Introduction from a North African Perspective

Mukaram Hhana and Michal Wasiuczonek

In a stunning victory under the command of Count Aleksei Orlov, the Russian fleet destroyed the sultan’s navy off the waters of Çeşme in the summer of 1770. While the battle’s strategic importance was relatively small and quickly overshadowed by other Russian victories on the Danube, it nonetheless served as potent sign of Russia’s growing military reach into the heartland of Ottoman domains and, more broadly, its entry into the Mediterranean. Pitted against the Sublime Porte in Southeastern Europe and the Caucasus, Russian imperial policies constituted the center of what came to be known the “Eastern Question,” a geopolitical quagmire that created constant concerns among in diplomatic cabinets of many an imperial center across Europe and beyond. Meanwhile, within the halls of the bab-i ʿali, the High Porte, Russian territorial expansion and the subsequent loss of Crimea prompted the Porte to introduce a wide-ranging set of naval, and later military and governmental overhauls under the auspices of Abdul Hamid I and Selim III.

Because of their intertwined histories, no scholar of the Ottoman Empire would deny the profound impact of Russian territorial
expansions on the historical trajectory of the sultan’s “well-protected domains” throughout the 19th century. However, in practice, Ottomanists’ engagement with the Russian Empire has stayed relatively limited, focusing almost exclusively on the scope of geopolitical, military, and diplomatic relations between the two land-based imperial giants. This is not for sheer oversight on the part of historians but rather due to the nature of archival sources and the barriers of languages.

This is to say that while most Anglophone, Turkophone, and Arabic-language scholarship of the Ottoman Empire has embedded the Sublime Porte within the geopolitical constellations of its European rivals, many specialists are hindered from accessing Russian sources directly, forcing us to rely on a handful of (oftentimes poorly) translated documents instead.

One of the most obvious examples is the controversy over the interpretation of the 1774 Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca. The treaty, which sealed the disastrous Ottoman losses of the Russo-Ottoman War of 1768–74, was often cited as a case of “Russian skill and Turkish imbecility” because of the clauses that secured Catherine II’s right to intervene on behalf of the Orthodox subjects of the sultan. However, as Roderic Davison has noted, this stipulation—supported by English and French translation—was not included in either the original Ottoman or Russian documents. Rather, the concessions made by the Porte were far more modest than had previously been believed.1 If we take into consideration that the 1774 constitutes one of the crucial documents for Russian-Ottoman relations in this period, the extent of the difficulties posed by the language barrier become blatantly evident.

The situation has been changing in recent decades, with notable contributions by Lale Can, Michael Reynolds, Victor Taki, and others.2 However, even when important studies by a new generation of scholars are taken into account, our knowledge of the Russian imperial presence

---

in the 19th-century Middle East and North Africa still remains relatively small in comparison to the enormous number of studies devoted to British and French encounters with the region.

This is not entirely a matter of the accessibility of sources but also owes much to the character of Russian historical experience in the Arabic-speaking domains of the Ottoman sultan, which differed greatly from that of maritime empires of Western Europe. Although the Russians made significant territorial gains in the Balkans and the Caucasus, the Middle East and North Africa proper played a secondary role in the Russian Empire’s grand strategy. With the vast expanses of its Eurasian empire, St. Petersburg was predominantly concerned with controlling the Black Sea—securing the passage of its ships through it and the Dardanelle Straits into the Mediterranean. This stands in sharp contrast to the direct control that first France and later Britain sought in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. Moreover, as Kovalevsky notes, Russian presence in the region was much smaller than either its British or French counterparts. These two forces taken together lead to the appearance, at least on the surface, that the Russian influence in the region was historically interpreted as limited and its importance negligible.

However, this conclusion is far from conclusive. In fact, Russian sources constitute a treasure trove—still largely untapped—for students of 19th-century Middle East and North Africa. Throughout the century, numerous Russian officials, scholars, merchants and pilgrims ventured across the region and frequently wrote down and published their travelogues and memoirs. Nevertheless, only a handful of them have attracted the attention of Western scholars. When approached in their own right, Russian accounts of sojourns in the Ottoman Middle East provide an alternative and, in many respects, unique perspective on the region. Far from being a source of purely factual data, they offer a distinct perspective on the 19th-century realities of the region, filtered through their authors’ own experiences of the Russian continental empire.

Egor Kovalevsky’s account of a mining expedition into Sudan fits well into this trend, providing invaluable information on Mohammed
Ali’s policies in the recently acquired territory as well as providing a distinct perspective on Egypt and Sudan as seen from the standpoint of an official and scholar with ample experience in Russia’s own imperial project. In this sense, both his narrative and the mission stem from three parallel developments: Mohammed Ali’s expansion into Sudan, the governor’s attempts to harness the human and natural resources of his domains, and the growing involvement of St. Petersburg in the Ottoman Middle East.

