Egypt

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Summary

Egypt played an important role in World War I. Although it saw limited combat operations on its own territory, British and imperial forces used Egypt as a staging ground for campaigns against the Ottoman Empire and the Senussi. Over 300,000 Egyptians were conscripted for manual labor to support the British army. The strain on local agriculture and food resources resulted in widespread inflation, food scarcity, and increased disease, and the measures taken to deal with them resulted in widespread discontent with British rule that culminated in a national uprising which became known as the “Egyptian Revolution of 1919”.

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Introduction

An Ottoman province since 1517, Egypt had been de facto independent since the reign of Mehmet Ali (1769-1849) and his dynastic heirs, who were given the title khedive. In 1876, Britain and France had taken control of the country’s finances under an agreement to introduce austerity measures after the Egyptian government defaulted on loan repayments to European banks. The exertion of direct political influence over the Egyptian government led to opposition from the Egyptian military beginning in the winter of 1880-1881. An open rebellion broke out in the spring of 1882 under the leadership of Colonel Ahmad ‘Urabi

(1841-1911), and, on the pretext of a supposed threat to the Suez Canal, British military forces landed at Alexandria in mid-July and successfully put down the revolt. As one of the main European advocates for maintaining the geographic integrity of the Ottoman Empire, Great Britain could not openly colonize Egypt or declare it a protectorate, so a legal fiction was established that English officials had assumed control of various ministries and the civil service in an “advisory” capacity, while claiming that Egypt remained under de jure Ottoman sovereignty. This was known as the system of Dual Control, or the “Veiled Protectorate”, and it lasted from 1882 until December 1914.

British Protectorate

When war was declared in Europe on 25 July 1914, the ruling khedive of Egypt, Abbas II “Hilmi” (1874-1944), was convalescing in Constantinople following an assassination attempt. In his absence, Prime Minister Hussein Rushdi (1863-1928) followed the directive of British Consul General Milne Cheetham (1869-1938) to expel German and Austro-Hungarian diplomats from Egypt and ordered the seizure of Austrian and German assets. The entry of the Ottoman Empire into the war on the side of the Central Powers on 2 November created a legal crisis regarding Egypt’s official status. The khedive (still in Constantinople) called upon his subjects in Egypt and the Sudan to fulfil their obligations as de jure Ottoman subjects to take up arms against the British in support of the Central Powers. The Anglo-Egyptian administration declared martial law, suspending freedoms of the press, public assembly, and extraterritorial privileges for foreign nationals under the Capitulations, as well as giving the military authorities the right to try civilians.

In a public address on 5 November, General John Maxwell (1859-1929), commander of the British forces in Egypt, announced that Egypt would remain officially neutral in the conflict and that “Great Britain takes upon herself the solemn burden of the present war without calling upon the Egyptian people for aid”.[1] The remaining issue of Egypt’s legal status was resolved on 18 December with the formal declaration of Egypt as a British protectorate. Khedive Abbas, still abroad, was formally deposed and his uncle, Hussein Kamel (1853-1917), was installed as sultan. Cheetham was elevated to acting high commissioner, pending the arrival of Sir Henry McMahon (1862-1949) to assume the post in early 1915.

The number of British and imperial troops in Egypt at the onset of the war was around 30,000, organized into the Force in Egypt, a British army primarily consisting of brigades from Great Britain and India and tasked with the defense of the Suez Canal. The Mediterranean Expeditionary Force (MEF), which commanded Allied forces in the Gallipoli and Salonica campaigns, was coordinated from Egypt; troops rotated back and forth from Egyptian ports so as not to violate Greek neutrality. Following the abandonment of the Gallipoli campaign in

January 1916, the MEF and the Force in Egypt were combined into the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF), which comprised over 450,000 men by September 1918. Native Egyptians were not permitted to enlist in the fighting forces; these were all foreigners. Soldiers became a common sight on the streets of major Egyptian cities. The area around Cairo's Azbakiyya Square became a major center for British military operations, with the military headquarters operating from the Cosmopolitan Hotel, military intelligence based at the Shepheard's Hotel nearby, and a large barracks at Qasr el-Nil adjacent to the Egyptian Museum. Several military and civilian support operations were based nearby, all of which fed a flourishing local economy of vendors, bars, dance halls, and brothels.[2]

