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General Gordon's Last Crusade: The Khartoum Campaign and the British Public

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On January 26, 1885, Khartoum fell. The fortress-city which had withstood an onslaught by Mahdist forces for ten months had become the last bastion of Anglo-Egyptian rule in the Sudan, represented in the person of Charles George Gordon. His death at the hands of the Mahdi transformed what had been a simple evacuation into a latter-day crusade, and caused the British people to re-evaluate their view of their empire. Gordon’s death became a matter of national honor, and it would not go unavenged. The Sudan had previously existed in the British consciousness as a vast, useless expanse of desert, and Egypt as an unfortunate financial drain upon the Empire, but no longer. Images of Gordon defiantly facing his attackers on the ramparts of Khartoum stirred up in the British consciousness pride at the man’s accomplishments and a resolute determination that his death would not be in vain.\(^1\) In death, Gordon represented to the British the best qualities of an Englishman: His life had been continual service to Queen and Country, promoting the ideals of Christianity and civilization to peoples yet living in darkness. They saw him as the ambassador of the values of the British Empire: Civilization, Christianity, and good government. As a popular music hall song stated, “His life was England’s glory, his death was England’s pride.”\(^2\)

Gordon was a hero because he embodied the tenets of Victorian values and religion. Thomas Carlyle in his seminal work on Victorian heroism, *On Heroes and Hero Worship*, defines religion as, “The thing a man does practically believe...the thing a man does practically lay to heart concerning his vital relations to this mysterious Universe, and his duty and destiny there.”\(^3\) Gordon was a devout Christian, so he embodied the spirit of Victorian missionary evangelism. Gordon fought against rebellions and upheld order, so he embodied civilization. Gordon sought to end corruption in the Sudan and restore proper self-rule to the region, so he embodied good government. He was a martyr to these three tenets of the Victorian imperial religion.

Almost immediately after Gordon’s death, the British public viewed intervention in the Sudan as necessary. However,

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they did not think of the war in terms of national conquest, which was its final result. Gordon’s death made the war a reluctant crusade, a necessary interference in African affairs forced upon the British by a religious revolt. The British, as a rule, did not see themselves as warmongering imperialists, preferring to think of their rule and interference in other nation’s affairs as a paternalistic necessity; in their view annexation was “forced” upon the Empire. Gordon’s death made the war a reluctant crusade, a necessary interference in African affairs forced upon the British by a religious revolt. The British, as a rule, did not see themselves as warmongering imperialists, preferring to think of their rule and interference in other nation’s affairs as a paternalistic necessity; in their view annexation was “forced” upon the Empire. Britons saw themselves as the most enlightened society in the world, with a mission to spread this enlightenment to other peoples.

The Sudan is a vast region south of Egypt, watered by the Blue and White Nile Rivers. It stretches for nearly a million square miles: one quarter the size of Europe. Deriving its name from the Arabic bilad al-Sudan, or “The Land of the Blacks,” the Sudan was host to numerous ethnic groups and tribes, all dominated by their Arab rulers in the north. Before the Anglo-Egyptian War of 1882, Sudan was governed by Egypt. The Egyptians burdened Sudan with heavy taxes and stripped it of its natural resources. Egyptian garrisons served as the only law and order in the province, and they were only concerned with collection of taxes. Sudan acted as a backwater region where Egyptian administrators sent second-rate officers as punishment either for crimes or for incompetence.

While Sudan remained an Egyptian dominion, Egypt itself became a dependency of the British Empire. Subtle manipulations of economic policy allowed Britain to gain a foothold in Egypt without violating Ottoman sovereignty. From 1838-1841, Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston established free trade with the Ottoman Empire. The British hoped that the free market would liberalize the Turkish people, and allow it to become a modernized state under the influence and guidance of Great Britain. This policy was part of Palmerston’s larger policy of attempting to secure freedom of action, in which Britain deployed her “moral weight” behind peoples struggling for political

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5 Ibid., 78.
6 At present (2012), this region is divided into two sovereign states, the Republic of Sudan in the north and the Republic of South Sudan in the south. I will use the term “Sudan” to refer to the entire region, as it was politically unified in 1884-1898.
liberty. Palmerston stated his mission was to “extend, as far as possible, civilization,” although without military force or expense.  

The Sultan became increasingly dependent upon foreign loans in order to maintain his empire. Heavy taxes caused revolt in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Ottoman Empire finally went bankrupt in 1876. A similar situation happened with the Khedive of Egypt, who had an outstanding debt of £90 million to British and French creditors. Nevertheless, the Disraeli government rejected outright any partition of the Ottoman Empire or occupation of Egypt, even though Egypt and the Suez could secure passage to India. In rejecting Egypt, Benjamin Disraeli said, “Constantinople is the key of India, and not Egypt and the Suez Canal.”  