Mohammed Ali, the Conquest of Sudan, and the Quest for Fazoglu Gold

In many respects, the rise of Mohammed Ali at the beginning of the 19th century overturned the balance of power within the sultan’s imperial domains. Born in Kavala, he arrived in Alexandria in 1801 as a lowly quartermaster for a contingent of Balkan troops sent to oust Bonaparte’s army from Egypt. Despite his relatively modest beginnings, the young officer quickly managed to secure power by forming a political alliance with Albanian troops stationed in the province. This alliance, along with his position as quartermaster, propelled his career in the postinvasion chaos of Bonaparte’s Egypt. His powerbase and his political acumen allowed him to dominate the politics of the province and consolidate political hegemony by 1805.

In the years following his quick rise as vali, his prestige further increased. After massacring his rivals at the citadel and eliminating any serious opposition to his rule, the vali, on the behest of Mahmud II, managed to wrest control of the Hijaz and the holy cities of Mecca and Medina in a series of destructive campaigns against Abdullah bin Saud’s forces.

However, Mohammed Ali’s ambitions went far beyond the boundaries of Egypt and the Red Sea. Instead, he engaged in a multipronged political strategy to expand his possessions in the region while still maintaining his political relationship with the Ottoman Porte. To secure the resources necessary, the vali engaged in a general overhaul of the province’s military and naval fleet, as well as far-reaching
administrative and economic reforms designed to bring more revenue to the treasury, including the expansion of irrigation infrastructure, as well as early attempts at industrialization.  

This focus on increasing Egypt’s resources also played into Mohammed Ali’s decision to launch his campaign for Sudan in 1820. While still part of the Ottoman Empire’s “well-protected domains,” Egypt was now building an empire of its own, and Mohammed Ali’s forces remained in Khartoum until 1885.

However, the Egyptian conquest of Sudan failed to provide resources that Mohammed Ali hoped to secure, and the administration of such an extensive province constituted a serious challenge for the new administration. Short on man power, the governor’s troops were hit with frequent bouts of illness, revolts, and unreliable communications. This was especially true for those tasked with one of the Egyptian vali’s most important projects: the establishment of gold-mining and extraction facilities.

Finding gold deposits constituted one of the main objectives of a fact-finding mission led by Selim Qapudan in 1820, and further attempts were made in the following years with the employment of European prospectors in the 1820s and 1830s. However, the results remained disappointing for Mohammed Ali, as the establishment of the mines in Fazoglu region produced only meager amounts of gold. In 1837, a Piedmontese engineer in Egyptian service named Carlo Boreani was sent to evaluate the viability of the mines. His findings resulted in a pessimistic report, and he advised the vali to abandon the project altogether.

Despite these difficulties, Mohammed Ali forged ahead and, in 1838–39, undertook a long journey to Fazoglu to inspect the mines. Boreani’s report was dismissed in favor of a much more optimistic

---


5 Ibid.
account produced by Joseph von Russegger. Following his return to Egypt, the vali stepped up his attempts to bring Sudan under his effective control by co-opting local powerholders and tying them to his imperial enterprise. Further, the governor renewed attempts to revive the project by recruiting engineers and miners from Europe, this time turning to St. Petersburg for assistance. The request, passed to the Russian government by way of the general consul in Egypt, Aleksandr Medem, resulted in a report on gold-mining techniques employed in Russia, a leading exporter of the precious metal in this period, that was presented to the Egyptian governor.

In 1843, Mohammed Ali issued another request, this time asking for experienced engineers and miners to revive the Fazoglu project. However, his request was rejected by the tsarist government. The argument was that the booming mining industry in Russia made it impossible to spare skilled workmen. However, in order not to alienate the vali, St. Petersburg agreed to employ two Germany-educated Egyptian engineers, Ali Muhammad Ibrahim and Issa al-Dashuri, to observe the mining techniques employed in the Ural Mountains. Throughout the Egyptians’ stay in the Urals, Egor Kovalevsky was tasked with their supervision. His performance was praised by the governments in St. Petersburg and in Cairo; following Ali Muhammad and al-Dashuri’s returns, Kovalevsky received a personal gift from Mohammed Ali himself—an encrusted tobacco box—which he reciprocated by sending a collection of minerals to Egypt.

The Egyptian engineers’ sojourn in the Ural Mountains laid the groundwork for further cooperation between the Russian state and the Egyptian governor. In 1847, Mohammed Ali renewed his request for engineers. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs complied. Due to his experience in Montenegro and Central Asia, as well as his previous contacts with the Egyptian vali, Kovalevsky was a natural choice to serve as the leader of the expedition. Having recruited two experienced foremen from the Zlatoust’ mine—Ivan Borodin and Ivan Fomin—the

7 Aleksei V. Antoshin, _Zoloto Sennara: Egipet i Sudan glazami ural’skogo mastera zolotodoby-
chi XIX veka_ (Moscow: IV RAN, 2013), 19–42.
expedition set out for Egypt by way of Istanbul. It is this context that paved the way for Egor Kovalevsky’s Alexandrine docking.

