anglo-French confrontation that was resolved only by diplomacy[18]. The Khalifa himself, pursued into Kordofan, was finally defeated and killed at the Battle of Umm Diwaykarat on 24 November 1899, an action that extinguished the Mahdist state[19]. The Sudan thereupon passed under renewed Anglo-Egyptian control, formalised in the Condominium of 1899.

7. Conclusion

The Mahdist War illustrates how colonial expansion in Africa proceeded through cycles of oppression, revolt, and reconquest. The movement led by Muhammad Ahmad arose from concrete grievances — punitive taxation, fiscal subordination to Europe, and the disruption of established economic life — yet it drew its cohesion and force from religious renewal and the language of jihad[20]. For more than a decade the Mahdist state demonstrated that an indigenous polity could expel a European-backed administration and govern in its stead.

Its destruction, however, was determined less by internal weakness than by the technological and organisational transformation of the forces ranged against it. The contrast between the spears and captured rifles of the Ansar and the machine-guns, gunboats, and railways of Kitchener's army at Omdurman epitomised the wider asymmetry that underlay the partition of Africa[21]. The reconquest secured the Nile for British strategic interests, forestalled French and Italian ambitions, and inaugurated more than half a century of Anglo-Egyptian rule. The Mahdist episode thus stands as both a landmark in the history of Sudanese resistance and a revealing case study in the dynamics of nineteenth-century imperialism.

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[18]Collins R. O. A History of Modern Sudan. Op. cit. – P. 237.

[19]Holt P. M. The Mahdist State in the Sudan. Op. cit. – P. 98.

[20]Holt P. M. The Mahdist State in the Sudan. Op. cit. – P. 98.

[21]Churchill W. S. The River War. Op. cit. – P. 251.

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