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SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND  
POPULAR MOBILISATION  
IN THE MENA

# STRIKES, RIOTS AND LAUGHTER

AL-HIMAMIYYA VILLAGE'S  
EXPERIENCE OF EGYPT'S  
1919 PEASANT INSURRECTION

Alia Mossallam

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# Strikes, Riots and Laughter: Al-Himamiyya Village's Experience of Egypt's 1918 Peasant Insurrection

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## About the Author

**Alia Mossallam** is a EUME Fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation in Berlin, and a Visiting Scholar at the Lautarchiv at Humboldt University. She is currently writing a book about the building of the Aswan High Dam through the memories and popular archiving practices of both the dam's builders and the Nubian communities displaced by it. She is also working on a new project tracing the experiences of the Egyptian labour corps on the fronts of World War I, through the songs, stories and performances unearthed in international archives. Some of her publications from both projects can be found in *The Journal of Water History*, the *History Workshop Journal*, *Jadaliyya*, *Ma'azif*, and *Bidayat* as well as an upcoming contribution on WWI in the edited volume *Cultural Entanglements in the Pre-Independence Arab World*, edited by Anthony Gorman and Sarah Irving, to be published by I.B. Tauris in November 2020.

## Abstract

When asked to write his personal memoirs, the Marxist intellectual 'Ismat Saif al-Dawla wrote a history of his Upper Egyptian village, al-Himamiyya, based on the stories that were formative to both the village's and his own political repertoire. The memoirs tell us of how the waves of World War I rippled through Europe to Egypt, reaching as far as al-Himamiyya. He tells the stories of Younis, the village's only member taken to the front in Calais, and the strike action the labour corps undertook to negotiate with the French military command; the experiences of Sheikh 'Abbas, who strove to 'fight the law with the law' and petition against the conscription of village youth into the war; and the stories of Fikry and Nu'man, who plotted an armed insurrection against the village elite and noblemen. In this paper, I present a close reading of the memoirs that provide us with another language with which to understand the momentous peasant revolts of 1918 and the 1919 elite politician-driven revolution. I use official colonial archives to situate the events the memoir describes in their wider political context, while unearthing songs and chants heard during the insurrections that give us a better understanding of how and why people revolt. The paper explores the popular politics that were obscured by the sanitised banner of the nationalist-led 1919 Revolution.

## Acknowledgements

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## Introduction

‘If the story of the rise of nationalist resistance to imperialism is to be disclosed coherently, it is the role of the indigenous subaltern that must be strategically excluded.’ – Gayatri Spivak<sup>1</sup>

‘Does the near impossibility of recovering unmediated subaltern voices mean that we have no access to subaltern experiences and consciousness?’ – Joel Beinin<sup>2</sup>

In the summer of 1918, the Ministry of Interior’s Public Security Office in Cairo was bombarded with various reports of ‘criminal activity’ from villages as far north as the Delta governorate of Beheira and far south as Aswan.<sup>3</sup> These activities ranged from the burning of police stations and attempts to free recruits who had been forcefully ‘volunteered’ for service with the Egyptian Labour Corps<sup>4</sup> under the British military, to the stabbing of local ‘*ummad*’ (village mayors) and British soldiers associated with the recruitment. This was the beginning of one of the biggest peasant revolts in twentieth-century Egypt. The outcomes of this revolt, I argue, were harnessed as leverage by nationalist politicians Sa’d Zaghlul and Ali Sha‘arawi during negotiations for the country’s independence from the British empire.<sup>5</sup>

Zaghlul and his compatriots founded al-Wafd (which later became a nationalist liberal party) in November 1918 as a delegation of nationalist gentry to represent the Egyptian case for independence at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. Students and lawyers all over the country were mobilised to collect the signatures of peasants on a petition granting al-Wafd authority to speak on their behalf.<sup>6</sup> Once this was possible, the ‘revolution’ took on a different face.<sup>7</sup> There was a coordinated call for a general strike: pamphlets were dis-

<sup>1</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 245.

<sup>2</sup> Joel Beinin, *Workers and Peasants in the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 100.

<sup>3</sup> See various reports in FO 141/797/1/2689/130-FO 141/2689/162.

<sup>4</sup> Where there were may have been cases of actual volunteers, a large number of recruits were forcefully recruited by the local or imperial administration. However, both in public records and in local rhetoric, the term remained ‘volunteering’, so people would encourage each other to ‘resist being volunteered’ for instance. For more on the recruitment process, see Kyle Anderson, ‘The Egyptian Labor Corps: Workers, Peasants, and the State in World War I’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, no. 1 (February 2017): 5–24, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743816001112>