Russia’s Involvement in Northeast Africa in the Mid-19th Century

Mohammed Ali’s modernization of Egypt and his imperial expansion into Sudan corresponded with the growing involvement of Russia in the Middle East and Egypt itself. The Russo-Ottoman wars of the 18th and early 19th centuries as well as Alexander I’s victory over Napoleonic France confirmed the position of Russia as a global power, and the opening of the Black Sea straits greatly expanded the empire’s interests in the Mediterranean. The rising importance of the region was reflected in the rising status of Russia’s consuls in Egypt. At the beginning of the 19th century, consular functions were performed by local merchants and go-betweens in Alexandria. However, starting in the 1830s, the post was occupied by high-ranking Russian officials with ample government experience, such as Aleksandr O. Dugamel’ This reflected the priorities of St. Petersburg and stemmed from geopolitical concerns as well as Russia’s status as a multicultural continental empire, which included the growing economic ties between Russia and Egypt.

The decline of Mediterranean corsairing and the development of warm water ports in the Black Sea increased Russia’s commercial presence in the region, including Egypt. This trend continued despite the bouts of conflict that accompanied the War of Greek Independence that engulfed the region throughout the 1820s. For example, in 1820, only 10 Russian ships dropped anchor in Alexandria; by 1827, this number almost quadrupled, showing the growing commercial exchange between the Black Sea and Egypt. Pilgrimage and religious ties constituted another important facet of Russia’s connections with the region. In the late 18th century, Russia claimed the right of patronage over the Orthodox Christian population of the Ottoman Empire. This was further enhanced by Nicholas I, who embraced Sergei Uvarov’s formula of “Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality” as state ideology in the 1830s and 1840s. This policy was exemplified by the activity of Porfirii
Uspenskii and the establishment of an ecclesiastical mission in Jerusalem in 1843, which aimed at providing support for Orthodox pilgrims in the Levant.\(^8\)

However, Orthodox Christians were by no means the only Russian subjects to engage Middle Eastern pilgrimages. Recent scholarship has demonstrated that Muslim subjects of the tsar likely outnumbered their Orthodox counterparts because of hajj.\(^9\) The Muslim subjects’ role in shaping Russian policies toward the region was by no means negligible in the 19\(^{th}\) century, in large part due to their ties with Ottoman domains. The existence of these cross-imperial confessional ties constituted a serious source of concern for the Russian authorities, especially in Crimea and the Caucasus.

**Russian-Egyptian Ties**

Mohammed Ali’s relationship with the Russian Empire was a complex and changed significantly throughout his reign. After all, Russia played a considerable role in thwarting the vāli’s expansionist designs in the Mediterranean in the late 1820s and early 1830s during the War of Greek Independence. In October 1827, the Russian navy participated in the destruction of Mohammed Ali’s newly built fleet in the Battle of Navarino, effectively cutting off supplies for the Egyptian troops and contributing to Ibrahim Pasha’s eventual withdrawal. The subsequent escalation of hostilities led to a new war between the Sublime Porte and Russia, bringing further territorial losses for the Ottoman state.

Further, Mohammed Ali’s invasion of Syria in 1831 and the following conflict with the Sublime Porte again pitted Russian and Egyptian interests against one another. As Egyptian troops under Ibrahim Pasha overran Syria and entered Anatolia, the panicked authorities in Istanbul turned to Russia for assistance in exchange for commercial and political concessions in the sultan’s domains. The Russian deployment of troops

---


and the Treaty of Hünkâr Îskelesi (1833) forced Mohammed Ali to seek an agreement with Sultan Mahmud II, bringing the hostilities to a halt and possibly saving the Sublime Porte. Yet again, St. Petersburg’s policy prevented the vali from reaching his objectives.

After the 1831–33 conflict, relations between Russia and Egypt warmed significantly, creating a favorable climate for future cooperation. In his attempts to garner international support for his modernizing efforts, Mohammed Ali saw the Russian Empire as a potential ally, one less intrusive than Great Britain or France. In turn, the government at St. Petersburg clearly recognized the vali’s influence, both in the Middle East and among Russian Muslims. As Ilya Zaytsev and A. Kroll point out, it is likely that during the 1831–33 crisis, Mohammed Ali used hajj networks to foment dissent among Muslim subjects.10

In his reports, the governor-general of Crimea reported that rumors circulated among local Tatars that—following the capture of Istanbul—Mohammed Ali would liberate Crimea from Russian rule. In the following years, Mohammed Ali corresponded with Imam Shamil, the leader of anti-Russian rebellion against the tsarist regime in the Caucasus. Taking into consideration Mohammed Ali’s prestige in the Islamic world, it comes as no surprise that post-1833 St. Petersburg sought to establish amicable ties with the Egyptian vali. At the same time, this fit into the wider pattern of the tsarist empire during this period, which aimed to expand its role in the Middle East after the agreements reached with the 1833 Ottoman Empire and the cessation of hostilities with Qājār Persia through the Treaty of Turkmenchay (1828).11

