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H-France Review Vol. 20 (June 2020), No. 90

Jacques-Olivier Boudon, *La Campagne d'Égypte*. Paris: Belin, 2018. 320 pp. 24€ (pb). ISBN 978-2410015270.

Review by Ian Coller, University of California, Irvine.

The cover of Jacques-Olivier Boudon's *La Campagne d'Égypte* features a gleaming black granite bust of Napoleon Bonaparte mirrored by a sphinx hovering over the sands of Egypt. It is a striking image, but a perplexing one. In his introduction, Boudon invokes the "collision of two myths"--"one born of a dizzying military and political ascent that would carry its hero to the peak of glory, the other that of a magical civilization that still preserves its secrets."(p. 9) Yet it is not clear whether he wants to debunk these myths or to refashion them. In his own words, he sets out to reveal a "more differentiated reality" (*une réalité plus contrastée*) behind the "façade" (p. 10). In this, the book is a success, offering a significant advance in charting the atrocity of combat and civilian repression, confronting the realities of physical and sexual violence in ways few previous accounts have done.

Earlier scholars of the occupation, from Andre Raymond to Henry Laurens and Juan Cole, dismantled the view of the "Egyptian Expedition" as a postrevolutionary exportation of modernity to the Middle East, revealing a far messier and more destructive occupation with chaotic outcomes.[1] Boudon is not a historian of Egypt or the Middle East: in line with his other works on Napoleonic warfare, he approaches events from a French perspective, focusing primarily on the experience of French soldiers and *savants* and offering a fine-grained analysis of the military campaign on the ground.[2] The advantage of this approach lies in identifying what made this conflict distinctive without indulging in the flights of exoticizing rhetoric that so often afflict the retelling of this story. Without seeking to minimize the driving role of Bonaparte, Boudon offers a broader picture of the conquest under generals like Desaix, Kléber, and Menou, and he gives ample space to the ongoing complexities of the occupation after Bonaparte's departure. The view from the boots up helps dismantle the clichés of Napoleonic "glory" by revealing the common misery of French occupier and Egyptian occupied.

In his opening chapter, Boudon briefly discusses the origins of the Egyptian plan, giving us a glimpse of the interlocking ambitions of Talleyrand and Bonaparte. Eschewing the myth that the plan was purely the whim of Bonaparte himself, Boudon emphasizes Talleyrand's "colonial policy" (p. 15) and the cultural context of "fascination" with Egypt. We should be suspicious of Talleyrand's apparent interest in new colonies, which seemed to evaporate the moment Bonaparte left Toulon. Boudon invokes Claude-Étienne Savary's *Lettres sur l'Égypte* (1787) and Constantin-François de Volney's *Les Ruines, Ou Méditations sur les révolutions des empires* (1791),

but aside from these texts and the sporadic appearance of pyramids and obelisks, there is in fact little evidence for a wider cultural interest in Egypt during the revolutionary period.[3] Revolutionary geopolitical realities were far more pressing, and there is surprisingly little account of this here.

Perhaps because of this preconception about a French cultural fascination, Boudon tells us little about Egypt itself, the Ottoman Empire, or North Africa. In the two-page section on “Egypt on the eve of the conquest”, focus is given to famous “Mamelouks” like Roustam Raza, a servant presented to Bonaparte as a gift, who had no significance in Egyptian society (pp. 17-19). The Egypt described here is almost entirely a French conception, and a largely retrospective one. Boudon is much better on the French themselves, drawing on a large corpus of diaries, memoirs and archival documents to present a quasi-prosopographical account of the French army “on the eve of conquest”. Capsule biographies help to individualize the 45,000-strong army, but also set up his *dramatis personae*, allowing him to trace their itineraries and experiences as revealed in their writings. Boudon’s montage is neutral, avoiding editorializing and allowing the various characters to emerge onto the scene. This is mostly a virtue, but at times a line or two explaining the larger significance of these figures would help to build a more coherent picture.

In the account of the capture of Malta, we can see the effectiveness of recounting the journey and seizure of the island in multiple voices. But this approach becomes more troubling when dealing with the arrival in Egypt. When the army disembarks in Alexandria in chapter two, Boudon’s narrative is saturated by the language of his French observers faced with the shock of their hostile encounter. Historians have often shown how conflict situations generated perceptions of the so-called backwardness of the occupied people, whether in the Vendée, in Italy, or later in the Iberian peninsula.[4] Boudon’s descriptions of Alexandria do not establish sufficient distance from the set of Orientalist tropes with which the French sought to comprehend the city they had invaded: the dominant terms are “decline,” “disrepair,” “plague,”—recounting a horrible scene of an infected woman and her baby buried alive. The distorted perceptions of French observers need to be contextualized using decades of rich historical research on late eighteenth-century Egypt.[5]

In chapter three on the dynamics of the occupation, Boudon can draw on translations of two important local observers, Abd el-Rahman al-Jabarti and Nikula al-Turk. It is hard to make these official histories—composed under restored Ottoman rule—balance the intimate perception of the French sources, and for this reason the Egyptians themselves largely remain outside the narrative as Boudon recounts the continuation of the conquest into Upper Egypt. Like many French historians, Boudon is particularly drawn to the *savants* who accompanied the army, and in several cases went on to become icons of French science. The ideological transmutation of an aggressive military attack on a neutral power into a scientific expedition to civilize a barbarous people is certainly one of the greatest, and perhaps the only enduring victory of a military campaign that left 17,000 Frenchmen and innumerable Egyptian men, women and children dead, and the bulk of French naval power in tatters. Boudon is perhaps less analytical of the “Egyptian laboratory” than other historians of science have been, but through the counterpoint of their voices with those of the soldiers who began by admiring and ended by loathing them, we see better the misery of their position as compradors to a violent conquest “just to add one more line of praise in the history of Bonaparte,” as Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire observed to Cuvier.[6]

