

SUDAN, IMPERIALISM, AND THE MAHDI'S HOLY WAR

DURING THE AGE OF IMPERIALISM, EUROPEAN POWERS SCRAMBLED TO DIVIDE UP AFRICA. IN SUDAN, HOWEVER, A MUSLIM RELIGIOUS FIGURE KNOWN AS THE MAHDI LED A SUCCESSFUL JIHAD (HOLY WAR) THAT FOR A TIME DROVE OUT THE BRITISH AND EGYPTIANS.

In the late 1800s, many European nations tried to stake out pieces of Africa to colonize. In what is known as the “scramble for Africa,” countries sought to acquire territories with valuable resources and to control economically strategic rivers.

Many African tribal chiefs signed treaties with European countries, giving them the sole right to trade along major rivers. In 1884–85, 13 European nations with ambitions for their empires met in Berlin to discuss Africa.

The Berlin Conference agreement dealt mainly with opening up free trade along West African rivers and outlawing the slave trade. The agreement also recognized the idea of European powers carving Africa into territorial zones, in which each could pursue colonization by treaty with tribal chiefs or by conquest.

The Europeans who signed the agreement saw little chance of significant African resistance. But as the Berlin Conference met, a Muslim religious leader in Sudan had assembled a huge army that proved how wrong the Europeans were.

Ottoman Egypt and Sudan

By 1800, Egypt was part of the Muslim Ottoman Empire, ruled by the sultan in Istanbul, Turkey. In 1805, Muhammad Ali, an Ottoman military officer, seized power in Egypt.

Ali sent his son up the Nile River to conquer northern Sudan in 1821. A desert area, it was inhabited by Muslim Arabs who were mainly nomadic herders. Further south was a wetter region populated by black Africans who were Christians or followers of native religions. Arabs took advantage of tribal warfare in southern Sudan to buy and sell black captives in a highly profitable slave trade.

Ali established Sudan’s colonial capital at Khartoum, where the White and Blue Nile rivers join to form the main Nile River, which flows north to the Mediterranean Sea. Khartoum grew into a major trading center.

By the 1860s, a weakened Ottoman Empire ruled Egypt indirectly through a khedive (viceroy). He and most of the top government and military leaders were Turks, but they increasingly identified themselves with an independent Egypt rather than the Ottoman Empire.

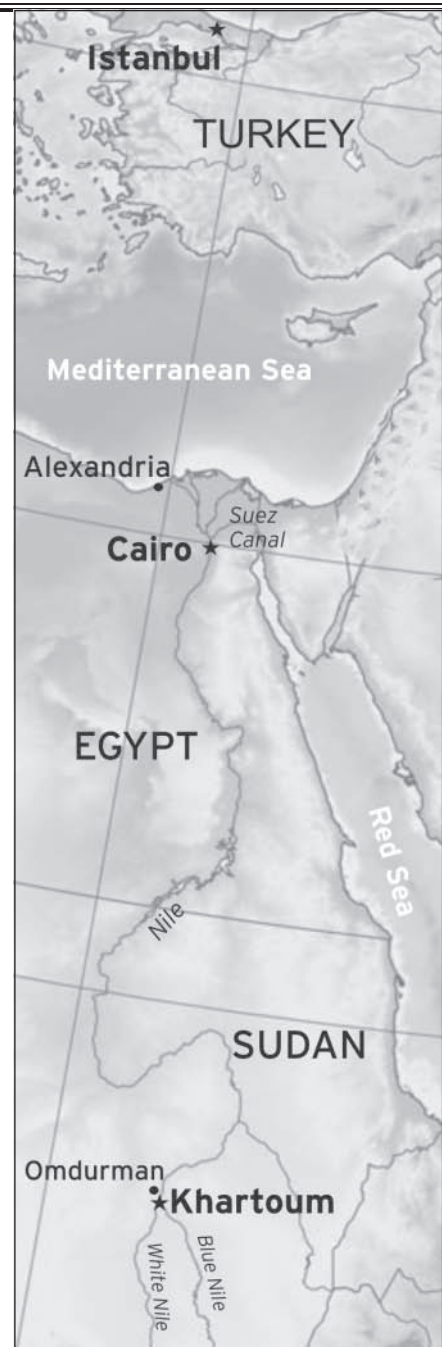
The Suez Canal, connecting the Red Sea with the Mediterranean, was completed by a French company in 1869. For the first time, Britain began to take a strategic interest in Egypt. The British viewed the Suez Canal as a vital link to its empire in Asia, especially India.