This détenté set the stage for Kovalevsky’s mission and the presence of Egyptian engineers in the Ural mines. However, it is important to note that this intellectual exchange between Russia and Egypt under Mohammed Ali was by no means one-sided. Seven years prior to Kovalevsky’s departure to Egypt, a graduate of the Cairene al-Azhar, Sheikh Muhammad Ayyad al-Tantawi (1810–61) arrived in St. Petersburg and

11 For the dynamics of Russian-Qājār relations, see Moritz Deutschmann, Iran and Russian Imperialism: The Ideal Anarchists, 1800–1914 (London: Routledge, 2017).
served as a lecturer at the Asian Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Department of Oriental Studies at the University of St. Petersburg. In this capacity, he contributed to the development of Middle Eastern studies in Russia, publishing numerous works and producing his own account of Russia in the Arabic language.

It is against this background of intensifying Russian-Egyptian contact that Egor Kovalevsky began his expedition. The political realities of the period and his own experiences in the Ural Mountains and Central Asia all played a role in the way he recounted and interpreted the state of affairs in Egypt and Sudan. In effect, it makes his memoirs an invaluable source for both Mohammed Ali’s imperial project in Africa and the Russian perception of the region.

**Kovalevsky’s Mission and Its Accounts**

Kovalevsky’s mission to Sudan has been known to Western scholars, and his biographical note was included in the *Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan*, the basic reference work for the region’s history.\(^{12}\) However, his activity in Fazoglu has been overlooked or disregarded. Richard L. Hill claims, “As a geographer the Russian gives an impression of naivety and arrogance.”\(^{13}\) In his perception of Kovalevsky’s ineptitude as a scholar, he refers to the criticisms launched against him by his contemporary P. Tremaux, who claimed that the engineer’s work included numerous geographical mistakes and had limited value as a scholarly contribution.\(^{14}\)

However, Hill’s critical judgment of Kovalevsky’s writings is rather surprising when we consider his report of the expedition as presented in this edition. While he did not shy away from moments of self-aggrandizement, Kovalevsky nonetheless creates the impression of being a keen observer of his surroundings and gives no indication of professional ineptitude. Moreover, Hill’s harsh remarks were based on

---

a single source—namely, the French translation of the lecture the engineer delivered at the Geographical Society of St. Petersburg—rather than his whole body of work. Again, we experience the necessity of utilizing Russian sources for the study of 19th-century Middle East and Africa.

Apart from Kovalevsky’s work, two other sources have been published regarding the expedition to Fazoglu. Unfortunately, the account of Ivan Borodin, a foreman who accompanied Kovalevsky in Fazoglu, has been published only in Russian, which renders it similarly inaccessible to Western scholarship.15

The other account is a fragment of the chronicle of Sudan, translated and published in English by Richard Hill in 1956. The anonymous author, who accompanied the expedition to the Tumat valley and produced an account of political events in French, is replete with grammatical mistakes.16 The bombastic style of the source contrasts starkly with the much soberer and to-the-point literary strategy employed by Kovalevsky, whose arrival to Cairo—as the author claims—overjoyed Mohammed Ali: “The Viceroy saw in him the Mahdi of the Muslims and the Messiah of the Jews. Honors, emoluments, and facilities surpassing those rendered to the highest personage in any European court were lavished on the polar bear from Siberia and his companions.”17

Literary decorum aside, the chronicle published by Hill provides a much shorter and shoddier narrative. However, it provides some complementary information that Kovalevsky—who addressed his account to a general audience—decided to omit, such as details regarding the technique of prospecting. Thus, from our perspective, while the anonymous chronicle provides some interesting details, it constitutes an inferior source regarding the events surrounding the mission, as well as lacks details regarding the Russian’s discussions with Mohammed Ali and Ibrahim Pasha.

In this sense, Kovalevsky’s account constitutes the central source for Mohammed Ali’s last attempts to revive the Fazoglu gold-mining

15 Antoshin, Zoloto Sennara, 7–11. Unless noted otherwise, translations in this chapter are my own.
17 Ibid., 114.
project and, consequently, one of the main aspects of Egyptian imperial policies in Sudan. In the following sections, I will discuss the topics that Kovalevsky focused on during his sojourn in Egypt and Sudan, as well as the interpretative framework he applied to analyze them.