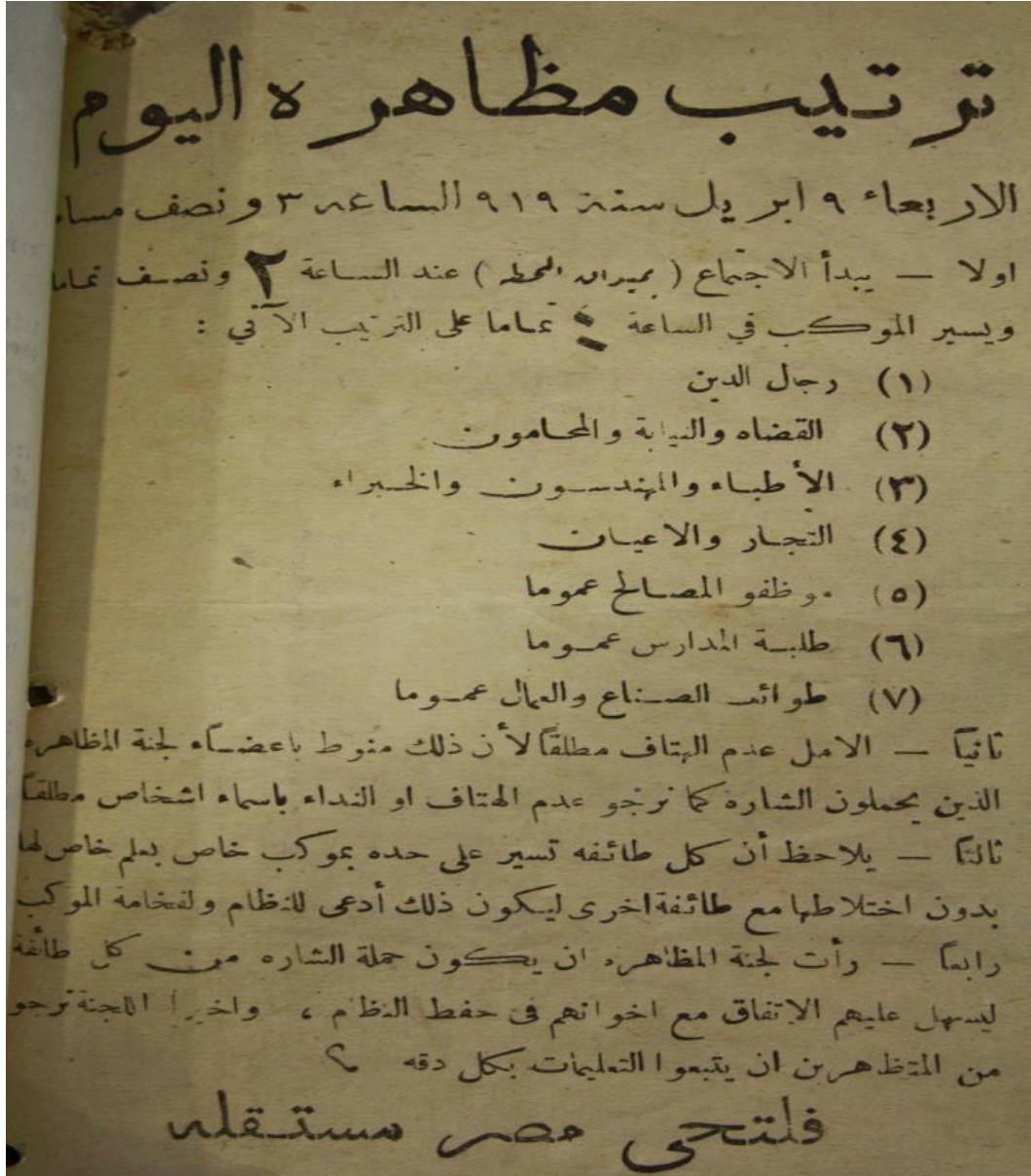
<sup>5</sup> See Ellis Goldberg, ‘Peasants in Revolt: Egypt 1919’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 24, no. 2 (1992): 261–280; Rheinhard Schulze, ‘Colonization and Resistance: The Egyptian Peasant Rebellion of 1919’ in Farhad Kazemi and John Waterbury (eds), *Peasants and Politics in the Modern Middle East* (Miami, FL: Florida International University Press, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> For more about the logic and strategy behind the petitions, see Sa’d Zaghlul, *Mudhakirat Sa’d Zaghlul: Al-Juz’ al-Sabi’*, ed. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Ramadan (Cairo: Al-Hay’a al-Misriyya al-‘amma lil-Kitab, 1996). For the language of the petitions, see Mustafa Amin, *Min Wahid Li-‘Ashara* (Cairo: Matbu‘at Kitab al-Yawm, 1977). For the distribution strategies, see ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Raf‘i, *Thawrit Sanat 1919: Tarikh Misr al-Qawmi min 1914 ila 1921* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma‘arif, 1987); Ziad Fahmy, *Ordinary Egyptians: Creating the Modern Nation through Popular Culture, 1870–1919* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> In his memoirs, Sa’d Zaghlul mentions the uprisings in May 1918 in villages surrounding his own in Beheira, emphasising how the attacks were not only on imperialist centres, but also (particularly) on

tributed in Cairo and various governorates depicting how protesting processions should emerge (see Figure 1); instructions included the order of protesters, the slogans to be called, the banners to be carried, as well as maps indicating embassies and international institutions they should walk by.<sup>8</sup>

Figure 1: Flyer showing protest order in Mansoura, 9 April 1919, from FO 141/747/6



Many protesters chanted peaceful slogans, as directed by the flyers, while destroying

local accomplices such as the Ministry of Interior: Zaghul, *Mudhakirat Sa' d Zaghul: Al-Juz' al-Sabi'*, 36. Journalist and grand-nephew Mustafa Amin's memoirs quote Zaghul in discussions as to how to mobilise the populace. Similar scenes of the burning of police stations and cutting railway lines in villages in Upper Egypt and the Delta are recounted in Amin's memoirs, but are framed in a nationalist framework as attacks only on imperialist institutions and interests, and as a response to Zaghul's arrest in March 1919. See Amin, *Min Wahid li-'Ashara*, 163.

<sup>8</sup> Fahmy, *Ordinary Egyptians*, 143.



businesses and institutions which they considered to be symbols of Western imperialism.<sup>9</sup> This episode – where people followed instructions to proclaim non-violence while simultaneously destroying property – is representative of the tension in the movement, which started by targeting symbols of oppression in the periphery and developed into a nationalist elite politician-led revolt, striving to portray the image of a society civil enough to be worthy of its independence. It is this ‘glitch’ in the narrative of 1919 that begs a deeper look.

The aim of this paper is to take a step back from the nationalist interpretations and framings of the 1918 peasant revolt, and to explore the political consciousness that was building up amongst the peasants. What exactly were they revolting against? What strategies of resistance were they considering? How were they articulating them? My focus is not only the various forms of resistance leading up to the riots of 1918, but also how these forms were discussed, negotiated and practiced, as political ideas evolved and desired relations with the various power structures were articulated.

The sources, however, that could reveal the ‘political consciousness’ of those who were part of the movements outside of (and sometimes even in opposition to) the overwhelming nationalist sentiment are few and disparate. How, over a century after the event, can we find sources that give us insights and access to the thoughts and motivations of revolting peasants – particularly when these voices come to us as mediated through imperial archives, personal memoirs and eye-witness reports?

The 1918 riots are depicted as a series of criminal activities in the Foreign Office records, and in contrast, as loyal to the nationalist movement (and otherwise apolitical) in the memoirs of Sa‘d Zaghlul (1987)<sup>10</sup> and the writings of Latifa Salim (1984).<sup>11</sup> I aim to contribute to a limited body of scholarship that has argued for their importance and significance in Egyptian subaltern history.<sup>12</sup> This paper will draw upon the memoirs of Arabist ideologue and lawyer ‘Ismat Saif al-Dawla (1923–96) which recount events in his native Upper Egyptian village between World War I and the 1919 revolution. In this account, the al-Himamiyya villagers appear to have been involved in some of the iconic incidents otherwise recorded in the FO archives and nationalist literature.

<sup>9</sup> Amin, *Min Wahid li-‘Ashara*, 162.

<sup>10</sup> In the memoirs of Sa‘d Zaghlul and Mustafa Amin, and in Abdalrahman al-Raf‘i and Latifa Salim’s historiography of WWI, the peasant revolts in 1918 and peasant contributions to the revolution in 1919 are seen as disjointed – the first is apolitical resistance to being drafted and the second instance is loyal nationalist mobilisation. In the memoirs of Saif al-Dawla, on the other hand, we see the evolution of resistance to the drafting into a bigger and highly politicised revolt, that almost harnessed the 1919 revolution for its own purposes.

<sup>11</sup> Zaghlul, *Mudhakirat Sa‘d Zaghlul: Al-Juz’ al-Sabi’*, 36–8; Abdalrahman al-Raf‘i, *Thawrit 1919: Tarikh Misr al-Qawmi min 1914–1921* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma‘arif, 1987), 107–8; Amin, *Min Wahid li-‘Ashara*, 162. In Latifa Salim’s work on WWI, she chronicles the forced recruitment of peasants and workers without mentioning the revolts, Latifa Salim, *Misr fil Harb al-‘Alamiyya al-Oula* (Cairo: Al-Hay’a al-Misriyya al-‘amma lil-Kitab, 1984), 246–53. While she recounts the increase in crime during the years of the revolts (1917–18) in the very governorates where they took place, she makes no link between these crimes and armed resistance (Salim, 194).