Military actions in Egypt were limited to the sparsely populated Sinai Peninsula and oases of the Western Desert. The Ottoman army invaded Sinai in January 1915; their furthest advance to the west was a raid on the Suez Canal from 26 January – 4 February, followed by an orderly withdrawal into the desert. Sinai was placed under military administration for the remainder of the war. The Ottomans also fomented unrest among the Senussi in Libya, whose border with Egypt had not been defined. The Senussi were a religious-political Sufi order under the command of Sayyid Ahmad Sharif (1873-1933) and Omar al-Mukhtar (1858-1931) who espoused an anti-imperialist stance. This earned them the attention of Ottoman and German agents who encouraged raids against British and French controlled territory in North Africa. They staged raids on the oases in the Western Desert and conducted a military campaign along the Mediterranean coast. The coastal campaign was ended with the battle of Agagia on 26 February 1916; the Force in Egypt then used Bani Suwayf, in Middle Egypt, as a base of operations for its "southern army" to conduct desert raids into the Siwa and Dakhla oases in the Western Desert, which continued until April 1917.[3]

Sultan Hussein Kamel died on 9 October 1917. He had publicly expressed his preference to be succeeded by his son, Prince Kamal el-Din (1874-1932), but the latter had renounced his place in the line of succession. The British had appointed Hussein's younger brother, Ahmad Fuad (1868-1936), as his heir only three weeks before the sultan's death. The exact reason for Kamal el-Din's renunciation is unknown. The sultan had been the target of two assassination attempts in 1915, although it remains unknown whether this was the result of agitation from his deposed nephew's agents, or anti-British sympathies more generally. Prince Kamal el-Din was opposed to the protectorate and there is speculation that he refused to take the throne under British rule; the prince was also married to the deposed Khedive's sister, who did not recognize the legitimacy of her brother's deposition. This explanation gained popular traction during the 1919 uprising and is referenced in an oft-quoted line from the opening pages of Naguib Mahfouz (1911-2006) 1955 novel Bayn al Qasrayn (Palace Walk): "What a fine man Prince Kamal al-Din Husayn is! Do you know what he did? He refused to ascend the throne of his late father so long as the British are in charge”.[4] The throne instead went to his uncle, Ahmad Fuad, who acceded to the throne as Sultan Fuad I.

Social Distress

Despite Maxwell’s proclamation at the onset of the war that the Egyptians would not be called upon, there is little question that Egypt was a nation at war between 1914-1918. Its citizens were recruited into the war effort, and many of those citizens faced bodily harm and death. On the home front, the civilian population was negatively impacted by the war; the civilian economy could not be specially protected, nor could civilian bodies be shielded from the war, even if no combat actions took place on its territory. The problems manifested first as economic issues, which quickly caused other forms of social distress.

Unemployment

Economic problems plagued Egypt for the duration of the war. The Egyptian economy was based on the export of cotton as a cash crop, with foodstuffs and other agricultural products grown on a rotating basis over a two-year period. The Anglo-Egyptian government established a series of official tariffs on “primary need” items in the fall of 1914 as a price control intended to maintain a guaranteed supply at a fixed price. However, this system was ineffective; by the end of the war some basic items had increased in price by over 300 percent while wages held relatively steady. The resulting inflation, coupled with food scarcity, placed significant hardship on the Egyptian population with dire results.

Unemployment rates soared as soon as war was declared in Europe due to the near cessation of shipping in the Mediterranean. Seasonal labor migration between Upper Egypt and the Mediterranean ports provided an important source of supplemental income for poor manual laborers; as docks and warehouses began to shutter, tens of thousands of people found themselves out of work. By the beginning of September 1914, thousands of unemployed workers were staging public demonstrations in Alexandria, Cairo, and Port Said demanding work and bread. The government paid to repatriate several thousand migrant laborers to Upper Egypt, hoping to reassign them into the agricultural sector.

