

[Back to Islamic History Sourcebook](#) | [Back to Medieval Sourcebook](#) | [Halsall History Web Sites Page](#) |

# Islamic History Sourcebook: Alfred Egmont Hake: The Death of General Gordon at Khartoum, 1885

---

*[Tappan Introduction] In 1882 there arose in the Soudan, a province of Upper Egypt, one Mohammed Ahmed, who called himself the Mahdi or Messiah, and invited all true believers to join in a holy war against the Christians. Thousands of wild tribesmen flocked to his banner, and in the following year he annihilated an army of eleven thousand English and Egyptians that had attempted to subdue the revolt. Rather than send more soldiers to die in the deserts of the Upper Nile, England decided to abandon the province. But first the thousands of Europeans who had taken refuge in Khartoum and other towns of the Soudan must be rescued from their perilous position. In this crisis the Government turned to the one man who could effect the withdrawal if it was still possible, and in January, 1884, appointed General Gordon to superintend the evacuation of the Soudan.*

GENERAL GORDON arrived at Khartoum on February 18th, and spent his time between that date and the investment on March 12, in sending down women and children, two thousand of whom were sent safely through to Egypt, in addition to six hundred soldiers. It was stated by Sir Evelyn Baring (English consul-general to Egypt) that there were fifteen thousand persons in Khartoum who ought to be brought back to Egypt---Europeans, civil servants, widows and orphans, and a garrison of one thousand men, one third of whom were disaffected. To get these people out of Khartoum was General Gordon's first duty, and the first condition of evacuation was the establishment of a stable government in the Soudan. The only man who could establish that government was Zebehr. Gordon demanded Zebehr with ever-increasing emphasis, and his request was decisively refused. He had then two alternatives---either to surrender absolutely to the Mahdi, or to hold on to Khartoum at all hazards. While Gordon was strengthening his position the Mahdi settled the question by suddenly assuming the offensive. The first step in this memorable siege was the daring march of four thousand Arabs to the Nile, by which, on March 12, they cut off the eight hundred men at Halfaya, a village

to the north of Khartoum, from the city. A steamer was sent down to reconnoiter, and the moment she reached the front of the Arab position a volley was fired into her, wounding an officer and a soldier. The steamer returned the fire, killing five.

Thus hostilities began. "Our only justification for assuming the offensive," wrote General Gordon on March 13, "is the extrication of the Halfaya garrison." The Arabs, however, did not give him the chance. They cut off three companies of his troops who had gone out to cut wood, capturing eight of their boats, and killing or dispersing one hundred to one hundred and fifty men. They intrenched themselves along the Nile, and kept up a heavy rifle-fire. Retreat for the garrison was obviously impossible when the Arab force covered the river, the only line of retreat, with their fire. Twelve hundred men were put on board two grain-barges, towed by three steamers defended with boiler plates, and carrying mountain-guns protected by wooden mantlets; and, with the loss of only two killed, they succeeded in extricating the five hundred men left of the garrison of Halfaya, and capturing seventy camels and eighteen horses, with which they returned to Khartoum.

The Arabs, however, held Halfaya, and on March 16 Gordon tried to drive them away. Advancing from a stockaded position covering the north front of the town, two thousand troops advanced across the open in square, supported by the fire of the guns of two steamers. The Arabs were retreating, when Hassan and Seid Pashas, Gordon's black generals, rode into the wood and called back the enemy. The Egyptians, betrayed by their officers, broke and fled after firing a single volley, and were pursued to within a mile of the stockade, abandoning two mountain guns with their ammunition---"sixty horsemen defeated two thousand men"---and leaving two hundred of their number on the field. After this affair he was convinced that he could not take the offensive, but must remain quiet at Khartoum, and wait till the Nile rose. Six days later, the black pashas were tried by court-martial, found guilty, and shot.

A very determined attack upon one of the steamers coming up from Berber, at the Salboka Pass, was beaten off with great slaughter, Gordon's men firing no fewer than fifteen thousand rounds of Remington ammunition. Meanwhile, his efforts to negotiate with the Mahdi failed. "I will make you Sultan of Kordofan," he had said on arrival to the Mahdi. "I am the Mahdi," replied Mahomet Ahmet, by emissaries who were "exceedingly cheeky," keeping their hands upon their swords, and laying a filthy, patched dervish's coat before him. "Will you become a Mussulman?" Gordon flung the bundle across the room, canceled the Mahdi's sultanship, and the war was renewed. From that day to the day of the betrayal no day passed without bullets dropping into Khartoum.

