The Rise and Fall of Royal Alexandria: From Mohammed Ali to Farouk – Philip Mansel

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In 1806, with a population of 6,000, Alexandria appeared to Chateaubriand to be 'the saddest and most deserted place in the world'. By 1849 it had become a cosmopolitan court city of 100,000 people. The reason for the transformation was Mohammed Ali Pasha's desire to create a modern monarchy.

David Wilkie, Portrait of Muhammad 'Ali Pasha (1841)

Like Alexandria's founder Alexander the Great, Mohammed Ali came from Macedonia. He was born in 1770, son of a Turkish tobacco merchant, in the port of Kavalla in what is now northern Greece. He came to Egypt with an Ottoman army in 1801, to expel the French 'expedition d'Egypte'. By 1805, helped by Egyptians' yearning for law and order, he had forced the Ottoman government to make him governor of Egypt. By 1811, having massacred the detested military elite of Mamelukes, he had done what other Ottoman officials were hoping to do in other provinces of the Ottoman Empire: he had established his own government. By 1819, or earlier, he was called, not vali or governor of Egypt, but His Highness the Viceroy.

Far more than Bonaparte, who left neither men, ideas nor institutions, Mohammed Ali was the founder of modern Egypt. In 1812 the French consul his friend Bernardino Drovetti remarked that he had 'gigantic ideas' and 'eagerly seizes every opportunity to shake the yoke of prejudices'. After 1809, Mohammed Ali was the first non-Christian ruler to send regular consignments of young men to be educated in Europe. On the initiative of Drovetti, a system of quarantine, to prevent the spread of plague, was introduced in Alexandria in 1817 – twenty years before the rest of the Ottoman Empire. Mohammed Ali's remark in 1825, when permitting Christians to ring church bells in Egypt - that, among so many religions, it would be a misfortune if one was not correct – shows an open mind.

Mohammed Ali was also a merchant. The great Egyptian chronicler a-Jabarti wrote with distaste that 'the Pasha', tried to raise money 'by all methods ... He wants his slightest desires to be executed without any comment': he thought only of taking other men's profits. Mohammed Ali began to visit Alexandria often in order to sell directly to foreign merchants the wheat, rice and other vegetables which he had requisitioned from Egyptians, in exchange for gold, tin, iron, textiles and other European goods - which he then sold on to Egyptian merchants at prices fixed by himself. The English traveller James Saint John found that, among foreigners, 'every look, word or smile of the Pasha is subjected to an arithmetical calculation to ascertain its value in piastres'. Some found that the Pasha 'is not always very attentive to his engagements'.

By 1811 Mohammed Ali was believed to be the richest pasha in the empire, and refused to obey orders from the ottoman government which went against his own interests. .By 1817 the port of Alexandria presented, in the words of an English traveller called Robert Richardson, 'an active scene of ships building, vessels loading and taking in their cargoes, with heaps of grain and bales of goods piled up along the shore.' Egypt's other ports, Damietta and Rosetta lost importance.

In 1811 Mohammed Ali spent six weeks in Alexandria, in 1812 two months, in 1818 four months. By 1822 he was said to be spending all the time there: that year the consuls-general moved their offices from Cairo to Alexandria. More Mediterranean, and much cooler, than its inland Muslim rival Cairo, Alexandria became Egypt's unofficial capital, a synonym for its government as 'London' and 'Paris' were for the British and French governments. It was particularly popular in the summer months, as an escape from the heat of Cairo. The two cities became a diarchy, each complementing the other, like Petropolis and Rio de Janeiro in Brazil.

In 1818-21, under the direction of the French engineer Pascal Coste, a seventy-five kilometre long canal was dug between Alexandria and the western branch of the Nile. Workers' death rates were appalling. The canal, still in use today, improved Alexandria's supply of drinking water, and enabled cultivation to spread in the surrounding countryside: Alexandria was freed from the constraints hindering its growth for the last two hundred years. Mohammed Ali revolutionised the landscape of Egypt, introducing pineapples, bananas, mangoes, figs, vines, orange groves. In the four years after his introduction in 1820 of long-crop Jumel cotton, cotton production rose from 944 to 228,078 hundredweight. Until the 1970's cotton would be the basis of Alexandria's economy.

Another improvement was public health. After 1825, with the help of a French chief medical officer Clot Bey, Mohammed Ali instituted an early form of state health control, with rural clinics and quarantine applied with brutal efficiency – to improve the quality of his soldiers - long before the rest of the Ottoman Empire.

Alexandria became a court city as well as a commercial port. Mohammed Ali built a palace on the western edge of the peninsula on which Alexandria was built, called Ras el-tine (the cape of figs) in 1811-17. It was in traditional Ottoman style, in wood and plaster, with wide, projecting eaves, and protruding rectangular windows, probably designed by craftsmen from the mountains of Macedonia. There were two sections: a harem, like a walled convent; and a divan or office and reception building. Soon, however, reflecting the influence of an architect from Livorno called Pietro Avoscani, the palace began to look more European. Portraits of Mohammed Ali's own family and European monarchs were hung on the walls, French furniture placed in the rooms.