The British policy of free trade and non-interventionism ended in 1882, with the Anglo-Egyptian War. In order to restore the pro-British Khedive Tewfik’s rule of Egypt against the rule of nationalistic colonel Arabi Pasha, the Royal Navy bombarded Alexandria and sent an expedition to attack his forces at the Battle of Tel el-Kabir in the Delta. This resulted in de facto protectorate status for Egypt. As such, British rule now extended to the Sudan as well. Heavily taxed, burdened with misgovernment, and resentful of foreign and Christian rule, the Sudan was ripe for rebellion. The revolt which followed centered on the figure of the Mahdi, a promised redeemer of the Islamic faith.  

In Islamic eschatology, the Mahdi is a promised redeemer and purifier of the earth, who shall appear in the days before the Second Coming of Jesus and the Last Judgment. The man who laid claim to this title was named Muhammad Ahmad. He was born around 1846 in Dongola, to an obscure and poor family, but one that claimed Ashraf, or descent from the Prophet Muhammad himself. This lineage was the prime criterion he would use to establish his claim. From his early life, Muhammad Ahmad pursued the life of a religious scholar. He first sought religious training under Muhammad el Kheir in Berber, and upon reaching

12 Ibid., 82.
13 Ibid., 4.
15 Islamic eschatology holds that the Prophet Jesus will return and establish an Islamic utopia at the end of time. Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* (London: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1918), 273.
adulthood went to Khartoum to become an apprentice to Sheik Muhammad Sherif. His training consisted of transcribing and reciting verses from the Quran. He quickly became a devoted follower of the Sheik and lived with him on his plantation on the island of Abbas in the White Nile. However, during his apprenticeship, Muhammad Ahmad became disgusted with the revelry and merriment that characterized the Sheik’s court. He took exception to the fact that the Sheik issued dispensations for sins committed during a festival commemorating the circumcision of his sons. Muhammad Ahmad raised his voice in protest, and was banished from Khartoum as punishment.16 When Muhammad Ahmad sought his forgiveness, the Sheik called him a “wretched Dongolawi” and “Satan in the skin of man.”17

Upon his dismissal, he sought the protection of Sherif’s chief rival, Sheikh el Koreishi. Sherif apologized for his insults and offered him forgiveness, but Muhammad Ahmad would have none of it. He insisted that only God could forgive sins, and that Sheik Muhammad Sherif was a heretic. Muhammad Ahmad’s actions sent rumors all over the Sudan that he was the promised redeemer who would throw out the oppressor and restore true Islam.18 Muhammad Ahmad did not originate this idea; it was thrust upon him, particularly by his chief lieutenant Abdallah wad Torshayn.

Born in 1846 in Darfur, a province not yet under Egyptian rule, Abdallah’s religious background was a form of revivalist Islam that eagerly anticipated the coming of the Mahdi. Indeed, Abdallah sought the manifestation of the Mahdi wherever he could. In 1873, when his tribe raided a slave caravan run by the powerful trader and warlord Zubehr Pasha, the pasha defeated them but spared Abdallah’s life. Some time later, he experienced an intense vision in which Zubehr appeared to him as the promised redeemer. Both Zubehr’s magnanimity and his prowess upon the battlefield inspired this dream. When Abdallah asked in a letter if Zubehr was the Mahdi, the very suggestion shocked Zubehr; it amounted to heresy, and, at any rate, Zubehr’s political ambitions lay with the Khedive of Egypt. Within the next year, he would lead an army to invade Darfur and claim the province for Egypt.19

Abdallah’s search for the Mahdi continued. He had heard rumors of the brave cleric who defied Sheik Muhammad Sherif,

17 Churchill, The River War, 23; Slatin, Fire and Sword in the Sudan, 125.
18 Ibid., 24-25.
19 Asher, Khartoum, 48-50.
and sought him out. The coming of the Mahdi was expected by year 1300 of the Hijra, the Islamic calendar, or 1880 A.D. In that year, Abdallahi and Muhammad Ahmad met for the first time. He found him in al-Masallamiyya, a village south of Khartoum on the White Nile. Here, Muhammad Ahmad was busy building a tomb for his master Sheik Koreishi, and had become renowned as Zahed, an ascetic who renounced earthly pleasures. Abdallahi was mesmerized by his oratory abilities, and became certain that Muhammad Ahmad was the Mahdi. The two formed a bond over time, and Abdallahi became one of his standard-bearers. Muhammad Ahmad preached that the purification of the faith was nigh, and that the Islam professed by the Egyptians and Turks was a corruption of the true faith. He embarked on a circuit, intent upon converting the Sheiks to his movement. Yet, even in this, Muhammad Ahmad made no claims to be the Mahdi. The first one to proclaim him so was his devoted disciple Abdallahi. In this sense, the Mahdist movement was not the work of a single man, but a cult of personality developed by his followers.