The arrival of refugees, mostly from neighboring Syria, throughout the war continued to strain the economy as many arrived with no means to support themselves and in desperate need of work. Refugees were generally placed in the care of religious organizations except in situations where the number of arrivals was unmanageable. The first notable refugee crisis occurred in Alexandria in January 1915, when the American warship Tennessee arrived from Jaffa carrying thousands of Zionist settlers of Russian origin who had been evicted from Palestine by the Ottoman army. Their numbers quickly overwhelmed the local Jewish community aid organizations and required the intervention of several other religious and charity organizations and the Alexandria municipality to secure housing and other basic needs.[5]

Similar support was needed when tens of thousands of Armenians fleeing Anatolia arrived at Port Said in early 1916. Although local Catholic and Greek Orthodox charities worked to place those without relatives in Egypt in communities throughout the Nile Valley and the Fayyum, the British military was obliged to maintain a large refugee camp for Armenian arrivals in the Suez Canal zone until after the war.[6]

Impact on Agricultural Sector

The agricultural sector was hit hard by the economic crisis. Mahmoud Abdel-Fadil estimated that 91 percent of Egypt’s landowning population were small landowners; those owning less than five feddans could not afford to set aside enough land to grow food for their own consumption and were not insulated from price shocks in the commodity market.[7] Gabriel Baer (1919-1982) has further estimated that those who owned less than three feddans of land would have to rent more land or hire themselves out as laborers on someone else’s property to earn enough to pay their seasonal debts.[8]

Even before the war began, the financial situation of the agricultural peasant class was already precarious as cotton yields were lower than expected in the summer of 1914; following the declaration of war, the worldwide price of cotton dropped by about one-third. The purchase of the fall cotton harvest was delayed due to problems shipping gold coinage from England. As protests mounted over the delay and fears that the cotton stock would rot before it could be sold, the Anglo-Egyptian government issued paper currency as a stopgap, but most peasant farmers, who had never seen paper money before, refused to accept it. In early fall, the government proceeded with the annual collection of the land tax, which could only be paid in cash. This created an immediate financial crisis, since most of the peasants had planned on using the cash from the cotton sale to pay their taxes. In some places, guards were placed at the entrance to villages to physically coerce residents into paying their taxes. Many farmers had to borrow money at high interest to make the payments. In many areas, large landowners, unable to collect rent, took the entirety of the cotton crop from their tenants instead, leaving the farmers “stripped bare and with a very gloomy outlook”.[9]

Agricultural production was further disrupted by the collection of both human and animal labor for the Egyptian Labour Corps (ELC; فرقات العمال المصري firqaat al-‘ummal al-masri) and Camel Transport Corps (CTC; فرقات النقل بالجمل firqaat al-naql-bi-l-gamal), established for military support services. In Egypt, as elsewhere in the British Empire, physical participation in the war effort was encouraged by nationalists hoping that the British would reward their support by negotiating independence after the war's end. Recruitment was ramped up heavily in the spring of 1917; Kyle J. Anderson estimates that over 325,000 Egyptians were working in military service during the period between March 1917 and June 1918.[10]

In Upper Egypt, where agricultural workers were paid less than in the delta and work was more seasonal, the ELC's consistent year-round wages were attractive and led to complaints that workers were walking off the land in mid-season to enlist. However, coercive measures were commonly employed by local officials tasked with gathering men for ELC service, with one official describing that village headmen "had unlimited power for extracting bribes and for unjustly recruiting those who could not afford to pay".[11] In the summer of 1918 violent resistance to the coercive methods employed for recruitment was reported throughout Egypt, resulting in multiple deaths and arrests.[12] In the delta, when rumors circulated that men were being recruited from a certain area, it became common for able-bodied men of the appropriate age in nearby villages to take flight until the threat had passed. Most day-to-day operations on small farms thus tended to be overseen by women, which put them at a disadvantage when negotiating sale prices for their crops with landlords and village headmen (umdahs).

Animals were also requisitioned for the war effort. Most food was transported longer distances by railroad, however beasts of burden – camels, donkeys, mules, and horses – were necessary for the critical stage of getting it from farm to local market and thence to the train station. Most of the rural Egyptian road network was not suited for motor vehicles, which at any rate were still rare in Egypt in the prewar era. For the same reason, however, the British military sought to use pack animals to move military supplies in Egypt and elsewhere and began requisitioning the animals from villages. In many cases, the animals were the only available means of transport. The number of camels in rural Egypt dropped by 15 percent between 1914 and 1916.

