

The 1956 Suez Crisis

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Impact on the British empire

British soldiers march into Port Said, Egypt, in 1956

How significant was the Suez Crisis in the decline of the British empire?

Exam links



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2 016 marked the sixtieth anniversary of the infamous Suez Canal Crisis of 1956. A failed invasion of Egypt, the crisis is widely regarded as an important moment in postwar British history, which helped bring to an end the era of Britain as a global empire and superpower. This article examines why Suez happened and its lasting significance in Britain. The article also discusses some of the crisis's international dimensions.

The Suez Canal

The Suez Canal opened in 1869 after a decade of construction financed by the French and Egyptian governments. As it connected the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea, the canal immediately reduced the distance required to travel the globe, particularly between Europe and Asia. This development made world commerce easier, and helped European empires such as Britain and France to acquire new colonies and govern them more effectively.

The canal soon fell under the control of Britain, which became the *de facto* ruler of Egypt after invading and occupying the country in the Anglo-Egyptian War of 1882. British troops subsequently occupied Egypt for several decades, and British influence and interference continued until the 1952 revolution. The vital strategic importance of the canal would later be proven in a series of international conflicts, including the First World War and the Second World War in the twentieth century.

Britain's hold over Egypt became increasingly strained after the end of the Second World War in 1945. Britain aspired to strengthen its influence in

the Middle East, and the Suez Canal was essential to this objective. However, anti-British sentiment also grew rapidly in Egypt during the initial postwar years, as the country experienced economic problems and many Egyptians grew weary of European control over their affairs. These tensions culminated in a military coup in 1952, which overthrew the monarchy and established an independent Republic of Egypt.

Nasser's Egypt

A pivotal figure in the new Egyptian regime was Gamal Abdel Nasser, a junior military officer who led from behind the scenes before assuming the presidency himself in 1956. A staunch advocate of Egyptian nationalism and pan-Arab unity, Nasser aspired for Egypt to become the regional leader of the Arab world. This put him at odds with Britain and France, the two established colonial powers in the region, as well as their ally the USA.

Increasingly agitated by Nasser's rhetoric and actions, the USA and Britain withdrew funding for construction of the Aswan Dam in July 1956. The dam was a major development project, seen as pivotal to Egypt's plans for industrialisation. Nasser responded by ordering the immediate seizure and nationalisation of the Suez Canal, while also publicly denouncing British imperialism in the region. The nationalisation of the canal was extremely popular in Egypt and throughout the Middle East, firmly establishing Nasser as a pre-eminent Arab leader and international symbol for anti-colonial resistance. He remained president until his death in 1970.