Ras el-tine palace today. Originally built by Mohammed Ali Pasha after 1811, later modernised, it was the scene of many dramatic events, including the departure of King Farouk and his family in July 1952.

In Ras-el-tine the pasha kept open house. He liked foreign visitors such as Disraeli, Marshal Marmont, or the painter Horace Vernet who brought him news from Europe or Alexandria. An English naval officer called Charles Napier found that he was 'fond of gossiping and said to be informed of everything that is either said or done in Alexandria.' Occasionally he discussed his methods of government: 'You must be aware of how many opposing interests I have to consult, how many prejudices to surmount, how delicate is the affair! I can find very few to understand me and do my bidding. I have been almost alone for the greater part of my life.'

Foreigners were more likely to be present in the palace than pious Muslims. One popular Alexandria preacher, Sheikh Ibrahim denounced innovations in his sermons: when he claimed (incorrectly) that meat butchered by Christians and Jews could not be halal, he was temporarily exiled. A rebellion by a shaykh who called himself the Mahdi, and Mohammed Ali an infidel, was crushed. A French consul wrote that Mohammed Ali had bought most of the ulama; those opposed to his projects were exiled. Once one of the most fanatical provinces of the Ottoman Empire, under Mohammed Ali Egypt became one of its most tolerant. Jabarti complained that Christians, 'the enemies of our religion', had become 'the companions and intimate friends of His Highness', and even employed Muslims as servants.

Mohammed Ali's desire for a modern navy was another reason for his move to Alexandria. A naval school was established by Ras el-tine in 1826. Its 1,200 pupils would include Mohammed Ali's own son Said. The Director of the port of Alexandria, Besson Bey, with another French officer called Koenig, were in charge of Said's education and ensured that he spoke good French. Another French officer, Louis de Cerisy, began to supervise the construction of a new arsenal, between Ras el-tine palace and the city. Employing as many as 5,000, the arsenal was as international as the palace: 'French, English, Italians, Maltese, Arabs, Turks, Armenians, Copts, Arabs of the desert all work together and understand each other as best they can'.

Mohammed Ali spent much of the day in the arsenal, or watching it through a telescope from a special wooden bath house, jutting into the sea from the garden of Ras el-tin, whence he bathed in the sea. For Mohammed Ali's move to Alexandria had personal, as well as political and commercial, motives. Like George III at the same time, he had doctors who told him to take sea baths for his health. From the start Alexandria was a recreational, as well as a naval and commercial, court city. It is still Egypt's most popular summer resort.

Alexandria became a boom city, like two other international 'windows on the west' to which it was sometimes compared, Saint Petersburg and Odessa. After 1825 wrote the Russian consul, every day 'we see some fresh innovation in the European style destined for the improvement of the city or for public utility.' In 1834 Mohammed Ali set up the Commissione di Ornato or Board of Works to supervise the construction of roads and buildings, and, as the city expanded, to allot land to those he favoured. The first President was the first Greek consul Michael Tossizza, a Vlach merchant from Kavalla and founder of the Greek hospital. He built the Palais Tossizza, later the Bourse, at the head of the Place des Consuls.

The Bourse in Alexandria, the largest in world outside Europe and North America

Alexandria was becoming Greek again – for the first time since it surrendered to an Arab army in 642. Greeks' success was partly due to language. Mohammed Ali never learnt Arabic. Until the 1860's Turkish not Arabic was the first language of the court and government in Egypt. Since immigrants like

Tossizza came from areas of the Ottoman empire with large Turkish populations, they probably knew Turkish better than most Egyptians.

Alexandria became part of the world economy. In 1839, at £2,825,880 p.a., the value of trade going through Alexandria alone was equivalent to the value of all trade going through the whole of Egypt ten years earlier. The number of European firms established in Alexandria (such as the Barkers and Peels, who would remain until the Suez war of 1956) rose from 23 in 1822 to 69 in 1837. In 1844 the Comte d'Estourmel arriving from Cairo, seeing people in the 'broad airy streets' of the modern part of Alexandria, wearing European clothes and speaking European languages, felt that he was back in Europe.

Alexandria developed the first modern square in the Middle East, between the Ottoman city on the peninsula and the ruins of the classical city inland. In 1813 it was described as a 'large square near the sea … the Europeans come here to breathe the sea breezes'. By 1829 residence of the French, American and Swedish consuls, it was called the Place des Consuls, visible expression of their power and status. It was redesigned as a formal rectangle in the early 1830s by a political exile from the Papal States called Francesco Mancini with a surrounding area of straight wide streets. Large stone complexes known as okallas, contained court-yards, shops selling 'all the productions of Europe, and, on the upper floors, apartments - in effect nineteenth century shopping malls. Round the Place des consuls, according to Mrs George Griffith in 1843, 'Carriages of every description filled with smartly dressed ladies are to be seen driving about at all hours'.

As the city expanded, it began to be surrounded by another city, of workers' huts among the classical ruins. The huts were single rooms six feet high, covered in white plaster, which reminded Florence Nightingale of an army of white ants. James Saint John called them 'inferior in comfort and appearance to dog kennels or pig sties', even to 'the cabins of the Irish'. Their inhabitants' poverty seemed to have gone 'beyond the limits of the possible'.