Kovalevsky and Mohammed Ali’s Egypt

In many respects, Kovalevsky follows Orientalist tropes regarding Egyptian history. He focuses on antiquity and ignores virtually all of the country’s Islamic history, only deeming to mention the conqueror of Egypt, ʿAmr ibn al-ʿAs, and then Saladin, who himself is only referenced when discussing the very prominent Citadel of Cairo. Particularly striking is the almost complete erasure of Ottoman history, though the lands, upon Kovalevsky’s travels, still constituted a formal part of sultan’s “well-protected domains.” Indeed, the only reference to the Sublime Porte that makes it into the account is Kovalevsky’s description of Mohammed Ali’s rise to power at the beginning of the 19th century.

This stands in sharp contrasts with extensive descriptions of ancient Egyptian and Nubian monuments that the author visited, complemented with Herodotus’s comments on the country and its people. Kovalevsky’s propensity to ignore Islamic history is exemplified in his account of Alexandria: after mentioning the city’s grandeur in antiquity and at the eve of Arab conquest, Kovalevsky quickly moves on to the Napoleonic period and the reign of Mohammed Ali, claiming that the vali took over Alexandria in a “most miserable state.” In this sense, the author creates an impression that the “golden age” of Egyptian antiquity was followed by a millennium of decline, which ended only with the French invasion in 1798 and the emergence of Mohammed Ali. In this sense, Kovalevsky is very much a man of his time.

Kovalevsky impressions of the cities of Egypt were overwhelmingly negative. He claimed that—with the exceptions of Cairo and Alexandria—every single one of them “is worse than the one preceding it.” While he praised Alexandria’s European style boulevards and architecture, his perception of Cairo was much more reserved. On the
one hand, he was certainly impressed by the extent of the city, as well as the abundance of antiquities, but simultaneously decried the decay of numerous buildings, the lack of hygiene, and considered the new Levantine-style edifices disagreeable.

The Ottoman erasure further highlights the role of the vali, whom Kovalevsky identifies as the modernizer of Egypt and the driving force behind the imperial expansion into Sudan. However, his portrayal of the elderly ruler was written in an ambiguous and somewhat melancholic fashion:

Mohammed Ali is not tall; shriveled by age and illness, he seemed diminutive, his tiny hands and head matching his entire figure; his thin white beard and small mustache did not conceal his face, once handsome but now pale and wrinkled, although not in the least unpleasant, as it can often be said of old men—on the contrary, it made you respect and trust him, whilst his light-brown, deep-set eyes, quick and alive, still glinting, illuminated his figure in a peculiar way, evidence that he was still sparkling with vitality and possessed of a rebellious spirit, just as active today as he had been 20 years ago. Only from time to time could we hear some terrible exclamation that seemed to erupt from the ailing man’s deepest soul, all of a sudden, through no effort of his own. It frightened us, but the others were accustomed to it, for Viceroy’s illnesses had always been accompanied by similar cries, which neither his strong will nor the efforts of doctors could eliminate. They say it occurred in consequence of the extreme moral stress that he had suffered during the war with the Wahhabis.

In Kovalevsky’s eyes, Mohammed Ali presented himself as a shrewd and forceful ruler who pursued his goals with ruthlessness and determination, paying scant attention to the human and financial costs of his enterprises. This is particularly salient in his discussion of irrigation system, which the vali greatly expanded by conscripting local peasantry as corvée. Kovalevsky discusses Mohammed Ali’s style of governance in the context of the construction of the Mahmoudiyah Canal, which linked Alexandria to the Nile. As he points out, while the canal was
finished within 10 months, disease and the lack of provisions took an enormous toll on the workers.

Similar traits manifested with regard to the Fazoglu project. For example, Mohammed Ali offered to send 10,000 workers right away, a plan that startled Kovalevsky, as the infrastructure was not yet set up. While the engineer clearly enjoyed his discussions with the vali, he nonetheless remarks that Mohammed Ali had grown increasingly reclusive with age and distrustful of those outside his immediate circle. These points, coupled with the governor’s low tolerance for dissent, inspire Kovalevsky to write, “Everyone wanted, in their turn, to cheer the old Pasha, as if he were a spoilt child.”

Nonetheless, Kovalevsky appreciated Mohammed Ali’s achievements and saw the ailing vali in a generally positive light, valuing his determination, praising his modernization of the Egyptian economy and attempts to uproot the administrative abuse that impoverished the population. This last point, as per Kovalevsky, was hampered by the prevalent corruption among officials and not the heavy hand of the pasha. Kovalevsky was equally unimpressed with the character traits among Egyptians, who allegedly “have no self-confidence whatsoever, neither will-power nor character, not a shade of personal dignity or self-respect.”

