



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.

590L

In the early 1800s, Egypt connected the enormous Ottoman Empire with the African continent. The Ottoman Empire included parts of modern-day Europe, Africa and the Middle East. Both were huge areas of trade. However, they began struggling.



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

Europe had begun industrializing. It was making cheaper, machine-made goods. Europe became a competition for the Ottoman Empire. Many people in the empire lost their jobs. Factories closed down. Production in Africa had also fallen. This was due to centuries of the Atlantic slave trade. Africa was seen as a place for collecting materials. It was not seen as a place for building factories.

Muhammad Ali and Egypt's industrial expansion

Egypt is an African country. However, at that time it was part of the Ottoman Empire. In the early 1800s, a new Egyptian ruler wanted to quickly industrialize. His name was Muhammad Ali. Ali had to work with Ottoman leaders, European powers and the Egyptian people.

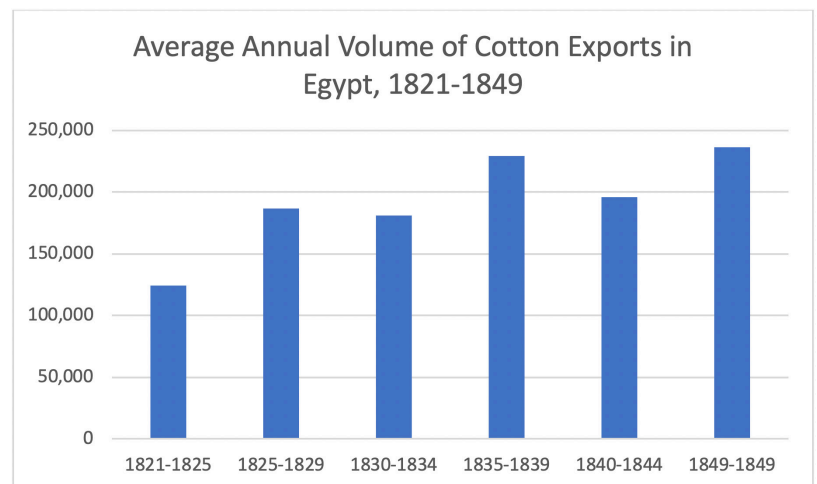
Ali was given control of the Ottoman forces in Egypt. This happened during a rough time. Egypt had just lost a war with France. Eventually, Britain helped push the French out of Egypt. After the war, Egypt was technically still part of the Ottoman Empire. In reality, Ali made it an independent state. Ali wanted to industrialize the country. He started with the military. He forced peasants to enlist. He also bought modern weapons. By 1831, he was the ruler of a much more modern Egypt.

Some wealthy Egyptian leaders did not want to modernize. Ali kept these leaders happy by maintaining many Egyptian traditions. At the same time, he began modernizing Egypt's economy. Egypt already sold some cotton to British cloth factories. Ali encouraged even more cotton production. This changed life for most Egyptian peasants. Peasants were forced to spend their winters growing cotton. Before, they had rested in the winter.



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.

Ali's government also started creating factories. These factories made clothing, food and other goods. This helped Egypt profit from its own industrialization. By the late 1840s, looked like Egypt would become an industrial power. However, Egypt's economy soon began to decline. The factories stopped producing. Egypt got into serious debt with British banks. Egypt was still independent. However, Egypt was being controlled by British banks.



What went wrong?

Three explanations...

Three things help explain why Egypt's industrialization failed. Bad leadership is one of them. Ali's family took over after his death. Some experts say they were not good rulers. They depended too much on cotton for money. The rulers also borrowed money from European banks. This money helped them live a luxurious lifestyle. The banks used this debt to influence Egypt's government.

A second explanation for Egypt's failure was environmental. They didn't have as much coal as the Europeans. Egyptian factories moved their machines using animals. This system was less efficient than burning coal.

A third explanation is European competition. European countries tried to ruin the Egyptian industry on purpose. They did not want the competition. European countries began taxing imports of Egyptian cloth. They also forbid Egypt from taxing European products. The price of Egyptian cloth went up. Egyptian factories could not match low European prices.

Reform and tradition

Industrialization caused cultural challenges in Egypt. Some Egyptians wanted to modernize. They thought they should become more like Europeans. Others wanted to return to their Islamic roots. Some Egyptian thinkers thought Egypt could have both European and Islamic traditions.