Mohammed Ali used Alexandria as a base from which to attack the Ottoman empire. In 1822, in a letter to his nephew Ahmed Pasha Yeghen, he had denounced it as 'feeble and rampant with problems because of its viziers' obsession with ceremonies and tradition.' The Sultan was in the hands of ulama, too bigoted to employ Franks in positions of authority. Using his modern navy and army in 1831 and 1832 Mohammed Ali conquered Syria; his armies almost reached Constantinople.

In 1839 -1840 Alexandria was the focus of European diplomacy. Egypt's ally France wanted Mohammed Ali to keep control of Syria. Britain, Austria and the Ottoman empire demanded its return to Ottoman rule. Europe trembled on the brink of general war. Palmerston wrote to the British consul in Alexandria of 'the importance which His Majesty's Government attaches to the maintenance of the integrity of the Turkish empire as an object of European interest'. Mohammed Ali began to fortify Alexandria. A national guard drilled on the Place des Consuls. Rival French and British naval squadrons cruised among the islands of the Aegean.

In October and November however, Mohammed Ali lost Syria to a combined British, Ottoman and Austrian attack, helped by a Maronite uprising. On 22 November 1840 Commodore Charles Napier, moored his ship HMS Powerful in Alexandria harbour. On 26 November he had an audience with Mohammed Ali. When asked for his credentials, he replied that 'the double-shotted guns of the Powerful, with the squadron under his command to back him, his honour as an Englishman, and the knowledge he had of the desire of the four Great Powers for peace, were all the credentials he

possessed.' He advised the Pasha to accept the terms offered by the Porte. Otherwise Alexandria might be bombarded 'and His Highness, who has now the opportunity of founding a dynasty, may sink into a simple Pasha.'

Mohammed Ali yielded to superior force. Boghos Bey his foreign minister replied that 'in no case has His Highness intended to place himself in opposition to the will of the great powers of Europe'. After much renegotiation, an imperial decree dated 1 June 1841 arrived from Constantinople in Alexandria. Mohammed Ali was made hereditary governor; his family would reign in Egypt until King Farouk's departure from Ras el-tin on 26 July 1952. Egypt and the Ottoman Empire, however, would share the same flag, coinage and uniforms, and follow the same internal laws and international agreements. The Pasha of Egypt's army was to be limited to 18,000 and no ships of the line were to be built without the Sultan's permission. In other words Mohammed Ali would no longer have the means to invade other Ottoman provinces. Europe had, yet again, intervened to save the Ottoman Empire. Mohammed Ali's dynastic ambition, however, had started Egypt on its long march to independence.

In the 1840's Alexandria continued to expand. Bayle Saint John, who arrived there in 1846, found 'a perfect rage for building in Alexandria'. Entire quarters had been added 'as if by magic…everywhere else almost the bricklayers and masons are at work'. The population had risen from 60,000 in 1840 (of whom about 12,000 were soldiers and 8,000 sailors) to 104,189 in 1848, the first year that a proper census was conducted. When Mohammed Ali died there in 1849, he inspired such regret that, the British consul reported, his funeral procession was followed by 'all the chief Muslim officers, all the consular body and all the principal merchants and inhabitants… Moreover we as Europeans ought in justice to his memory to remember that during many years while a Christian could not walk about Aleppo or Damascus or any other town under the immediate government of the sultan safe from injury or insult, the English Traveller, the Sportman or the Naturalist might wander unarmed about the valley of the Nile and its adjacent deserts with as much safety to his person and property as at midday at Hyde Park.'

Thanks to Mohammed Ali, the city of Alexandria would be as effective as a modernising force in Egypt as government decrees. However, 'the key to Egypt', as Alexandria was called, might also act as a Trojan horse. Its role as a summer court city put the Egyptian ruler within range of foreign warships' guns. Palmerston threatened Mohammed Ali with a bombardment or blockade of the city, in 1833, 1838 and 1840. Flaubert predicted during his visit in 1850, that, given its ambition to control the route to India, Britain was bound to become mistress of Egypt: 'remember my prediction'.

Mohammed Ali was succeeded by his grandson Abbas, who preferred Cairo – in particular the suburb he created there called Abbasiya. After his untimely death in 1854, the French and British consuls helped to secure the succession of the eldest male of the dynasty, his uncle Said Pasha, rather than Abbas's son Ilhami. In the words of the British consul, Said 'is 38 years of age, speaks… French and English with fluency, has always affected the society of Europeans'. Like Mohammed Ali, he preferred Alexandria to Cairo.

Under Said the Egyptian government became, in the words of one of its officials Nubar pasha, 'a regime of laissez-aller and complete lack of self-respect.' Said was the victim of his own character, as well as Europeans' financial and technical skills. Since he invariably yielded to pressing demands, his reign saw government contracts produce 'incredible' profits, and Alexandria businessmen make equally incredible fortunes and law-suits. Consuls often supported their nationals' claims on the Egyptian government, and shared the profits. During an audience at Ras el-tin, a consul-general

shivered by an open window. Said pasha said 'Cover yourself, cover yourself; if you catch cold, your government will ask me for an indemnity.

