

The Wrongs of Egyptian Peasants

AN APPEAL TO LABOR AGAINST THE CRIME—By DR. L. HADEN GUEST, M.C., L.C.C.—FROM THE "LABOR LEADER," APRIL 3

OF the many failures of the Executive Government of this country during the war, Egypt is one of the worst.

The whole Eastern question has been mismanaged.

India was treated with contempt in the early days, and her sons refused either commissions or the right to serve along with other British subjects.

Then there was the terrible disaster of the operations in Mesopotamia, conducted by the Government of India; the almost equally bad disaster of Gallipoli; and then, the chronic disaster of the maltreatment of the Egyptians, with its result—the present rebellion. The blight of incompetent officialism is on the East and it seems worse in Egypt than in India.

The Executive Government might have saved the situation had they wished, but now, when they have failed, labor must take up the responsibility and help those who are too weak to help themselves.

The Cause of the Revolt

The facts are briefly these:

On December 18, 1914, Egypt was formally declared a British protectorate, and we became entirely responsible for its government and administration. We declared Hussein Kamil to be Sultan (no longer Khedive), and he has since been succeeded by the Sultan Fouad, who is reigning at the present moment. But the Sultan of Egypt only takes important action on the advice of the High Commissioner representing H. M. the King. Sir Reginald Wingate was appointed to this office on January 1, 1917, but is now in England, and all power at the moment is in the hands of General Allenby, who is virtually dictator.

During the war Egypt has been under exceedingly severe military restrictions amounting to a very large measure of martial law, and governed on the civil side by the fiat of the High Commissioner and of the military by the orders of the General Officer in Command of the Forces in Egypt.

The High Commissioner receives his orders from the Foreign Office and the G. O. C. from the War Office. The Home Government, therefore, is directly responsible for the executive acts of the civil and military sides of the Egyptian Government.

When it became necessary during the war to raise a large body of men for transport duties, road-making and other work on the lines of communications of the army in Egypt recourse was naturally had to the men on the spot, the Egyptian Fellaheen.

The Egyptian Fellaah, or peasant, of whom there are about 11,000,000 in all Egypt, is a simple, laborious, almost entirely illiterate, man. The vast number of these people are Mohammedans, and they live in the little villages of mud-hovels and in the small towns and large towns of Egypt all along the course of the Nile.

Their living depends on their daily work in their fields; they are intensely conservative and home-loving. So big a factor is this in their character that there are practically no Egyptian sailors, the voyage even to Greece taking them too long away from their homes. Their physical and mental character seems much the same now as 2,000 years ago. Besides the Fellaheen there are about 1,000,000 other people in Egypt, including all the Europeans, and this 1,000,000, who correspond roughly to the educated and propertied classes, include the small group of educated non-European Egyptians, who are "nationalists." To the peasantry our civil and military administrators turned for help when men were needed, and devised a plan of "voluntary" enlistment in the Labor Corps, Donkey Transport Corps or Camel Transport Corps, for service with the E. E. F.

Forced Labor for the Fellaheen

The period of enlistment was to be for six months (as-a-rule), the rate of pay good from the peasant standpoint, and food, clothing, blankets and tentage were also to be provided.

A certain number of men enlisted readily enough. Then there came a pause, and men were still required. Orders were then sent round to stimulate the recruiting, and eventually a press-gang method was established. A friend described to me how it was done.

A party of "recruiters" would go up to one of the little mud villages (many look like big ant-hills) and wait for dusk when the fellaheen would return from the fields. When they returned they were "rounded up" like cattle, and the suitable ones picked out and enlisted. If they refused to "volunteer" they were lashed with the Egyptian shorthide whip until they changed their minds.

There were boys of 14 taken and men of 70 or even over.

The medical examination, if any, was a farce, and men gravely ill were sent to do military duties. Once the men were enlisted discipline was maintained by the free use of the lash, and whippings were so common that a medical officer told off to oversee the administration of the punishment arranged to have his "sick parade" and his "whipping parade" at the same time, the whipping parade being quite near to his tent where he saw the sick, so that he could overlook both functions (with little agility) at the same time.

"They Died Like Flies"

The men received their pay regularly, I understand, but rations were often deficient, and clothing, blankets and tentage very often deficient. In the winter of 1917-18 Egyptians died like flies as the result of epidemics of typhus fever and other diseases, cold and insufficient food.

The medical arrangements for the men were entirely inadequate, and the sickness rate and death rate would prove interesting, if grim reading, if they could be obtained. Egyptians were treated so brutally in their own units that they were afraid to report sick, and those discharged as permanently unfit on medical grounds were not exempt from being recruited again by the next press-gang party which came to their village. Very frequently indeed also men were kept beyond the stipulated time of their contract service, and our word as Britons broken.

In addition to these raids on the homes of the fellaheen for men we also requisitioned nearly the whole of their donkeys and their camels—at any rate, all the good ones.

Of course, these animals were paid for, but the peasant cultivator could not make a few piastres do the work of a four-footed assistant. Also we bought up much food, and directly and indirectly, as a result of the presence of large bodies of troops in Egypt, the cost of living went up tremendously without a corresponding rise in wages.

Before November last the Egyptian papers even—which are censored as to practically every word by a semi-military official—were reporting riots around food stores and shops, where half a dozen people were killed. In Alexandria practically all the poorer classes were underfed—Egyptian and European alike.

Is it very remarkable, therefore, that we were hated and detested in Egypt, and that it was currently said that all Egyptians were pro-German?

What I have said hitherto is the economic social foundation of the "trouble."

But this has not contented our Imperialists. We have conquered Mesopotamia, Palestine, Syria and Turkey—and been studiously mysterious and

vague about what we are going to do with these countries. Are we going to turn the Arabs out? That is a question which Egyptians of the highest standing could not get answered when they asked it of those in power. How, then, should the Arab in his village get an answer?

And the rumor ran from village to village, from camp to camp, of some vague disaster overhanging the Arab Moslem world from the infidel Frank world. Is it any wonder we lighted up religious fanaticism against us?

In the east "nationality" does not exist as it does in the West, and its place is taken in Egypt, Palestine, Syria and adjoining countries by the sentiment of religion. Men feel themselves one as Mohammedans. Egyptian nationalism is thus only the local expression of Near Eastern Mohammedan religious feeling—and the more dangerous for that reason.

Labor Must Act

The whole of the Near East is in a dangerous ferment. We have treated the Egyptians with gross injustice; we have not cared for their elementary human needs as it was our bounden duty to do; we have stirred up Mohammedan religious feeling against us; we are now playing the fatuous game of "high politics" with the destinies of races and continents as though they were card counters.

Let Labor insist on the immediate despatch to Egypt of a small commission armed with full powers to examine witnesses, report and act with the same rapidity as the Coal Commission has done. And let Labor insist on having half the members of that commission its own nominees, of which a proportion shall be Egyptians nominated by the Labor members after arrival in Egypt and consultation with the Egyptians there.

We cannot and do not trust the Foreign Office. We must have an open commission and a commonsense and humane settlement.

Not machine guns, but reason and humanity are needed. The Egyptians are men as we are men, and enjoy and suffer as we enjoy and suffer. They are weak and unorganized; many, nay, most, are illiterate and unlearned in ways of governments and rules of diplomacy—let us then of the Brotherhood of Labor take these younger brothers under our protection, and say to the government: "Give these men justice and reparation for wrong. They are our brothers, and we fight for them as we fight for ourselves."

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