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TOPIC: THE SUEZ CANAL CRISIS

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Introduction

The Suez Crisis marks a crucial moment in history where massive tensions rapidly escalated the already-precarious Cold War, where powers were cautious and attentive of the line between engagement and direct conflict, as powers grapple with the consequences of a post-atomic world. It also marks the definitive turning point of American and Soviet domination in lieu of the colonial era.

Set in Egypt, 1956, the crisis unfolding in the Middle East involved regional players: Egypt, Palestine, Israel, and international players: U.K., U.S.S.R, France, and to a certain extent, the U.S. Major themes and movements can be explored throughout this event, including the fading colonial powers, anti-imperialism, Zionism, Arabism, and the ongoing battle between communism and democracy.

Key Terms

Nationalise

- An action whereby the state seizes ownership of a private asset

Colonialism

- Whereby powers (typically European) exert political control over foreign territories. Often gained through war and conquest, resulting colonies served the colonizers as markets for their goods, and exporters for raw materials

The Ottoman Empire

- A former republic which had ruled over the Middle East. Defeated in 1918 after WWI, the areas were hastily split and shared by the British and French

Background Information and Key Areas to Consider

Significance of the Location

- The Suez Canal serves as a crucial mode of transport for the Middle East, Europe, and Asia. A project conceived and executed by U.K. and France, the man-made canal's strategic location meant waterborne cargo ships were no longer forced into sailing around Africa to reach Asia. The former regions of the Ottoman Empire, Europe and Asia would be able to be more accessible, opening up various opportunities for trade.
- As such a pivotal trade route, when U.K., US and France decided to reject funding for the Aswan Dam on the basis of Egypt's friendly relations with communist states, Egypt's largest piece of leverage fell onto the canal. Formerly owned by the Suez Canal Company, funded by the British and French, Egypt nationalised the canal, effectively enraging the former colonial powers.

Post-War Nationalism

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Post-War Nationalism

- The end of World War I and II caused an increased awareness for freedom and democracy, as the Western powers had toted their victory an occurrence celebrating liberty. As such, there were numerous calls for the former colonial powers to give up their territory. This comes from the colonizers, as their ability to extend influence had diminished amid overexertion and the prospect of rebuilding Europe. These calls also extended to former colonies, such as former Ottoman states. Movements to rid themselves of their colonial past resulted in the Anglo-Egyptian treaty. It demanded the total withdrawal of all British troops, except for in the defence of the Suez Canal. However, this agreement lasted until 1956, in which the need for British troops would be re-evaluated. (It is worth noting, that the day troops pulled out of the Canal, was when Nasser suddenly nationalised it)
- Within the Middle East, a rising movement against the colonial powers occurred, resulting in the Arab League, similar to NATO an organisation which included Egypt, Syria, Lebanon... Its main purpose was to coordinate the development of the region, yet as Israel was supplanted into their land via intervention from the colonial powers, the Arab League (which had a mutual defense treaty) were united in their anti-imperialist views. Amid this backdrop, in Egypt, elections resulted in President Nasser, who called for pan-Arab unity and nationalism.

Cold War and Its Role in the Aswan Dam

- Nasser had sought to exploit both sides of the Cold War, who were both keen on influencing the leader of the Arab league and leadership. As such, he strategically chose to remain neutral on all fronts, being anti-communist, anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist, but accepting loans and endorsements
- In the beginning, the West was friendly to seek out a potential ally. When Nasser asked the US for help to modernise the army against Israel, the terms set by them included use of military equipment only for defensive purposes, and that they be trained by the Americans. The Egyptians refused this and instead, turned to the USSR, who helped with fewer caveats.
- To rectify this turn of relations, the West began funding the Aswan Dam hoping it would lobby influence for them.
- This optimism quickly changed. While somewhat unclear, it is speculated that US leadership had become irritated at Nasser playing both sides of the war, and it's recognition over communist China. As a neutral country, recognising the PRC was (in their eyes) an act undoubtedly tainted with pro-communist views