<sup>12</sup> Anderson, ‘The Egyptian Labor Corps: Workers, Peasants, and the State in World War I’; Goldberg, ‘Peasants in Revolt: Egypt 1919’; Schulze, ‘Colonization and Resistance: The Egyptian Peasant Rebellion of 1919’; Kazemi and Waterbury (eds), *Peasants and Politics in the Modern Middle East*.

Saif al-Dawla's memoirs, *Mudhakirat Qarya* (Memoirs of a Village), were published in two parts by Dar al-Hilal in 1994 and 1995, just before his death in 1996. The first of the two is a socio-geographical history of the village, drawing on the works of chroniclers and historians such as Ali Mubarak.<sup>13</sup> The second, *Mashayikh Jabal al-Badari*, is based on a series of interviews and conversations with several of the village's inhabitants.<sup>14</sup> The question of evading recruitment during World War I recurs throughout.

Memoirs have been used by scholars of the history of Egyptian labour movements to analyse political ideas beyond the structural politics of parties and revolutions to make arguments for subaltern politics and popular movements, giving intimate accounts of personal motivations behind the political.<sup>15</sup> Works of fiction that rely on archival sources have also offered insight into political historical events, as well as archived stories that may not be accessible through formal historical sources and narratives.<sup>16</sup> *Mudhakirat Qarya*, with its collective narrative voice, is unique in its format; this plurality is a language of politics and resistance that is otherwise absent from our knowledge and understanding of one of Egypt's most iconic peasant revolts – the 1919 revolution.

In a review of Saif al-Dawla's memoirs, Egyptian economist Galal Amin compares them to Gamal Hamdan's *Shakhsyyat Misr* (Character of Egypt)<sup>17</sup>: 'while through Hamdan's work you read about the whole to understand all its parts; in Saif al-Dawla's work you read about the part and understand the whole', he remarks.<sup>18</sup> This is comparable to Gyanendra Pandey's 'defense of the fragment' where he asserts that, 'in opposition to the established procedure that, with all their apparent solidity and comprehensiveness, what the official sources give us is also but a fragment of history. More than that, what the historians call a "fragment" – a weaver's diary, a collection of poems by an unknown author ... is of central importance in challenging the state's construction of history.'<sup>19</sup>

<sup>13</sup> He starts with *al-Khitat al-Tawfiqiah*, see Ali Pascha Mubarak, *Al-Khitat al-Jadidah al-Tawfiqiyah li Misr al-Qahirah wa Mudumuha wa Biladuha al-Qadima wal-Shahirah*, 20 vols (Cairo: Boulaq Press, 1886–9).

<sup>14</sup> Based on an interview with Saif al-Dawla's son and custodian of his personal records and archive – Mohammed Saif al-Dawla (21 January 2020), his father put together these interviews with stories he had heard throughout his life in the village.

<sup>15</sup> See for example Joel Beinin's use of Fikry al-Khouli's memoirs for the Mahalla strikes in the 1940s, Beinin, *Workers and Peasants in the Modern Middle East*; Hanan Hammad's reading into Arwa Salih's memoirs for the 1970s student movement, Hanan Hammad, 'Arwa Salih's *The Premature*: Gendering the History of the Egyptian Left', *Arab Studies Journal* 24, no. 1 (2016): 120–145; and Donald Quataert's use of the memoir of a nineteenth-century coal-miner in Turkey, Donald Quataert, *Miners and the State in the Ottoman Empire: The Zonguldak Coalfield, 1822–1920*, vol. 7 (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006); Donald Quataert and Yüksel Duman, 'A Coal Miner's Life during the Late Ottoman Empire', *International Labor and Working Class History* 60 (2001): 153–179.

<sup>16</sup> See Samia Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers between History and Fiction* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1994); Noha Radwan, 'A Place for Fiction in the Historical Archive', *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 17, no. 1 (2008): 79–95.

<sup>17</sup> Gamal Hamdan, *Shakhsyyat Misr: Dirasa fi Abkariyat al-Makan*, 4 vols [The Personality of Egypt: A Study in the Genius of the Place] (Cairo: Dar Al Hilal, 1967); Adel Darwish, 'Obituary: Gamal Hamdan', *The Independent*, 26 May 1993. Available at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-gamal-hemdan-2325278.html>

<sup>18</sup> Galal Amin, *Shakhsyyat laha Tarikh* (Cairo: Dar al-Sherouq, 2007), 200.

<sup>19</sup> Gyanendra Pandey, 'In Defense of the Fragment: Writing about Hindu-Muslim Riots in India Today'

Both the British archive and authoritative nationalist historical accounts such as those of ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Raf‘i (1946)<sup>20</sup> and Latifa Salim (1984) present linear narratives of the war and the revolution. Such narratives claim that the peasants were taken to war either because they desired it or they were forced to, and that the revolution rose against imperialism. However, the sources that provide insight into ‘intimate languages’ (sayings, slogans, songs and other linguistic encapsulations of prominent experiences)<sup>21</sup> indicate a multitude of narratives, a multitude of possibilities and, quite often, contradictory consciousness such as the persistent question of how to revolt and who to revolt against. By analysing Saif al-Dawla’s memoirs alongside other ‘fragments’ and voices, this paper explores diverse legacies of revolution and resistance arising from the 1919 revolution, challenging straightforward nationalist accounts of this period. I draw upon reports from the British Foreign Office archives to situate the memoirs in their broader historical context. To reveal more of the prevalent ‘language of resistance’, I draw on chants and slogans popularised during the revolt that often highlighted the anti-government sentiment apparent within state archives, newspapers, and other memoirs.

### ***Mudhakirat Qarya: A Village’s Memoirs of War***

Our story begins in that summer of 1914 when a crazy war erupted in Europe. A war like the kind of fights that flare up between coffee-shop dwellers during *al-mawalid*. It starts with a chair hitting the lights, leaving everyone in the dark, and then the fight begins. Each person starts to hit the one next to him for no better reason than that the fight ‘has started.’ It’s always an opportunity to get away from paying for the drinks. ...This is what neighboring European countries did to their continent. ...Some unknown Serbian shot the Archduke Ferdinand dead in Sarajevo. So, Austria hit Serbia, Germany hit France, and while it was at it Belgium. Russia hit Hungary, Turkey hit Russia, England hit Germany, Italy hit Austria, and so on. Until the waves of violence rippled from Europe unto the rest of the world and enveloped the earth. They called it the ‘World War’ – while it was actually their own. The important thing is that the waves inundated Egypt, and the current shook the village of al-Badari, and extended to the Himamiyya peoples, and that is how we were swept into the World War. – ‘Ismat Saif al-Dawla<sup>22</sup>

*Mudhakirat Qarya* is a two-volume memoir of the village of al-Himamiyya written by socialist ideologue, political philosopher and lawyer ‘Ismat Saif al-Dawla. He was born in his native village of al-Himamiyya near the Badari mountains in the Upper Egyptian governorate of Assiut, and left al-Himamiyya for his education. After completing a PhD in Paris, Saif al-Dawla returned to Cairo to practise law, and is known for his writings on Arabism,

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in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *A Subaltern Studies Reader, 1986–1995* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 28–9.