At this time, the khedive of Egypt’s economic program had driven the country deeply into debt. Fearing that a financially unstable Egypt could endanger the Suez Canal, Britain and France jointly took control of the country’s finances.

In the 1870s, the khedive wanted to suppress the Arab slave trade in Sudan. He appointed a British army officer, Col. Charles Gordon, as governor-general of Sudan to take on this job.

Gordon enthusiastically pursued crushing Sudan’s widespread slave trade, which Britain had outlawed in its empire. He sent Egyptian troops headed by European officers to track down Arab slave traders. In the process, Gordon and his forces rescued thousands of black African slaves.

Appalled by the brutal living conditions he saw in Sudan, Gordon blamed Egypt’s heavy taxes and corrupt officials. When Gordon finally resigned as governor-general in 1880,



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Arab slave traders bribed Egyptian officials not to interfere with their profitable business.

In Egypt a year later, native Egyptian army officers led a patriotic revolt and overthrew the khedive, who still technically ruled in the name of the Ottoman Turk sultan. They then attempted to break away from both the Ottoman Turks and European powers.

Worried that the Egyptian rebels would seize control of the Suez Canal, Britain and France each sent a fleet of warships to Alexandria to intimidate

the rebels. Enraged mobs rioted in the city and killed about 50 Europeans. The French withdrew their fleet, but the British opened fire on Alexandria and leveled many buildings. Later in the year, Britain sent 25,000 troops to Egypt and easily defeated the rebel Egyptian army. Britain then returned the government to the khedive, who now was little more than a British puppet. Thus began the British occupation of Egypt.

While these dramatic events were happening in Egypt, a spellbinding religious figure, calling himself the Mahdi, was stirring up rebellion against Egyptian rule in Sudan.

'I Am the Mahdi'

The Mahdi, or the "Expected One," is part of the traditions of Islam. According to these traditions, a figure will be sent by God at the end of times to rule the world in preparation for the messiah. Jesus will return and together with the Mahdi defeat the false messiah and bring justice to the world before Judgment Day.

Born on a White Nile island in Sudan, Muhammad Ahmad grew up to be known as a deeply religious Muslim. He studied the Quran in Khartoum and preached a pure form of Islam.

By the 1870s, Ahmad had become a popular religious figure in Arab Sudan. In 1881, he declared himself the long-awaited Mahdi. He claimed he was chosen by God to liberate Sudan from Egypt's tyranny, sweep away the modern ways of "corrupted" Muslims, and restore the pure Islam practiced by the Prophet Muhammad. Ahmad's declaration drew many new followers to him.

The Egyptian governor-general in Khartoum sent soldiers to arrest Ahmad, but he and his supporters defeated them with clubs, swords, and spears. He then led about 10,000 followers to a remote area south of Khartoum.

Ahmad took advantage of the widespread hatred of Egypt's brutal colonial rule and announced a jihad, or holy war, against the "Turks," a term he used for the Ottomans, Egyptians,



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Muhammad Ahmad (1844-1885), an Islamic religious leader, led a rebellion in Sudan against colonial rule.

and other "corrupted" Muslims. "I am the Mahdi," he proclaimed in 1881, "the Successor of the Prophet of Allah. Cease to pay taxes to the infidel [unbeliever] Turks and let everyone who finds a Turk kill him, for the Turks are infidels."

The Mahdi appointed three kalifas, or lieutenants. The most important was Kalifa Abdallahi who became the Mahdi's military commander. Abdallahi organized an Arab army of horsemen and infantry that defeated numerous Egyptian garrisons of soldiers and captured their firearms.

In 1883, the khedive sent an expedition of nearly 10,000 Egyptian troops led by British Col. William Hicks and a dozen European officers to smash the Mahdi's army. But Abdallahi's fighters killed nearly every man in the Egyptian force, including Hicks.

Believing these victories proved that Allah had blessed the jihad, huge numbers of fighters from Arab tribes swarmed to the Mahdi. They joined his cause of liberating Sudan and bringing Islam to the entire world.

The worried Egyptian khedive and British government decided to send Charles Gordon, the former governor-general of Sudan, to Khartoum. His mission was to organize the evacuation of all Egyptian soldiers and government personnel from Sudan. British Prime Minister William Gladstone did not want to get entangled in another colonial war.

When Gordon got to Khartoum in February 1884, he found it well fortified with a defense force of 7,000 soldiers. But advance units of the Mahdi's army had already begun to arrive. Gordon soon found himself besieged. He could have evacuated himself earlier by steamboat, but declared he would not abandon the others.

