

Mahdist War

The Mahdist War (Arabic: الثورة المهديّة, romanized: ath-Thawra al-Mahdiyya; 1881–1899) was a war between the Mahdist Sudanese of the religious leader Muhammad Ahmad bin Abd Allah, who had proclaimed himself the "Mahdi" of Islam (the "Guided One"), and the forces of the Khedivate of Egypt, initially, and later the forces of Britain. Eighteen years of war resulted in the nominally joint-rule state of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan (1899–1956), a de jure condominium of the British Empire and the Kingdom of Egypt in which Britain had de facto control over the Sudan. The Sudanese launched several unsuccessful invasions of their neighbours, expanding the scale of the conflict to include not only Britain and Egypt but also the Italian Empire, the Congo Free State and the Ethiopian Empire.

The British participation in the war is called the Sudan campaign. Other names for this war include the Mahdist Revolt, the Anglo–Sudan War and the Sudanese Mahdist Revolt.

Background

Following the invasion by Muhammad Ali in 1819, Sudan was governed by an Egyptian administration. Because of the heavy taxes it imposed and because of the bloody start of the Turkish-Egyptian rule in Sudan, this colonial system was resented by the Sudanese people.

Throughout the period of Turco-Egyptian rule, many segments of the Sudanese population suffered extreme hardship because of the system of taxation imposed by the central government. Under this system, a flat tax was imposed on farmers and small traders and collected by government-appointed tax collectors from the Sha'iqiyya tribe of northern Sudan. In bad years, and especially during times of drought and famine, farmers were unable to pay the high taxes. Fearing the brutal and unjust methods of the Sha'iqiyya, many farmers fled their villages in the fertile Nile Valley to the remote areas of Kordofan and Darfur. These migrants, known as "jallaba" after their loose-fitting style of dress, began to function as small traders and middlemen for the foreign trading companies that had established themselves in the cities and towns of central Sudan. The jallaba were also known to be slave trading tribes.

By the middle 19th century the Ottoman Imperial subject administration in Egypt was in the hands of Khedive Ismail. Khedive Ismail's spending had put Egypt into huge debt, and when his financing of the Suez Canal started to crumble, the United Kingdom stepped in and repaid his loans in return for controlling shares in the canal. As the most direct route to India, the jewel in the British Crown, the Suez Canal was of paramount strategic importance, and British commercial and imperial interests dictated the need to seize or otherwise control it. Thus an ever-increasing British role in Egyptian affairs seemed necessary. With Khedive Ismail's spending and corruption causing instability, in 1873 the British government supported a program whereby an Anglo-French debt commission assumed responsibility for managing Egypt's fiscal affairs. This commission eventually forced Khedive Ismail to abdicate in favor of his son Tawfiq in 1877, leading to a period of political turmoil.

Also in 1873, Ismail had appointed General Charles "Chinese" Gordon Governor of the Equatorial Provinces of Sudan. For the next three years, General Gordon fought against a native chieftain of Darfur, Al-Zubayr Rahma Mansur.

Upon Ismail's abdication in 1877, Gordon found himself with dramatically decreased support. Exhausted by years of work, he resigned his post in 1880 and left early the next year. His policies were soon abandoned by the new governors, but the anger and discontent of the dominant Arab minority was left unaddressed.

Although the Egyptians were fearful of the deteriorating conditions, the British refused to get involved, as Foreign Secretary Earl Granville declared, "Her Majesty's Government are in no way responsible for operations in the Sudan".

Among the forces historians see as the causes of the uprising are ethnic Sudanese anger at the foreign Turkish Ottoman rulers, Muslim revivalist anger at the Turks' lax religious standards and willingness to appoint non-Muslims such as the Christian Charles Gordon to high positions, and Sudanese Sufi resistance to "dry,

scholastic Islam of Egyptian officialdom." Another widely reported potential source of frustration was the Turco-Egyptian abolition of the slave trade, one of the main sources of income in Sudan at the time.

In the 1870s, a Muslim cleric named Muhammad Ahmad preached renewal of the faith and liberation of the land and began attracting followers. Soon in open revolt against the Egyptians, Muhammad Ahmad proclaimed himself the Mahdi, the promised redeemer of the Islamic world. In August 1881 the then-governor of the Sudan, Raouf Pasha, sent two companies of infantry each with one machine gun to arrest him. The captains of the two companies were each promised promotion if their soldiers were the ones to return the Mahdi to the governor. Both companies disembarked from the steamer that had brought them up the Nile to Aba Island and approached the Mahdi's village from separate directions. Arriving simultaneously, each force began to fire blindly on the other, allowing the Mahdi's scant followers to attack and destroy each force in turn at the Battle of Aba.

