## HSTCMP 202 Digital World Wars - Read for Tuesday, October 6

Winston Churchill, *The River War Vol. II: An Historical Account of the Re-Conquest of the Soudan* (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1899) pages 155-164, 198-200, 219-227 only

Full text of the book is available here <https://archive.org/details/1899RiverWarVol2/page/n179/mode/2up>

Winston Churchill looms over British history in the twentieth century. He is perhaps best known for serving as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom during World War II (1940-1945) and again after the war (1951-1955). But Churchill had a long career in the British Parliament and in the military – he was First Lord of the Admiralty during World War I (head of the British Royal Navy), and orchestrated the disastrous invasion of Gallipoli. During WWI he also served as British Minister of Munitions, Secretary of State for War, Secretary of State for Air, and Secretary of State for the Colonies.

Churchill was a fervent believer in the British empire, which is where he began his military, journalistic, and political career. Churchill was an aristocrat, and in 1900 was launched into fame when he wrote a book about his escape from a prisoner-of-war camp during the South African War (if you are interested, read Candace Millard, *Hero of the Empire: The Boer War, a Daring Escape, and the Making of Winston Churchill,* 2016).

But, even before the escape that made him famous, Churchill served with the British Army in India (an experience about which he wrote an 1898 book, *The Story of the Malakand Field Force)*.

We are reading an account of Churchill’s other imperial war – the Anglo-Egyptian Re-Conquest of the Sudan. *The River War* is Churchill’s account of the joint British-Egyptian invasion of the Sudan to fight Muhammed Ahmad (the Mahdi), an Islamic anti-colonial politician and insurgent military leader. In particular, we are reading the sections about the Battle of Omdurman, which took place on 2 September, 1898.

## Things to know:

* Churchill refers to the Khalifa – this is the title of Abdallahi ibn Muhammad, one of the Mahdi’s trusted military leaders and his presumed successor.
* Churchill calls the Khalifa’s forces “the Dervishes” – this term was commonly used by the British to refer to the Islamic army they were fighting. The British used this term loosely and pejoratively, we wouldn’t use it today.
* The Anglo-Egyptian army that fought at Omdurman was made up of white British soldiers (those regiments are listed on p. 198) and of black “Soudanese” and Egyptian battalions (listed on p. 199). When Churchill talks about the “Soudanese” or about “blacks,” he is referring to troops fighting for the British side. They were commanded by a white British officer, in this case, MacDonald. (We will talk a lot more about Africans serving in colonial armies this quarter).

## What’s in this PDF:

* Begin reading at “While all this was taking place” on page 155 to page 164. This is Churchill’s description of the battle – compare how he describes the “Dervishes” and how he describes the Soudanese battalions fighting for the British. What does Churchill have to say about the role of military technology at Omdurman?
* Read pages 198-200, Churchill’s account of the battle’s casualties and the ammunition used.

What kind of information is Churchill recording here? Along what lines does he divide and classify casualties?

* Read beginning on page 219 with “Another sight” to page 227, which is Churchill’s description of visiting the site of the battle three days later.

How does Churchill think the battle will be remembered? What does he notice about the aftermath of the battle? What arguments about the British is he trying to make? What arguments about the Mahdi’s forces he is trying to make?