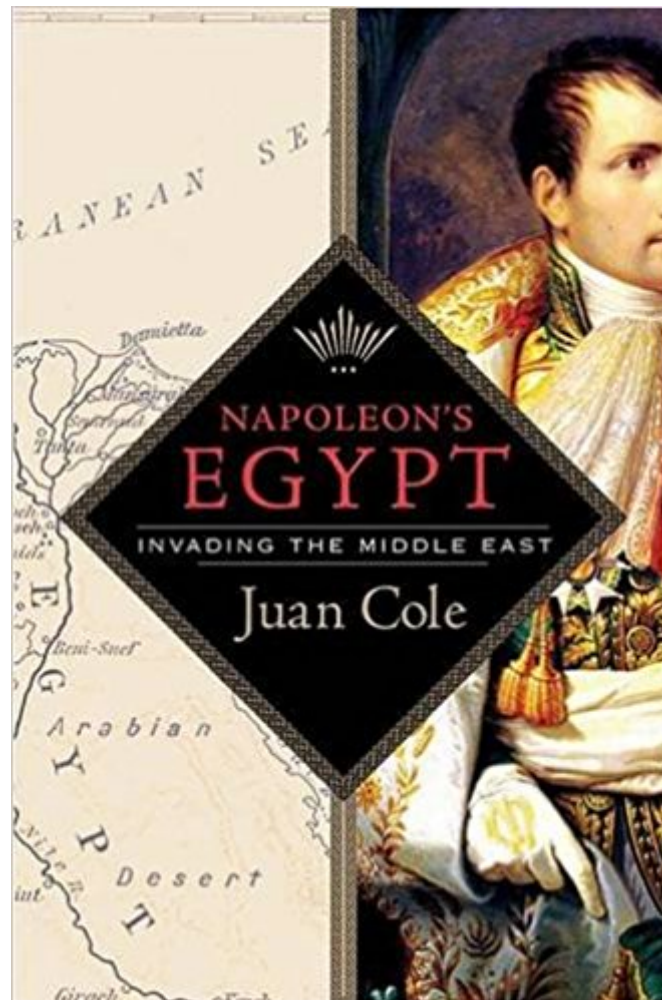




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Napoleon's Egypt: Invading The Middle East



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Synopsis

In this vivid and timely history, Juan Cole tells the story of Napoleon's invasion of Egypt. Revealing the young general's reasons for leading the expedition against Egypt in 1798 and showcasing his fascinating views of the Orient, Cole delves into the psychology of the military titan and his entourage. He paints a multi-faceted portrait of the daily travails of the soldiers in Napoleon's army, including how they imagined Egypt, how their expectations differed from what they found, and how they grappled with military challenges in a foreign land. Cole ultimately reveals how Napoleon's invasion, the first modern attempt to invade the Arab world, invented and crystallized the rhetoric of liberal imperialism.

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Customer Reviews

In July 1798, Napoleon landed an expeditionary force at Alexandria in Egypt, the opening move in a scheme to acquire a new colony for France, administer a sharp rebuff to England and export the values of French republicanism to a remade Middle East. Cole, a historian of the Middle East at the University of Michigan, traces the first seven months of Napoleon's adventure in Egypt. Relying extensively on firsthand sources for this account of the invasion's early months, Cole focuses on the ideas and belief systems of the French invaders and the Muslims of Egypt. Cole portrays the French as deeply ignorant of cultural and religious Islam. Claiming an intent to transplant liberty to Egypt, the French rapidly descended to the same barbarism and repression of the Ottomans they sought to replace. Islamic Egypt, divided by class and ethnic rivalries, offered little resistance to the initial French incursion. Over time, however, the Egyptians produced an insurgency that, while it couldn't

hope to win pitched battles, did erode French domination and French morale. Perplexingly, Cole ends his account in early February 1799, with Napoleon still in control of Egypt but facing increasingly effective opposition. Napoleon's attack on Syria is only mentioned, not detailed, and his return to Cairo and eventual flight to France are omitted altogether. In a brief epilogue, Cole makes an explicit comparison between Napoleon's adventure in Egypt and the current American occupation of Iraq. Though at times episodic and disorganized, this doesn't detract from the value of Cole's well-researched contribution to Middle Eastern history. Illus. (Aug.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

At the end of the eighteenth century, the Middle East had remained beyond the orbit of European concerns since the end of the Crusades in the late thirteenth century. Egypt, in particular, was viewed as a backward Ottoman province. In 1798, Napoleon led a massive force across the Mediterranean to the Nile Delta, quickly overwhelming the Egyptian forces, but the French occupiers were expelled by British and Ottoman armies in 1801. Although the military effects of the French incursion were minimal, the long-term cultural and political results were immense. Historian Cole, effectively utilizing diaries and letters of contemporaries on both sides, illustrates the confusion, hostilities, and necessary accommodations as two distinct cultures collide. French scholars who accompanied the expedition make the now familiar claims of "liberating" a people from backward oppressors while respecting the traditions of a great people. Arab reactions range from outrage to indifference. At the center of events, of course, is the young emerging titan, Napoleon, who is revealed here as cynical, power hungry, but possessed of an enormous intellect and insatiable curiosity. Jay Freeman Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