<sup>20</sup> Al-Raf‘i, *Thawrit Sanat 1919*.

<sup>21</sup> Alia Mossallam, “‘Hekāyāt Sha‘b’: Nasserism, Popular Politics and Songs in Egypt, 1956–1974’ (London School of Economics PhD Thesis, 2012). Available at <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/16390657.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> ‘Ismat Saif al-Dawla, *Mashayikh Jabal al-Badari: Al-Juz’ al-Thani min Mudhakirat Qarya* (Cairo: Dar al-Hilal, 1996), 16.

theories on the foundations of Arab socialism and revolution, and his courageous positions in the defence of those implicated in political cases during Anwar al-Sadat's era (1970–81) and particularly the 1977 'bread riots'. He was imprisoned several times for his Marxist, Arab socialist writings and organising in 1972 (for over a year) and 1981.<sup>23</sup>

His ideological inclination is clear in that he opens *Mudhakirat Qarya* by talking about how there is no truthful way to write the memoirs of an individual without referring to the collective, for 'the narrator is but a production of his village (community's) voices'.<sup>24</sup> Thus, rather than write his own memoirs, he writes those of his village, whose memories of events and inherited experiences 'seep into the pores of each of its children'. This paper focuses on the memoir's second volume, *Mashayikh Jabal al-Badari* (The Elders of the Badari Mountain), which opens with a discussion between the narrator (the writer's voice) and the village's *shaikh al-ghaffar* (head of the village watchmen). To write the village's memoirs, the shaikh explains, 'Ask them [the villagers] about the calamities, put them together and you have the sira or the story of the village,'<sup>25</sup> – because a collective is only formed when there is a danger to which all are exposed and for which all are prepared to take risks.

The writer asks Shaikh 'Aziz what he would consider such collective crises or calamities to be, and the shaikh mentions three, each of which are underscored by the experience of World War I: the *sulta* (joint British-Egyptian administration),<sup>26</sup> the annual flood and the *jazira* (island of sedimented silt bequeathed to the village by Nile floods and manipulated by landowners). The memoir does not flow in chronological order, but rather is shaped by the relationship of the village to the interlocking forces of the *sulta*, the *hukuma* (the individuals representing the government or perceived as having power over the villagers), and land (how entitlement to it is determined). In dealing with each calamity, a repertoire for which forms of organising have worked, and which have been futile, is developed alongside a catalogue of village experiences.

There are four main characters through whom these memoirs are told. The first is Shaikh 'Abbas, the author's father<sup>27</sup> and an Azhar-educated village intellectual who keeps up to date with local and world politics and tries to entice the villagers towards formal engagement with the government (such as through petitions and taking landowners to court). The second voice is that of Younis 'Abdallah, a disciple of 'Abbas who ends up being taken to the warfront in France, risking his life to take his place. The final two voices are those of Nu'man wild-al-Shaikh 'Imad Zaidan and Fikry 'Abd al-Naby — two young men

<sup>23</sup> Biographical information on Saif al-Dawla from the memoirs, or in Salah Zaki Ahmed, 'Ismat Saif al-Dawla: Sahib Nadhariyyit al-Thawra al-'Arabiyya (Founder of the Theory of Arab Revolution)', *Aswat Online*, 9 January 2020. Available at <http://aswatonline.com/2020/01/09/عصمت-سيف-الدولة-صاحب-نظرية-الثورة-الع>; a list of his iconic works and writings on him can be found on the blog in his name. Available at <http://essmatseifeldawla.blogspot.com>

<sup>24</sup> Saif al-Dawla, *Sirat Qarya: Al-Juz' al-Awal min Mudhakirat Qarya* (Cairo: Dar al-Hilal, 1995), 2–3.

<sup>25</sup> Saif al-Dawla, *Mashayikh Jabal al-Badari*, 10.

<sup>26</sup> Though this is what *sulta* officially referred to, it is a shifting term in Saif al-Dawla's memoirs which I explore in more detail in sections to come.

<sup>27</sup> As verified in the interview with Mohammed Saif al-Dawla, 21 January 2020.

who take it upon themselves to reclaim the village's *jazira* (fertile agricultural island) from the notable landowners to whom ownership was granted by the government.

This paper explores the three main strategies of resisting the various authorities depicted in Saif al-Dawla's memoir: using the law, for instance through petitions; strikes on the front during the war; and the use of arms or force to retrieve land. I analyse how these forms of resistance, entitlement, risk, and success or failure are articulated and built into the local repertoire. My central concern is not whether these events have actually taken place, but rather to use this exploration as an opportunity to look into consciousness when it comes to how 'politics' is articulated outside the period-specific terms and notions of the nation and imperialism. This offers insight into how notions of despotism and freedom are articulated and how freedom is fought for in ways that are specific and relevant to the village.

Most significantly for this research, the meanings of certain terms are explored and brought apart, with an awareness that this memoir is aimed at a wider audience that would not be familiar with the language and rhetoric of the village. Thus, there is much need for exploring who or what the *sulta* represents. At first it is the combined administration concerned with the war, but then it becomes the war itself – a large looming power that takes men and requisitions goods to where 'no one knows.'<sup>28</sup> The *sulta* is barely visible, unlike the floods that the villagers physically intercept, or the *hukuma* whose representatives live amongst them. In each section, I will focus on one of these terms, examining forms of resistance to the types of power they represent: resistance to *ta'a* and *tatawu'* (obedience and volunteerism), the *sulta*, and the *hukuma*.

### Petitioning Against the War: Challenging the *ta'a* in *tatawu'*

On 20th October 1917, a Decree was issued to encourage recruiting. ...[T]his Decree was accompanied by a circular to the provinces, dated 21st October 1917, requesting ma'murs and 'umdahs to urge the villagers to enlist in the Labour Corps, and asking the mudirs to use their moral influence to support the movement...In Assiut they are in full agreement with the project and have expressed their desire to furnish recruits. – Foreign Office records<sup>29</sup>

Around the beginning of 1917, stories of British soldiers raiding the markets of surrounding villages for livestock and harvest, and taking young men to 'a place no one knows of', spread like wildfire in Upper Egyptian villages. Fear of recruitment and discussions of what forms of resistance to mount took over the village of al-Himamiyya.<sup>30</sup> In 'Ismat Saif al-Dawla's memoirs, he tells the story of Shaikh 'Abbas – the village intellectual (his father) – and his discussions with the 'umda and elders of the village as to how they should resist the recruitment. 'Abbas was of the opinion that a petition must be put together. He had gleaned from the newspapers the eligibility criteria (youth aged 18–45) and that the recruitments were based on volunteerism. The way the recruitment ought to be resisted,

<sup>28</sup> Saif al-Dawla, *Mashayikh Jabal al-Badari*, 11, 19.