The Mahdi then began a strategic retreat to Kordofan, where he was at a distance from the seat of government in Khartoum. This movement, couched as a triumphal progress, incited many of the Arab tribes to rise in support of the Jihad the Mahdi had declared against the Turkish oppressors.

The Mahdi and the forces of his Ansar arrived in the Nuba Mountains of south Kordofan around early November 1881. Another Egyptian expedition dispatched from Fashoda arrived around one month later; this force was ambushed and slaughtered on the night of 9 December 1881. Consisting, like the earlier Aba Island force, of two 200 man strong Egyptian raised infantry companies, this time augmented with an additional 1,000 native irregulars, the force commander – Colonel Rashid Bay Ahman – and all his principal leadership team, died. It is unknown if any of Colonel Ahman's troops survived.

As these military incursions were happening, the Mahdi legitimized his movement by drawing deliberate parallels to the life of the Prophet Muhammad. He called his followers Ansar, after the people who greeted the Prophet in Medina, and he called his flight from the British, the hijrah, after the Prophet's flight from the Quraysh. The Mahdi also appointed commanders to represent three of the four Righteous Caliphs; for example, he announced that Abdullahi ibn Muhammad, his eventual successor, represented Abu Bakr Al Sidiq, the Prophet's successor.

The Egyptian administration in the Sudan, now thoroughly concerned by the scale of the uprising, assembled a force of 4,000 troops under Yusef Pasha. In mid 1882, this force approached the Mahdist gathering, whose members were poorly clothed, half starving, and armed only with sticks and stones. However, supreme overconfidence led the Egyptian army into camping within sight of the Mahdist 'army' without posting sentries. The Mahdi led a dawn assault on 7 June 1882, which slaughtered the army to a man. The rebels gained vast stores of arms and ammunition, military clothing and other supplies.

Hicks expedition

With the Egyptian government now passing largely under British control, the European powers became increasingly aware of the troubles in the Sudan. The British advisers to the Egyptian government gave tacit consent for another expedition. Throughout the summer of 1883, Egyptian troops were concentrated at Khartoum, eventually reaching the strength of around 7,300 infantry, 1,000 cavalry, and an artillery force of 300 personnel hauling between them 4 Krupp 80mm field guns, 10 brass mountain guns and 6 Nordenfeldt machine guns.[10] This force was placed under the command of a retired British Indian Staff Corps officer William Hicks and twelve European officers. The force was, in the words of Winston Churchill, "perhaps the worst army that has ever marched to war"—unpaid, untrained, and undisciplined, its soldiers having more in common with their enemies than with their officers.

El Obeid, the city whose siege Hicks had intended to relieve, had already fallen by the time the expedition left Khartoum, but Hicks continued anyway, although not confident of his chances of success. Upon his approach, the Mahdi assembled an army of about 40,000 men and drilled them rigorously in the art of war, equipping them with the arms and ammunition captured in previous battles. On 3 and 4 November 1883, when Hicks' forces actually offered battle, the Mahdist army was a credible military force, which utterly defeated Hicks' army—only about 500 Egyptians survived—at the Battle of El Obeid.

Egyptian evacuation

At this time, the British Empire was increasingly entrenching itself in the workings of the Egyptian government. Egypt was groaning under a barely maintainable debt repayment structure for her enormous European debt. For the Egyptian government to avoid further interference from its European creditors, it had to ensure that the debt interest was paid on time, every time. To this end, the Egyptian treasury, initially crippled by corruption and bureaucracy, was placed by the British almost entirely under the control of a 'Financial Advisor', who exercised the power of veto over all matters of financial policy. The holders of this office—first Sir Auckland Colvin, and later Sir Edgar Vincent — were instructed to exercise the greatest possible parsimony in Egypt's financial affairs. Maintaining the garrisons in the Sudan was costing the Egyptian government over 100,000 Egyptian pounds a year, an unmaintainable expense.