Kovalevsky argued that this was the basis for the virtual exclusion of Egyptians from the sphere of administration. However, administrative positions were historically occupied by Turks, Circassian, and Albanians, which further limited the upward mobility for the local population. This struggle between Mohammed Ali’s efforts to reform Egypt and the administrative inertia of the state apparatus is best exemplified in Kovalevsky’s dim hopes for his own mining project in Fazoglu. According to the Russian, the determination of the vali was the only thing that kept the project alive. With his eventual abdication of power, the whole enterprise was doomed to fail. He writes,

Bearing in mind the close-minded stubbornness and superstitions of the present-day Governor-General, Khalid Pasha, who is able to destroy but not to create. Mohammed Ali, who dreamed of the discovery of gold
(that favorite idea of his whole life), who spent several million piasters on the business over 20 years, undertaking a most dangerous journey to the Sudan, where he was struck by an illness due to his complete disappointment in the success of the matter—Mohammed Ali was not destined to see this enterprise realized, even though he still talks, dimly and unconsciously, of the search for gold.

In the Russian’s narrative, Mohammed Ali appears as a tragic figure in many respects: a forceful, but ultimately unsuccessful reformer increasingly engulfed in by crippling senility.

The news of Ibrahim Pasha’s succession reached the expedition on the way back to Alexandria. The Russian had a chance to meet the regent in Alexandria, prior to the latter’s departure for Istanbul. Ibrahim Pasha struck Kovalevsky with his unassuming behavior, greeting him in a European fashion and strolling by foot along the streets to buy candleholders. Ibrahim expressed great interest in the expedition’s findings, including its geographical and ethnographical surveys, and made plans for securing the frontier with Ethiopia. While Ibrahim Pasha definitely impressed the author with his way of life, modesty, and military fame, Kovalevsky nonetheless remarks that the son is not as brilliant as the father.

In general, Kovalevsky steers away from discussing international politics, with the single exception of the news regarding the revolutionary wave that swept through Europe in 1848. Instead, European penetration can be seen in Kovalevsky’s everyday situations and encounters with other imperial agents. The flurry of activity accompanying the arrival of Indian mail to el-Aft or the sorry state of the Catholic mission led by Bishop Cozzolani and Father Rillo—who, during their stay in Khartoum, failed to convert a single soul—provide us with insights into the Russian’s understanding of his imperial rivals. Kovalevsky also provides us with other details regarding the Russian presence in the region, including the presence of a consular agent in Keneh, whose task was to assist Russian subjects performing hajj, further evidence of Islam’s role in Middle Eastern-Russian ties. In these nuances, we can glean insights into Kovalevsky’s intended audience in St. Petersburg.
Kovalevsky and the Egyptian-Sudanese Imperial Experience

In late January 1848, Kovalevsky and his mission embarked from Cairo toward their final destination in Sudan. From the very beginning, the Russian engineer highlights enormous difficulties associated with Egypt's Sudanese expansion, most important of which were unreliable communication, long supply lines, and Egypt's lack of sufficient administrative capacity. The sections of the route from Cairo and Khartoum, where the party had to disembark and cross the desert, proved to be particularly trying for the engineer, who suffered from extensive heat and thirst. For Kovalevsky, the Nubian Desert constituted a tomb devoid of life and water.

Further challenges focused on the lack of proper administration. Kovalevsky describes the Sudanese system, which centered around a governor-general in Khartoum and the mudirs of the provinces (Dongola, Taka, Kordofan, Khartoum, Sennar, Fazoglu.) Kovalevsky argued that the weak administrative structure meant administrative boundaries mattered little in actual governance and that the distribution of power only created further challenges for proper authority. In fact, with his control of vast provincial resources, and at a safe distance from Cairo, Governor-General Ahmed Pasha Abudan exercised considerable power and used it enhance his own position vis-à-vis Mohammed Ali. According to Kovalevsky, Abudan looked to follow the example of Mohammed Ali and break off his relations with the metropole.

In order to secure his base of power, he replaced many of incumbent mudirs, inserted his clients into the army ranks, and established contacts with rival Ottoman governors via the port of Suakin. These actions raised Mohammed Ali's suspicion, but Ahmed Pasha was able to retain his position, promising to launch a campaign into Darfur, another region that the vali had been hoping to conquer. However, the campaign never materialized, and Ahmed Pasha finally committed suicide in 1845 in order to escape his looming arrest.

Subsequently, the vali tried to decentralize the system of governance by sending the comptroller Mohammed Pasha Melikhli to manage the
province while enhancing the prerogatives of mudirs. However, this plan also failed. By 1847, Mohammed Ali was forced to revert to the previous arrangement and appointed Halid Pasha as the new governor-general. Kovalevsky deemed him superstitious and injudicious, which bode poorly for the pasha’s Sudan enterprise.