Back in London, pressure grew on the government to "save Gordon." The British did not know that they were up against not just a political revolt against Egypt but a fanatical religious movement.

Finally, the British sent a relief expedition from Cairo up the Nile to Khartoum, a distance of more than 1,000 miles. The commander took his time building boats for infantry transport and training a brand-new camel cavalry.

The siege of Khartoum lasted almost a year. Food ran short. Starvation and disease weakened the soldiers and civilians. The Mahdi's

An Imperialist's Dream

Imperialism is the practice of nations' building empires and holding other nations as colonies or dependent states. Cecil Rhodes was a British businessman and diamond mining baron in South Africa. In the following statement made in 1891, he described British imperialism.

I contend that we are the first race in the world, and that the more of the world we inhabit the better it is for the human race. . . . Added to this, the absorption of the greater portion of the world under our rule simply means the end of all wars. . . . The furtherance of the British Empire [is] for the bringing of the whole uncivilized world under British rule, for the recovery of the United States, for making the Anglo-Saxon race but one Empire. What a dream but yet it is probable.

What was Cecil Rhodes' point of view about British imperialism?



This 19th-century wood engraving depicts the expedition down the Nile to rescue General Gordon, which arrived at Khartoum too late.

men continually raked the city with rifle and cannon fire.

Camped near Omdurman, a town directly across the river from Khartoum, the Mahdi finally decided to take the city and defend it against the approaching British. On January 26, 1885, his army stormed the city. The slaughter of the weakened defenders was followed by the mass murder and rape of civilians. Gordon was hacked to death by swords while defending himself at the governor's palace. His attackers cut off his head as a trophy. Altogether, about 10,000 soldiers and civilians were massacred.

Two days later, an advance British gunboat under heavy enemy fire reached Khartoum. The British saw that the city had fallen and presumed Gordon was dead. Since his rescue was impossible, the entire expedition withdrew back to Cairo. The Mahdi was now the master of Sudan. Egyptians were frightened. The British were shocked.

The Mahdist State

The Mahdi established his capital at Omdurman. He sent a letter to the khedive in Cairo, demanding that he join the jihad against the unbelievers or suffer an invasion of Egypt. The Mahdi, however, did not live long enough to carry out his threat.

The Mahdi began to organize a government for his Mahdist state. At its core were the laws of Islam as practiced in the time of the Prophet Muhammad.

The Mahdi demanded his followers strictly follow the Quran and avoid worldly pleasures like drinking, dancing, smoking, and fancy clothes.

Under the Mahdi's laws, women could not own property or divorce. Girls were barred from schooling. He permitted trading and owning slaves, as did the Quran, but called for humane treatment of them.

Punishments were harsh. They included confiscation of property, flogging, cutting off a hand or foot, and beheading. But the Mahdi himself, now 40, increasingly enjoyed luxuries such as fine clothes and a large harem.

Shortly after naming Kalifa Abdallahi his successor, the Mahdi suddenly died of typhus only a few months after the sack of Khartoum. Ismail, one of his followers who wrote his biography three years later, explained the Mahdi's death this way: "The Mahdi's period — as indicated in the Tradition — came to an end. Therefore God transferred the Mahdi to himself."

Muhammad Ahmad remained a sacred and heroic figure among Sudan's Arabs for years. They celebrated him for preaching the true Islam, uniting Sudan's Arab tribes, and driving foreign imperialists from their soil.

Kalifa Abdallahi tried to continue the Mahdi's jihad. He fought a bloody but indecisive war against neighboring Christian Abyssinia

(now Ethiopia). His attempt to invade Muslim Egypt failed.

Abdallahi put on a show of religious devotion. He built a great mosque and a huge domed tomb for the Mahdi in Omdurman. But he became little more than a traditional Arab tribal king, ruling by military force.

The River War

Seven years after the fall of Khartoum, a different British government decided to reconquer Sudan. Britain declared the Nile River from the Mediterranean to its source, a distance of more than 2,000 miles, as a British zone for occupation under the Berlin Conference agreement.

Maj. Gen. Herbert Kitchener was appointed to plan and lead a massive invasion force, consisting of British, Egyptian, and black African Sudanese troops, all commanded by British officers. Their mission was to move up the Nile, destroy Kalifa Abdallahi's army, and occupy all of Sudan.

Winston Churchill, who much later became Britain's prime minister during World War II, was a young officer in Kitchener's army. He wrote a book, titled *The River War*, about Kitchener's epic campaign. Churchill justified the reconquest of Sudan mostly in economic terms. He said it would economically unify Egypt and Sudan while strengthening Britain's trading position along the Nile.