Abdallahi's motives for publicly proclaiming the Mahdi at first appear religious but, aside from his quest to find a redeemer, Abdallahi was not a particularly religious man. Rudolph Carl Slatin, an Austrian soldier who lived among the Mahdists, reported that as a youth Abdallahi neglected his Quranic studies, and rarely said his private daily prayers. Slatin believed that Abdallahi lacked genuine faith, and at heart, "no man could have been more irreligious." Apparently, Abdallahi used religion to political ends, transforming Muhammad Ahmad from a reformist preacher into a militant leader of all Islam. He knew that if the rebellion succeeded, he would secure a place of phenomenal power in the new regime.

Upon the proclamation of the Mahdi, his old master Sheik Muhammad Sherif warned the Egyptian government about his plans. While the government dismissed his reports at first, the Governor-General Raouf Pasha resolved to act upon them once it became evident that the Mahdi intended to abolish Egyptian rule over the Sudan. He sent a messenger to Muhammad Ahmad ordering him to come to Khartoum and explain his actions, but this action infuriated the Mahdi. He proclaimed himself rightful

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20 Churchill, 25.
21 Asher, 51.
22 Religious leaders were accompanied by standards with verses from the Quran written on them. Slatin, 130.
23 Slatin, 132.
24 Asher, 53.
25 Slatin, 547.
ruler of the land and declared that he did not have to justify himself to anyone. The Mahdi was now in open rebellion. His followers organized themselves into an army. They wore loose-fitting white garments and fought only with traditional tribal weapons such as spears and shields. These warriors became known as *daraweesh*, or holy men. This term was anglicized as “dervishes.”

On January 17, 1883, the Mahdi conquered El Obeid, capital of the Kordofan Province. This prompted an immediate response from the Egyptians. The Governor-General hastily assembled an army and placed it under the command of Colonel William Hicks, but this army was completely unprepared for the battle ahead. The expedition was ill-equipped, demoralized, and, at only eight thousand men, vastly outnumbered by the Mahdists, who numbered over forty thousand. Hick's native officers discouraged their men from fighting, since their enemies were Muslims like themselves. On November 3, the Mahdist army marched out of El Obeid and engaged the Hicks Expedition in open battle near the Shaykan forest. 7,500 men, including Hicks, were killed. Now only Khartoum and the port of Suakim on the Red Sea remained for the Mahdi to conquer.

Darfur remained under Egyptian rule, garrisoned by a force commanded by an Austrian general, Rudolph Carl von Slatin. But after the disastrous defeat of the Hicks Expedition, Darfur fell as well. In order to escape death, and to appease his troops who attributed their defeat to his Christianity, General Slatin publicly embraced Islam and moved into the Mahdi's camp. His account of life and military service under the Mahdi provide an important written record of Mahdist rule and military campaigns. Slatin was never a true believer in the Mahdi; his conversion was superficial, and the publication of his memoirs served to incite the cause of Sudanese re-conquest by the British in the 1890s.

By now, the rumblings war in the Sudan had reached the ears of the British people. Their Egyptian allies lay defeated at the feet of a mystic from Dongola, who had killed white commanders and swayed them to his cause. The story was fantastical; it did not seem possible to Europeans that the Mahdi

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26 Churchill, 27.
27 Asher, xxiii.
28 Churchill, 30.
30 Featherstone, 9-10.
32 Slatin, 259.
could be victorious. Indeed, the *Star* newspaper of Saint Peter Port, Guernsey, prematurely published unconfirmed reports that the Hicks Expedition had defeated the Mahdi, describing how modern weapons and tactics cut down the false prophet and his troops with clinical efficiency. The willingness of the paper to print a fictional story as fact belies the people's belief that the British Empire and European supremacy was essentially invincible.

The government of William Gladstone faced a mounting crisis to protect British interests in Sudan that had been all but lost. Evacuation appeared to be the only option. Gladstone was by now in his second administration, and problems closer to home dominated political discourse, such as the Franchise Bill and the question of Irish Home Rule. The government saw the Sudan and Egypt as unfortunate financial drains upon the Empire, and cared more for saving British lives than recovering lost territory. Gladstone viewed the Empire as over-extended already, and disliked jingoistic adventures in Africa. However, he also had a sense of British dignity, meaning that the withdrawal would be calculated and ordered; a retreat rather than a rout. Khartoum was to be abandoned and its supplies destroyed, but the port of Suakim was to be retained. Gladstone's government had been elected on an anti-imperialist platform, and was now embroiled in an imperialist quagmire.

