



Egypt's Industrial Revolution

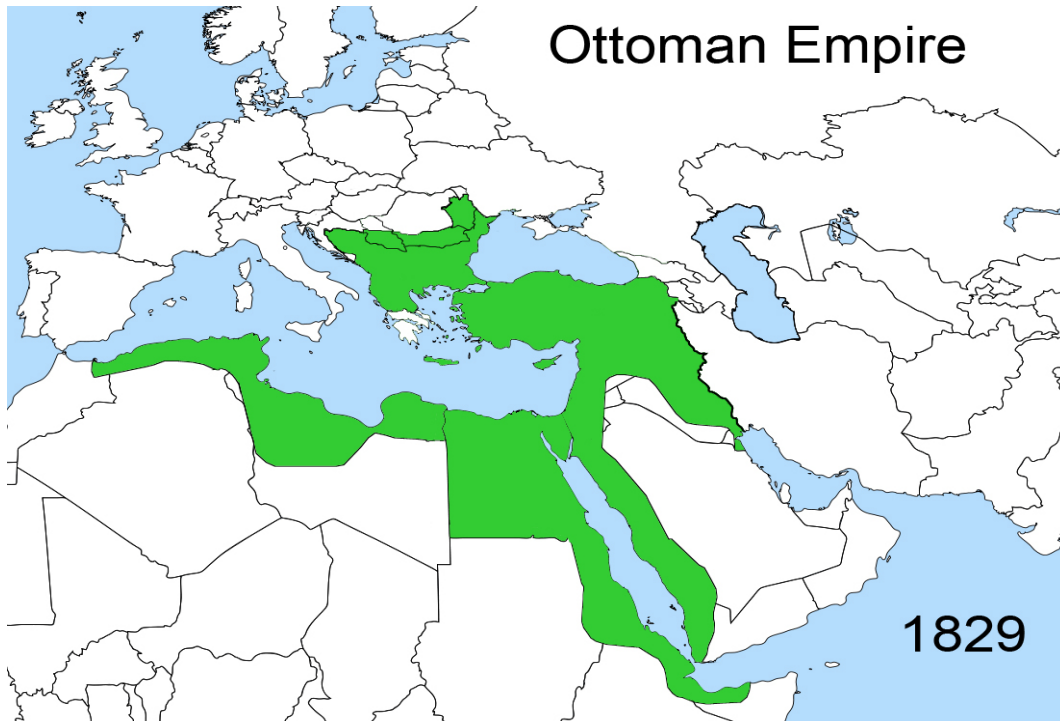
By Trevor Getz

During the nineteenth century, Egypt became a major producer of cotton and embarked on a process of building an industrialized economy. However, ultimately Egypt's industrialization failed, for reasons that are still debated.

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In the early nineteenth century, Egypt connected the enormous empire of the Ottoman Sultans with the even larger African continent. The Ottoman Empire included parts of modern-day Europe, Africa and the Middle East. Both were immense zones of trade and interaction. However, they were both struggling to find their place in a world that was industrializing faster than anyone expected.



[The Ottoman Empire in 1829](#). By Esemono, public domain.

For centuries, the Ottoman Empire had been at the center of trade in Eurasia. It had also been a major center of manufacturing. The empire produced handmade goods that were in great demand in Europe and Africa, in particular.

Soon, the Ottomans faced competition. Europe had begun industrializing, and its cheaper, machine-made goods became a competition for the Ottoman Empire. This caused increased unemployment and de-industrialization in the empire. Meanwhile, the production of goods in much of Africa also fell after centuries of slavery. Africa was seen as a place full of materials that could be offered to European factories, but not a place that could have its own factories.

Muhammad Ali and Egypt's industrial expansion

Egypt, however, was an African country that was technically still part of the Ottoman Empire. In the early nineteenth century, a new Egyptian ruler named Muhammad Ali wanted to rapidly industrialize. He had to carefully figure out how to work with the Ottoman sultans, the big European powers and the Egyptian people.