Overall agricultural production declined during the war; the period from 1905-1914 showed an average annual rate of growth of 0.8 percent, but 1914-1919 showed an average annual decline of 2.8 percent.[13] Part of the decline can be linked to the suspension of outside investment in agricultural projects and the halting of projects in progress, as well as the curtailing of trade (although Egypt maintained a net surplus in exports throughout the war). Two other factors contributed to difficulty in food production. Investment in agricultural machinery came to a virtual halt during the war years. Agricultural machinery imports were cut by a factor of ten between 1914 and 1918. While most food production was still carried out by hand, the ability of the domestic agricultural industry to feed Egypt’s growing population while meeting export demands was tied to the adoption of new technologies that allowed for more intensive production.

Also important to this effort was the use of chemical fertilizers, which had allowed most agricultural producers in Egypt to move from a three-year growing cycle to a two-year growing cycle by the onset of the war. The ability to maintain an intensive growing cycle was dependent upon a commodity that had to be imported, however, imports of chemical fertilizer dropped by half between 1914 and 1917. Although not as dramatic, there was a gradual decline in the crop yield per feddan between 1915 and 1917 as the land slowly became exhausted.

Inflation and Food Scarcity

While the production of foodstuffs, as with other agricultural products, did not drop significantly during the war years, the food distribution process was profoundly altered due to a drop in the amount of available labor to harvest it and the prioritization of military requisitions over civilian needs. The increase in demand, coupled with a decline in imports due to the war, contributed to inflation which was reflected in a sharp rise in the prices of basic commodities – most foodstuffs increased in price by between 200 and 300 percent during the war. An official tariff on “primary needs” goods was set by the government, but in real terms it quickly became nearly impossible to purchase commodities at the officially established prices.

While wages did rise during the war, they did so unpredictably and in a way that did not correlate to inflation in the cost of living. Laborers in the ELC could be paid anywhere from three to eight piasters daily, depending on their duties and where they were stationed; the minimum daily wage was increased from three to four piasters in August 1917. That ELC workers were making more than their agricultural counterparts was well known and posed a problem for agricultural companies that needed workers on their estates. Major companies throughout Egypt demanded that the government lower ELC wages, complaining that the higher wages were attracting workers away from agricultural production.

For women who took up jobs outside the agricultural sector during the war, the wage situation was particularly dire. A report issued in December 1918 reported that most Egyptian women who engaged in full time work earned less than two Egyptian pounds per month. The low wages were generally justified on the basis that female employees tended to be younger women who lived at home, however during the war many women had to step in to cover for husbands who were deployed with the ELC. Unlike the situation with Indians employed in the British army, ELC wages were paid in cash directly to the workers at the front; and there was no possibility of their families at home collecting wages instead. This put women in the precarious position of needing to find ways for themselves, or children of working age, to earn sufficient income to support themselves and their families.

Sex Work and Moral Panic

Soaring inflation and unemployment drove people to extreme measures. Men from rural Egypt who sought work in ports, especially Alexandria, often brought their families along. By 1917, as the EEF broke its long stalemate with Ottoman forces in the Sinai and began to move eastward toward Palestine, lower-class women in larger cities faced financial struggles, leading some to resort to sex work, causing social tensions. Although socially distasteful, sex work was legal: sex workers were licensed by the Bureau des Moeurs, situated within the police medical office, and underwent weekly medical examinations for syphilis and gonorrhea. Infected women were held in government hospitals until they had passed three tests. Under the Capitulations, the regulation and screening of foreign sex workers was “merely nominal”, however, the Anglo-Egyptian administration was able to enforce the screening and licensing of foreigners by agreement of foreign consular agents in late December 1914; these measures remained in effect until martial law was lifted in early 1919.