Said's most important contract was for the creation of the Suez Canal. It was signed in Alexandria with his old friend Ferdinand de Lesseps. De Lesseps had first met Said in 1831 when serving as French vice-consul in Alexandria – where he had also found, in the consulate archives, plans for a Suez Canal drawn up during the French occupation in 1798-9. The friendship had been reinforced by de Lesseps's secret presents of food, when Mohammed Ali had been trying to force Said to lose weight.

On the day he returned to Alexandria, 7 November 1854, De Lesseps was received by Said. On 30 November a convention was signed. By the time the canal was opened by de Lesseps's cousin the Empress Eugenie in November 1869, the Compagnie universelle de Suez had charged so much money, and used so much forced Egyptian labour, that it had helped ruin both the Egyptian treasury, and many Egyptian lives None of Said's predecessors, nor any Ottoman Sultan, would have agreed to the construction of the canal. They knew that, once it had become the main British route to India, it would tempt the British government to occupy Egypt.

In the nine years of Said's reign the number of Europeans in Alexandria quadrupled. By 1864 there were 50 to 60,000, a quarter to a third of the population: 15, 000 Greeks, 15,000 Italians, 10,000 French, the rest mainly Maltese and Syrians from the Ottoman Empire.

His successor Ismail Pasha won the title of Khedive – confirming his semi-sovereign status under the Ottoman Sultan – in 1867. Alexandria's modernising role was confirmed by the unveiling of an equestrian statue of Mohammed Ali – the first public statue in a Muslim country - in the middle of the Places des Consuls in 1873. Ismail Pasha's extravagance, however, ensured that lost control of Egyptian finances to European bankers. Their programme of reforms and austerity – putting interest payments to foreign creditors before salary payments to Egyptian soldiers and officials - increased Egyptian unrest. In 1879, prompted by the French and British governments, the Ottoman Sultan forced Ismail to abdicate in favour of his son Tewfik. He sailed into exile from the quay by Ras el-tin palace on 30 June 1879.

The British government began to plan intervention. A Liberal government came to power in 1880. Sir Charles Dilke, the new under-secretary of state at the Foreign Office - protesting his government's respect for 'the liberties of the Egyptian people' - was determined to show British voters that Liberals could be as imperialistic as Tories.

The Prime Minister Mr. Gladstone had a personal incentive for intervening, as he realised when adding up his fortune in December 1881. He had an exceptionally large holding in Egyptian government bonds: £40,567 or 37% of his entire portfolio. Sixty-five other MP's also had investments in Egypt. Thanks in part to the British occupation of Egypt, these investments would prove more profitable than many British stocks. The need to 'protect the Suez Canal' was another factor influencing British policy. Strategy, 'the market' and domestic politics drove Britain to occupy Egypt. The fate of the Khedive, and of Europeans in Alexandria, would be a pretext.

On 20 May 1882 British and French gun boats anchored off Alexandria. Their orders were to communicate with the consuls- general, support the Khedive and land a force if the safety of Europeans required it. For the Khedive Europe was a friend - for most Egyptians an enemy. Many wanted a written constitution to replace khedivial absolutism.

On 13 June, as he did every year, the Khedive Tewfik arrived in Alexandria for the summer, accompanied by the foreign consuls-general and Egyptian ministers including the Minister of War, a popular hero called Urabi Pasha. Fighting between Egyptians and Europeans broke out. Most Europeans fled. On 11 July British warships opened fire on the city. That day and the next the main sounds in Alexandria were the crackle and roar of flames, the crash of falling buildings, and howling dogs. The last Egyptian troops left around 1 pm on 12 July.

Alexandria turned, in the words of a British consular assistant A. Hulme Beaman, into 'a dantesque Inferno, alight almost from end to end, the flames running riot from street to street without any attempt being made to check them being made, with wild figures here and there pillaging and looting and ghastly corpses swollen to gigantic proportions lying charred and naked in the roadways.' The only object untouched was the statue of Mohammed Ali, who seemed to survey the ruins with disgust.

The commander of the British fleet, Admiral Sir Beauchamp Seymour was too nervous to let troops land. Therefore the city was abandoned to looters. 'So far as any repressive action on the mob is concerned, I fear our expedition must be regarded as a failure', reported the British consul Charles Cookson on 14 July.

That evening, however, 400 British sailors and marines landed with a Gatling gun, and entered the city. As more ships arrived, more sailors and marines landed, including – in a gesture showing international support for British imperialism - Germans, Americans and Greeks, to guard their consulates and help 'restore order'. They were joined after 17 July by soldiers from the British garrison in Cyprus.

The geography of the Khedive's palaces helped determine events. Resolved to remain on shore, rather than take refuge with the Royal Navy, on 10 July the Khedive had left Ras el-tin for the palace of his cousin Mustafa Fazil in Ramleh, to the east of the city, with his ministers. For the next few days, while British ships bombarded Alexandria, his household was 'completely beside themselves with fear'; but on 12 July loyal Bedouin arrived to strengthen his guard. The Khedive 'himself showed the most complete self-possession and calm'. Egyptian troops left on 12 July, to follow Urabi to Cairo. The Khedive wanted to 'if possible to get within reach of the fleet': in other word he allied himself with Britain against most Egyptians. On 13 July remaining officers affirmed their loyalty and were rewarded with decorations. The account by Gerald Portal continues: 'At about 4 o'clock His Highness arrived at the Ras el-tine palace, having been met on the road by Sir A. Colvin and Mr Cartwright, while at the foot of the staircase he was received by Admiral Sir Beauchamp Seymour'. Britain provided protection for the Khedive; the Khedive provided legitimisation for the British occupation of his country.