Charles Gordon as Governor of the Sudan

It was therefore decided by the Egyptian government, under some coercion from their British comptrollers, that the Egyptian presence in the Sudan should be withdrawn and the country left to some form of self-government, likely headed by the Mahdi. The withdrawal of the Egyptian garrisons stationed throughout the country, such as those at Sennar, Tokar and Sinkat, was therefore threatened unless it was conducted in an orderly fashion. The Egyptian government asked for a British officer to be sent to the Sudan to co-ordinate the withdrawal of the garrisons. It was hoped that Mahdist forces would judge an attack on a British subject to be too great a risk, and hence allow the withdrawal to proceed without incident. It was proposed to send Charles 'Chinese' Gordon. Gordon was a gifted officer, who had gained renown commanding Imperial Chinese forces during the Taiping Rebellion. However, he was also renowned for his aggression and rigid personal honour, which, in the eyes of several prominent British officials in Egypt, made him unsuitable for the task. Sir Evelyn Baring (later the Earl of Cromer), the British Consul-general in Egypt, was particularly opposed to Gordon's appointment, only reluctantly being won over by the British press and public. Gordon was eventually given the mission, but he was to be accompanied by the much more level-headed and reliable Colonel John Stewart. It was intended that Stewart, while nominally Gordon's subordinate, would act as a brake on the latter and ensure that the Sudan was evacuated quickly and peacefully.

Gordon left England on 18 January 1884 and arrived in Cairo on the evening of 24 January.] Gordon was largely responsible for drafting his own orders, along with proclamations from the Khedive announcing Egypt's intentions to leave the Sudan. Gordon's orders, by his own request, were unequivocal and left little room for misinterpretation.

Gordon arrived in Khartoum on 18 February, and immediately became apprised of the vast difficulty of the task. Egypt's garrisons were scattered widely across the country; three—Sennar, Tokar and Sinkat—were under siege, and the majority of the territory between them was under the control of the Mahdi. There was no guarantee that, if the garrisons were to sortie, even with the clear intention of withdrawing, they would not be cut to pieces by the Mahdist forces. Khartoum's Egyptian and European population was greater than all the other garrisons combined, including 7,000 Egyptian troops and 27,000 civilians and the staffs of several embassies. Although the pragmatic approach would have been to secure the safety of the Khartoum garrison and abandon the outlying fortifications and their troops to the Mahdi, Gordon became increasingly reluctant to leave the Sudan until "every one who wants to go down [the Nile] is given the chance to do so," feeling it would be a slight on his honour to abandon any Egyptian soldiers to the Mahdi. He also became increasingly fearful of the Mahdi's potential to cause trouble in Egypt if allowed control of the Sudan, leading to a conviction that the Mahdi must be "crushed," by British troops if necessary, to assure the stability of the region. It is debated whether or not Gordon deliberately remained in Khartoum longer than strategically sensible, seemingly intent on becoming besieged within the town. Gordon's brother, H. W. Gordon, was of the opinion that the British officers could easily have escaped from Khartoum up until 14 December 1884.

Whether or not it was the Mahdi's intention, in March 1884, the Sudanese tribes to the north of Khartoum, who had previously been sympathetic or at least neutral towards the Egyptian authorities, rose in support of the Mahdi. The telegraph lines between Khartoum and Cairo were cut on 15 March, severing communication between Khartoum and the outside world.

Siege of Khartoum

Gordon's position in Khartoum was very strong, as the city was bordered to the north and east by the Blue Nile, to the west by the White Nile, and to the south by ancient fortifications looking on to a vast expanse of desert. Gordon had food for an estimated six months, several million rounds of ammunition in store, with the capacity to produce a further 50,000 rounds per week, and 7,000 Egyptian soldiers.[31] But outside the walls, the Mahdi had mustered about 50,000 Dervish soldiers, and as time went on, the chances of a successful breakout became slim. Gordon had enthusiastically supported the idea of recalling the notorious former slaver Pasha Zobeir from exile in Egypt to organize and lead a popular uprising against the Mahdi. When this idea was vetoed by the British government, Gordon proposed a number of alternative means to salvage his situation successively to his British superiors. All were similarly vetoed. Among them were:

- Making a breakout southwards along the Blue Nile towards Abyssinia (now Ethiopia), which would have enabled him to collect the garrisons stationed along that route. The window for navigation of the upper reaches of that river was very narrow.
- Requesting Mohammedan regiments from India.
- Requesting several thousand Turkish troops be sent to quell the uprising.
- Visiting the Mahdi himself to explore a possible solution.