Gordon now set to work in earnest to place Khartoum in a defensible position. Ten thousand of the Madhi's sympathizers left Khartoum and joined the enemy. The steamers kept up a skirmishing fight on both Niles. All the houses on the north side of Khartoum were loopholed. A sixteen-pounder Krupp was mounted on a barge, and wire was stretched across the front of the stockade. The houses on the northern bank of the Blue Nile were fortified and garrisoned by Bashi-Bazouks. Omdurman was held and fortified on the west and Buri on the east. On March 25, Gordon had to disarm and disband two hundred and fifty Bashi-Bazouks who refused to occupy stockaded houses in a village on the south bank of the Blue Nile. The rebels advanced on Hadji Ali, a village to the north of the Nile, and fired into the palace. They were shelled out of their position, but constantly returned to harass the garrison. They seemed to Gordon mere rag-tag and bob-tail, but he dared not go out to meet them, for fear of the town. Five hundred brave men could have cleared out the lot, but he had not a hundred. The fighting was confined to artillery fire on one side, and desultory rifle-shooting on the other. This went on till the end of March. The Arabs clustered more closely round the town.

On April 19, Gordon telegraphed that he had provisions for five months, and if he only had two thousand to three thousand Turkish troops he could soon settle the rebels. Unfortunately, he received not one fighting man. Shendi fell into the hands of the Mahdi. Berber followed, and then for months no word whatever reached this country from Khartoum.

On September 29, Mr. Power's telegram, dated July 31, was received by the "Times." From that we gathered a tolerably clear notion of the way in which the war went on. Anything more utterly absurd than the accusation that Gordon forced fighting on the Mahdi cannot be conceived. He acted uniformly on the defensive, merely trying to clear his road of an attacking force, and failing because he had no fighting men to take the offensive. He found himself in a trap, out of which he could not cut his way. If he had possessed a single regiment, the front of Khartoum might have been cleared with ease; but his impotence encouraged the Arabs, and they clustered round in ever-increasing numbers, until at last they crushed his resistance. After the middle of April the rebels began to attack the palace in force, having apparently established themselves on the north bank.

The loss of life was chiefly occasioned by the explosion of mines devised by General Gordon, and so placed as to explode when trodden on by the enemy. Of all his expedients these mines were the most successful and the least open to any accusation of offensive operations. The Arabs closed in all round towards the end of April, and General Gordon surrounded himself with a formidable triple barrier of land torpedoes, over which wire entanglement and a formidable

*chevaux-de-frise* enabled the garrison to feel somewhat secure. On April 27, Valeh Bey surrendered at Mesalimeh, a disaster by which General Gordon lost one steamer, seventy shiploads of provisions, and two thousand rifles.

General Gordon was now entirely cut off from the outside world, and compelled to rely entirely upon his his own resources. He sent out Negroes to entice the slaves of the Arabs to come over, promising them freedom and rations. This he thought would frighten the Arabs more than bullets. On April 26, he made his first issue of paper-money to the extent of ,2500 redeemable in six months. By July 30, it had risen to ,26,000 besides the ,50,000 borrowed from merchants. On the same day he struck decorations for the defense of Khartoum---for officers in silver, silver-gilt and pewter for the private soldiers. These medals bear a crescent and a star, with words from the Koran, and the date, with an inscription,---"Siege of Khartoum,"---and a hand-grenade in the center. "School-children and women," he wrote, "also received medals; consequently, I am very popular with the black ladies of Khartoum."

The repeated attacks of the Mahdi's forces on Khartoum cost the Arabs many lives. On May 25, Colonel Stewart was slightly wounded in the arm, when working a mitrailleuse near the palace. All through May and June his steamers made foraging expeditions up and down the Nile, shelling the rebels when they showed in force, and bringing back much cattle to the city. On Midsummer Day, Mr. Cuzzi, formerly Gordon's agent at Berber, but now a prisoner of the Mahdi's, was sent to the wells to announce the capture of Berber. It was sad news for the three Englishmen alone in the midst of a hostile Soudan. Undaunted, they continued to stand at bay, rejoicing greatly that in one, Saati Bey, they had, at least, a brave and capable officer.

Saati had charge of the steamers, and for two months he had uninterrupted success, in spite of the twisted telegraph wires which the rebels stretched across the river. Unfortunately, on July 10, Saati, with Colonel Stewart and two hundred men, after burning Kalaka and three villages, attacked Gatarnulb. Eight Arab horsemen rode at the two hundred Egyptians. The two hundred fled at once, not caring to fire their Remingtons, and poor Saati was killed. Colonel Stewart narrowly escaped a similar fate.