Despite the position of the government, the British people were resolute, determined to save face after such an astonishing defeat. Critics of the Gladstone government decried its plans to retreat as weak. An editorial in the Cardiff *Western Mail* said, "There was a time when no thought of retreat before a savage foe would have entered into the mind of any English statesman or soldier...when the civil government of a nation is weak in spirit, great achievements cannot be expected of the army." Khartoum and Suakim could still be saved, they argued; to evacuate would be to let the Mahdi win.

While the government put forth several names in regards to evacuation, the man eventually chosen to oversee it was Charles George Gordon. This man, who would later become the

33 “Defeat of the Mahdi,” *The Star* (Saint Peter Port), 3 November 1883, 4e.
37 “The Cut-and-Run Policy and Its Results,” *Western Mail* (Cardiff), 14 January 1884, 2g.
supreme martyr of the British Empire, boasted a long and storied career in service of his country, serving with distinction in Crimea and gaining fame as the commander of the Chinese “Ever-Victorious Army” that crushed the Taiping Rebellion in the 1860s. Yet Gordon was also a man in possession of an erratic and eccentric personality. Although he had been deployed in Sudan, he spoke no Arabic. Although he was a fiercely devout Christian, he did not belong to an established denomination, and often exhibited an unorthodox and unconventional theology. Although he labored to suppress the slave trade, he often compromised and dealt with slave traders during his exploits. He was prone to fits of rage, often striking or cuffing servants and aides for the slightest offenses. His own father described him as a “powder keg.” He was full of energy, but also prone to uncontrollable explosions.

Gordon’s involvement in the Sudan began in 1874, when Khedive Ismail appointed him Governor-General of the province of Equatoria in the far south. This region was remote, far removed from Khartoum and notoriously hard to control, only bound to the north by the slave trade. His duty as Governor-General was to suppress this slave trade, which flourished in the region and provided most of the income for its inhabitants. The Khedive’s motives for suppressing the trade were far from altruistic, however. Khedive Ismail understood that Egypt and the Ottoman Empire were essentially European powers. Indeed, he said of Egypt, “My country is no longer in Africa. We now form part of Europe. We must abandon the old false notions and adopt a new system consonant with our new status.” Ismail understood that all the Great Powers except the Ottomans had abolished slavery and were working to quash it in their African colonies. By financing expeditions to stop the trade of slaves without actually abolishing the institution, Ismail was able to preserve slavery while appearing modern and enlightened to outside observers. He was, after all, in debt to European creditors.

Gordon spent three years in Equatoria, where he learned that the slave trade was harder to suppress than he or any Western politicians had believed. Gordon entered with a mandate

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38 Asher, 70-71.  
39 DNB, s.v. “Gordon, Charles George.”  
41 Asher, 69.  
44 Trench, 70.
to: enforce a government monopoly on the ivory trade, thus reducing the amount of slaves that would come down the river carrying the ivory; prohibit the formation of armed bands in the province to curb slave raiding; prevent the importation of firearms and gunpowder; and prevent anyone from entering Equatoria without a permit from the Governor-General. However, because the slave trade was the lifeblood of the province, he encountered people who insisted that their slaves were wives, children, or other family members. There was no way for Gordon to falsify such claims, and all slave owners had to be compensated, making it a costly endeavor. Moreover, by patrolling the Nile, he merely forced the slavers inland, actually increasing the hardship of slaves who marched northward through dense jungle instead of down the Nile by boat. Gordon was fully aware of such difficulties. He also knew that his suppression of the trade would not be permanent. His administration would have to be followed by a like-minded one, or the slavers would resume sending ivory-laden slave caravans down the Nile to Khartoum.

During his tenure, he faced a rebellion in Darfur, led by notorious slaver Suleiman, son of Zubehr Pasha. In order to reason with Suleiman, Gordon rode alone to his camp on a camel and ordered the rebels to disperse within two days. His imperious bearing awed the rebels, and he was able to put down the rebellion through his sheer audacity with this stroke. However, Suleiman fled Darfur to the province of Bahr-el-Ghazal and amassed forces again. Gordon was able to defeat the rebels once more, however, and ordered a subordinate to execute Suleiman as an example to other rebels. This decision would have far-reaching ramifications for Gordon’s future dealings in the Sudan.