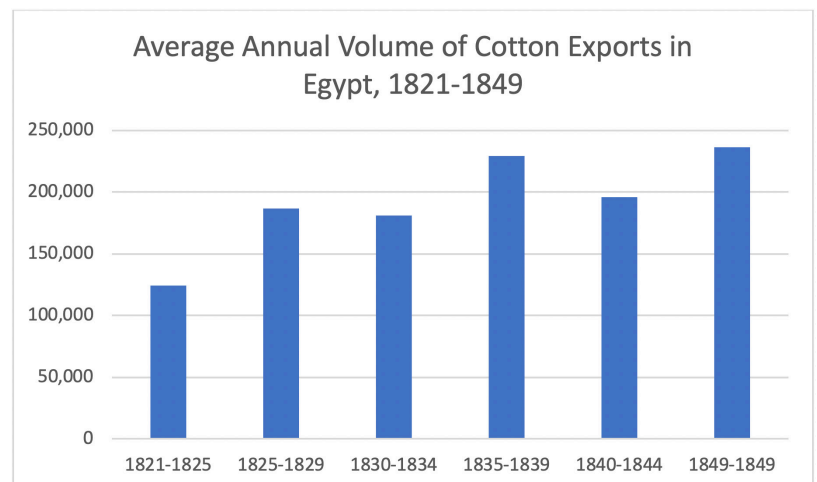
Ali was appointed to control Ottoman forces in Egypt at a pretty rough time. Egypt had recently suffered a crushing defeat to the French army in 1798. With British help, the Ottoman forces eventually drove the French out of Egypt. After the war, Egypt was still technically part of the Ottoman Empire. In reality, though, it was an independent state led by Ali. Ali set up a plan to modernize Egypt, starting with the military. He required Egyptian peasants to enlist, hired European advisers, and bought modern weapons. By 1831, he was effectively an independent ruler of a stronger, more modern Egypt.



This painting, by a European artist, shows Muhammad Ali in traditional Ottoman clothing, doing business involving modern sailing vessels. It is true to his reputation as a reformer and modernizer who still valued his country's own culture and traditions. By Farouk Mizr, public domain.

Egypt's rural elite disagreed with modernizing. Ali kept wealthy Egyptian leaders happy by maintaining many Egyptian traditions. However, he also made changes to modernize Egypt's economy. Egypt already produced small quantities of cotton that were sold to British cloth factories. Ali encouraged even more cotton production in Egypt. This changed life for most Egyptian peasants. They were used to working in the spring and summer and resting in the winter. With Ali's changes, peasants were forced to spend their winters producing cotton.

Ali's government used this money from cotton production to make factories. These factories processed cotton into clothing, but also made foods and some other goods. This helped Egypt profit from its own industrialization. By the late 1840s, it looked like Egypt would eventually become an industrial power. But by the 1850s, Egypt's economy began to decline. The factories stopped producing. By the 1880s, Egypt was so in debt to Britain that British banks had basically taken over the country. Egypt was technically independent, but the country was functioning more as a British colony.



What went wrong? Three explanations...

One explanation for the collapse of the Egyptian economy was a failure of leadership. Members of Ali's family took over after his death, but some experts argue they were not very effective rulers. Their focus was largely on cotton production. This meant that Egypt had to rely on a single export, which could be dangerous if the cotton crops failed. They also borrowed money from European banks to support their luxurious lifestyles. These banks used this debt to influence Egypt's leaders and government.

A second explanation for Egypt's failure was environmental. It didn't have the coal resources Britain and Europe had, so Egyptian factories ran their machines using donkeys and other animals. This system was more expensive and less efficient than burning coal.

A third explanation was that other countries purposely destroyed the Egyptian industry. These countries also made cloth and did not want Egypt as their competition. Some of these countries taxed imports of Egyptian cloth, meaning Egypt could not sell to them at a competitive price. At the same time, the European countries forbid the Ottoman Empire from taxing European goods. In the end, Egyptian factories could not match their low prices.

Reform and tradition

In this difficult economic climate, the Egyptian people had a problem similar to what many nations faced during industrialization. Some looked to modernize and become more like Europeans. Others wanted to return to their Islamic roots. Some Egyptian thinkers believed there was a middle ground between European and Islamic traditions.

One thinker was Rifa'a al-Tahtawi. He was a young Islamic religious leader called an imam. Al-Tahtawi studied in France in order to start a new university in Cairo. Al-Tahtawi believed European beliefs about science and the military could work with Islam. However, he thought the French were not religious enough and argued that religion was necessary to properly use science.