Cold War and Its Role in the Suez Crisis

- Egypt had nationalised the Suez Canal, enraging the West, and the Straits of Tiran, enraging Israel. Shipping was blocked for all of the aforementioned states and regions.
- As such, France, Israel (whom had an arms-sale and alliance) and the U.K. to bring in their troops,
- Surprised by the conflict, and offended that the nations had not consulted them, the US condemned the conflict, as it destabilised the region, gave further fuel to anti-imperialist movements in the Middle East, and complicated the relations in the Middle East. They condemned the Anglo-French-Israeli alliance, threatened economic sanctions and the selling of British bonds (which were propping up the devastated market) and the United Nations forced the nations to halt their operations
- As such, **the three nations eventually pulled out of the region**

Significance of the Event

- The former colonial powers were humiliated, delegitimizing both France and the UK. In Margaret Thatcher's words, Britain's rulers "went from believing that Britain could do anything to an almost neurotic belief that Britain could do nothing". This was the similar case for France, as their former glory was diminished. This resulted in their submission of American dominance over Europe, and further thrust them as the world's superpower.
- It hastened decolonisation, as the crisis was hailed as one of neo-colonialism and of an issue of pride by the UK. For the first time, there was opposition within Parliament to the intervention in the Suez Canal

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- It emboldened the Israeli-Arab conflict, as the former nation had directly attacked Egypt, where Nasser had led the movement for unity

Guiding Questions

1. Was the Anglo-French-Israeli response to the nationalisation an overreaction?
2. Should the U.S. have interfered?
3. What should've been the Soviet Union's role in the conflict?
4. What actions should be taken to prevent further military conflict as a result of decolonisation?

Key Parties Involved

United Kingdom

- Prime Minister Anthony Eden had been bolstered by public indignation to respond to the nationalisation, but did not recognise (at the time) the severe political repercussions of a former colonial power invading a former colony. Reluctant to admit the fading of their colonial empire, many view the UK to have acted delusionally, as the UK had believed they had a genuine responsibility to protect their colony from the communists. He had also allegedly, falsely believed in US support for the act. However, it should be recognised that the UK did have legitimate interests in the Canal regarding trading, as they had owned the Suez Canal Company, a large source of income. The canal connected them to the bases in Asia. The move to nationalise the canal had also slighted and offended them, and felt that leaving it untouched would ruin their reputation.

France

- Embroiled in conflict over their Algerian colony, there was residual animosity against Nasser as he had supported the rebels. In addition to that, France had more colonies within the Middle East than the British, and therefore believed that, had Nasser nationalised the Canal against them, they would be losing credibility and their grip on power. They also operated the Suez Canal Company in conjunction with the British due to an agreement, and had an obligation to act in defense of their company and their loss of income.

Israel

- Israel was formed from resultant demand stemming from the Holocaust in WWII, resulting in a Zionist movement, where many Jews believed in the concept of statehood. They turned to Jerusalem, which they viewed as their homeland from ancient times. Therefore, when the Ottoman Empire was divided among the colonial powers, Israel was formed, and a mass wave of Jewish migration to Israel resulted in conflicts between the two groups. Egypt supported the Palestinians in their call for unity, and Nasser had increasingly anti-Israel speeches, along with recently nationalising the Straits of Tiran, vital for Israel's trade. Skirmishes among the Israeli borders also occurred. Given this, Israel had very little reason to not attack Egypt, especially when given support by both the UK and France. As such, they were the first nation to invade the Suez Canal area. UK and France would only join them later due to logistical issues.

Egypt

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- The Aswan Dam was a large priority for them, as as the US had pulled out of funding the project, he turned to nationalising the canal as a means to fund the project. However, they did not expect the aggressive response from the UK and France, and as a result, nationalising the canal was regarded to be a irrational act by Nasser, made in isolation without consulting generals or aides. Despite this, Egypt only stood to gain from this, as their reputation as leading the wave of Arab unity and anti-imperialism only grew. Moreover, the Suez Canal is Egyptian territory, and it would be humiliating to enable their former colonisers to capitalise on a profitable and vital location.