Eventually it became impossible for Gordon to be relieved without British troops. An expedition was duly dispatched under Sir Garnet Wolseley, but as the level of the White Nile fell through the winter, muddy 'beaches' at the foot of the walls were exposed. With starvation and cholera rampant in the city and the Egyptian troops' morale shattered, Gordon's position became untenable and the city fell on 26 January 1885, after a siege of 313 days.

Nile campaign

The British Government, reluctantly and late, but under strong pressure from public opinion, sent a relief column under Sir Garnet Wolseley to relieve the Khartoum garrison. This was described in some British papers as the 'Gordon Relief Expedition', a term Gordon strongly objected to. After defeating the Mahdists at the Battle of Abu Klea on 17 January 1885, the column arrived within sight of Khartoum at the end of January, only to find they were too late: the city had fallen two days earlier, and Gordon and the garrison had been massacred.

Suakin Expedition

The British also sent an expeditionary force under Lieutenant-General Sir Gerald Graham, including an Indian contingent, to Suakin in March 1885. Though successful in the two actions it fought, it failed to change the military situation and was withdrawn. These events temporarily ended British and Egyptian involvement in Sudan, which passed completely under the control of the Mahdists.

Muhammad Ahmad died soon after his victory, on 22 June 1885, and was succeeded by the Khalifa Abdallahi ibn Muhammad, who proved to be an able, albeit ruthless, ruler of the Mahdiyyah (the Mahdist state).

Equatoria expedition

Between 1886 and 1889 a British expedition to relieve the Egyptian governor of Equatoria made its way through central Africa. The governor, Emin Pasha, was rescued, but the expedition was not without its failures, such as the disaster that befell the rear column.

Ethiopian campaigns

According to the Hewett Treaty of 3 June 1884, Ethiopia agreed to facilitate the evacuation of Egyptian garrisons in southern Sudan. In September 1884, Ethiopia reoccupied the province of Bogos, which had been occupied by Egypt, and began a long campaign to relieve the Egyptian garrisons besieged by the Mahdists. The bitter campaigning was led by the Emperor Yohannes IV and Ras Alula. The Ethiopians under Ras Alula achieved a victory in the Battle of Kufit on 23 September 1885.

Between November 1885 and February 1886, Yohannes IV was putting down a revolt in Wollo. In January 1886, a Mahdist army invaded Ethiopia, seized Dembea, burned the Mahbere Selassie monastery, and

advanced on Chilga. King Tekle Haymanot of Gojjam led a successful counteroffensive as far as Gallabat in the Sudan in January 1887. A year later, in January 1888, the Mahdists returned, defeating Tekle Haymanot at Sar Weha and sacking Gondar. This culminated in the end of the Ethiopian theatre at the Battle of Gallabat.

Italian campaign and Anglo-Egyptian reconquest

In the intervening years, Egypt had not renounced her claims over Sudan, and the British authorities considered these claims legitimate. Under strict control by British administrators, Egypt's economy had been rebuilt, and the Egyptian army reformed, this time trained and led by British officers and non-commissioned officers. The situation evolved in a way that allowed Egypt, both politically and militarily, to reconquer Sudan.

Since 1890, Italian troops had defeated Mahdist troops in the Battle of Serobeti and the First Battle of Agordat. In December 1893, Italian colonial troops and Mahdists fought again in the Second Battle of Agordat; Ahmed Ali campaigned against the Italian forces in eastern Sudan and led about 10–12,000 men east from Kassala, encountering 2,400 Italians and their Eritrean Ascaris commanded by Colonel Arimondi. The Italians won again, and the outcome of the battle constituted "the first decisive victory yet won by Europeans against the Sudanese revolutionaries". A year later, Italian colonial forces seized Kassala after the successful Battle of Kassala.

In 1891 a Catholic priest, Father Joseph Ohrwalder, escaped from captivity in Sudan. In 1895 the erstwhile Governor of Darfur, Rudolf Carl von Slatin, managed to escape from the Khalifa's prison. Besides providing vital intelligence on the Mahdist dispositions, both men wrote detailed accounts of their experiences in Sudan. Written in collaboration with Reginald Wingate, a proponent of the reconquest of Sudan, both works emphasized the savagery and barbarism of the Mahdists, and through the wide publicity they received in Britain, served to influence public opinion in favour of military intervention.