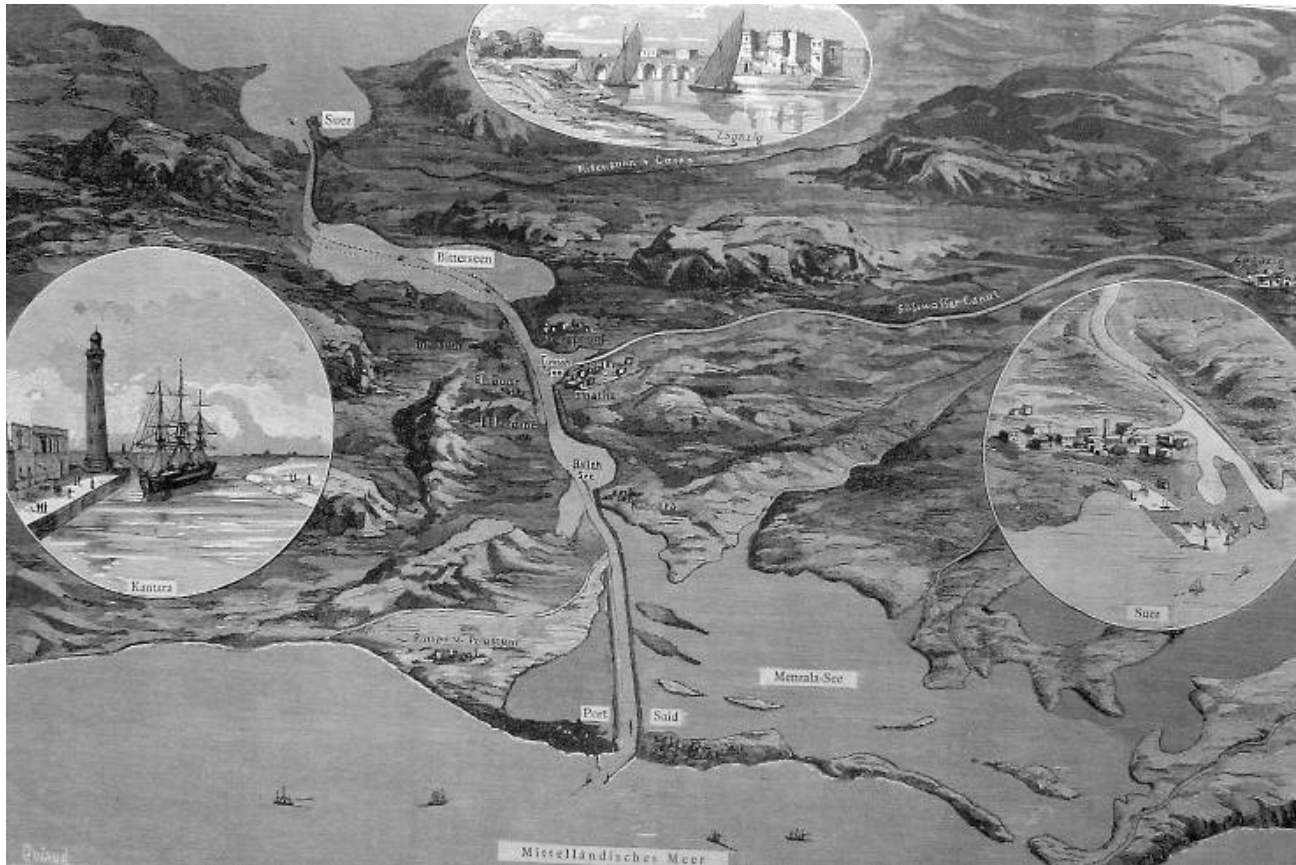
Meanwhile, Europeans kept meddling in Egypt. One reason was the Suez Canal, built between 1859 and 1869. The canal cut across Egypt, connecting the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea's Gulf of Suez. European powers wanted to control the canal because it was a shortcut to access their colonies.

Egypt's leaders could not agree on how to deal with European involvement. They were already stressed from the industrial collapse that left their country with no money. In 1875, the king sold his portion of the Suez Canal Company to the British, giving them control of this important national resource. Several Egyptian military officers were not pleased and took control of Egypt's government in 1881. The powerful British took advantage of this turmoil and instability and seized the



Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, imam and scientist. Public domain.

country. They restored the king, but only as a puppet ruler they could control. By 1882, Egypt's industrialization and independence had come to an end. Egypt did not become an industrialized nation-state until much, much later. Even then, it happened on much worse terms than Muhammad Ali had originally planned.



[Artist's impression of the Suez Canal](#), connecting the Mediterranean with the Red Sea (and then the Indian Ocean). By Artmod, public domain.

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