The formal licensing system had notable gaps. It was estimated that in both Alexandria and Cairo, there were as many unlicensed sex workers as licensed ones. Many unlicensed Egyptian women engaged in part-time sex work during economic hardships, often in poorer neighborhoods, renting rooms discreetly. Fearful of official registration, women who were married hesitated to have their names recorded (the names of women treated in hospital were sent to the Department of Public Health). Public health officials acknowledged the need for discretion for unlicensed women but failed to establish a mechanism to allow anonymous treatment.
Another gap was male sex workers, due to British disapproval of homosexuality, which was legal in Egypt. In 1916, over 500 male sex workers were estimated to be working in Cairo; 270 were arrested during the 1918 Alexandria purification campaign. British soldiers actively sought them out, and officials estimated that around one quarter of them were infected with syphilis. Despite recognizing the public health risk, health officials refused to license, regulate, or provide medical treatment for male sex workers due to the illegality of homosexuality under British military codes.

The 1905 law regulating sex work required brothels to be located in specific districts, but enforcement was lax until martial law was imposed in 1914. Red-light districts in Alexandria, Cairo, Port Said, and Ismailiya were established in Egyptian neighborhoods to facilitate patrol and restrict military access. A challenge arose with Cairo’s Wagh el-Birka district because of its location within blocks of military headquarters. The area gained international notoriety after clashes between Australian troops and local business owners in May and June 1915 known as the “Battles of the Wazzer”. The Cairo governorate attempted to force the bars and brothels to relocate away from town, however, political pressure from wealthy business owners hindered closure.

Mismanagement of Price Controls 1918-1919

By early 1918, it had become clear that more centralized oversight was needed to overcome the labor, transportation, and distribution issues that were believed to be causing inflation and scarcity in the food market. The government established the Supplies Control Board (SCB) to assume control over the tariff list, to oversee the collection of crops by the Ministry of Interior, and to run district markets to guarantee the availability of commodities at the official price. However, when the SCB replaced the “primary needs” tariff system in April 1918 it proved to be even less effective than its predecessor. When proposing amounts to be requisitioned from each governorate and district for the spring 1918 harvest, calculations were made based on the expected productivity of each area based on the previous year’s production but were not revised based on actual production; in some areas peasants could only fulfill their quotas by purchasing extra grain at a higher price than what they were paid for it.

The failure of the SCB management in its first harvest season became clear when the supply of wheat to Egypt’s major cities faltered for the first time during the war in mid-1918. Cities were entirely dependent on wheat imports from outside; until the SCB had been established, these markets had fetched the highest prices (usually in contravention of the tariff), but with the new oversight system in place, vendors looked for buyers who were willing to pay higher prices. Despite constant reassurances from the SCB that there was an ample supply of wheat, reports of shortages and price gouging were often published adjacent to the SCB’s statements. Several districts ran out of grain entirely and sixteen people were killed in a stampede at the Rod el-Farag (Cairo) cereal market on 24 October 1918.

Dr. William H. Wilson (?-?) from the Egyptian School of Medicine drafted a memo in late 1919 in which he described the challenges of the cost of living in wartime Egypt. Wilson had set out to investigate the question of whether “a man in regular employment at the ordinary rate of wages” would be able to “provide sufficient food for himself and a small family, taking as the basis of the necessary expenditure on food the official retail prices of foodstuffs”.[14] Wilson determined the maximum amount that a hypothetical man making a slightly-higher-than-average wage who supported a family of four could afford to pay for enough wheat and durum (semolina) to provide his family with adequate nutrition. By November 1916, wheat prices were already 5 percent above Wilson's threshold; in December 1917, they were 162 percent higher. Wilson considered the SCB's tariff controls to be a direct cause of the 1919 uprising, however neither of the wartime price control systems guaranteed affordable commodities to the poorest Egyptians, as they were theoretically designed to do.

Increased Disease Rates and Neglect of Public Health

Wilson further suggested a link between malnourishment and the high incidence of infectious diseases. During the war, reported cases of most epidemic diseases in Egypt increased substantially over pre- and post-war levels; this was also due to the redirection of government health services toward military needs. Government health officials who held military rank were drafted into service beginning in the fall of 1914, and the Department of Public Health's resources were prioritized for military use. Although the military had its own medical service and hospital camps to treat sick and injured personnel, nearly every government run hospital in the Nile Valley was requisitioned for the military between 1915-1917. Among the more serious consequences of this was the suspension of the government's smallpox vaccine campaign, resulting in a rise in smallpox mortality to levels not seen in over three quarters of a century. One of the civilian training programs, for barber-surgeons (jerrahs) to be retrained by government officials, was suspended in 1915, as were two mobile hospital units that had previously been deployed to handle epidemic outbreaks.