In 1896, when Italy suffered a heavy defeat at the hands of the Ethiopians at Adwa, the Italian position in East Africa was seriously weakened. The Mahdists threatened to retake Kassala, which they had lost to the Italians in 1894. The British government judged it politic to assist the Italians by making a military demonstration in northern Sudan. This coincided with the increased threat of French encroachment on the Upper Nile regions. Lord Cromer, judging that the Conservative-Unionist government in power would favour taking the offensive, managed to extend the demonstration into a full-fledged invasion. In 1897, the Italians gave back to the British the control of Kassala, returning in Italian Eritrea, in order to get international recognition of their colony.

Herbert Kitchener, the new Sirdar (commander) of the Anglo-Egyptian Army, received his marching orders on 12 March, and his forces entered Sudan on the 18th. Numbering at first 11,000 men, Kitchener's force was armed with the most modern military equipment of the time, including Maxim machine-guns and modern artillery, and was supported by a flotilla of gunboats on the Nile. Their advance was slow and methodical, while fortified camps were built along the way, and two separate 3 ft 6 in (1,067 mm) Narrow gauge railways were hastily constructed from a station at Wadi Halfa: the first rebuilt Isma'il Pasha's abortive and ruined former line south along the east bank of the Nile to supply the 1896 Dongola Expedition[a] and a second, carried out in 1897, was extended along a new line directly across the desert to Abu Hamad—which they captured in the Battle of Abu Hamed on 7 August 1897—to supply the main force moving on Khartoum. It was not until 7 June 1896 that the first serious engagement of the campaign occurred, when Kitchener led a 9,000 strong force that wiped out the Mahdist garrison at Ferkeh.

In 1898, in the context of the scramble for Africa, the British decided to reassert Egypt's claim on Sudan. An expedition commanded by Kitchener was organised in Egypt. It was composed of 8,200 British soldiers and 17,600 Egyptian and Sudanese soldiers commanded by British officers. The Mahdist forces (sometimes called the Dervishes) were more numerous, numbering more than 60,000 warriors, but lacked modern weapons.

After defeating a Mahdist force in the Battle of Atbara in April 1898, the Anglo-Egyptians reached Omdurman, the Mahdist capital, in September. The bulk of the Mahdist army attacked, but was cut down by British machine-guns and rifle fire.

The remnant, with the Khalifa Abdullah, fled to southern Sudan. During the pursuit, Kitchener's forces met a French force under Major Jean-Baptiste Marchand at Fashoda, resulting in the Fashoda Incident. They finally caught up with Abdullah at Umm Diwaykarat, where he was killed, effectively ending the Mahdist regime.

The casualties for this campaign were:

- Sudan: 30,000 dead, wounded, or captured
- Britain: 700+ British, Egyptian and Sudanese dead, wounded, or captured.

Aftermath

The British set up a new colonial system, the Anglo-Egyptian administration, which effectively established British domination over Sudan. This ended with the independence of Sudan in 1956.

Textiles played an important role in the organisation of the Mahdist forces. The flags, banners, and patched tunics (jibba) worn and used in battle by the anṣār had both military and religious significance. As a result, textile items like these make up a large portion of the booty which was taken back to Britain after the British victory over the Mahdist forces at the Battle of Omdurman in 1899.[48] Mahdist flags and jibbas were adapted from traditional styles of textiles used by adherents of Sufi orders in Sudan. As the Mahdist war progressed, these textiles became more standardised and specifically colour coded to denote military rank and regiment.

Mahdist flags

Sufi flags typically feature the Muslim shahada – "There is no God but Allah; Muḥammad is Allah's Messenger" – and the name of the sect's founder, an individual usually regarded as a saint. The Mahdī adapted this form of flag for military purposes. A quotation from the Koran was added – "Yā allah yā ḥayy yā qayūm yā ḏhi'l-jalāl wa'l-ikrām" (O Allah! O Ever-living, O Everlasting, O Lord of Majesty and Generosity) – and the highly charged claim – "Muḥammad al-Mahdī khalifat rasūl Allah" (Muḥammad al-Mahdī is the successor of Allah's messenger).

After the fall of Khartoum, a "Tailor of Flags" was set up in Omdurman. The production of flags became standardised and regulations concerning the colour and inscriptions of the flags were established. As the Mahdist forces became more organized, the word "flag" (rayya) came to mean a division of troops or a body of troops under a commander.[50] The flags were colour coded to direct soldiers of the three main divisions of the Mahdist army – the Black, Green and Red Banners (rāyāt).