<sup>29</sup> Notes on Recruitment, FO 141/2689.

<sup>30</sup> Saif al-Dawla, *Mashayikh Jabal al-Badari*, 50.



therefore, was a petition signed by each of the villagers declaring that they did not wish to volunteer for the war, thus obliging the *sulta* to abide by its own rules. Once the *'umda* and the elders reluctantly agreed to the idea of the petition, Shaikh 'Abbas took the liberty of leading the Friday prayers. Exploring the notion of *tatawu'* (volunteering), he noted that the term came from *ta'a* (obedience). In the Quranic context, *ta'a* is to be given to the elders of one's own religion, but the villagers were under no obligation to 'obey' a colonising power, as *ta'a* should not be granted to an oppressor and certainly never to an infidel. If they did, the villagers would be committing no less than blasphemy.<sup>31</sup>

In time, 'Abbas finds that his suggestions were not as celebrated as he had imagined. His leading the congregation is considered audacious – a privilege limited to village elders. More significantly, the idea of having all 45 names of the village youth delivered on paper to the very bodies of governance responsible for the recruitment feels to the *'umda* like they are turning the villagers over – the opposite to what they believe should be the strategy: hiding the villagers. Other *'ummad* in surrounding villages chose their own recruits, he was told – primarily the sick and those seen as trouble-makers – in order to shield the rest of the villagers from recruitment.<sup>32</sup>

Other arguments about the futility of 'Abbas' attempts to 'report the government to the government' (*'alladhin yashtakun al-hukuma lil-hukuma'*)<sup>33</sup> revolved around the question of risk. In relation to power, the popular wisdom in al-Himamiyya indicated that they would always have two ways to go – against the current or with it. As *fallahin* (often translated as 'peasants') who struggled annually with the floods, they knew that contesting certain currents could only lead to demise; as the people of al-Himamiyya (and as the memoirs express), they knew from previous confrontations with the state that only loss could come from confrontation.<sup>34</sup>

Going with the current, however, was not articulated as accepting the recruitment strategies or volunteering. Rather it included strategies that circumvented the recruitment, such as marriage of a form they called *salaf* (borrowing), which entailed taking a bride temporarily to ensure they did not match the criteria for men to be taken to war; not showing up on market days to avoid the requisitioning of their crops and livestock; and escaping to the nearby mountains. 'Abbas was warned several times that his advice as 'village intellectual' was not always welcome. Whereas the village relied on its history of 'calamities' as a reference for what worked and what did not, 'Abbas relied on his knowledge of the way things should work according to legal entitlements, a form of knowledge whose relevance was questioned.

The *'umda* ultimately relented and gave 'Abbas the stamped petition, obtaining some

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>32</sup> For the heated discussions around 'Abbas' sermon and the dangers associated with the petitions, see ibid, 31–4.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 176.

<sup>34</sup> There is always a reference to '*el-ghara'*, an incident in the late nineteenth century mentioned in the first part of the memoirs, where a confrontation with the state led to the hanging of villagers.

stamps from the villagers, and stamping the rest himself – on his own accord.<sup>35</sup> He did this out of some belief in and affection for ‘Abbas, but not because he was fully persuaded. ‘Abbas proceeded to Assiut with his petition and employed a lawyer who could ensure that copies of the petition reached the head of government, the interior minister, the governor (*hikimdar al-mudiriyya*), the head of the provincial office (*mudir al-mudiriyya*), local police station (*mu‘awin al-bulis*) and the head of the local police station (*ma‘mur*). Each petition carried the name of the addressee and a mention of everyone else to whom it was sent, written by ‘Abbas in the black ink used by the *mudiriyya* itself. Each measure – the petition’s careful language, the addressees, the ink – constituted an attempt to formalise the request, and to create a legally viable channel for refusal and resistance.

Throughout the memoirs, Saif al-Dawla spoke of village specificity. He unpacked what terms such as *sulta*, *tatawu‘* and *hukuma* signified in the village lexicon, and referred repeatedly to how village decisions and political strategies stemmed from their own private repertoires of resistance tactics. This specificity was in contrast to ‘Abbas’ aspirations that seemed to place the village within a larger legal system, and ultimately also within a nationalist movement. ‘Abbas came back from the capital with knowledge of the law and structural politics. He tried to appeal to these structures directly to save the village from the tides of war. However, his reliance on these structures and the law was constantly contested by local knowledge that focused on saving the village, but also somehow sustaining it, regardless of what happened outside it.

In her analysis of the novel *Al-Ard* (The Land), Samah Selim discusses the city-educated intellectual who returns with the desire to address the government directly through petitions to protect the village land from destruction by infrastructural projects. She considers the official eloquent Arabic of the educated villager as representing a nationalised language, equating this language with a knowledge of how freedom can be achieved, and possibly also how the village’s status can be elevated.<sup>36</sup> This recalls how ‘Abbas put himself on the mosque’s podium and tried to engage the villagers in ‘reporting the government to the government’. In both these cases, knowledge of the larger political structures does not impress the villagers but rather inspires their cynicism. A struggle ensues over both the languages used in petitions and the different kinds of knowledges of how freedom can be obtained.

In John Chalcraft’s work on peasant petitions in nineteenth century Egypt, he also talks about language, noting that ‘they used an officially authorised language of complaint in a heavily power-laden context, where a wrong word could cost them their case, their livelihoods, and even their lives.’<sup>37</sup> He argues for the importance of the petitions in illustrating that:

<sup>35</sup> Unique stamps were issued to illiterate people as an official substitute for a signature. Saif al-Dawla, *Mashayikh Jabal al-Badari*, 27.

<sup>36</sup> Selim, *The Novel and the Rural Imaginary in Egypt, 1880–1985*, 176–79.

<sup>37</sup> John Chalcraft, ‘Engaging the State: Peasants and Petitions in Egypt on the Eve of Colonial Rule’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 37, no. 3 (August 2005): 308.

a certain peasant politics of engagement and negotiation with state institutions, a politics that receives little play in the literature on peasants in Egypt, and even in the larger scholarly literature, which often depicts rural cultivators' politics in terms of passivity, everyday avoidance, or violent revolutionary action. These sources also suggest that, rather than seeing state and peasant society in terms of a monologic and zero-sum antagonism, one can perceive a more fractured and differentiated set of relationships that involve some dialogic forms.<sup>38</sup>

With both the petition in the novel *Al-Ard* and that which opposed forceful recruitment in al-Himamiyya, the villagers somehow implicate themselves in an asymmetrical power dynamic that can envelop them, despite their appropriation of the language.

'Abbas, who tried to outsmart the law, was outsmarted by it. When his petition was finally given the attention that he had requested for months, the *ma'mur* asked him to testify in writing that every villager mentioned in the petition was not willing to volunteer for the war, and also, that any villager whose name was not on the petition would be willing to do the same. 'Abbas testified and signed to this, not realising that he had forgotten to include his own name in the petition. Upon signing it, 'Abbas was arrested. He was kept in a dark, dirty cell, with the other recruits from nearby villages, only to be released a few days later, as another villager – Younis, his disciple – had volunteered to take his place.