Gordon resigned his commission in 1876, after three grueling years in the equatorial jungles. The Khedive, however, would not accept his resignation. Gordon relented, and at last was appointed Governor-General, a post he kept until 1880. His successors did not share his mission to end slavery, and the rebellion of the Mahdi destroyed any semblance of Egyptian authority in the province. Indeed, in 1879, Gordon presciently remarked, “If the liberation of slaves occurs in 1884 and if the present system of government goes on there cannot fail to be a revolt of the whole country.”

45 “General Gordon’s Expedition,” York Herald, 30 April 1874, 3a.
46 Trench, 130.
47 Lytton Strachey, Eminent Victorians, 267.
By 1883, Arab and European officials in Cairo called for Gordon’s return to his post. They were convinced that Gordon’s stellar reputation and popularity with both the Arabs and the English could allow him to assume authority and unite the opponents of the Mahdi, crushing the rebellion once and for all.\(^49\) The British government telegraphed Cairo to inquire if Gordon would be of any use to the evacuation effort, and if so, in what capacity. Sir Evelyn Baring, the British representative in Cairo, responded that because the Mahdi’s rebellion was religious in nature, the Egyptians were “very much averse” to the appointment of a devout Christian to high command.\(^50\)

The Egyptian government turned to the very man whose son Gordon had labored to stop in Darfur: Zubehr Pasha. He was a man of considerable power and wealth, and could command enough authority to stop the rebellion. Baring said of him, “Whatever Zubehr’s faults, he is said to be a man of great energy and resolution. The Egyptian government considers that his services may be very useful...Baker Pasha is anxious to avail himself of Zubehr Pasha’s services.”\(^51\) In contrast to the enthusiasm they had for Gordon, the appointment of Zubehr Pasha to a subordinate position of command under Samuel Baker at Suakim provoked reprisals from the British. As a slave dealer, he represented the very problem Gordon had striven so hard to solve. With his appointment, it became apparent that the Egyptian government did not share the British distaste for slavery, and a war against the Mahdi in Sudan would do nothing to end slavery.

A correspondent for the *Times* in Constantinople suggested that there was no need for the British to defend Khartoum or invade territory already under the Mahdi’s control. Suppression of slavery would best be served by eliminating it in Egypt proper; the ultimate end of the slave caravans was the Nile Delta, so slavery would die out without a market in Cairo.\(^52\) The foremost concern of all Europeans involved in the discourse was suppression of slavery, not imperial expansion into the Sudan.

The British government would not tolerate Zubehr, though, and so Baring revoked the appointment. Gordon had by then retired on holiday to the Holy Land, dabbling in religious writings and biblical scholarship and pseudo-archeology. His most promising prospect for employment was a post as governor of the Congo Free State under the Belgian King Leopold II. His

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\(^{50}\) Churchill, 35.

\(^{51}\) Ibid., 36.

\(^{52}\) “Latest Intelligence from our Correspondents: Egypt and the Soudan,” *The Times* (London), 6 December 1883, 5a.
brief stints as personal secretary to Lord Ripon, Viceroy of India, as commander of artillery in Mauritius, and as commandant-general of the Cape Colony proved his inability to work well with any commanding officer. 53 He had angered Khedive Tewfik by publicly referring to him as a “little snake” in a newspaper interview.54 Almost everyone who knew Gordon described him as irascible, insubordinate, and sanctimonious; a man who treated orders as a basis for discussion.55 Evelyn Baring described him succinctly as a “queer fellow.”56 This familiarity with Gordon’s less-agreeable characteristics may have caused Baring’s initial rejection of him for commanding the Sudan.

Nevertheless, pressure from the Cabinet and the Egyptian government forced Baring to consent to Gordon’s appointment. Gordon met with the Cabinet to accept the appointment on January 18, 1884, and left for the Sudan that night, accompanied by Lieutenant Colonel J.D.H. Stewart of the 11th Hussars.57 He arrived in Cairo on January 24, and met with Horatio Kitchener, the man who would later avenge Gordon’s death in the eyes of the British public. This was their first meeting, and Gordon’s personal gravitas immediately won him over. Gordon would be Kitchener’s personal hero for the rest of his life.58

