

# Good Friday 1915: Anzacs riot in Cairo's red-light district

Will Harvie07:00, Mar 30 2018



*Australian War Memorial, Reference: PS1378*

This photo is thought to show the aftermath of the riot by Anzac soldiers. The white figure on the right is probably a woman connected to the sex trade.

## **A riot in Wasa'a opens a window on 20th century sex trafficking. Will Harvie reports.**

Prostitution was supposedly regulated in Egypt in 1915. British colonial authorities had created an official red light district in central Cairo, close to the areas frequented by Europeans.

In this district, variously spelled Azbakiyya or Ezbekiyya, sex workers were supposedly registered and subject to regular medical examinations to contain the spread of venereal diseases.

Azbakiyya was popular with European tourists, part of the spectacle of Cairo. Some probably came across Ibrahim el-Gharbi, a huge Nubian transvestite, son of

a slave trader and the dominant brothel owner.

"He could be seen every evening sitting cross-legged on a bench outside one of his houses," wrote Raden Dunbar, author of [\*Secrets of the Anzacs: The Untold Story of Venereal Disease in the Australian Army, 1914-1919\*](#).

"Dressed as a woman and veiled in white, this [repulsive pervert](#) sat like a silent, ebony idol, occasionally holding out a bejewelled hand to be kissed by some passing admirer, or giving a silent order to one of his attendant servants," Dunbar wrote.

"The buying and selling of women for the trade both in Cairo and the provinces was entirely in el-Gharbi's hands", wrote Dunbar, citing Sir Thomas Russell, known as Russell Pasha, the British deputy chief of police for Cairo at the time.

In modern terms, most of the girls and women were trafficked for the sex trade, [wrote Francesca Biancani](#), an adjunct professor of history at the University of Bologna.

"Non-Moslem women and girls from backgrounds of poverty or disadvantage were imported from countries around the Mediterranean Sea, especially from North Africa, but also from Italy, Greece, Albania, France, and sometimes South Asia," wrote Dunbar.

Of the European women, Russell Pasha was brutal: "Most of the women were of the third-class category for whom Marseilles had no further use, and who eventually would be passed on to the Bombay and Far East markets ... but they were still European and not yet fallen so low as to live in the one-room shacks of the Wasa'a which had always been the quarter for purely native prostitution of the lowest class."

There was, of course, plenty of unregulated prostitution in Cairo in 1915. Much of this was concentrated in Wasa'a, also spelled Wozzer or Wazzir and other variations, which was also near the European quarter.

Here underground sex slavery thrived, medical checks were routinely faked and venereal diseases like syphilis and gonorrhoea teemed.



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Kiwi soldiers in Egypt during WWI get a break from training to be tourists at the pyramids.

This was widely known in Europe. In 1912, journalist Olive Malvery published [The White Slave Market](#), a book-length expose of sex trafficking in the British Empire and elsewhere.

It was in Wasa'a, on Good Friday, 1915, when Anzac troops rioted.

When they left the Antipodes, they thought they were bound for war on the Western Front. Instead, they disembarked in Egypt for what became the Gallipoli campaign.

They were lads from places like Masterton and Gawler. To them, Egypt was exotic. "Marched through the streets [of Cairo] with our mouths open this morning: everything [so new and funny](#)," wrote Australian cavalryman Howard Chambers.

Everything must have been alien: the Arabic language, Egyptian customs, food, religion. On days off, they toured the pyramids, the Sphinx and central Cairo, including the spectacle of Wasa'a.

By most accounts, the brothels and taverns there did a [roaring trade](#).

"The soldier finds it easy to live a prodigal life. He reasons ... that he may as well eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow he may be in the casualty list," wrote Fred Waite, who was wounded at Gallipoli and was later elected to the NZ Parliament.

Venereal diseases were a problem. It's unclear how many in Cairo's sex trade suffered. The average incidence of syphilis and gonorrhoea across the Anzacs was 12 per cent, or [one man in eight](#), according to the former editor of the Middle East Journal, Michael Collins Dunn.

About 60,000 Australian soldiers were treated for VD's during and after the war, Dunbar found.

The NZ Medical Corps suggested 16,000 Kiwi soldiers had contracted VD's. "Behind closed doors, higher figures were discussed," [reported Te Ara](#).

In any event, the cause of the riot in Wasa'a remains unclear. The most commonly cited cause is that the boys were furious about catching syphilis and gonorrhoea, and being tricked by pimps. There were rumours beer was being watered down or worse, "stretched with urine". Some soldiers may have been knifed in the district.

Good Friday was a day off from training and some of the soldiers started drinking early. There was some incident, which somehow escalated into a riot and Wasa'a was ransacked.

A [letter written by Australian private John Jensen](#) tells another story and it sheds light on Egyptian sex trafficking. An English woman had been taken to Egypt as a servant, then abandoned, Jensen wrote. Her circumstances forced her into a Wasa'a dance hall.

"A dozen or so women [were] dancing perfectly naked in a big hall and exposing their person to every kind of indignity," he wrote.

"It is just as well that I cannot tell you everything that goes on here as it would only grieve you."

Her brother, an English soldier stationed in Cairo, found her and she agreed to leave. But she was held captive by dance hall enforcers. Her brother was thrown out of a window and hospitalised for nearly a week.

Back in camp, he rounded up about 500 Anzacs and some Tommies and headed to Wasa'a, according to Jensen. Many of these soldiers were already drunk and they were joined by others already drinking in the district. They found the sister in a "particularly vile house" and trashed it.

"They got the girl out first and then set fire to the houses," Jensen wrote.

This version seems noble. But having rescued the sister, they didn't stop. They kept ransacking.

At its height, 2500 Anzacs were said to be involved. Witnesses remember a piano being thrown from a window. It "fell with an awful crash on the pavement," recalled Jensen. "All the strings seemed to break at once and it went off like a cannon."

"Women and all went out the window," recalled Tasmanian digger [Archie Barwick](#).

"The military police had to resort to firing on the crowds with the result that several soldiers were seriously wounded, [remembered Sergeant Godfrey Hammond](#), who grew up near Nelson and later farmed the King Country. "I happened to be in town with Charlie Stewart and Percy Best at a picture when two bullets came crashing through the walls, one just missing me by a few inches."

It was never discovered who was responsible for the riot, according to an article on [ww100.govt.nz](#), an official commemoration website. "The New Zealanders and Australians blamed each other, and neither party co-operated with the military court of enquiry."

In any event, senior officers had other priorities. Three weeks later, the Anzacs landed at Gallipoli.