The street of the Italian Post Office in Alexandria destroyed by British bombardment, 1882 - Phot. Luigi Fiorillo

By 20 July there were about 3,800 British soldiers, sailors and marines in Alexandria. It became the base from which the British army conquered Egypt. Europeans and Egyptians began to return. More British forces arrived under General Sir Garnet Wolseley who, in a private letter to his wife on 10 September 1882, denounced 'That silly and criminal bombardment of Alexandria which Lord Northbrook and the Admiralty concocted'. Two days later he defeated Urabi at Tel el-Kabir. British forces would not finally leave Egypt until after the attack on the Suez Canal in 1956.

Tewfik's son Abbas Hilmi succeeded him in 1892, at the age of eighteen. The real rulers of the country were the British consul-general and the British commander-in- chief of the Egyptian army. Every June, however, Abbas Hilmi would enter Alexandria in state, escorted by cavalry. His arrival would be celebrated by a ball in his honour given by the merchants of the city – most of whom then left to spend the summer in Europe. For them, the Khedive Ismail's boast about Egypt being part of Europe was true. When visiting the municipality, Abbas Hilmi expressed (probably in French) his belief in Alexandria's cosmopolitanism: 'in my good city of Alexandria I want there to be neither foreigners nor natives, but only Alexandrians, rivalling and emulating each other for the progress of their city.' He married an Austrian countess and in his own household employed Turkish, Arabic and English secretariats.

The Khedive built himself yet another palace, call ed Montazah – 'the path' - on a pine-covered promontory to the east of the city. A monstrosity reminiscent of one of King Ludwig II's castles in Bavaria, the vast columned Haremlik building, extended in the 1920's, is surmounted by 'Florentine'

campaniles with views of Alexandria. Inside the decoration and furniture is in the gilt 'Louis Farouk' style preferred by the House of Mohammed Ali.

Suspected of being pro-Geman, Abbas Hilmi was deposed by the British government in 1914. In 1917 his uncle Fouad, son of the Khedive Ismail, was Britain's choice as Sultan of Egypt – thanks in part to his friend Ronald Storrs, Oriental Secretary at the British Residency. Other princes, out of loyalty to the Khedive or the Ottoman Empire, refused the throne. A former playboy, Fouad spoke with a 'high spasmodic bark': a bullet had remained stuck in his throat after his brother-in-law had shot him during a quarrel over his first wife's money. At times the bark sounded like a gun being fired.

Having shuttled in his youth between Turin (where he was educated), Vienna (where he had served as Ottoman Military Attache), Paris and Constantinople, as well as Cairo and Alexandria, even more than most of his family he was a natural cosmopolitan. King Fouad I, as he became after the proclamation of the constitution in 1922, had also acquired a taste for grandeur and cultural patronage. He helped found the Universite Fouad Ier in Cairo – importing Italian and French professors - and commissioned magnificent editions of foreign documents on nineteenth century Egypt, for which historians will always be grateful. He also founded the Arab Language Academy, modelled on the Academie Française, to guard the purity of Arabic, and the Arab Music Academy, which established a system of notation.

In Alexandria, King Fouad commissioned the transformation of Ras el-tin palace, and the creation of a throne room in 'Islamic Baroque', by the architect of the royal palaces, his friend Ernesto Verrucci Bey. Verrucci Bey was also the architect of the neo-baroque arcade erected on the corniche around a statue of the Khedive Ismail by Pietro Canonica, inscribed in Italian and Arabic 'a Ismail il magnifico, la communita italiana' and unveiled in 1938.

King Fouad became a major political force, able to keep the Egyptian national hero Saad Zaghloul out of office for most of his reign. In Alexandria he held a monthly levee, which British naval officers were required to attend: the king, 'most affable and civil', spoke to them in French. To diplomats, bankers and politicians, he gave what the British diplomat David Kelly called 'astonishing' audiences, analysing men and events with embarrassing frankness, complaining of the limits placed on his power by the new - in his opinion far too democratic - 1922 constitution, based on that of Belgium. Egyptians 'were completely unsuited for parliamentary government on those lines … why had we not left him to run the country as he well knew how to do, if we would only cease interfering?'

Sir Richard Vaux, president of the Cours mixtes in Alexandria, found King Fouad 'the ablest man in his own dominions…[with] an almost encyclopaedic knowledge of the men and affairs of his country… A prodigious worker, he easily mastered the details of administration and it is safe to say that his ministers were in truth his ministers and not his masters.' Another official praised the King's 'perception of world affairs, common sense judgements and humane interest in all aspects of contemporary Egyptian life.' His friends included two wealthy Egyptian ladies from prominent Jewish families, Madame Rolo and Mme Cattaui Pasha, chief lady in waiting to the Queen. Like most Egyptian Jews at the time, they felt Egyptian and, if they thought of Zionism, regarded it as 'very unchic'. A few years later a Zionist official reported of the 25,000 Jews living in Alexandria: 'a decided animosity and antipathy to Zionist aims has sprung up. They look upon it as something that threatens their own peace and must be discouraged.'