At Cairo, Gordon also met with Lord Garnet Wolseley, a member of the Cabinet who staunchly opposed Gordon’s plans to evacuate the Sudan. Wolseley was a lifelong imperialist, and harbored ambitions to make the Sudan a formal British colony. The Mahdist rebellion provided him the perfect opportunity for such a venture. He also held a high admiration for Gordon, holding him to be the ideal Christian hero, and declaring that he was not fit to “pipe-clay Gordon’s belt.”59 Gordon shared Wolseley’s imperialist views, believing that the only way to end the misgovernment of the Sudan was to place it under enlightened British rule. Gordon respected and admired the Sudanese people, and he understood that the Mahdist revolt was just as much about ending Egyptian rule as it was a religious rebellion. In an interview with the Pall Mall Gazette, Gordon said, “The sole cause of the rebellion was misgovernment by Egypt...the movement is not really religious but an outbreak of despair.”60

54 Asher, 77.
55 Trench, 195.
56 DNB, s.v. “Gordon, Charles George.”
57 Churchill, 36.; Featherstone, 11.
58 Asher, 69.
59 Ibid., 81.
60 Trench, 197.
The two governments charged Gordon with conflicting roles when dispatching him to the Sudan. The British expected him to act as an advisor, playing a passive role to ensure that the evacuation went smoothly. In contrast, the Egyptians appointed him Governor-General and expected him to take an active role in the practical execution of the evacuation. Gordon himself wanted to defend Khartoum at all costs; he was not about to hand a victory to the Mahdi. In his interview with the *Pall Mall Gazette*, he asserted the whole of the eastern Sudan could be saved, and it was in the best interests of the British government to defend it.

Gordon arrived in Khartoum on February 18, to fight for what had become a lost cause. Berber had come under attack on January 1, and the situation in Suakim looked grim. Beja tribesmen defeated Valentine Baker at the First Battle of et-Teb on February 5. Almost immediately after Gordon’s arrival, Khartoum came under siege. He knew that Zubehr Pasha would be an invaluable ally in his endeavor, and telegraphed Cairo to request his aid. Gordon’s execution of his son during his previous tenure as Governor-General, however, did not endear Zubehr to him. Furthermore, the Government in Britain would have none of it. He was a slave trader, and they had fought too hard to end his appointment at Suakim. Thus, Gordon was left without a powerful and beneficial Sudanese ally. His potential allies dwindled in number as the Mahdi took more territory and followers. The government’s refusal of Gordon’s request deepened the separation between them. In his journals, Gordon asserts that if Zubehr had been appointed, there would be a Sudanese government in opposition to the Mahdi, able to sway tribes away from the rebellion.

By the March 17th, communication lines between Berber and Khartoum had been cut. There was now no hope of relief by a column or evacuation. Khartoum, and Gordon, would live or die at the Mahdi’s mercy. On September 10th, Gordon sent Stewart down the Nile in order to inform Wolseley about his situation. From that day until his death, he was altogether alone. Stewart never reached Wolseley, but was instead killed

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61 Featherstone, 11.
63 Churchill, 42.
64 Asher, 102.
66 Churchill, 47.
by the dervishes in a surprise attack when his steamer ran aground.\textsuperscript{67}

On January 6, 1885, in order to relieve the burden on his dwindling food supplies, Gordon allowed most of the civilian population to go over to the Mahdi, provided that he protect and feed the starving population of Khartoum. Such was his concern for the Sudanese people that he strengthened the forces of his enemy in order to see them fed and sheltered where he could not provide for them. Omdurman surrendered on January 12. Now Khartoum was surrounded on all sides by the Mahdi.\textsuperscript{68}

Despite the ominous prospects for Khartoum, the British public remained optimistic about the fate of Gordon. When Lord Wolseley led an expedition up the Nile in late 1884-early 1885 to relieve Gordon, newspaper editors wrote as if its success was a foregone conclusion. "We have, happily, good grounds for hoping that General Gordon, one of the bravest and most masterful soldiers of this age, will gallantly hold his own at Khartoum until the long-beleaguered garrison is relieved by Lord Wolseley's skillfully-conducted Expedition," said one paper.\textsuperscript{69} When the news of the fall of Khartoum reached the British on February 6, they were livid. This disaster was unexplainable. The defeat of the Empire's great hero was unthinkable. He had superior arms, superior tactics, and a special relationship with God. Government offices overflowed with queries as to whether or not Gordon was still alive and free, taken prisoner, or dead.\textsuperscript{70}

After Gordon's death, Gladstone's Sudan policy suffered a major loss in public support. After 1885, virtually no one supported Gladstone. At Haileybury College, Liberal members of the school newspaper were reportedly afraid to show their faces due to the backlash against their party's leader.\textsuperscript{71} Queen Victoria herself publicly chastised Gladstone in a telegram which read, "These news from Khartoum are frightful and to think that all this might have been prevented and many precious lives saved by earlier action is too fearful."\textsuperscript{72} Foreign Secretary Stafford Northcote moved for a vote of censure against the government.\textsuperscript{73} Gladstone's critics mocked his nickname, "G.O.M." for "Grand Old Man," as "M.O.G." for "Murderer of Gordon."\textsuperscript{74} Such was the