And this conquest was indeed violent, as Boudon so strikingly shows. Chapter seven, “The War Without Mercy,” candidly confronts the atrocities committed in the course of this invasion, from

mutilation and massacre to cultural destruction and religious desecration. Here, Boudon expertly draws contrasts with campaigns that preceded and followed: the rules of war in Europe no longer applied in Egypt, opening the gates to horrors beyond measure. Boudon abandons the conventional squeamishness of the Napoleonic historian to chart not only physical but sexual violence, and the impact on Egyptian women of an army of tens of thousands of unaccompanied men quartered on a resistant population for three years. This dimension of the occupation is crucial in comprehending its impact on society in Egypt and even in France: as Boudon notes later in the book, it was Egyptian women who would suffer the most as scapegoats for collaboration after the restoration of Ottoman rule. Thousands of French men took wives and mistresses or purchased slaves. In the course of brutal warfare others committed sexual crimes against women and girls of all ages. At the same time, French men could themselves be victims of rape when taken captive by the Mamelouks, for whom hierarchical sexual relations between men formed a dimension of the military caste. The associated trauma further intensified fear and hatred. This is a dimension of Napoleonic conquest that has been too long neglected, and that is receiving increased attention from historians.[7]

The last three chapters of the book recount what is frequently neglected in popular accounts--the continuation of the occupation after the departure of Bonaparte, not as a coda, but as an integral element of the story. Bonaparte was in command for less than 14 months of the three years from invasion to evacuation: his return to France gave him ultimate power over the military might of France, but little day-to-day involvement in decisions in Egypt. Boudon draws less of a contrast between Bonaparte and his successor Kléber than others have done, and he traces the continuation and even the acceleration of the repressive force of the occupation, even as Kléber sought to conclude a treaty that would permit a withdrawal from the country. Indeed, Kléber, the convinced republican patriot, appears ham-fisted with French and Egyptians alike: his assassination by a Syrian Muslim appears less inexplicable with Boudon's retelling of the disastrous invasion of Palestine, with its massacre, plague, and siege. Like his successor, Menou, Kléber's course seems dictated by the dynamics of occupation, regardless of his political views. This is a dynamic that would translate itself to the colonial politics of the century to come.

Ultimately, despite its glossy packaging, this is not a book with many heroes. Its strength is in bringing this exoticized and mythologized event into a more prosaic relation with other military campaigns, while recognizing its brutality, not as an outlier, but as an innovation that would feed other conflicts to come: from the ghastly attempt to reimpose slavery on Haiti to the guerilla war in Spain that would give rise to the horrors unforgettably drawn by Goya, and ultimately help to condition the colonial violence of France's empire in North Africa and beyond. If there is a larger global story to be told about this key event, this is a refreshing, if sobering account from the French perspective. It is a useful book to serve as a short and accessible introduction to a moment still highly worthy of our interest.

## NOTES

[1] André Raymond, *Égyptiens et français au Caire, 1798-1801* (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1998); Henry Laurens, *L'expédition d'Égypte* (Paris: Colin, 1989); Juan Cole, *Napoleon's Egypt: Invading the Middle East* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); see also Allain Bernède et. al, eds, *La Campagne d'Égypte, 1798-1801, mythes et réalités* (Paris: Musée de l'Armée, 1999).

[2] Boudon has written on the “Russian campaign” of 1812 and the “French campaign” of 1814, among many other works.

[3] As a rough indication, a search on “Égypte” on Google N-grams shows a peak around 1768, with a rapid decline to 1774, and further decrease in the 1790s, climbing gradually after 1794 to a new peak in the 1820s. This corresponds well to the identification of “Egyptomania” with the Restoration. See Anna Piussi, “The Orient of Paris: the vanishing of Egypt from early nineteenth-century Paris salons (1800-1827)” in Daniel Panzac, André Raymond, eds., *La France & l'Égypte: à l'époque des vice-rois 1805-1882* (Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 2002), 41-58. The *Archives Parlementaires* database from 1789-93 shows 86 mentions of Egypt, against 163 mentions of China, 221 mentions of Algiers, 460 mentions of Africa and 1420 mentions of India. For Bonaparte's fascination with Islam (which was much more in evidence than his interest in Ancient Egypt) see chapter 10 in my book, *Muslims and Citizens: Islam, Politics and the French Revolution* (Yale University Press, 2020).

[4] See for example Michael Broers, *The Napoleonic Empire in Italy, 1796-1814: Cultural Imperialism in a European Context?* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Stuart Woolf, “French Civilization and Ethnicity in the Napoleonic Empire.” *Past & Present*, 124 (1989): 96-120.

[5] eg. Michael Winter, *Egyptian Society under Ottoman Rule, 1517-1798* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, *Women and Men in Late Eighteenth-Century Egypt* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995); Peter Gran, *Islamic Roots of Capitalism: Egypt, 1760-1840* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979).

[6] For example, Nicole Dhombres and Jean Dhombres, *Naissance d'un pouvoir: Sciences et savants en France, 1793-1824* (Paris: Payot, 1989); Marie-Noëlle Bourguet, Daniel Nordman, Vassilis Panayatopolous, and Maroula Sinarellis, eds., *Enquêtes en Méditerranée: Les expéditions françaises d'Égypte, de Morée et d'Algérie* (Athens: Institut de Recherches Néohelléniques/FNRS, 1999).

[7] See Philip G. Dwyer, ‘It Still Makes Me Shudder’: Memories of Massacres and Atrocities during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars” *War in History* 2009 16 (4) 381-405.

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