

What the British Military really thought of "The Mad Mullah"

Our Connection with Somaliland.

2. With regard to the first of these points, our connection with and obligations in Somaliland. In 1884 we took over the Somali coast from Berbera to Zeyla from the Egyptians; and we concluded treaties of protection with all the tribes, except the Dolbahanta.

Obligations.

In view of what follows, I will quote you an extract from the terms of these treaties. "The British Government is desirous of maintaining relations of peace and friendship with the tribes, and undertakes to extend to them the gracious favour and protection of Her Majesty the Queen Empress." I would ask you to note the unequivocal promise of protection

Advantages of our Occupation.

3. Our motives in undertaking this new responsibility were not entirely disinterested. In the first place, we had secured Berbera, a natural harbour and only 150 miles from Aden. Even if we had no particular need of it ourselves, we certainly did not want any other European and potential enemy Power to have it; and Germany was known to be throwing out feelers in this direction.

Character of the Rebellion.

7. The third point in my introduction is the birth of the rebellion and its character. The general opinion appears to be that it was due to fanaticism, and that the Mullah was a mad man. I desire to show, on the one hand, that fanaticism characterized and strengthened, but did not cause the revolt; and on the other, that the Mullah's conduct throughout was the perfectly rational conduct of an extremely ambitious and extremely capable man. If there was any madness in his composition, it was only that madness which is akin to genius. The cause of the rebellion was the desire of Mahomed bin Abdille Hassan to be not only the temporal, but also the spiritual lord of all Somaliland. Its successful continuance was due to this man's remarkable personality and to his insight into not only the minds of his own people but also of the British politician. He was author, stage manager, and principal actor in a play that ran for 21 years, and he pocketed all the receipts. Nor was there any question of an understudy carrying on if the principal was removed; for he allowed no-one to play "Khalifa" to his "Mahdi".

1. To arm and organize the friendly tribes of the interior in such a manner as to enable them to protect themselves from outside aggression.

2. To withdraw entirely from the interior and abandon all methods of direct control, leaving the administration of the internal affairs of the tribes in the hands of their elders.

3. To concentrate on the coast and limit active administration to the coast towns.

The change was completed by March, 1910, but the new policy completely failed to justify expectations.

The friendly tribes, instead of combining against the common foe, employed the rifles and ammunition issued to them by Government to fight amongst themselves. The more easterly tribes were at the mercy of the Dervishes. In 1910 July, the Mullah moved west and settled at Dumer, on the frontier of the British Protectorate, with a small outpost in the Nogal Valley. The object of this move was to coerce the Gadwein and Warsangeli, by his proximity, to join him, and to furnish the supplies of food, cloth, and ammunition which he so urgently required. No important move was made till November, 1911, when he successfully attacked the Ali Gheri at Bohotleh. He followed this up in February, 1912, with an attack on the Dolbahanta at Eildab. In this engagement our people lost all their stock and were reduced to starvation. They flocked to Berbera demanding to be supported. Yet another attack on Bohotleh in March resulted in the remaining Dolbahanta in that vicinity being looted and driven out. Bohotleh remained in Dervish hands.

Meanwhile intertribal warfare had assumed alarming proportions. The whole country, almost within sight of the coast towns, was in state bordering on anarchy. With a view to

Summary.

On the history of the past eighteen years, as summarized in the preceding pages, it is possible to base the following brief estimate of the Mullah's character, capabilities, and present resources. By forming a combination, other than tribal, of Somalis, and by exercising a despotic rule over this most socialistic race, he has proved himself to be possessed of a truly remarkable personality. Further, he has imbued his following of the "least fanatical of all Mohamedan peoples" with a fanaticism which burns as fiercely to-day as it did eighteen years ago. But a combination such as the Dervish combination in Somaliland could never have been maintained by personality and religious fervour alone. The Mullah's position has demanded military genius, administrative ability, and diplomatic skill. History has shown how effectively he has met these demands. Perhaps the best example of his military genius is to be found in his defeat of our forces in detail at Gumburu and Daratoleh, and his subsequent skilfully covered retreat to the Nogal. The distribution and rationing of his troops, his arrangements for supplying himself with arms, ammunition and other necessities, the organization/

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organization of his pony stud, all bear testimony to administrative and organizing ability of a high order. As a diplomat he has been remarkably successful. Despite their apparent hostility to his cause, despite their promises to the British Government, Osman Mahmud, Sultan of the Mijjertein, Yusuf Ali, Sultan of Obbia and Alula, and the Warsangeli Sultan have all actively assisted the Mullah at crucial moments in his career. In view of the fact that there is considerable intercourse between the Dervishes and the outer world, the efficacy of the Mullah's propaganda and of his system of censorship is extraordinary. Intelligent deserters are genuinely surprised to find their countrymen under the British Government following the Moslem faith, while the news of any reverse to the Mullah's arms is most effectively suppressed.

The many letters that Mahomed bin Abdulla Hassan has indited to representatives of the British Government reveal a remarkable breadth of outlook and a keen insight. "Self preservation has been the guiding principle of his policy, his first object and his only excuse".

That his methods have been unspeakably cruel cannot be gainsaid, but on the other hand it cannot be denied that they have been remarkably successful.

Excerpts from two "Lectures on Somaliland"

1 Somaliland 1884-1919 by Major H L Ismay 11th Cavalry (1922)

2 The Mullah's Following (Jan 1919)

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