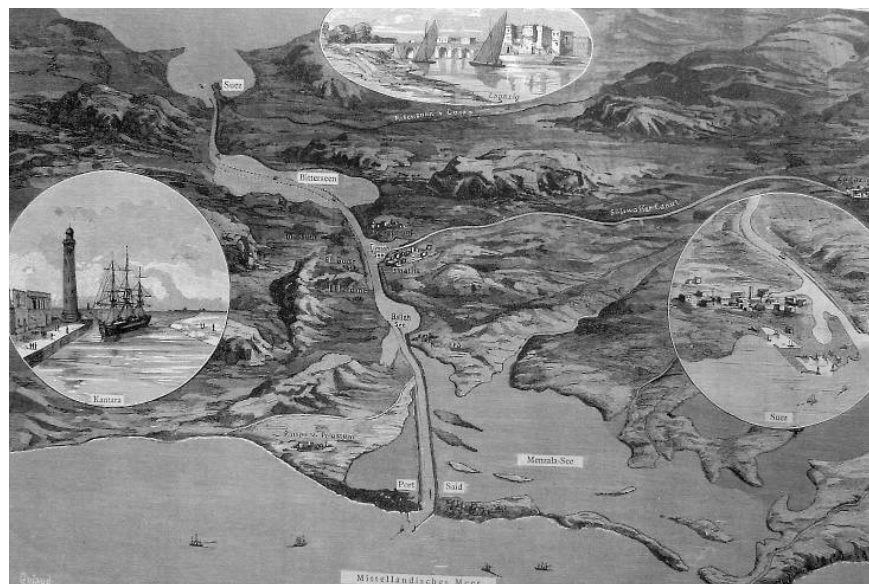
Meanwhile, Europeans kept meddling in Egypt. One reason was the Suez Canal. The canal cut across Egypt. It connected the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea. European powers wanted to control the canal because it was a shortcut to their colonies.

Egypt's leaders disagreed on what to do with Europe. They had already lost all their money. The king sold his portion of the Suez Canal Company to the British. This gave the British control of an important resource. Some Egyptian military officers did not like this decision. In response, they took control of Egypt's government. The British took advantage of this chaotic moment. They seized control of the country. The British brought back the king. However, he was just a puppet ruler they could control.

By 1882, Egypt was no longer independent. Industrialization came to an end. Egypt did not become an industrialized nation-state until much later. This time, industrialization happened in a much worse way than Muhammad Ali planned.



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



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

Trevor Getz

Trevor Getz is Professor of African and World History at San Francisco State University. He has written or edited eleven books, including the award-winning graphic history *Abina and the Important Men*, and co-produced several prize-winning documentaries. He is also the author of *A Primer for Teaching African History*, which explores questions about how we should teach the history of Africa in high school and university classes.

Image credits

Cover: Interview with Mehemet Ali in his Palace at Alexandria (May 12th 1839) lithograph published 1849, David Roberts - Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Interview_with_Mehemet_Ali_in_his_Palace_at_Alexandria,_by_David_Roberts_and_Louis_Hague.jpg

The Ottoman Empire in 1829. By Esemono, public domain. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Territorial_evolution_of_the_Ottoman_Empire#/media/File:Territorial_changes_of_the_Ottoman_Empire_1829.jpg

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 Misr, public domain. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhammad_Ali_of_Egypt#/media/File:Mouhamed_ali_army%26navy.jpg

Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, imam and scientist. Public domain. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rifa%27a_al-Tahtawi#/media/File:Tahtawi.jpg

Artist's impression of the Suez Canal, connecting the Mediterranean with the Red Sea (and then the Indian Ocean). By Artmod, public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Suez_Canal#/media/File:Suez_Canal_1882.JPG



Articles leveled by Newsela have been adjusted along several dimensions of text complexity including sentence structure, vocabulary and organization. The number followed by L indicates the Lexile measure of the article. For more information on Lexile measures and how they correspond to grade levels: www.lexile.com/educators/understanding-lexile-measures/

To learn more about Newsela, visit www.newsela.com/about.



The Lexile® Framework for Reading

The Lexile® Framework for Reading evaluates reading ability and text complexity on the same developmental scale. Unlike other measurement systems, the Lexile Framework determines reading ability based on actual assessments, rather than generalized age or grade levels. Recognized as the standard for matching readers with texts, tens of millions of students worldwide receive a Lexile measure that helps them find targeted readings from the more than 100 million articles, books and websites that have been measured. Lexile measures connect learners of all ages with resources at the right level of challenge and monitors their progress toward state and national proficiency standards. More information about the Lexile® Framework can be found at www.Lexile.com.