By this time, the British realized that Kalifa Abdallahi's Arab fighters were among the most fierce and courageous in the world. They were driven by the belief that being martyrs in battle guaranteed their place in Paradise.

Kitchener assembled an invasion force of about 25,000 well-trained men. His "grand army of the Nile," as Churchill called it, included infantry, horse cavalry, a camel corps, and steamboat transports. He equipped his men with the most modern bolt-action repeating rifles, heavy artillery, and machine guns.

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Muhammad Ahmed and the 'Turks'

The Sira, the first biography of Muhammad Ahmad, was written in 1888 by one of his followers, Ismail ibn 'Abd al-Qadir. Ismail described Ahmed in heroic terms as the true Mahdi. The following is an excerpt from the Sira about the rule of the "Turks" in Sudan.

[The land] was filled with oppression and tyranny by the Turks, who profaned the [sacredness] of the Religion and imposed the [per person] tax of the Muslims. Falsity, and infamy spread among them, and they obeyed Satan and rebelled against the Merciful [God]. They hastened to obliterate the traces of Islam and they did not fear Allah in the [Muslim] Community of the Lord of Mankind.

What was Ismail's purpose in describing the "Turks" in this way?

To transport supplies, Kitchener's men constructed a "Desert Railway," sometimes laying three miles of tracks in a day. Resupplied daily by rail, Kitchener's invasion force slowly moved southward toward Kalifa Abdallahi's capital at Omdurman.

Beginning from Cairo in March 1896, Kitchener's army took two and a half years to work its way more than 1,000 miles to Omdurman. When Kitchener reached the Mahdist capital, he created a half-circle battle line with the Nile at his back. Meanwhile, his gunboats shelled the city, damaging the dome atop the Mahdi's tomb.

The Battle of Omdurman took place on September 2, 1898. More than 50,000 Arab fighters faced Kitchener's army of 25,000. Kalifa Abdallahi's men fought on foot, horse, and camel, but less than half had guns of any kind. The rest carried swords and spears.

Kalifa Abdallahi had a smart battle plan, but his men never broke through Kitchener's battle line. Chanting religious phrases and carrying flags with quotations from the Quran, the Arab fighters were torn to pieces by intense rifle, machine gun, artillery, and gunboat firepower. Still, they kept charging until they covered the battlefield with mounds of dead and dying. An estimated 10,000 of Abdallahi's men were killed. Kitchener lost 48.

At the end of the bloody day, Kitchener entered Omdurman. He ordered the Mahdi's tomb destroyed and his bones cast into the Nile. Kitchener, however, kept the skull. Later, he conducted a memorial at Khartoum for Charles Gordon who had been beheaded there 13 years earlier. (The Mahdi's skull was eventually buried in a Muslim cemetery near Cairo.)

In the meantime, Kalifa Abdallahi escaped south with his surviving soldiers and refugee families. He attempted to reorganize his army. But after evading British troops for a year, he was finally trapped and killed in a battle on November 25, 1899. On that day, the independent Mahdist state in Sudan ended.

Britain and Egypt signed an agreement to jointly rule Sudan, with Britain as the senior partner. The appointed governor-general of Sudan headed the military and made all the laws. The agreement also outlawed the slave trade.

Kitchener became the governor-general of Sudan for a short period. In one of his reports, he wrote, "The country has at last been finally relieved of the military tyranny which started in a movement of wild religious fanaticism." Sudan remained for nearly 60 years a Muslim land controlled by a Christian European nation.

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Sudan achieved independence in 1956. But since gaining independence, the nation has suffered famines, military takeovers, civil wars, and genocide. Persecution by Sudan's Muslim Arabs against the largely Christian black African Sudanese finally resulted in the country's division into Sudan and South Sudan in 2011.

DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. Why did Britain occupy Egypt and later Sudan?
2. Why were so many Arab Sudanese drawn to the Mahdi's jihad?
3. What were the strengths and weaknesses of Kalifa Abdallahi's army at the Battle of Omdurman? Why did Abdallahi lose?

Common Core Short Written Research Report Questions

In addition to the article, research at least one print and digital source and write a 1–2 page response to one of the following questions.

1. What are the similarities and differences between the Taliban of Afghanistan/Pakistan today and the Mahdists of Sudan 130 years ago?
2. What events led to the division of Sudan into two countries in 2011?