The Egyptian government and the foreign embassies continued to move to Alexandria every summer. The British residency required a special train, which was saluted as it slid past the stations along the route by bowing mayors, and soldiers and police standing to attention. As in other court cities, shops displayed signs advertising their role as suppliers 'by appointment' to the monarch or a member of his family.

In 1936, King Fouad died. The arrivals of his son King Farouk in Alexandria harbour, in May 1936, returning from his education in England, and in July 1937, after a holiday in Europe, were government-organised popular triumphs. In 1936 showered with rose petals, he drove from the harbour to the train station in an open Rolls Royce. In 1937, crowds of girl guides, boy scouts, school children and workers and religious students shouted 'Long live Farouk!', 'Long live the king of the Nile!' Handsome, well-intentioned and, unlike his father, fluent in Arabic, he was admired as 'Farouk the Pious', and regularly went to mosque in public.

His marriage in 1938 made him even more popular. Both he and his bride Farida Zulficar were only seventeen. She came from Alexandria's modernising Muslim elite, educated at the Catholic school of Notre Dame de Sion. King Farouk liked Alexandria. It would be his idea to revive the Egyptian navy, with head quarters in Alexandria, and ships bought from Britain. In 1940, during celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of the Alexandria municipality, Ahmed Kamel Pasha, the Director-General, expressed the official view of the city's future. It was assured not only by 'this spirit of confraternity and solidarity between the Egyptian and foreign elements' - and the municipality's 'particular benevolence for the working class and the poor' - but also by 'the High solicitude of His Majesty the King ...who has made of our beautiful city not only the second capital of the Kingdom but also His Residence of predilection'; his first child, a daughter, was born there. The local newspaper La Reforme, founded in 1895, also prophesied the 'finest destiny' for Alexandria as a crossroads of east and west, 'a furnace of different races, religions and customs ... under the aegis of His Majesty King Farouk'.

In the Second World War, even when German and Italian armies were only sixty miles away, Alexandria remained relatively calm. The Egyptian government showed its confidence by starting a university. It was called the Universite Farouk Ier – as Cairo University was the Universite Fouad Ier - and opened by the King in person on 8 February 1943. He was still handsome and popular: people were disappointed that he drove through the streets, decorated with triumphal arches, in a closed rather than an open car. The event was commemorated by a gold medal, which can be seen today in the National Museum in the Villa Bassili on the rue Fouad, former residence of a dynasty of wood and cotton merchants. Revealing the adulation surrounding the young King, its Arabic inscription reads 'King Farouk's university – Alexander the Great who established Alexandria – and King Farouk the first is the King 1361/1943'.On one side are superimposed effigies of Alexander the Great and King Farouk, as equals.

Alexandria appeared stable enough to assume a new role, as a refuge for exiled royalty. Already Alexandria had sheltered the Greek royal family and government fleeing the German invasion in 1941. Exiled Ottoman princes living in Alexandria since 1924 were joined by Crown Prince Paul and Crown Princess Frederica of the Hellenes and their children in 1944-6. In 1946 ex-King Victor Emanuel of Italy and his grandson ex-King Simeon of Bulgaria, and ex-king Zog of Albania, came at King Farouk's invitation, with their relations and servants.

For a time Alexandria was capital of 'free Albania', a base from which expeditions were sent to try to liberate it from Communism. The self-made king, Zog I, lived in a regal villa in Ramleh, in greater state

than the head of the ancient House of Savoy, Victor Emanuel III. The latter lived with his wife in a small villa in a new area called Smouha City: a marshy district which had been drained and laid out as a garden city, with its own sports club and racecourse, by a Jewish friend of King Fouad from Baghdad, called Joseph Smouha. When Victor Emanuel was buried at Saint Catherine's church in 1948, the funeral procession was organised by King Farouk.

Alexandria retained the appearance of a royal capital. On 11 February 1945, to celebrate the King's birthday, a relay race was run from Rase el-tin palace to Abdine palace in Cairo, followed by a military review. On other years palaces, offices and villas, and ships in the harbour, were illuminated. 'The whole town' came to the corniche to watch the firework display, as the King was driven past cheering crowds in a procession of red Rolls Royces from Montazah to Ras el-tin: red was the colour reserved for palace cars. From 1945 the director general of the municipality was a trusted servant of the King, the chief architect of the royal palaces, Mustafa Fahmy Pasha.

However Farouk had begun his transformation from handsome young hero into obese buffoon. There were two triggers: a head-on car crash in November 1943, and long and painful recuperation; and the failure of his marriage to Queen Farida. Addicted to gambling and women, he became an embarrassment, then a scandal, to many Egyptians. In 1943 Noel Coward, like many other British friends, had found him charming and courteous, 'a big fine-looking young man'. Sholto Douglas called him well informed and well read and 'unquestionably very popular'. A year later an English officer was shocked by the King's 'ravenous appetite' and the 'marked coarseness' in his conversation; his entourage – including his favourite servant/companion Antonio Pulli – was 'very third class'. He began to frequent night-clubs and parties. Mary de Zogheb noted after a party at Alice Zervudachi's on 6 September 1944:'King Farouk came late, goes often to parties'.

