

The French Invasion of Egypt and Its Legacy

Objective

As a result of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Explain the motivation behind the French invasion of Egypt.
- Evaluate the impact of the French invasion of Egypt

Materials

Student Handout: **The French Invasion**

Key Questions

- Which great French general led the invasion of Egypt in 1798?
- Why did France invade Egypt?
- Napoléon used Egypt as a base to invade which territory?
- How long were the French forces in Egypt?
- In what year did Napoléon leave the Middle East to return to France?
- What are the main complaints/concerns expressed by General Dogua in the letter excerpt?
- What is the title (in French and/or English) of the literary, scientific, artistic work passed down to us from the time of Napoléon's invasion of Egypt?

References

Readings

Burleigh, Nina. *Mirage: Napoleon's Scientists and the Unveiling of Egypt*. First Edition. New York: HarperCollins, 2007.

Cole, Juan. *Napoleon's Egypt: Invading the Middle East*. First Edition. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Goldschmidt, Arthur. *Modern Egypt: The Formation of a Nation-State*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004.

Digital DVD

Bibliotheca Alexandrina, in conjunction with the International School of Information Science. *Description de L'Égypte*. 2004. [*Description of Egypt*]

Websites

<http://napoleonegypt.blogspot.com/> (Blog based on Juan Cole's book, *Napoleon's Egypt*; includes primary sources from the French perspective.)

<http://www.bibalex.org/English/index.aspx> (Website for the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, with information on the digital DVD and link to the library's site where one can purchase the DVD.)

<http://www.napoleonexhibit.com/> (Website for "Napoléon, An Intimate Portrait" exhibit; link contains some information on the invasion of Egypt and on the *Description*.) *Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood*. Hudson Institute Journal. January 2006.

The French Invasion

The French Invasion

“Soldiers, from the height of these pyramids, forty centuries look down on you.”

—*Alleged words of Napoléon to his troops before the Battle of the Pyramids (21 July 1798)*

In 1798, the French, under the leadership of Napoléon Bonaparte, invaded the Ottoman province of Egypt. That same year, the British defeated the French navy at the Battle of Abu Kir. Nevertheless, the French retained a presence in Egypt until 1801, when they were forced out of the territory by joint British-Ottoman forces. In 1799, Napoléon led an expedition into Syria-Palestine (eastern Mediterranean coast and immediate hinterlands, sometimes also called the Levant), but was unsuccessful in establishing any kind of permanent foothold there. From Syria-Palestine, Napoléon evaded British forces and in 1799 returned to France as a hero; he would later go on to rule France and establish a continental empire in Europe.

Why did Napoléon invade Egypt, you may ask? Simply stated: to attempt to undermine Britain’s imperial interests in India. In the words of Marshal Zeringue:

Gen. Napoléon Bonaparte's invasion of Ottoman Egypt in the summer of 1798 was intended to forestall the drift of that province into the British sphere of influence, and to interrupt British communications with India, the more urgent of which went from Bombay to the Red Sea, up the Nile and across the Mediterranean to the Atlantic and London. Many French observers had become convinced that the Ottoman Empire was in swift decline and would lose its provinces to the British or Russians [ed: or Austrians]. The rebelliousness of Egypt made it especially vulnerable to the Great Powers, since it was already slipping from Istanbul's grasp.¹

France and Britain had been growing rivals since at least the 1700s. As a result of the Seven Years’ War (1756-1763), in which Britain defeated France, France lost territory and influence in North America and India. France first sought revenge by supporting the American colonists in their successful War of Independence against Britain. The invasion of Egypt was a further attempt to gain advantage over Britain.

Source

From an online posting by Marshal Zeringue dated Monday, August 6, 2007, 7:57AM; accessed on January 1, 2008, at: <http://page99test.blogspot.com/2007/08/juan-coles-napoleons-egypt.html>.

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**A French
Officer
Describes the
Desperate
Situation in
Egypt**

LIBERTY. EQUALITY.

Cairo, October 13, 1799.

DOGUA(1), General of Division, to Citizen BARRAS, Director.

I confess to you, Citizen Director, that I could never have believed General Bonaparte would have abandoned us in the condition in which we were; without money, without powder, without ball, and one part of the soldiers without arms. Alexandria is a vast intrenched [sic] camp, which the expedition into Syria has deprived of a considerable portion of the heavy artillery necessary for its defence. Lesbe, near Damietta, is scarcely walled in; part of the wall of El Arisch is tumbling of itself. Debts to an enormous amount; more than a third of the army destroyed by the plague, the dysentery, by ophthalmia, and by the war; that which remains almost naked, and the enemy but eight days march from us! Whatever may be told you at Paris, this description is but too true. You know me to be incapable of imposing on you by a false one.

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The country, however, is very fine; the possession of it may be useful to the Republic in many points of view. The productions of every quarter of the globe may be raised here. If these advantages determine the Government to exert itself to preserve Egypt, there is not a moment to lose; men, arms, powder, lead, cannon-balls, &c. &c. must be sent us without the smallest delay.

If the Government cannot succor us, if it cannot appease the Ottoman Court, and recall it to its true interests; if, in short, we are abandoned here to ourselves, compelled to continue fighting, one against ten, to struggle with the most cruel maladies, all that France will ever see again of the "Army of Egypt," will be the maimed and the blind, if the Turks should have the humanity to send them back. The rest will perish here, exhausted by their fatigues and their victories! . . .

Source

Excerpt from translation posted online by David L. Boyle, dated Wednesday, December 12, 2007, at 11:28 PM; accessed on January 1, 2008, at: <http://napoleonegypt.blogspot.com/>.

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The *Description de L'Égypte*

France's presence in Egypt was short-lived. But another aspect of the invasion has left a lasting impression up to the present time. In good French cultural fashion, Napoléon was accompanied in his 1798 invasion by an entourage of 150 prominent scholars and scientists. The intellectual efforts of this group were combined with some 2000 artists and technicians to produce the magisterial *Description de L'Égypte (Description of Egypt)*. Over a twenty-year period, these scholars, scientists, and artists examined and meticulously documented almost every aspect of contemporary and ancient Egyptian civilization, including the flora and fauna. The end result was twenty volumes of texts and plates compiled to make up the *Description*. These writings and engravings have become the most comprehensive record and inventory of Egypt's landscape, monuments, and people.²

Source

Some information for this paragraph was obtained from the digital version of *Description de L'Égypte* produced by the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in conjunction with the International School of Information Science. Bibliotheca Alexandrina, B.P. 138 – Chatby, Alexandrie 21526, Egypt; Tel: +(203) 4839999; Fax: +(203) 4820405; www.bibalex.org; Email: Isis@bibalex.org.
