

Fashoda: The Pitfall of Imperial Policy and a Possible War Avoided

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Starting with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1859 and concluding by 1887, Egypt became a semi-autonomous satellite of the rising British Empire in Africa.¹ An immediate result of this imperial British triumph was the violent separation of the Sudan from its former masters in Cairo, by the success of the largely anti-Western reactionary forces of Mahdism.² Another relatively immediate result was a feeling of jubilation among those British subjects, home and abroad, that had invested so much effort, money, and personal vision to making a reality of a British Empire in Africa that stretched from the pyramids of Egypt to the farms and mines of the Cape Colony. This joy was contrasted by the disgust of other imperialists who had dreamt of a colonial empire in Africa from west to east and not from north to south. These disgruntled imperialist thinkers were, of course, French.³

In 1896, ministers and men of military and political standing in Paris moved to assert French power in Africa and issue forth the destabilization of British control over Egypt by launching a seizure of the former Egyptian outpost on the Sudanese Nile, Fashoda. This action the French government intended to cement through a new alliance with the virulently anti-European Mahdists⁴ and the recently triumphant Ethiopian emperor, Menilek II.⁵ The expedition from the French Congo to Fashoda that followed, led by Major Jean-Baptiste Marchand, succeeded in taking the Sudanese Nile territory, yet not only gained no serious local support, but almost opened the door to war with Britain.⁶

There are two aspects of the Fashoda Crisis that make it an incredibly fascinating event. The first was the how it illustrated the dangers for Europe inherent in the imperial race. Newspapers in France and Britain rallied for a war between two countries that were increasingly forgetting the pre-1815 history of Anglo-French animosity.⁷ Though sober heads prevailed in the wake of Kitchener's victory at Omdurman and the French government ordered Marchand and his force home in November, 1898, for a moment the possibility of a new Anglo-French conflict was a reality.⁸

The other aspect of Fashoda that is amazing to contemplate is how different modern history may have been had France and Britain unleashed the nightmare of technological mass butchery upon each other. Would Germany have entered the conflict against the Third French Republic and thus revived the pre-1815 Anglo-Prussian alliance? How would Italy, Russia, Spain, and the United States have reacted to a Fashoda based conflict?

Historians obviously will never know, yet Fashoda teaches that even those accepted notions of historical study, such as the ever increasing friendship of France and Britain since Germany's unification, were not concrete guarantees of an era, but were events that were fragile and hostage to an unseen future. The assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in 1914 was the simple stroke that turned the Balkans into a powdered keg for world war. Incidents like the Morocco Affairs and the Fashoda Crisis likewise could have functioned as incendiary actions.

Endnotes

¹ M. E. Chamberlain, *The Scramble for Africa*, 2nd ed., London: Longman, 1999, 80.

² Ibid.

³ David Levering Lewis, *The Race to Fashoda: Colonialism and African Resistance*, New York: Henry Holt & Company, Inc., 1987, 8.

⁴ Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa, 1876-1912*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991, 467.

⁵ D. W. Brogan, *The French Nation: From Napoleon To Pétain*, New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1957, 200.

⁶ Chamberlain 81.

⁷ Darrell Bates, *The Fashoda Incident of 1898: Encounter on the Nile*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984, 154-155.

⁸ Sir Harry H. Johnston, *A History of The Colonization of Africa By Alien Races*, New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1966, 227.