The Mahdist jibba

The patched muraqqa'a, and later, the jibba, was a garment traditionally worn by followers of Sufi religious orders. The ragged, patched garment symbolised a rejection of material wealth by its wearer and a commitment to a religious way of life. Muhammad Ahmad al-Mahdī decreed that this garment should be worn by all his soldiers in battle. The decision to adopt the religious garment as military dress, enforced unity and cohesion among his forces, and eliminated traditional visual markers differentiating potentially fractious tribes. During the years of conflict between Mahdist and Anglo-Egyptian forces at the end of the 19th century, the Mahdist military jibba became increasingly stylised and patches became colour-coded to denote the rank and military division of the wearer.

Battle of Atbara (The Atbara clasp)

The Battle of Atbara also known as the Battle of the Atbara River took place during the Second Sudan War. Anglo-Egyptian forces defeated 15,000 Sudanese rebels, called Mahdists or Dervishes, on the banks of the River Atbara. The battle proved to be the turning point in the conquest of Sudan by a British and Egyptian coalition.

By 1898, the combined British and Egyptian army was advancing down the Nile river into Sudan. The Sudanese Mahdist leader, the Khalifa Abdallahi ibn Muhammad ordered the Emir Mahmud Ahmad and his

10,000 strong army of western Sudan northward towards the junction of the Nile and River Atbara rivers to engage the British and Egyptian army led by Herbert Kitchener.

Encamping on the banks of the Atbara river by March 20, Mahmud, with Osman Digna's group of Dervish warriors were within 20 miles (32 km) of the British camp outpost at Fort Atbara at the confluence of the Atbara with the Nile. On April 4, after seeing that the Mahdists were unwilling to attack, Kitchener quietly advanced with the British and Egyptian army towards the Mahdist fortified camp just outside the town of Nakheila

The Anglo-Egyptian attack began at 06:20 on 8 April 1898. Three brigades, the British Brigade led by William Gatacre, and two Brigades of the Egyptian Division led by Archibald Hunter, led the attack. After a brief artillery bombardment of the Mahdist camp, the combined British and Egyptian brigades attacked. Soon, the British and Egyptian troops were in the Mahdist camp, often fighting hand-to-hand with the Mahdist warriors. After 45 minutes, the battle was over as Osman Digna led a few thousand warriors on a retreat to the south, while most of the remainder were killed or captured, including Mahmud who was captured by loyal Sudanese troops of the Egyptian Brigade.

Battle of Omdurman (Khartoum clasp)

The Battle of Omdurman was fought during the Anglo-Egyptian conquest of Sudan between a British–Egyptian expeditionary force commanded by British Commander-in-Chief (sirdar) major general Horatio Herbert Kitchener and a Sudanese army of the Mahdist Islamic State, led by Abdullah al-Taashi, the successor to the self-proclaimed Mahdi, Muhammad Ahmad. The battle took place on 2 September 1898, at Kerreri, 11 kilometres (6.8 mi) north of Omdurman in Sudan.

Following the establishment of the Mahdist Islamic State in Sudan, and the subsequent threat to the regional status quo and to British-occupied Egypt, the British government decided to send an expeditionary force with the task of overthrowing the Khalifa. The commander of the force, Sir Herbert Kitchener, was also seeking revenge for the death of General Gordon, killed when a Mahdist army had captured Khartoum thirteen years earlier.[3] On the morning of 2 September, some 35,000–50,000 Sudanese tribesmen under Abdullah attacked the British lines in a disastrous series of charges; later that morning the 21st Lancers charged and defeated another force that appeared on the British right flank. Among those present was 23-year-old soldier and reporter Winston Churchill as well as a young Captain Douglas Haig.

The victory of the British–Egyptian force was a demonstration of the superiority of a highly disciplined army equipped with modern rifles, machine guns, and artillery over a force twice its size armed with older weapons, and marked the success of British efforts to re-conquer Sudan. Following the Battle of Umm Diwaykarat a year later, the remaining Mahdist forces were defeated and the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan was established.

Background

On 13 September 1882, the British established their control over Egypt following the Battle of Tel el Kebir. In 1883 Muhammad Ahmad ibn as-Sayyid Abd Allah who called himself the Mahdi appeared in Sudan followed by thousands of Islamic warriors known as Dervishes or Ansar. At El Obeid on 3 November 1883, an Egyptian force under General William Hicks, sent by the Egyptian government to put down the uprising, was defeated by the Mahdi's army during the Battle of Shaykan. Another force, this time sent by the British government, and led by Major General Charles Gordon proceeded to Khartoum where it was besieged by the Mahdists. On 26 January 1885, the Dervishes overcame Gordon's troops and massacred the entire garrison. After the Mahdi died in 1885, Abdallahi ibn Muhammad known as Khalifa 'Abdullahi' became the new ruler. The Mahdist state, the Mahdia, built on slavery and holy war, enforced a strict Islamic code imposing a reign of terror over the regions of Sudan.