Military intervention

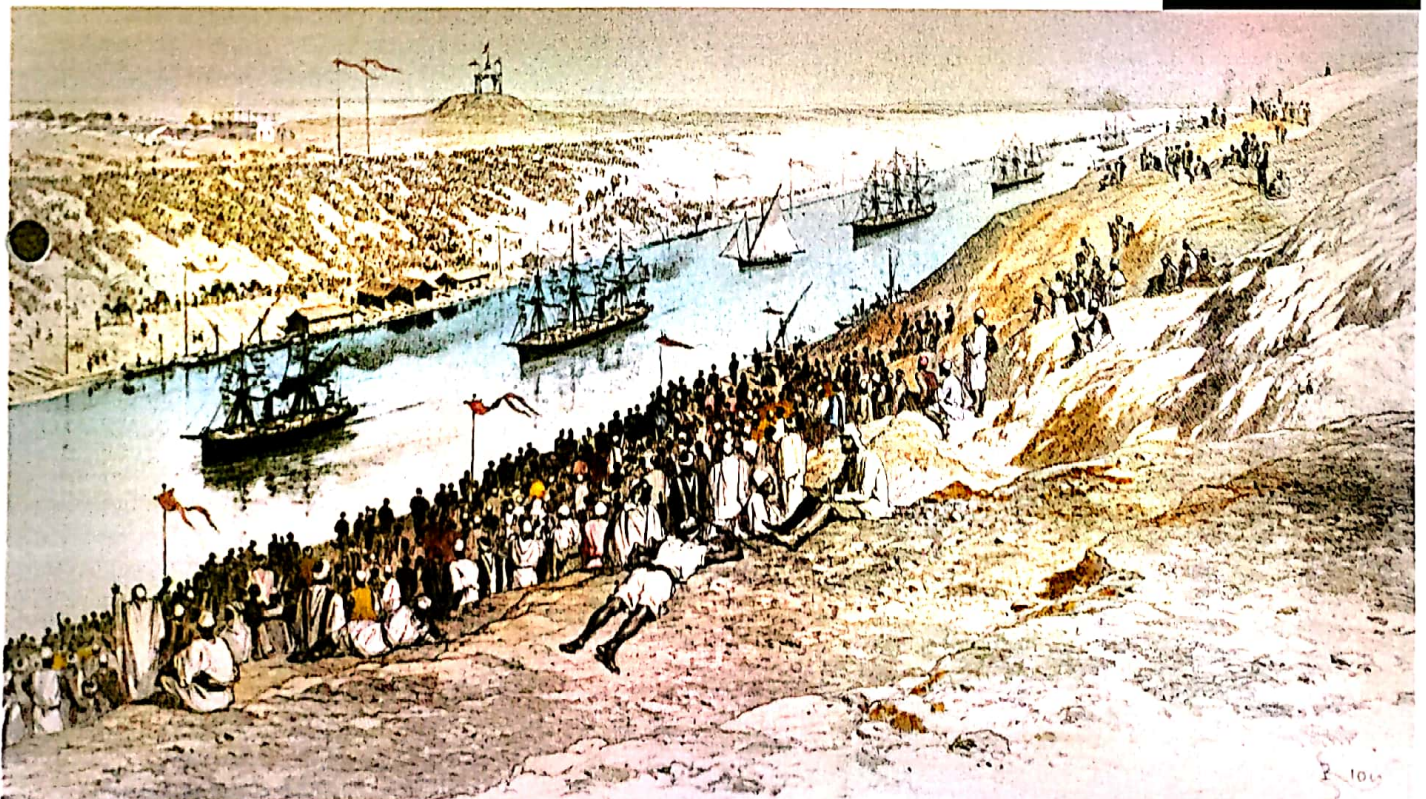
While the seizure of the canal was celebrated across the Arab world, it was met with shock and anger in Britain. Nasser was already widely disliked in Britain for his nationalist policies, with Conservative prime minister Anthony Eden in particular holding an obsessional hatred for him. The loss of the Suez Canal whipped up these sentiments and heaped huge pressure on Eden to respond.

Eden's government soon decided on a military intervention in Egypt, to be undertaken before the end of 1956. The operation was planned jointly with the French government, who resented Nasser for his growing influence on their North African colonies. Israel would later join the two colonial powers, sensing an opportunity to weaken what it saw as a dangerous and hostile state in the Middle East.

After months of planning, the intervention was executed in late October 1956. The three parties agreed that Israel would spark the fuse by invading the Sinai Peninsula in northeastern Egypt. Britain and France would respond by intervening in the region, under the pretext of separating the warring Israeli and Egyptian forces. The two European powers would then claim that Egypt's control of the Suez Canal was too fragile to continue, and it should be placed under permanent Anglo-French management for the good of the world economy.

The real objectives of the intervention were clear: to seize back ownership of the canal, weaken Egyptian and pan-Arab nationalism, and depose the troublesome Nasser in the process. The intervention