ACTIVITY

Board of Inquiry – The Fall of Khartoum

The fall of Khartoum and the killing of Gordon in January 1885 was a disaster for the British. In this activity, students role play members of a Board of Inquiry, investigating for the British government to find out who was responsible for what went wrong in Khartoum.

1. Form small groups, each will role play a Board of Inquiry.
2. Each group should:
 - a. Examine the article and discuss who might possibly bear the responsibility for the fall of Khartoum.
 - b. Decide on who, if anyone, was responsible.
 - c. Be prepared to report to the class, citing your conclusions, reasons for them, and evidence from the article.
3. Call on a member of each group to come to the front of the room. Each member will report its groups' findings to the class. Members of the class can ask questions following the reports.
4. Ask students to vote on which conclusion they agree with.

Sources

Lincoln-Douglas Debates

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Bible Readings

Abington School District v. Schempp. 374 U.S. 203 (1963). · “About RFC.” Religious Freedom Coalition. Web. 22 Apr 2013. URL: www.religiousfreedomcoalition.org/about/ · Abraham, Henry Julian, and Barbara A. Perry. *Freedom and the Court*. UP of Kansas, 2003. · French, Kimberly. “A Victory for the Heretics.” *UU World*. 01 Jan 2003; Web. 22 Apr. 2013. URL: www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/3063.shtml · Kim, Severson. “Mississippi Tells Public Schools to Develop Policies Allowing Prayers.” *NY Times*. 16 Mar 2013. · Schempp, Ellery. Interview by Liane Hansen. *Discovering the Man Behind a Boy's Protest*. 02 Sep 2007. National Public Radio. URL: www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=14124191.

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Standards

Lincoln-Douglas Debates

National High School U.S. History Standard 11: Understands the extension, restriction, and reorganization of political democracy after 1800. (2) Understands the positions of northern antislavery advocates and southern proslavery spokesmen on a variety of issues (e.g., . . . Lincoln-Douglas debates).

California History-Social Science Standard 8.9: Students analyze the early and steady attempts to abolish slavery and to realize the ideals of the Declaration of Independence. (5) Analyze the significance of . . . the Missouri Compromise (1820), . . . the Compromise of 1850, . . . the Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854), the Dred Scott v. Sandford decision (1857), and the Lincoln-Douglas debates (1858).

Common Core Standard RH.11B12.6: Evaluate authors= differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors= claims, reasoning, and evidence.

Common Core Standard RH.11B12.8: Evaluate an author=s premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.

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National High School World History Standard 36: Understands patterns of global change in the era of Western military and economic dominance from 1800 to 1914. (3) Understands the influence of European imperial expansion on political and social facets of African and Indian society (e.g., . . . the major chain of events in Europe and Africa that led to the “scramble” for African territory, and the role of particular African governments or peoples in the partition of Africa by the Europeans) (6) Understands economic, social and religious influences on African society (e.g., . . . how and why slavery and the slave trade flourished in both West and East Africa . . .). (7) Understands African resistance movements against the British during the period of European imperial expansion (e.g., the nature of the Sudanese resistance to the British, as well as the general success of Mahdi Muhammad Ahmed and the Mahdi uprising against British imperialism).

California History-Social Science Standard 10.4: Students analyze patterns of global change in the era of New Imperialism in a least two of the following regions or countries: Africa (2) Discuss the locations of the colonial rule of such nations as England (3) Explain imperialism from the perspective of the colonizers and the colonized and the varied immediate and long-term responses by the people under colonial rules. (4) Describe the independence struggles of the colonized regions of the world, including the role of leaders and the roles of ideology and religion.

Common Core Standard WHST.11B12.7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question . . . synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

Bible Readings

National High School Civics Standard 25: Understands issues regarding personal, political, and economic rights. (1) Understands the importance to individuals and to society of personal rights (5) Knows major documentary sources of personal, political, and economic rights such as . . . court decisions (6) Understands how personal, political, and economic rights are secured by constitutional government and by such means as the rule of law, checks and balances, an independent judiciary, and a vigilant citizenry

National High School U.S. History Standard 29: Understands the struggle for racial and gender equality and for the extension of civil liberties. (3) Understands how various Warren Court decisions influenced society (e.g., . . . the effectiveness of the judiciary in promoting civil liberties).

National High School U.S. History Standard 31: Understands economic, social, and cultural developments in the contemporary United States. (3) Understands how the rise of religious groups and movements influenced political issues in contemporary American society (e.g., . . . how Supreme Court decisions since 1968 have affected the meaning and practice of religious freedom)

Common Core Standard SL.11B12.4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.

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