Further troubles were posed by the climate and diseases, which took a serious toll on the vali’s troops from Cairo. High mortality rates among Egyptian troops forced local commanders to recruit locally, but Sudanese troops—which constituted 80 percent of Mohammed Ali’s forces in the region—were not reliable. In Wad Medina, Kovalevsky mentions a failed revolt among the local troops, who conspired to kill the Egyptian soldiers and abandon their service altogether. Troubles were further exacerbated by a constant shortage of manpower and often lax discipline among the troops, not least due to considerable amounts of liquor consumed. Moreover, the lack of frontier garrisons opened the country to predatory raids from neighboring lands, most importantly by the Galla, who—according to Kovalevsky—enjoyed a reputation of being invincible.18

In spite of these challenges, Kovalevsky identifies Sudan as a fruitful resource for Mohammed Ali’s administration, highlighting its human and natural assets. He considers Khartoum one of the best locations in Mohammed Ali’s domains, second only to Alexandria and Cairo. Further, Kovalevsky points out opportunities for trade that could revive other spaces and, most importantly, Sennar. Upon his return to Alexandria, the Russian went so far as to propose a secured border with Ethiopia and the Galla, suggesting to Ibrahim Pasha to properly equip Sudanese units and station them at the garrisons along the frontier.

However, his main focus during his stay in Sudan remained geographical and ethnographic research. Kovalevsky provides detailed description of the tribes and ethnic groups inhabiting the province, with a special look at the region of Fazoglu and Sennar, providing interesting, although limited, analyzes of languages and indigenous beliefs. Even more precise are his descriptions of geological features of the country, its flora and fauna. Kovalevsky shows a somewhat amusing fascination

---

with particular species, which he mentions repeatedly: the camel (which he compares with the camels of Central Asia), crocodile, giraffe, and baobab. However, the topic he is most concerned with is the location of the sources of the White Nile, hotly debating the topic throughout the text. His research, which is known through French translations of his work, constituted an important contribution to the discussion that was taking place exactly at this time, involving prominent geographers such as Antoine-Thomson d’Abbadie and Charles Tilston Beke.

The Russian Imperial Experience and Kovalevsky’s Perception of Egyptian Sudan

By the time Kovalevsky arrived in Egypt, he was experienced as a military and mining engineer in the employ of the Russian Empire, with deployments in the Urals, the Altai, Montenegro, and Khiva. This experience as an imperial servant in Eurasia provided him with an interpretative grid, which he utilized when describing the Egyptian imperial experiment and ethnography of Sudan in a manner distinct from Western travelers.

This becomes apparent as soon as he begins describing his conversation with Mohammed Ali. In response to the vali’s remarks on the harsh climate of Sudan, the Russian lightheartedly points out that the conditions are not dissimilar from those in Siberia:

Here, he said incidentally, you have to constantly change your underwear for perspiration, but in the Sudan, no sooner has it got wet than it dries and begins crackling like paper: crack, crack!

I told him that a similar thing could happen in Siberia too: no sooner has your underwear got wet than it freezes, and then it also begins crackling like paper: crack, crack! He was much amused by my remark.

Of course, these comparisons are not limited to remarks on the speed of drying undergarments but abound throughout the narrative. For Kovalevsky, the great distances and harsh environmental conditions of Sudan corresponded to the Russian imperial experience in Siberia.
However, not all his comparisons with the Russian landscape are as gloomy. When arriving in Sudan, he is thoroughly impressed with the rich vegetation and vastness of the province: “Nature is sprawled widely, in a manner reminiscent of Russia; there is sufficient room for both man and wild beasts, and myriads of birds, and the various reptile creatures inhabiting these forests—indeed, man takes up the least space of all.” This is especially the case for the nomadic population of Egypt and Sudan, whom he constantly compares with Central Asian nomads, most notably the Kyrgyz.

In a detailed comparison, he argues that while Bedouins are more resilient in bearing the harsh conditions of travel, they are generally more prone to flee and have only a limited grasp of the principles of navigation across the desert when compared with Central Asian pastoralists. In spite of these differences, however, their styles of life—including the principles of hospitality and loose attachment to religious prescription and their reliance on camels and horses for survival—show striking similarities. At the same time, he points out the rift dividing the Bedouins from fellahs, from whom the former differ in all respects.

While it cannot be proven, it is quite possible that Kovalevsky’s origins and life in the Russian Empire contributed to his perception of race, which is quite distinct from those that were emerging in the West. In his discussion of the black population of Sudan, he strongly rejects the claims—inspired by Monboddo and Rousseau—of the inherent biological inferiority of Africans. Though, in line with 19th-century discourses, he refers to whiteness as the superior skin color and sees “lack of whiteness” as a defect, he insists that there is no biological grounds for racial theories. In this sense, he identifies nurture and social background as the defining features of one’s mental capabilities and pointed out that the Sudanese, “not being alien to any human ideas, shall sooner be reasoned with than a Belorussian in our land or a French peasant living far from the high road and the city.”