After 1948 King Farouk was further weakened by Egypt's defeat in the first Arab-Israeli war, a sense of personal impotence, and accusations of corruption. Like most rich Alexandrians, he resumed the pre-war habit of summering in Europe. Egyptians resented, even more than their own monarch, the vast British bases still in the Canal zone. On 25 January 1952 British troops killed fifty Egyptian auxiliary policemen during fighting in Ismailia. The next day – Black Saturday - Cairo – but not Alexandria – erupted. In the words of Naguib Mahfouz, 'concealed anger, suppressed despair, unreleased tension, all the things people had been nursing inside them had suddenly burst their bottle, exploding like a hurricane of demons.'

From Alexandria on 3 April 1952, Colonel Sir Edward Peel MC of Peel and Company, which had been in the city over a hundred years, tried to instil sense in the British government. He wrote 'security and British interests in the Middle east are being jeopardized for an unattainable objective - a secure base on the canal'. That year five Prime Ministers came and went in as many months: by the summer Ahmad Abboud Pasha, the richest man in Egypt, was said to be paying the King to appoint the Prime Minister of his choice. The American ambassador Jefferson Caffery reported a feeling of 'impending revolution'. 'The factors of instability in Egypt outbalance by far the factors of stability'. The failure of negotiations for a complete British withdrawal of all military personnel from the Canal Zone was the single most important factor of instability. The King felt time was running out and warned the American ambassador: 'you will all be sorry if I get turned out.'

In 1952, as in 1882, the diarchy between Cairo and Alexandria, and the location of the royal palaces, helped determine events. As usual the King went by special royal train to Alexandria for the summer. As usual the beaches were packed with Cairenes, including government ministers. The King was

aware of opposition in the officer corps and for once did not plan to go to Europe that summer. It was a race for time between him and the 'Free Officers' led by Nasser. One Prime Minister Hussain Sirry failed to get the king to give orders to arrest the officers. The King thought he could control the army by suspending the Officers' Club board of directors, and appointing a new government under the reformist Neguib el-Hilali – arranged in Alexandria by Hafez Afifi the King's chef de cabinet – with the King's brother-in-law Ismail Shirin as Minister of War. At 4 pm on 22 July the new cabinet was sworn in by the King in the throne room of Ras el-tin. At 9pm the King finally ordered the arrest of the 'Free Officers'.

He was too late. That night, warned of the King's move, the Free Officers' units had occupied key installations in Cairo; palaces, ministries, Farouk airport and army HQ. Casualties were limited to two soldiers defending the last. From Cairo at 7 am on the morning of 23 July came a radio announcement by colonel el-Sadat: 'People of Egypt the country has just passed the most troubled period of its history.' Appealing for calm, he blamed the defeat of 1948 on 'the agents of dissolution'. There was no mention of revolution or republic.

Foreign diplomats and Egyptian politicians were caught off guard. The CIA and MI6, however, were not. They considered the Free Officers more likely than the King to be a barrier against communism and had been encouraging them since May 1952, or earlier. The British Prime Minister Antony Eden later said: 'I had frequently indicated to our Embassy that British forces would not intervene to keep King Farouk on his throne.' This policy was confirmed to Neguib in person by John Hamilton of the British Embassy. In 1882 the monarchy had been a useful instrument of control for Britain. In 1952 it was not.

On 23 July there were phone calls and messengers between Alexandria and Cairo. At 2 am the Minister of the Interior Mortada el-Maraghy, intelligent and energetic, spoke to the officers' figure-head leader, the popular general Neguib: 'I appeal to you as a soldier and as a patriot to put a stop to this affair.' Aly Maher the King's former chef de cabinet and Prime Minister, known as 'the fox', was imposed by the army as a new Prime Minister; he and Farouk had a meeting on 24 July. The King's detested advisers Pulli Bey, his valet Mohammed Hassan, two pashas of Lebanese origin Elias Andraos and Karim Thabet and six others were dismissed.

It soon became clear that the Free Officers wanted more than a change of ministry. The King prepared to leave. He had often enjoyed driving himself very fast through Alexandria in a red car. On his last drive through his favourite city, from Montazah to Ras el-tin – where his royal yacht Mahroussa was moored - early on the morning of 25 July, King Farouk was driven by a chauffeur in a black car, to try to escape notice. His second wife Queen Narriman, his son and their nanny sat behind. A photograph shows him sitting by the nervous chauffeur, shielding his face. He was followed by another car containing his daughters by his first wife. By 7 am on 25 July the palaces were surrounded by tanks, and buzzed by aircraft, sent from Cairo.