In 1896 to protect British interests, in particular the Suez Canal, and to suppress the slave trade, the British government decided to reconquer Sudan. An Anglo-Egyptian army under British Commander-in-Chief of Egyptian Army major general Herbert Kitchener marched south from Egypt. Kitchener captured Dongola on 21 September 1896, and Abu Hamed on 7 August 1897. At the Battle of the Atbara River on 7 April 1898 he

defeated Mahdist forces led by Osman Dinga and Khalifa Abdullah opening a line of march up the Nile. On 1 September 1898 Kitchener, supported by a powerful flotilla of gunboats, arrived to face the main Mahdist army at Omdurman, near Khartoum

Battle

The battle took place at Kerreri, 11 kilometres (6.8 mi) north of Omdurman. Kitchener commanded a force of 8,000 British regulars and a mixed force of 17,000 Sudanese and Egyptian troops. He arrayed his force in an arc around the village of Egeiga, close to the bank of the Nile, where a twelve gunboat flotilla waited in support, facing a wide, flat plain with hills rising to the left and right. The British and Egyptian cavalry were placed on either flank.

Abdullah's followers, calling themselves the Ansar and known to the British as Dervish warriors, numbered around 50,000,[2] including some 3,000 cavalry. They were split into five groups—a force of 8,000 under Osman Azrak was arrayed directly opposite the British, in a shallow arc along a mile (1.6 km) of a low ridge leading onto the plain, and the other Mahdist forces were initially concealed from Kitchener's force. Abdullah al-Taashi[2] and 17,000 men were concealed behind Surkab Hill (in older sources often distorted to "Surgham" Hill) to the west and rear of Osman Azrak's force, with 20,000 more positioned to the north-west, close to the front behind the Kerreri hills, commanded by Ali wad Hilu and Osman Sheikh ed-Din. A final force of around 8,000 was gathered on the slope on the right flank of Azrak's force.

The battle began in the early morning, at around 6:00 a.m. After the clashes of the previous day, the 8,000 men under Osman Azrak advanced straight at the waiting British, quickly followed by about 8,000 of those waiting to the northwest, a mixed force of rifle and spear-men. The 52 quick firing guns of the British artillery opened fire at around 2,750 metres (1.71 mi),[6] inflicting severe casualties on the Mahdist forces before they even came within range of the Maxim guns and volley fire. The frontal attack ended quickly, with around 4,000 Mahdist forces casualties; none of the attackers got closer than 50 m to the British trenches. A flanking move from the Ansar right was also checked, and there were bloody clashes on the opposite flank that scattered the Mahdist forces there.

While the Anglo-Egyptian infantry were able to make use of their superior firepower from behind a zariba barricade without suffering significant casualties, the cavalry and camel corps deployed to the centre-north of the main force found themselves under threat from the Mahadist Green Standard force of about 15,000 warriors. The commander of the Anglo-Egyptian mounted troops Lieutenant Colonel R.G. Broadwood used his cavalry to draw off part of the advancing Ansar attackers under Osman Digna but the slower-moving camel troops, attempting to regain the protection of the zariba, found themselves being closely pursued by Green Standard horsemen. This marked a crucial stage of the battle but Kitchener was able to deploy two gunboats to a position on the river where their cannon and Nordenfelt guns broke up the Mahadist force before it could destroy Broadwood's detachment and possibly penetrate the flank of the Anglo-Egyptian infantry.

The Battle of Omdurman, 1898, from the Purton Museum, Wiltshire. This illustration depicts the British wearing the red home service uniforms to identify the different regiments involved. The regiments in the picture have a number printed with them and a key at the bottom identify them. The red uniforms had in fact been superseded by khaki for active service in India and Egypt since the early 1880s.