\textsuperscript{67} Strachey, 336.
\textsuperscript{68} Trench, 285.
\textsuperscript{69} "Lord Wolseley's Expedition to Relieve General Gordon," Penny Illustrated Paper and Illustrated Times (London), 10 January 1885, 22a.
\textsuperscript{70} "From Our London Correspondent," York Herald, 6 February 1885, 4f.
\textsuperscript{71} Porter, 54.
\textsuperscript{72} Jenkins, 513.
\textsuperscript{74} Jenkins, 514.
fallout from the Gordon affair that the Gladstone government collapsed in the general election of 1885.

In contrast to the demonization of Gladstone, the British public lionized Gordon. An obituary published in the *Pall Mall Gazette* just as the news broke of his death called him the quintessential Englishman.

“In him were incarnate the characteristics of the heroes of our national story. The chivalry of Arthur, of the Table Round, the indomitable valour and saintly life of the Great Alfred, and the religious convictions of Oliver the Protector—all were united in that slight form, now, alas! laid low in death, upon which, with ever increasing fascination, the eyes of the world have so long been fixed.”

The postmortem lionization of Gordon reflects the Victorian tendency toward hero-worship. He was to them a Great Man, a man worthy of adoration and hero-worship. Thomas Carlyle describes the uncertain and tumultuous times as “dry dead fuel, waiting for lighting out of heaven which shall kindle it. The great man, with his free force direct out of God’s own hand, is the lightning...The History of the World...[is] the biography of Great Men.” Gordon was the lightning to the fuel of the Sudan, and the war was his fire. He was what the Victorians of 1885 needed. He was the Great Man for their age.

The Sudan conflict had shifted in the minds of the British from a minor uprising in darkest Africa to the struggle to preserve national honor, and now a crusade to avenge the hero of their values and worldview. The British people added Gordon to their pantheon of heroes; nearly all writings in the half-century following his death were hagiographic in nature. Paintings and sculptures of the hero of Khartoum proliferated, celebrating not just his martial spirit, but his “strength of mind, love, kindness, and affection.” Books such as William Frith’s *General Gordon; or, the Man of Faith*, written just before his death, portrayed Gordon as a Christian hero with perfect confidence of his eternal destiny whose religion guided every aspect of his life. Stephen Albert Swaine’s biography of Gordon states, “He did not live in

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75 “In Memoriam,” *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 11 February 1885, 1b.
77 Ibid., 16-17.
79 William Frith, *General Gordon; or, the Man of Faith* (London: S.W. Partridge & Co., 1884), 55.
vain. He did not die in vain. Englishmen are, and will be through
generations to come, the richer and nobler for such a life and
death...Not undeservedly might he be called, not only the Hero,
but the Martyr of Khartoum.  

The perception of Gordon as a saintly martyr heavily
influenced depictions of his death. One depiction, The Death of
Gordon by George William Joy, shows him standing stoically upon
the ramparts, saber and pistol sheathed, while fanatical dervishes
prepare to impale him with a spear. This picture of Gordon as a
Christ-like martyr who raised not a hand against his foes was
based little in reality, but it comforted the British in a dark hour.
The reality of Gordon’s death was much less romantic.

The image of Gordon’s death as heroic and self-sacrificing
came from early accounts of the Fall of Khartoum, which could
not be corroborated by eyewitnesses. This account was
propagated by most contemporary literature, such as Ten Years’
Captivity in the Mahdi’s Camp by Joseph Ohrwalder, a Roman
Catholic priest who was captured by the dervishes and escaped in
1892. His account of Gordon’s death is as follows:

“The surging mass threw itself upon the palace,
overflowed into the lovely garden, and burst
through the doors in wild search of their prey; but
Gordon went alone to meet them. As they rushed
up the stairs, he came towards them and tried to
speak with them; but they would not or could not
listen and the first Arab plunged his huge spear
into his body. He fell forward on his face, was
dragged down the stairs, many stabbed him with
their spears, and his head was cut off and sent to
the Mahdi. Such was the end of the brave
defender of Khartoum. When I came from El Obeid
to Omdurman I visited Khartum, and went to the
palace, where I was shown some black spots on the
stairs which they told me were traces of Gordon’s
blood.”