Younis 'Abdallah was the only villager of al-Himamiyya to go to the war, and the only villager from the whole of Assiut to return from it.

### Strikes on the War-Front: Dismantling the *Sulta*

On one of my nightly rounds to ensure that all was in soporific calm, voices from a bivouac gave a succinct summary of the military situation, with uncomplimentary remarks on both British and Turks. To our Bash-Rayyis' admonition for them to shut up and go to sleep, one orator replied, 'Alright Hassan, we know you have to carry out the Old Man's order.' — followed by silent consternation at my interpolation: '—but perhaps the Old Man himself is listening.' However apprehensive the debaters may have felt on 'taboor' next morning, no steps were taken., as they were some of the best workers in the Company. — E.K. Venables<sup>39</sup>

Few accounts or studies of the experiences of Egyptian soldiers on the front exist, let alone of the kinds of resistance they employed.<sup>40</sup> One of the few opportunities for the

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 318.

<sup>39</sup> E.K. Venables, 'They Also Served: The Story of the ELC in Sinai and Palestine', Unpublished Memoir, London, 1916–1918, EKV/2 Imperial War Museum Department of Documents, Imperial War Museum.

<sup>40</sup> However, a number of studies do exist on the experience of Indian soldiers of the British military, through letters confiscated or censored by British intelligence. Other studies have looked at how prisoners of war in Germany (particularly subalterns from British and French colonies) documented their experiences on the front, disguised as songs or folk stories collected by German ethnomusicologists and linguists from the camps' prisoners. See, for instance, Santanu Das, 'The Singing Subaltern',

excavation of voices of the Egyptians on the front during World War I is through the songs documented by British lieutenants overseeing working groups in Jaffa and Sinai. These appear in the British Foreign Office Archives, as well as memoirs, such as those of E.K. Venables, who supervised the Egyptian labour corps in Rafah, Gaza and later Jaffa.<sup>41</sup> In the incident quoted above, Venables was listening in on the workers while they made jokes, some of which were at his own expense, while they knew he was listening. The jokes therefore not only became a way of ‘chipping at the edifice’ of his power,<sup>42</sup> by ridiculing him and the authority he represented, but also a way to confront him with this ridicule, because they knew he was listening. Moreover, they seemed to know that he would not be able to do anything about it.

In a similar, though perhaps more radical vein, Younis ‘Abdallah and his compatriots on the front in Calais realised that the most important thing for the French military was that the work on the front did not stop, and that they were in that sense indispensable. They quickly learned that strikes were an effective means of getting what they needed. Saif al-Dawla narrates how Younis and his 24 compatriots from Assiut arrived in Boulogne after a long journey by sea. They were then taken to Calais, where they were instructed to dig trenches one metre deep along a lengthy stretch. One of them (Thabit) was given the role of *rayyis* (headman) and they were assigned a Moroccan overseer.<sup>43</sup> Upon arrival they were unhappy with their living conditions; they were each given a wooden plank to sleep on, and three woollen blankets (one to be placed directly on the plank, one with which to cover themselves and one for a pillow). They were then made to wait several hours for their food. Upon deciding not to leave their stations on weekends because they were asked to leave every restaurant or cafe they approached, the conscripts were asked to work on their days off too.

Soon however, Al-Rayyis Thabit taught them a smart ploy, as recounted in the memoirs:

Al-Rayyis Thabit knew exactly how to deal with the French. He held something against them and taught us a new trick. A trick, but one that really works. What matters most to them is that we don’t stop working. So every time we needed

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*Parallax* 17, no. 3 (n.d.): 4–18; Anette Hoffman, ‘Echoes of the Great War: The Recordings of African Prisoners in the First World War’, *Open Arts Journal* 3 (October 2014): 7–23, <https://doi.org/10.5456/issn.2050-3679/2014s11ah>; Anette Hoffman and Phindezwa Mnyaka, ‘Hearing Voices in the Archives’, *Social Dynamics* 41, no. 1 (December 2014): 141–165; Britta Lange, ‘South Asian Soldiers and German Academics: Anthropological, Linguistic and Musicological Field Studies in Prison Camps’ in Franziska Roy, Heike Liebau and Ravi Ahuja (eds), *When the War Began, We Heard of Several Kings: South Asian Prisoners in World War I Germany* (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2011).

<sup>41</sup> Venables, ‘EKV/2 They also served’, 6

<sup>42</sup> Salwa Ismail elaborates on De Certeau’s ideas of popular culture and resistance, describing a practice that results in a chipping at the edifice of power. ‘An incremental process of causing small cracks that would eventually bring down the structures of control. It is a trickery of the order of things that characterizes popular tactics of resistance.’ Salwa Ismail, *Political Life in Cairo’s New Quarters: Encountering the Everyday State* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

<sup>43</sup> They refer to him as ‘al-Maghrebi,’ which could mean he was Moroccan or that he was from the Maghreb (Northeast Africa), possibly an Algerian soldier of the French military.

something, we would sleep in a little longer; so the French would come and shout in their language, and the Moroccan would tell them that we didn't want to work because the food ration was too little and they would provide us with more. Everything we needed, even the heavy tea, even smokes, even red meat, we would never ask for. We learned that if we asked we would never get what we requested and that people *khaf ma yekhtushush* (have fear but no shame). Our weapon was ready. We stop working and Thabit would say, 'The men want this...' and they bring it straight away.<sup>44</sup>

The significance of these strikes lay in the conscripts' learning that the war's dependence on them as resources meant they could deny the *sulta* their resources in the form of labour, and thus make the *sulta* weaker.

Towards the start of the memoirs, Saif al-Dawla explains that the *sulta* for the people of al-Himamiyya was more than just the combined administrations;<sup>45</sup> it also designated a bigger, unknown force. The '*sulta* is arresting people to send them to where no one has been' soon becomes 'Younis has been sent to the *sulta*' and 'Will Younis ever return from the *sulta*?'<sup>46</sup> The *sulta* comes to represent the oblivion that is the war, from which there is no news and from which few people return.

Reports in the British Foreign Office Archives from 1918<sup>47</sup> indicate several arrests made for inciting others to resist, as well as the emergence of songs that describe the enticements of the war<sup>48</sup> to warn others against taking part. The resistance became more confrontational until turning violent, with broken railways, murders and fires raging through the villages. This pattern emerged in Egypt, but also in Algeria and West Africa,<sup>49</sup> where violent uprisings were led by peasants after they had been conscripted.

This growing audacity, however, did not come without its costs. In the case of Younis 'Abdallah, the condition of one of his compatriots, Qubaissy, already sick and weak, deteriorated when the cold weather arrived. The account relates that one morning they wake up to find him frozen to death. They report his death to the French officials, and

<sup>44</sup> Saif al-Dawla, *Mashayikh Jabal al-Badari*, 13.

<sup>45</sup> This is what Kyle Anderson refers to as a 'system of administrative pressure' combined of the War Office, civilian diplomats from the Foreign Office and the Rushdi government. See Anderson, 'The Egyptian Labor Corps: Workers, Peasants, and the State in World War I', 11.