Kitchener was anxious to occupy Omdurman before the remaining Mahdist forces could withdraw there. He advanced his army on the city, arranging them in separate columns for the attack. The British light cavalry regiment, the 21st Lancers, was sent ahead to clear the plain to Omdurman. They had a tough time of it. In what has been described as the last operational cavalry charge by British troops, and the largest since the Crimean War, the 400-strong regiment attacked what they thought were only a few hundred dervishes, but in fact there were 2,500 infantry hidden behind them in a depression. After a fierce clash, the Lancers drove them back (resulting in three Victoria Crosses being awarded to Lancers who helped rescue wounded comrades). One of the participants of this fight was Lieutenant Winston Churchill commanding a troop of twenty-five lancers. On a larger scale, the British advance allowed the Khalifa to re-organize his forces. He still had over 30,000 men in the field and directed his main reserve to attack from the west while ordering the forces to the northwest to attack simultaneously over the Kerreri Hills.

Kitchener's force wheeled left in echelon to advance up Surkab ridge and then southwards. To protect the rear, a brigade of 3,000 mainly Sudanese, commanded by Hector MacDonald, was reinforced with Maxims and artillery and followed the main force at around 1,350 metres (0.84 mi). Curiously, the supplies and wounded around Egeiga were left almost unprotected.

MacDonald was alerted to the presence of around 15,000 enemy troops moving towards him from the west, out from behind Surkab. He wheeled his force and lined them up to face the enemy charge. The Mahdist infantry attacked in two prongs. Lewis's Egyptian Brigade managed to hold its own but MacDonald was forced to repeatedly re-order his battalions. The brigade maintained a punishing fire. Kitchener, now aware of the problem, "began to throw his brigades about as if they were companies".[10] MacDonald's brigade was soon reinforced with flank support and more Maxim guns and the Mahdist forces were forced back; they finally broke and fled or died where they stood. The Mahdist forces to the north had regrouped too late and entered the clash only after the force in the central valley had been routed. They pressed Macdonald's Sudanese brigades hard, but Wauchope's brigade with the Lincolnshire Regiment was quickly brought up and with sustained section volleys repulsed the advance. A final desperate cavalry charge of around 500 Dervish horsemen was utterly destroyed. The march on Omdurman was resumed at about 11:30.

Awards

Four awards were made of the Victoria Cross, all for gallantry shown on 2 September 1898.

- Thomas Byrne, Private, 21st Lancers
- Raymond de Montmorency, Lieutenant, 21st Lancers
- Paul Aloysius Kenna, Captain, 21st Lancers
- Nevill Smyth, Captain, 2nd Dragoon Guards (Queen's Bays), attached to the Egyptian Army.[12]

Aftermath

Around 12,000 Muslim warriors were killed, 13,000 wounded and 5,000 taken prisoner. Kitchener's force lost 47 men killed and 382 wounded, the majority from MacDonald's command. One eyewitness described the appalling scene:

They could never get near and they refused to hold back. ... It was not a battle but an execution. ... The bodies were not in heaps—bodies hardly ever are; but they spread evenly over acres and acres. Some lay very composedly with their slippers placed under their heads for a last pillow; some knelt, cut short in the middle of a last prayer. Others were torn to pieces ...

The battle was the first time that the Mark IV hollow point bullet, made in the arsenal in Dum Dum, was used in a major battle. It was an expanding bullet, and the units that used it considered them to be highly effective. There was however controversy over the killing of the wounded after the battle began. The debate was ignited by a highly critical article published by Ernest Bennett (present at the battle as a journalist) in the *Contemporary Review*, which evoked a fierce riposte and defence of Kitchener by Bennet Burleigh (another journalist also present at the battle). Winston Churchill privately agreed with Bennett that Kitchener was too brutal in his killing of the wounded. This opinion was reflected in his own account of the battle when it was first published in 1899. However, mindful of the effect that patriotic public opinion could have on his political career, Churchill significantly moderated criticism of Kitchener in his book's second edition in 1902. The Khalifa, Abdullah al-Taashi, escaped and survived until 1899, when he was killed in the Battle of Umm Diwaykarat. Several days after the battle, Kitchener was sent to Fashoda, due to the developing Fashoda Incident. Kitchener was ennobled as a baron, Kitchener of Khartoum, for his victory.

Winston Churchill was present at the battle and he rode with the 21st Lancers. He published his account of the battle in 1899 as "The River War: An Account of the Reconquest of the Soudan". Present as a war correspondent for *The Times* was Colonel Frank Rhodes, brother of Cecil, who was shot and severely wounded in the right arm. For his services during that battle he was restored to the army active list.

The Battle of Omdurman has also lent its name to many streets in British and Commonwealth cities, for example 'Omdurman Road' in Southampton and 'Omdurman Street' in Freshwater, Sydney, Australia.