This account portrays Gordon as rational and peaceful in
the face of fanaticism. He goes to the grave unarmed and alone,
his final cries for peace ignored by the devilish savages. He acts

80 Stephen Albert Swaine, General Gordon (London: Cassell & Company,
1885), 127-128.
81 Featherstone, 72.
82 Asher, 263.
83 Joseph Ohrwalder, Ten Years Captivity in the Mahdi’s Camp: 1882-
as a representative of how the British viewed their Empire: peaceful, civilized, and rational, forced into conflict only to better inferior races and free them from misgovernment and fanaticism. His blood also gains a mystical quality, still staining the ground months after his death, as if no earthly power could wash it away. In this sense, the lionization of Gordon draws interesting parallels with medieval martyr cults. Just like saints could produce springs that never ran dry or lights that never grew dim, Gordon’s blood would never evaporate or be washed away. This image of Gordon’s martyrdom persisted well into the twentieth century. The 1966 film Khartoum even has the Arabs back away from Gordon and stand in awed silence before killing him. The film also contains a fictionalized scene in which Gordon tells the Mahdi that he will work a miracle after his death, implying that Gordon’s supernatural powers were at work in causing the Mahdi’s death.

There is no first-hand account of Gordon’s death, but accounts based on those present at the battle portray it differently from the popular martyrdom account. An account by Gordon’s aide-de-camp, Orfali, describes him not as a passive martyr but as a defiant soldier, fighting to the end. Orfali was present during the fighting, although not at the moment of Gordon’s death. According to this account, Gordon organized a defense force as soon as he learned that the dervishes had breached the walls. He stationed fifty men on the ramparts, armed with Remingtons and 120 rounds of ammunition. They shot and killed about seventy dervishes as they swarmed into the gardens. The dervishes swarmed the palace and killed the guards, only to meet Gordon facing them with a loaded revolver in one hand and his saber in the other. He shot two dervishes and killed another with his sword before taking a glancing spear wound. He and Orfali retreated in order to reload their weapons before being overrun. Gordon collapsed from his wounds and Orfali was knocked unconscious by a club wound. When Orfali awoke, Gordon’s head had already been cut off.

Still other accounts maintain that the fatal blow to Gordon came unawares, from a sniper’s bullet, and that he was not identified until the bodies were counted after the battle. His head was removed and his body unceremoniously dumped into the Blue Nile. This view was not propagated among the Victorian

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84 Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics, s.v. “Relics (Primitive and Western).”
85 Asher, 263.
86 Khartoum, DVD, directed by Basil Dearden (1966; Los Angeles, CA: MGM Home Entertainment, 2002).
87 Asher, 264-65.
newspaper-reading public, as such a death of their hero would have been nothing short of ignominious. To die like common cannon fodder was not the death of an imperial martyr. 88

Early reports of the fall of Khartoum likewise asserted that Gordon had only been defeated because of a treacherous Arab ally. Implicit in this assertion is that, given a fair fight, Gordon would have triumphed. 89 The Pall Mall Gazette decried the "treacherous Pashas" who had caused Gordon's death, saying, "doubts were entertained about the fidelity of Abdul Ahmed, the second-in-command, and he justified these by deserting." Additionally, it reported that the defeat was entirely due to "the treachery of Faragh Pasha, who commanded General Gordon's Soudani troops." 90 Despite these cries, no treachery had actually occurred during the fall of Khartoum. The city fell by force of arms, not intrigue. And Faragh Pasha, the supposed arch-traitor, died at the hands of the Mahdi on the streets of Khartoum. 91 Clearly these "treacherous Pashas" were nothing but scapegoats created by the press in order to explain Gordon's shocking defeat.

The war in the Sudan became the war to avenge Gordon. Whereas before Gordon's death the Sudan had been an encumbrance, now it was a prize to be won in a high-stakes game of national honor. Six months following the fall of Khartoum, the Mahdi died. Eleven years after Gordon's death, in 1896, the British sent Horatio Kitchener, the man who Gordon had inspired during their brief encounter, up the Nile to recapture the Sudan. He fought the Mahdists for two years, until he crushed resistance at the Battle of Omdurman and desecrated the tomb of the Mahdi. Gordon had at last been avenged. 92 After the battle, the soldiers held a memorial service for Gordon, where Sudanese buglers played "Abide With Me," Gordon's favorite hymn. Thirteen years after his death, the British had not forgotten their hero. 93

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88 Ibid., 265.
89 "Fall of Khartoum through Treachery," The Manchester Guardian, 6 February 1885, 6a.
90 "The Death of General Gordon," The Pall Mall Gazette (London), 11 February 1885, 8a.
91 Swaine, General Gordon, 123.
92 Trench, 293.
93 Strachey, 349.