The same day Neguib and Colonel Sadat flew to Alexandria from Cairo. Temporary head quarters were established in Mustafa Pasha Barracks – the palace where Tewfik had taken refuge in 1882. They had discussions with Ali Maher at Wizara, the government's summer office in the rue d'Aboukir in Bulkeley. Crowds cheered. Farouk may have wanted to leave Egypt on the evening of 25 July but had to wait for the Mahroussa batteries to be recharged. This historic royal yacht, built in Britain in 1865, (and recently refitted at government expense), which had opened the Suez Canal in 1869 and already

carried the Khedive Ismail into exile in 1879, was now preparing to carry another descendant of Mohammed Ali. The destination was the same: Naples.

On 26 July at 9.20am the officers' ultimatum demanding the King's abdication and exile was presented to Ali Maher. He too had believed that the officers – as they had first proclaimed – wanted only to expel the King's cronies, not the King. When told the news, Ali Maher went 'pale as death' according to Sadat. The fox had been out-foxed. The ultimatum – by 'the army representing the power of the People' - accused the King of responsibility for 'shameful fortunes'; violations of the constitution; contempt for the will of the people: complete anarchy - 'no citizen now feels his life, his dignity or his goods in security'; defeat in the Palestine war; and 'traffic in defective arms and munitions'.

On 26 July Montazah surrendered. The Sudanese guards at Ras el-tin put up a token resistance. Six were wounded, probably by mistake. Compared to the bloodbaths in other cities in the twentieth century, it was a civilised coup. Nasser is reported to have said: 'let us spare Farouk and send him into exile. History will sentence him to death.' Neguib boasted – describing his military coup, incorrectly, as a 'revolution' - 'few if any revolutions I think have accomplished more with the loss of fewer lives.'

Ras el-tin, the first expression of the Mohammed Ali dynasty's love of Alexandria, now witnessed its expulsion. When he presented the ultimatum to the King at 10.42 am, Ali Maher, who knew him well, said 'I am sorry Your Majesty.' The guards in the palace wanted to fight or kill any Free Officers who entered. The King ordered them not to. His last gamble was to offer to make Neguib a Field Marshal. The offer was refused. At noon in the marble hall, coughing and shuffling his feet, the King signed his abdication in favour of his one year old son Ahmed Fouad; his hand was shaking so much that he signed twice. Most of the royal collections, including his personal collections of books, stamps and coins, were in Cairo. Nevertheless a large number of trunks were loaded on the yacht. To his amazement the one person he asked to accompany him into exile – Pulli Bey, whom he had known since he was a boy – refused; the King was abandoned by his sycophants.

Sixteen years earlier King Farouk had arrived in Alexandria, showered with rose petals. Now he left, bloated and despised. Egyptians' principal reaction was surprise at the speed and ease of his overthrow. At 5.45 the King descended the staircase to the landing stage then by launch to the boat.

The American ambassador Jefferson Caffery was present – perhaps to show American approval, or to ensure lack of bloodshed. As Farouk and Narriman, carrying their son in her arms, passed the royal guards, the royal anthem was played and the royal standard lowered for the last time. Then, according to Neguib, 'the palace servants in accordance with Egyptian custom set up a wail of lament that could be heard a quarter of a mile away.' It was punctuated by the rhythmic booming of a twenty-one gun salute.

At 6 General Neguib came on board the Mahroussa to say goodbye to the ex-King. Both were, by Neguib's account, close to tears. He reminded Farouk that he had been the only officer to resign in 1942, in protest at a British intervention to force him to change his ministry: 'it was you, effendim, who forced us to do what we have done.'

'I know, you've done what I always intended to do myself 'replied the King, who wanted to appear less foolish than he felt. Other versions of his reply are, 'I should have done the same thing myself if you hadn't' – perhaps meaning that he had planned to leave Egypt, after ensuring his son's succession. Another version is 'what you did to me, I was going to do to you' – he would have arrested the officers if they had not expelled him.

They saluted and shook hands. The conversation continued:

- Your task will be difficult. It isn't easy, you know, to govern Egypt.

'Such were Farouk's last words. I felt sorry for him as we disembarked. Farouk I knew would fail as an exile even as he had failed as a King. But he was such an unhappy man in every way that I could take no pleasure in his destitution, necessary though it was.'

The Mahroussa sailed for Naples – 'it was a good departure', remembers Vice-Admiral Rushdi, who was on an escort ship and like most officers in the Egyptian navy loved its protector King Farouk. Every ship in the harbour hoisted its flags in farewell.

For King Farouk, as for other Alexandrians, leaving Egypt was not difficult. He merely exchanged one Mediterranean city for another. For Alexandria, however, his departure was a sign that its transformation from cosmopolitan court city to capital of the Nile delta, as it now is, had begun. The coup was a victory of Cairo over Alexandria. The new regime stopped the habit of senior government officials moving to Alexandria for the summer. Whatever the King's failings, he represented a monarchy which was cosmopolitan, multilingual and favourable to minorities. Whatever the Free Officers' ideals, they were nationalists and militarists. Within two months of their coup, political parties and newspapers were closed; opponents of the new regime arrested; strikers hanged. Since 1952, Egypt has been a military regime.

More on royal Alexandria and the Mohammed Ali dynasty can be found in the author's book Levant: Splendour and Catastrophe on the Mediterranean (John Murray, 2010).