This was a well done book that was very even handed. All the other books about Napoleon in Egypt that I have read have been very pro-French. This one showed that the Egyptians, the Berbers in particular, used much of the same tactics in fighting the French that George Washington and the Continental Army used in fighting the British. Hit and Runs, fight and retreat and fight head on when the odds were favorable. What is missing in this (and the other books) is truly the 'why' Napoleon chose to fight and invade his only ally at a time when all of Europe wanted to destroy the new France. There was not any advanced diplomacy with the Ottoman Sultan. There was no agreement, no nod and no desire to have the French in Egypt. Well done. Glad I read this.

Both a military and a cultural history, and for good reason. After Napoleon's infantry squares and

artillery techniques prove absolutely lethal to fast and courageous Ottoman cavalry, the war becomes an occupation, and the occupation will not be decided by military might alone. It is a joy to watch the gifted and ruthless Napoleon gamely struggling to master occupation politics in a cultural setting of which he has only the dimmest grasp, and to watch his opponents outwit him using time-tested strategies of resistance while making up a few of their own. Unforgettable moments range from the ridiculous to the macabre. Napoleon lets word get out that he might convert to Islam and bring his army with him, in an attempt to curry favor among Muslim clerics, but his army quickly nixes the idea, as the French were unwilling to endure circumcision and give up wine. French officers discover the pleasures and perils of harems. And in a remote desert fortification, one third of Napoleon's soldiers contract a local disease that causes their eyelids to flip inside out and they go blind. An attack comes, and the blind soldiers are pushed to the front by their comrades and told not to fire until the enemy closes to 75 yards. Juan Cole is a mideast expert and knows Arabic, so he well understands the Egyptian context and can show how locals perceived the French as well as the reverse. He enjoys the occasional victories of the Egyptian underdogs while at the same time retaining empathy for the French as they try to adapt to what becomes a terrible predicament.

Napoleon's Egypt: Invading the Middle East by Juan Cole should surely be considered "must reading" for anyone interested in today's foreign policy issues as they relate to this part of the world. It might appear a bit extreme to say it, but after reading this relatively short but deeply researched volume, one is likely to come to the conclusion that it is difficult to understand today's Middle East without it. It is a piece of history often ignored and left unexplored, but is arguably one of the critical "keys" to understanding today's events in the region. Cole's book details Napoleon's invasion of the nation of Egypt in 1798, just a few years after the French Revolution transformed French society, and specifically covers the unfolding of the event from 1798 to 1801. This is, of course, before Napoleon coronated himself Emperor in 1804, and therefore, as one reads the text, it must be remembered that this is Napoleonic "pre-history;" at least, "pre-history" to what is more commonly known about Napoleon's career. The book describes in extensive detail virtually every major military and civilian event of the invasion, including battles, uprisings, police actions, civil ceremonies, attempts at integration, populace control, and political tactics. But the book covers substantially greater than these alone, bringing to life the feelings of local tribes and individuals who sought to come to grips with the invasion in any way they could. It is a dispassionate account, but the accuracy and insight offered by the narrative cannot but help to swell the emotions, and the text offers a view of the event in such a manner that we are forced to rethink what we thought we knew

about this period in history. The similarities of this historical event with today's Iraq War are frighteningly similar. So similar, in fact, that some of the reviewers of the text have, like myself, tagged the work as a "must read" for anyone wishing to understand today's Middle East political realities. When we read towards the very end of the book the reasons why Napoleon himself decided that torture was ineffective and should be banned (Napoleon said that those under torture would say anything to be relieved, and most likely would say exactly what they knew the torturer wanted to hear most, regardless of its truthfulness), we cannot help but wonder why today's leaders can't come to the same conclusion. And the story has many more eerie parallels -- unilateral invasion, occupation tactics, propaganda techniques, religious appeals - that make it appear to be the "prequel" of the Iraq War. By reading this in a somewhat removed, historical setting, we are able to more clearly see the issues raised by such military events, and can develop conclusions that are not always as easy to see when the event is in progress. This alone makes the book a worthwhile read for any modern reader. Cole does a good job of communicating the details of the invasion, including generals, important local personalities and leaders, troop movements, bouts of sickness, civilian control techniques, and so on, without making the text overwhelming. The names and number of specific individuals, however, towards the end of the book can become difficult to follow. Nevertheless the book is excellently written, with an eye toward historical scholarship, thoroughly documented and judiciously annotated when needed. The book is based mainly on eyewitness testimonials and recorded memoirs from first-hand witnesses, as the topic has been largely avoided by historians of the past two centuries, making these source documents the key materials available on the subject. There is a short section at the end of the text for additional reading for both French and English readers. A highly recommended text for the history reader, political scientist, or anyone wishing to make further sense of the Middle East as it is known today. Five stars.

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