The Suez Canal was opened in November, 1869



Questions

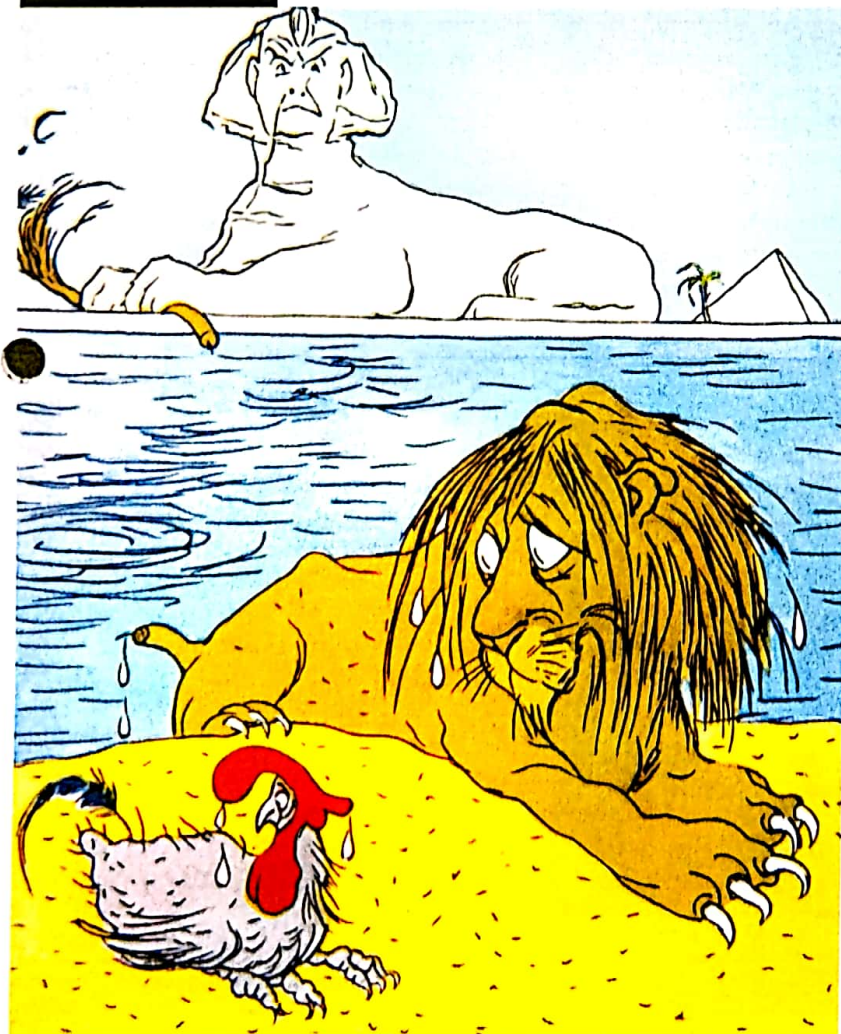
- How did the Suez Crisis impact on Britain's role as an imperial power?
- How significant is the Suez Crisis in the early history of the Cold War?
- Why did the USA refuse to support Britain and France in the Suez Crisis?

was planned and executed with precision, as Britain and its allies quickly seized control of Suez, Gaza and parts of the Sinai with minimal losses.

Britain's failure

The operation was a success in military terms. It was, however, a disaster politically. World opinion roundly condemned the three nations for their aggression and lack of respect for Egyptian sovereignty. Fury and outrage erupted across the Islamic world at Britain's perceived neo-colonial behaviour. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev even threatened to launch nuclear missiles against Western Europe in retaliation, a move that increased the prestige and influence of the Soviet Union in the Middle East.

France and Britain depicted as humiliated creatures in this Russian cartoon of 1956



Chronology

- 23 July 1952** Military coup in Egypt
- 23 June 1956** Nasser elected president of Egypt
- 19 July 1956** USA and Britain withdraw financial aid for Aswan Dam
- 26 July 1956** Nasser announces plan to nationalise Suez Canal
- 1 August 1956** USA, Britain and France hold talks about the Suez Canal
- 29 October 1956** Israeli forces invade Sinai Peninsula
- 30 October 1956** Anglo-French ultimatum issued to Egypt and Israel asking that both withdraw 10 miles from the canal zone, which Egypt rejects
- 31 October 1956** Anglo-French forces attack Egypt in the canal zone
- 6 November 1956** Ceasefire forced by US pressure
- 8 November 1956** Hostilities end
- 10 January 1957** Anthony Eden resigns as prime minister, succeeded by Harold Macmillan

Crucially, the USA was staunchly opposed. The USA's central objective in the Middle East at this time was to combat Soviet influence by maintaining good relations with the Arab nations, which would be gravely undermined by supporting Britain, France and Israel. President Eisenhower threatened significant financial sanctions and exerted diplomatic pressure through the UN, to force all three invading nations to withdraw.