While there is little chance of exploring how Kovalevsky’s views came to be, it is tempting to see this insistence on social environment and mode of life rather than physiological differences as a reflection of Russian imperial experience. Since the mid-16th century, the Grand
Duchy of Muscovy and its successor, Imperial Russia, faced the challenge of accommodating the wide array of ethnic and religious identities of its subjects. The administrative practice of cooptation resulted in an inclusive, composite elite, which included Orthodox Russian Muslims and Christians of various denominations and defined itself primarily along social rather than religious or cultural lines. This system was further reinforced during the reign of Catherine the Great, who drew on both traditional imperial models and Enlightenment ideals of religious toleration in order to support the multiconfessional nature of the Russian autocracy.¹⁹ Largely continued after the empress’s death, these policies served as both the institutional framework and the mental grid for interpreting diversity.

At the same time, this horizontal inclusiveness existed within stark vertical hierarchies, as is most evident in the institution of serfdom, abolished only in 1861.²⁰ The centrality of serfdom as the defining feature of an individual’s place in Russian society overrode religious differences, though it did not necessarily imply the existence of a racially defined difference between the aristocracy and its serfs. While we find isolated cases where such opinions were uttered, it seems that racial theories played only a limited role in justifying social hierarchies within the Russian imperial structure. More often there not, the deplorable state of the peasantry was interpreted in terms of ignorance rather than inherent biological capacities—a sharp divergence from that of their Western counterparts. Furthermore, as the 19th century progressed, an idealized vision of peasant community became in fact an object of aspiration for the intellectual and social elites as a means to remedy their own sense of alienation. In the generation that followed Kovalevsky’s, the Slavophile movement positioned the Russian peasants

---

¹⁹ Robert D. Crews, *For Prophet and Tsar: Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 2. This commitment to tolerance sometimes undermined other goals of imperial policy in the religiously mixed provinces of the empire, as Mara Kozelsky points out, effectively providing religious minorities with a competitive advantage over their Orthodox counterparts. See Mara Kozelsky, *Christianizing Crimea: Shaping Sacred Space in the Russian Empire and Beyond* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009).

²⁰ For the new approach to serfdom as a crucial institution of Russian social and political order, see Elise Kimmerling Wirtschaftler, *Russia’s Age of Serfdom, 1649–1861* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2008).
as the caretakers of the “true Rus” heritage, as opposed to that of the cosmopolitan capitals of St. Petersburg and Moscow. Needless to say, such juxtaposition would have been impossible if the peasantry was considered physiologically or racially inferior.

This complex and at times paradoxical attitude toward diversity and hierarchy arguably found its fullest expression in the writings of another Russian with ample firsthand experience of the Middle East. Born in 1831, Konstantin Leontiev, who worked as a consul in numerous postings within the Ottoman Empire during the 1850s and 1860s, owed his fame to his status as a social thinker. In contrast to the overwhelming sentiment of Russian public opinion, which pushed the tsarist authorities to support Southern Slavs against the Sublime Porte, Leontiev argued that the Ottomans should be left to rule in the Balkans, since they were a shield that protected the diversity of their domains against the onslaught of the equalizing liberal ideology. While Leontiev’s unusual stance, which favored diversity and distinctiveness, is far from the sober description of Kovalevsky, both men are the products of the centuries-long Russian experience with diversity and attempt to explain it through a cultural rather than a biological lens. In this sense, the realities of the Russian colonial enterprise in Eurasia and the Egyptian expansion in Sudan were much more similar than either were to French or British colonialism.

The Importance of Kovalevsky’s Account for the Study of Egypt and Sudan

Taken together, the aforementioned aspects of Kovalevsky’s travel account provide a treasure trove for researchers studying Egypt and Sudan in the mid-19th century, elucidating on a number of topics. First,

---


"A Journey to Inner Africa" provides an important contribution to the history of imperial explorations of the broader Sudan, both in terms of geographical discoveries and territorial expansion. While Kovallevsky’s claims to novelty are to some extent exaggerated, he nonetheless provides ample information about Sudan and contributes to one of the greatest scholarly debates of the period: the location of the Nile’s sources.

Even more importantly, for the history of the Middle East, he presents a vivid picture of Egypt’s colonial project in Sudan, Mohammed Ali’s quest for Sudanese gold, and the challenges that ultimately brought about the failure of the enterprise. This abortive endeavor formed the crux of the vali’s colonial ambition, his attempt to enhance the position of Egypt and modernize state infrastructure. Kovalevsky’s detailed account as presented here easily surpasses other Western-language sources on the topic. In this sense, it constitutes a must-read for any scholar addressing Egyptian imperial policies in Sudan.

Finally, Kovalevsky’s origin and career in the tsar’s service accounts for a different way of seeing the region in the mid-19th century. The Russian vantage point—born from its own imperial experience, which differed from that of Western European empires—elucidates both similarities and differences between its own Eurasian domains and Egyptian possessions in Sudan. The presence of a nomadic population, the multiethnic character of the elite, and similar challenges posed by sparsely populated and environmentally adverse domains run like a red thread throughout Kovalevsky’s account; taking into consideration the role Russia played in the region throughout the 19th century, the engineer’s account is too important for students of the region to ignore.