After July 31, there is a sudden cessation of regular communications. Power's journal breaks off then, and we are left to more or less meager references in Gordon's dispatches. On August 23, he sent a characteristic message, in which he announces that, the Nile having risen, he has sent Colonel Stewart, Mr. Power, and the French consul to take Berber, occupy it for fifteen days, burn it, and then return to Khartoum. All the late messages from Gordon, except a long dispatch of November 4, which has never been published, were written on tissue paper no

bigger than a postage-stamp, and either concealed in a quill thrust into the hair, or sewn in the waistband of the natives employed. Gordon seems to have been the most active in August and September, when the Nile was high. He had eight thousand men at Khartoum and Senaar. He sent Colonel Stewart and the troops with the steamers to recapture Berber. A steamer which bore a rough effigy of Gordon at the prow was said to be particularly dreaded by the rebels. On August 26, he reported that he had provisions for five months, but in the forays made by his steamer on the Southern Niles he enormously replenished his

stores. On one of these raids he took with him six thousand men in thirty-four boats towed by nine steamers.

After his defeat before Omdurman, the Mahdi is said to have made a very remarkable prophecy. He retired into a cave for three days, and on his return he told his followers that Allah had revealed that for sixty days there would be a rest, and after that blood would flow like water. The Mahdi was right. Almost exactly sixty days after that prophecy there was fought the battle of Abu Klea.

Stewart had by this time been treacherously killed on his way down from Berber to Dongola. Gordon was all alone. The old men and women who had friends in the neighboring villages left the town. The uninhabited part was destroyed, the remainder was inclosed by a wall. In the center of Khartoum he had built himself a tower, from the roof of which he kept a sharp lookout with his field-glass in the daytime. At night he went the rounds of the fortifications, cheering his men and keeping them on the alert against attacks. Treachery was always his greatest dread. Many of the townsfolk sympathized with the Mahdi; he could not depend on all his troops, and he could only rely on one of his pashas, Mehmet Ali. He rejoiced exceedingly in the news of the approach of the British relieving force. He illuminated Khartoum and fired salutes in honor of the news, and he doubled his exertions to fill his granaries with grain.

On December 14, a letter was received by one of his friends in Cairo from General Gordon, saying, "Farewell. You will never hear from me again. I fear that there will be treachery in the garrison, and all will be over by Christmas." It was this melancholy warning that led Lord Wolseley to order the dash across the Desert. On December 16 came news that the Mahdi had again failed in his attack on Omdurman. Gordon had blown up the fort which he had built over against the town, and inflicted great loss on his assailants, who, however, invested the city closely on all sides. The Mahdi had returned to Omdurman, where he had concentrated his troops. Thence he sent fourteen thousand men to Berber to recruit the forces of Osman Digma, and it was these men, probably, that fought the English relief army at Abu Klea.

After this nothing was heard beyond the rumor that Omdurman was captured and two brief messages from Gordon, sent probably to hoodwink the enemy, by whom most of his letters were captured. The first, which arrived January 1, was as follows: "Khartoum all right.---C. G. Gordon. December 14, 1884." The second was brought by the steamers which met General Stewart at Mentemneh on January 21st: "Khartoum all right; could hold out for years.---C. G. Gordon. December 29." On January 26, Faraz Pasha opened the gates of the city to the enemy, and one of the most famous sieges

in the world's history came to a close. It had lasted from March 12 to January 26---exactly three hundred and twenty days.

When Gordon awoke to find that, through the treachery of his Egyptian lieutenant, Khartoum was in the hands of the Mahdi, he set out with a few followers for the Austrian consulate. Recognized by a party of rebels, he was shot dead on the street and his head carried through the town at the end of a pike, amid the wild rejoicings of the Mahdi's followers. Two days later the English army of relief reached Khartoum.

---

## Source

From: Eva March Tappan, ed., *The World's Story: A History of the World in Story, Song and Art*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914), Vol. III: *Egypt, Africa, and Arabia*, pp. 240-249.

Scanned by Jerome S. Arkenberg, Cal. State Fullerton. The text has been modernized by Prof. Arkenberg

**Note:** Many Western sources about Islamic countries exhibit what has come to be known as *orientalism*. The terms used ("Mohammedan" for instance rather than "Muslim"), and the attitudes exhibited by the writers need to be questioned by modern readers.

---

This text is part of the [Internet Islamic History Sourcebook](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/islam/1885khartoum1.html). The Sourcebook is a collection of public domain and copy-permitted texts for introductory level classes in modern European and World history.

Unless otherwise indicated the specific electronic form of the document is

copyright. Permission is granted for electronic copying, distribution in print form for educational purposes and personal use. If you do reduplicate the document, indicate the source. No permission is granted for commercial use of the Sourcebook.

© Paul Halsall, November1998

[halsall@fordham.edu](mailto:halsall@fordham.edu)