<sup>46</sup> Saif al-Dawla, *Mashayikh Jabal al-Badari*, 11, 19.

<sup>47</sup> FO 141/797/7652 about an incident in the village of Kafr al-Sarem where a Sidi Ahmad Sha'ban was arrested for telling people, 'Do not accept and do not fear anything, but strike anyone who proposes that you volunteer.'

<sup>48</sup> Not all those taken to war were forced to do so. For some, economic enticements prompted them to join. See Anderson, 'The Egyptian Labor Corps: Workers, Peasants, and the State in World War I'; Goldberg, 'Peasants in Revolt: Egypt 1919'.

<sup>49</sup> Uprisings by recruits in regions in Algeria in 1914 and 1916–17 and in Upper Volta in 1915–16 are among the few known in relation to imperial recruitment purposes for the war (which also involved military and local administrations). See Gilbert Meynier, *L'Algérie Révélée - La Guerre de 1914–1918 et Le Premier Quart Du XXe Siècle* (Paris: Librairie Droz, 1981); Hoffman and Mnyaka, 'Hearing Voices in the Archives'.



ask for hot water and a blanket so that they can wash him and engage in burial rituals, a request that is promptly denied. Qubaissy is taken away and the group are thrown into panic. To die in the *ghurba* (far from home) is one thing, but not to be buried according to Islamic rituals meant another kind of loss or oblivion – not to find one’s way to the afterlife. The group decide to go on strike and make an oath to stay steadfastly ‘as one’ until they are sent back home, each fearing that he may be the next to die. The refusal of work and food lasts for five days. The French general whom they called *jinn-el-nar* (‘genie of fire’, a pun on the word ‘general’) then comes to negotiate with them himself. When this fails, he commands them to stand in the rain, and in protest they sit, ‘as one.’ An argument ensues, and Al-Rayyis Thabit loses his temper and attacks the general, killing him. The French soldiers then shoot at the group of workers, and all of them die immediately except for Younis.

The Maghrebi overseer, Khalifa, goes through the bodies one by one, and on finding Younis, advises him to ‘play dead’ until he is checked by doctors in the hospital. He does this, is kept in the hospital until he has healed, and is sent on the month-long journey back home. There he sits in the veranda and tells his story in a voice loud enough for the whole village to hear.

## Armed Struggle against the *Hukuma*

‘*Mish ‘ayzin had abadan yuhkumna wi inn makansh wala had yulumna!*’ (We don’t ever want to be ruled! Heed our call or don’t blame us for the consequences!) – Slogan during the 1919 revolution

The last section of the memoirs tells the story of the *jazira* (island), a piece of land that is composed of an accumulation of silt from sequential floods. These pieces of land eventually produce very fertile ‘islands’, making for easy cultivations off which villages in Upper Egypt live. They are considered a blessing, a gift from the Nile, and are declared communal property by village customs. The biggest *jazira* of al-Himamiyya was granted by the state, the *hukuma*, as a land deed to notables sometime in the mid-nineteenth century, during the reign of Khedive Sa‘id, the villagers claim.<sup>50</sup>

Fikry explains that the war brings ‘poverty upon poverty,’ – ‘it’s not that we have become poorer, but that we realised how poor we actually were’.<sup>51</sup> The war exacerbates their vulnerability, further limiting their control over their livelihoods. Fikry and his friend, Nu‘man, decide that the only way the *jazira* can be retrieved is by force, and that the power relations with the *hukuma* need to be reconfigured. The author reflects here on the notion of *hukuma* as it is expressed by the villagers. Unlike the *sulta*, which is a force or a thing,

<sup>50</sup> Throughout the memoirs ‘Abbas tries to trace the laws that allow these land entitlements, the actual law (law 48 of 1932) has its origins in 1858 when a law indicating that any ‘*tarh el nahr*’ or any land that appears without clear ownership automatically belongs to the state and can be distributed by it.

<sup>51</sup> Saif al-Dawla, *Mashayikh Jabal al-Badari*, 2, 54.

the *hukuma* is a person, an embodiment of the power relation, an oppressor; it is the tax collector, the *ma'mur*, the landowning pasha. Here again, a repertoire of the history of engaging with the *hukuma* in the village is told.<sup>52</sup>

As they make their way to the city where they believe weapons can be obtained, Fikry and Nu'man encounter the various signs of the uprising (by this time it is 1919). There are fires everywhere. They are on the train to Deirut during the notorious incident where the train stops and the British soldiers are killed by the locals.<sup>53</sup> They meet someone who is distributing weapons and he agrees to give them weapons on the condition that they join the revolt. They agree to do this, on their own terms, for:

After the revolution, they won't be able to take the weapons back from us. We will use them to get back our island if they haven't returned it by then. ... in Assiut the government of *bashas* headed by Rushdi Beh has fallen...and tomorrow, once the revolution has succeeded, the peasant revolt will start!<sup>54</sup>

News of the revolution sparks conflicting reactions in the villages. There is excitement that an uprising against the British is starting, giving the opportunity for access to arms for villagers to fight for their own demands. There is also, however, the realisation that all the names associated with the Wafdist revolution are the landowning *bashas* who are the oppressors they want to overcome.<sup>55</sup> The peasants are unsure whether the revolution will further entrench the power of the landowning class, whether it represents possibility for arming and possibly revolting against the government of landowners, or in the case of Shaikh 'Abbas, whether it should be joined in order to place their demands at the heart of the revolution.

Looking closely at the experience of Fikry and his friend, particularly their conviction that an armed revolt was the only way to challenge and reform power relations, sheds new light on the period between the 1918 peasant revolt and the 1919 revolution. Firstly, it provides insight into these events documented as 'violent' criminal acts. In the case of the villagers of al-Himamiyya, who appear to have been involved in iconic incidents that re-appear in several historical and literary sources, there is a strong political consciousness, a consideration of a history of relations with the government and of a particular repertoire of power relations, along with a desire to violently change those relations. There is also a dismantling of the 1919 narrative of unity and mobilisation of the peasants by the intellectual elite. Here the peasants see the revolution building, and consider the possibility of rising against it once it is over, to make sure they are ruled by the *fallahin*. In both cases, the villagers' concerns are foremost in the revolution, and do not relate to nationalist interests, which they perceive to be almost as oppressive as imperial interests.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 142–5.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 144–5; Fahmy, *Ordinary Egyptians*, 11. For more reports on this incident see FO 141/753/3 and Tawwaf, 1919.

<sup>54</sup> Saif al-Dawla, *Mashayikh Jabal al-Badari*, 168.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 184.