Demographic data through 1919 reveals consistent downward trends in the birth rate over the course of the war; in 1918, the number of births per 1,000 people dropped to a twenty-five year low (38.2 per 1,000), dropping below the death rate (51.8 per 1,000) for the first time in over half a century. The Egyptian Gazette observed in October 1918 that the decline of Alexandria's population was "to be held due to economic and other causes, which have come into existence owing to the war. It is alleged that the natives for some time past have been postponing marriage owing to the rise in the price of food".[15] The "Spanish influenza" pandemic alone killed over 1 percent of the population of Egypt between October and December of 1918, when food supplies were at their scarcest and most expensive.

1919 Revolution

By the end of the war, there was widespread opposition to British rule across Egypt. Men who had returned from service with the Egyptian Labour Corps and other support roles for the British army complained of poor treatment and working conditions, along with the use of corporal punishment even for minor disciplinary actions. Photographs of scarred and maimed workers were circulated widely and, along with eyewitness accounts of alleged atrocities, formed the appendix of a White Paper that was compiled by nationalist activists. The

Egyptian nationalist movement had existed since the Nahda, or “Arab Renaissance” of the mid-19th century, focused initially on a movement to gain autonomy (if not independence) from the Ottomans, and, after 1882, on ending British control of Egypt. The Fourteen Points issued by U.S. President Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924), which called for self-determination for non-Turkish nations that had been ruled by the Ottoman Empire, reignited hope for Egyptian independence as the war ended.

After the final armistice with Germany was signed on 11 November 1918, a delegation (wafd in Arabic) met with High Commissioner Reginald Wingate (1861-1953) to request the right to represent Egypt at the planned Paris peace conference. The delegation was headed by Saad Zaghlul (1859-1927), a lawyer originally from Kafr el-Shaykh in the Nile Delta, Ali Sha’arawi (1849-1922), and Abd al-Aziz Fahmy Bey (1870-1951). When Wingate denied their request, the Wafd began to encourage widespread organization around Egypt, sending representatives into towns and villages to plead their case and collect support for a petition for Egyptian independence that Zaghlul, Sha’arawi, and Fahmy intended to take to Paris anyway. As acts of civil disobedience – strikes, protests, and the burning of police stations – became more common, the British authorities, who had not ended martial law with the end of the war, arrested the three political leaders on 8 March 1919 and sent them into exile in Malta. Beginning on 12 March, widespread protests and demonstrations, many of which turned violent, broke out across Egypt. Over the next two weeks, at least 800 people were killed, many villages burned, large rural estates looted, and railway and telegraph stations and lines burned and cut by mobs.

In the popular imagination, what has become known as the Egyptian Revolution of 1919 united disparate parts of Egyptian society; rich and poor, Muslim and Christian, men and women, the new working class, the labor syndicates, and peasant farmers alike took to the streets, arm in arm, for the purpose of demanding Egypt’s right to self-determination and obstructing the British ability to rule the country. While there is a kernel of truth to this, this was also the version of events proposed by the Egyptian monarchy itself; Yoav Di-Capua has described how the national historiographical project launched by Sultan Fuad in 1920 was intended to respond to critics of the monarchy by creating “an alternative historical consciousness that would convincingly settle the apparent contradiction between the idea of the nation/people and that of the dynasty”, by recasting the role of the monarchy itself, which had been resistant to reform and tepid toward the nationalist movement prior to 1919.[16]

Some historians (for example: Kyle Anderson, Ellis Goldberg, and Reinhard Schülze) have questioned the degree to which Egyptian nationalism, which had heretofore been an elite, intellectual urban-based movement largely driven by the Europeanized upper classes, was able to gain traction among a mostly illiterate, rural population who would have been more likely to see the landholding classes as associates of the British rather than as natural allies. Many of the actions taken during the four-month uprising, which included the looting and pillaging of large agricultural estates, attacks on rural police, rail, and telegraph stations, and declarations of autonomy from Egypt by villages and sub-regions seem to instead suggest rural discontent with centralized authority in general, as well as frustrations with the economic situation, lack of resources, and overall neglect toward rural areas during the war. The causes of the uprising likely reflected all of these to varying degrees; the grassroots movements instigated by Wafdist agents in rural areas provided some with the ability to express their political grievances, and others with the opportunity to express their frustrations after four years of dire circumstances.