Reduced to an international pariah and threatened with severe American economic sanctions, Britain had no choice but to disengage and pull out of Egypt (with France and Israel following closely behind). The British government had failed emphatically to achieve its objectives, as instead of deposing Nasser and taking back the canal they actually helped consolidate his position and permanently lost control of Suez.

Eden resigned shortly afterwards, replaced by Harold Macmillan. In the immediate years that followed, the British empire rapidly disintegrated and decolonised, especially in Africa. The failed intervention stimulated widespread public debate and hand-wringing throughout the nation, embedding 'Suez' into the national consciousness as a traumatic moment in which Britain's influence on the world stage had been dramatically curtailed. Six decades later, the Suez Crisis still conjures up powerful images of national decline, ministerial incompetence and global humiliation.

How significant was Suez?

The importance of the Suez Crisis is often taken for granted by journalists and commentators. But how much was Suez truly a watershed moment in postwar

Further reading



For primary sources and documents relating to the Suez Crisis, see the US Office of the Historian website: www.tinyurl.com/y9rdtfe4.

Hall, S. (2016) *1956: The World in Revolt*, Faber & Faber.

Lucas, W.S. (1996) *Divided We Stand: Britain, the United States and the Suez Crisis*, Sceptre.

Milner, L. (2011) 'The Suez Crisis', BBC History. Available at: www.tinyurl.com/4yp5xle.

Whittle, M. (2016) 'Suez Crisis was when Britain gave in to US cultural dominance', *The Conversation*. Available at: www.tinyurl.com/y7abmk6j.



Satire of British defeat: Nasser reclines as Eden's head is served to him on a plate

British history? While the significance of the crisis was once accepted as conventional wisdom, in recent years historians have promoted more sophisticated and nuanced perspectives. The general consensus among historians now is that Suez did not immediately trigger the wave of decolonisation that brought an end to the British empire in the 1960s, nor did it cause a sudden and drastic decline in Britain's global influence.

Both of these trends had actually started long before 1956, and would have unfolded with or without the spark of Suez. Britain had been severely weakened economically by the Second World War, relying heavily on American loans in the decade that followed. With domestic economic pressures mounting throughout the 1950s, it was inevitable that both the size of the armed forces and the scale of overseas commitments would be drastically scaled down in the 1960s.

Furthermore, the failure in Suez did not mark an immediate collapse of British imperial power and prestige. The UK gradually disengaged from the Middle East after 1956 (handing over many commitments to the USA), but continued to staunchly defend her oil interests in the region. This included the employment of armed troops, SAS squadrons and RAF aircraft to help put down a rebellion against the Sultan of Oman in 1957.

From these broader historical perspectives, the impact and significance of the Suez Crisis appears to have been overstated. As Selwyn Lloyd (Eden's foreign secretary in 1956) later acknowledged, 'Suez became an excuse. It was the scapegoat for what was happening to Britain in the world, and for all that flowed from the loss of power and economic weakness.'

Suez and national decline

Two major historical trends reshaped how the world looked and interacted during the 1950s, and both of these trends met head on in Suez. The first was the decline of the major colonial powers of the previous century, especially Britain and France. The second

was the increasing importance of the Cold War in world affairs, which positioned the USA and the Soviet Union at the centre of the international agenda.

The intervention to seize back the canal was therefore a failed attempt to reassert European strength and colonial power at a time when the world was undergoing fundamental change, shifting to a new world order constituted of independent post-imperial states and organised around the poles of the competing Cold War superpowers.

For many observers, the Suez fiasco appeared to herald a harsh new world of British decline, in which the nation's purpose was no longer clear after the end of empire. In the years and decades that followed, successive British governments would attempt to find this purpose, through such avenues as integrating further with Europe or consolidating a 'special relationship' with the USA.

While the significance of the Suez Crisis in causing the end of the British empire may have been overstated, it was still an important and illuminating moment which continues to be remembered six decades later.

Andrew Jones is an assistant professor in global sustainable development at The University of Warwick. He has published and taught on various aspects of modern British and international history.