According to journalist Mustafa Amin's memoirs, during the 1919 revolution people were given flyers that asked them to chant '*al-hudu' wal-sakina*' ('in peace and harmony') while protesting. People did this, while breaking shop windows and setting them alight.<sup>56</sup> The same applies for the slogans recounted in a 1938 article about chants and songs during WWI<sup>57</sup> in which the author discusses the popular slogan '*Mish 'ayzin had abadan yuh-kumna wi inn makansh wala had yulumna!*' (We don't ever want to be ruled! Heed our call or don't blame us for the consequences!). These chants, whose exact origins are not indicated, are kernels of a wider anti-government sentiment that was growing at the time. This sentiment is also clear in Zeinab Abul-Magd's work on revolts in Qena where, years after the revolution, members of the Wafd are attacked upon their visits to Upper Egypt.<sup>58</sup>

These events and slogans contest the clear narrative of a popular revolt, but more importantly, they give us a sense of possibility. What legacy do these 'messy' events – 'messy' in their violence, in the lack of clarity of who exactly the oppressor is, in the lack of dichotomous power versus resistance relations – leave for movements to come? How would a different historiography of 1919 look: one that includes such violence, lack of leadership, a stronger degree of horizontalism, and ways of spreading and articulating political ideas that can inform current revolutions?

<sup>56</sup> Amin, *Min Wahid Li-'Ashara*, 163.

<sup>57</sup> 'Abd al-Latif al-Nashar, 'Al-Thaqafa Al-'askariyya Wa Anashid Al-Gaish', *Al-Risala* 224 (27 November 1939); Alia Mossallam, "'Ya 'aziz 'Aini, Ana Bidi Arawah Baladi": Voyages of an Egyptian Tune — from Estrangement at Home to Longing on the Fronts of WWI' in *Cultural Entanglement in the Pre-Independence Arab World: Arts, Thought and Literature* (London: I.B. Tauris, Forthcoming).

<sup>58</sup> Zeinab Abul-Magd, *Imagined Empires: A History of Revolt in Egypt* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013), 144.

## Conclusion

A synthetic overview of any subject, by attending to the 'big picture', is predisposed to emphasize large-scale structures and historical trends at the expense of micro-social histories which might allow more scope for subaltern voices. – Joel Beinin<sup>59</sup>

When Younis returned from the war, he sat in the open veranda of his family home and started to recount his experiences in a loud voice that all could hear. This was common practice when someone in the village had a story to tell; this way, those who could crowd into the veranda could hear it, as well as the women and children who needed or preferred to stay home. He told the story over and over for everyone to hear. This method was also sometimes deployed when authorities came to question villagers about the train attacks in Assiut or when they were searching for a fugitive. People would stand out in the veranda and answer the questions as loudly as possible to make sure everyone heard, and thus a unified front would be formed. This technique of formulating a narrative that could be heard and repeated by all is also metaphorical for how the village narratives are built, and in many ways, for how the village 'repertoire' was created and re-asserted throughout the incidents related in this paper.

In recounting the village memoirs, 'Ismat Saif al-Dawla relied on various oral traditions, telling the stories as they were told to him and dwelling on the terminology used. This was an attempt to both dilute the hegemony of his own supposedly superior language (his 'correct' Arabic, his ideological understanding and his knowledge of the historical context of events), and to understand how incidents, events and the factions of power in the larger political structures of government and colonial administration were named and described. Saif al-Dawla charts how the *sulta* they were to resist developed from the *hukuma* to the British administration responsible for the war, to the combined administration of colonial forces, the government, and representatives in the village, and eventually to the larger force that included all these elements – namely the landed gentry who sapped the village of its resources and its people.

Throughout the memoirs, there were no 'immaculate sites of resistance.' Within and beyond the village, a constant process of negotiating power structures took place. This included the struggle to incorporate the village into the larger political map, 'fighting government with government', the question of remaining marginalised and out of sight, as well as questioning whether the villagers should be part of the larger nationalist revolution. Indeed, the village is never isolated, but always connected to the larger country, implicated in power structures and disputes over land. The memoir indicates that discourses of resistance are never 'simply erased—neither from the politics of time, nor from the historical record.'<sup>60</sup> Traces of these struggles exist in the stories of those who inherit the village experiences through oral storytelling, jokes, protest slogans and songs found in various other sources. This insight into a language of protest sheds light on kernels of a different struggle outshined by the larger fight for national independence in 1919.

<sup>59</sup> Beinin, *Workers and Peasants in the Modern Middle East*, 99.

<sup>60</sup> Chalcraft, 'Engaging the State: Peasants and Petitions in Egypt on the Eve of Colonial Rule', 318.

In each of the incidents discussed, struggle emerged on various levels. 'Abbas' confidence that he knew exactly how to resist being drafted by the colonial administration was met with both admiration and disdain as villagers discussed the dangers of confrontation and engagement in an asymmetrical power struggle with larger political forces. The almost daily arduous trips to Assiut that 'Abbas made on his donkey throughout the memoirs – whether to meet with lawyers or process papers to officialise land ownership, follow up on the petitions, or eventually, to wait for Younis – also became symbolic of his attempt to link the village to the rest of the world. He does this by documenting the villagers' resistance, recording opposition to recruitment through petitions and recording contested land ownership through legal documents.

In Younis' experience on the front, he engages with others from various villages in Assiut, as well as their overseer al-Maghrebi, on the different techniques of striking and resisting to improve their conditions based on their growing understanding of the importance and indispensability of their labour to the French military. Ultimately, however, they are all shot, except for Younis who returns to tell the tale, and to participate in the start of the 1918 riots.

Fikry, Nu'man and others like them are torn between joining the 1919 revolution – a revolution whose champions are the very same landowners they hope to oust – or using the weapons offered in the revolution to start a 'real peasant revolt.' Understanding their dilemma is paramount for a deeper understanding of both the roots and nature of the uprisings leading up to and surrounding the 1919 revolution. A cornerstone of the metanarrative of the 1919 revolution is unity across class and religion; debates like this deconstruct this metanarrative, shedding light on the power structures, especially locally within the villages, that peasants, later silenced by the 1919 revolution, wished to rise against.

Did Sheikh 'Abbas' insistence on using petitions save the entire village at the expense of Younis, or did he effectively hand one of them in? Did the strikes on the front better the working conditions of the 25 Upper Egyptian labourers in Calais, or did it lead to the demise of all but one? Should Fikry and Nu'man have held their ground and continued to mobilise a 'real peasant revolt' or was it more strategic to join the national cause?

These are not the questions to ask, nor are the answers to them worth imposing on these narratives. What is most valuable about such oral sources, micro-histories and matrices of possibility is the insight they give us into the evolution of political consciousness. Peasants don't merely engage in violent revolts, nor do they shy away from confrontation; rather the village provides us with a micro-history of consciousness-raising, organising, and resistance that is by no means homogenous. It is a set of collective voices that tells of many political possibilities. A deeper look into this narrative and its rhetorical elements gives us insight into a new politics, a new language with which to articulate it, and leaves us with a new legacy for a legendary 100-year-old revolution. Revolutions are messy, the risks are high, and the sacrifices are huge, and it is often the indigenous subaltern who is written out of the struggle for the sake of a smooth, unified and sanitised narrative. The struggle to negotiate power and resist oppression is ongoing and never-ending.





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Members of the Egyptian Labour Corps on their transport to begin their service overseas.

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