High Commissioner Wingate was blamed for the uprising by London, which appointed Lord Edmund Allenby (1861-1936), commander of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, to replace him. Wingate refused to resign and threatened to embarrass the government after Allenby arrived in Cairo and reversed Wingate's decision, requesting permission from the Colonial Office to allow the Wafd to proceed to France as requested. The Wafdist delegation was not officially recognized at the Paris conference and returned to Egypt unsuccessful. He also allowed the exiled leaders to return to Egypt, although Zaghlul would not do so until 1921. As tensions began to ease, Allenby agreed to end martial law in Egypt.

Prime Minister David Lloyd George (1863-1945) sent a parliamentary commission of inquiry under Alfred, 1st Viscount Milner (1854-1925) to Egypt in December 1919 to investigate the causes of the uprising and make recommendations about the political future of Egypt. Milner's report to the cabinet and King George V (1865-1936) was published in February 1921. He acknowledged there were "unfortunate incidences" during the period of the war which "shook for a time" Egyptians' "confidence in our justice and good will, and were pre-disposing causes of the savage outbreak of anti-British feeling in the spring of 1919".[17] His ultimate recommendation was that the Egyptian protectorate was untenable and should be abandoned. Zaghlul issued another call for independence in 1921.

The British ultimately granted independence on 28 February 1922, elevating Fuad to the title of king. However, under the terms of independence, Britain retained control over the Suez Canal Zone and "the safeguard of imperial communications", assumed responsibility for defending Egypt against foreign affairs, protecting foreign interests in Egypt (which extended the extraterritorial privileges enjoyed by foreign residents of Egypt), and officially agreed to share administration of the Sudan with Egypt, although in practice this amounted to the use of Egyptian territory and resources in support of British rule there. The British also exerted a considerable amount of political influence in Egypt, often negotiating directly with the king when parliament proved uncooperative. The British continued to exert direct influence over Fuad’s son, Faruq (1920-1965), whose early ambitions toward autonomy were ended with an incident in 1942 in which the British ambassador rode a tank through the gates of the royal palace and forced the king at gunpoint to appoint a pro-British prime minister. For this reason, the Free Officers coup d’etat of 26 July 1952, which resulted in the deposition of the king and abolition of the monarchy, is often viewed as the date when Egypt truly achieved its political independence from Britain.

Conclusion

World War I came at a critical moment in Egyptian history, marking the point at which Britain’s administration over the country was formalized, but independence was forestalled due to the prioritization of war and combat efforts. Many Egyptians heeded the call to participate in the war, both in the hope that it would support an independence bid, and for financial reasons. However, the war would ultimately be remembered as a period of hardship: hunger persisted in the countryside, and excesses of power by both Egyptian landowners and British military officials had the combined impact of turning the population against the Anglo-Egyptian administration. Whether the 1919 uprising represented a moment of national political awakening, an opportunity to seek retribution for four and a half years of hardship, or a combination of both remains a topic of academic debate, but it did have the desired effect of leading to political independence under King Fuad I in 1922. Egyptian grievances stemming from their experiences during World War I would continue to shape national politics and contribute to tense relations between Egypt and the British through much of the interwar period and beyond.

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Notes

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External Links

- Collins, Robert: The Sudan under the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, 14 August 2023 (Encyclopædia Britannica) (Article)
- Guerville, A.B. de: New Egypt, London 1906 (Internet Archive) (Book)
- Jakes, Aaron: Nationalism and Capitalism in British-Occupied Egypt, September 2020 (Ottoman History Podcast) (Audio)
- War Office Cinema Committee / Topical Film Company: The Sultan of Egypt's Funeral, Cairo, 10 October 1917 (Imperial War Museums) (Video)

Metadata

Regional Section(s)

Middle East > Egypt

Thematic Section(s)

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