USSR

- They had previously broken their policy of aggression against neutral nations in favor of garnering support. With the Cold War in the background, the USSR supplied arms and weapons to Egypt, whom they saw as a potential ally. Moreover, the Western powers allied with the US were against their communist agenda. As such, they were aligned with Egypt in their fight against the Anglo-French-Israeli alliance, and had even threatened the use of nuclear weapons on the region. However, it should be noted that their ICBM capabilities were still very low, and that it eventually turned into a bluff.

US

- On a purely reputational scale, the US had felt slighted by the UK, as they had not asked them for support. Their applying of economic sanctions, selling of bonds, and condemnation could be to ensure that the former colonies would acknowledge American supremacy. On a policy scale, President Eisenhower had promised to maintain peace in light of developments. When the Soviets threatened nuclear attacks, it seemed petty for France and UK keep fighting for their reputation, under an illusion of colonial supremacy. Had they not intervened, a full-scale war could occur, sparking WWII.

Timeline

Date	Event
2nd April, 1982	Argentine forces rapidly overcame the British marines at Stanley, the capital of the Falkland Islands, resulting in British surrender by Governor Hunt.
5th April, 1982	The United Kingdom assembles a task force of more than 100 ships, which sets sail for Falkland Islands. Among those ships are aircraft carriers HMS Hermes and HMS Invincible. Lord Carrington, the Foreign Secretary, resigns over the invasion and is replaced by Francis Pym.
25th April, 1982	South Georgia is retaken by British forces.
2nd May, 1982	Argentine cruiser General Belgrano was sunk by British submarine HMS Conqueror, killing more than 320 Argentine sailors, leading to the single biggest loss of life in the war. Margaret Thatcher faced criticism over the sinking because the vessel was outside the 200-mile exclusion zone around the Falklands.
4th May, 1982	British destroyer HMS Sheffield was abandoned after being hit by a missile, killing 20 crew.
21st May, 1982	British landings begin at San Carlos. British frigate HMS Ardent was sunk by Argentine aircraft, killing 22 sailors. Fifteen Argentine aircraft were shot down.
28th to 29th May, 1982	Battle of Goose Green. 17 soldiers from British Second Battalion, Parachute Regiment were killed in two days of fierce fighting, which ended in Argentine surrender with dozens killed and more than 1,000 taken as prisoners of war.
8th	Over 50 British soldiers killed in attacks on landing craft RFA Sir Galahad and

1982	
8th June, 1982	Over 50 British soldiers killed in attacks on landing craft RFA Sir Galahad and RFA Sir Tristram.
11th to 12th June, 1982	British destroyer HMS Glamorgan badly damaged in a missile attack. Three Falkland civilians killed in British naval bombardment.
13th to 14th June, 1982	British forces take Argentine positions on mountains overlooking Port Stanley. General Mario Menendez surrenders to Major General Jeremy Moore as British forces march into Port Stanley.
17th June, 1982	Argentine President Leopoldo Galtieri resigns as leader of Argentina's military junta.

United Nations Involvement

The United Nations Security Council adopted Security Council Resolution 502 on the 4th April condemning the hostilities and demanding immediate Argentine withdrawal from the islands. Notably, Panama voted against the resolution whilst the Soviet Union, China, Poland and Spain abstained.

The United Nations Special Committee on Decolonisation was established to implement United Nations General Assembly Resolution 1514, which granted independence to colonial countries in 1960. The United States and Britain do not participate in this committee, although Argentina constantly lobbies the committee for assistance.

United Nations Resolution 2065 acknowledged that the Falkland Islands' sovereignty was a remnant of colonial days.

Possible Solutions

United Nations mediated negotiation between Argentina and the United Kingdom:

- Discussion of ceasefire arrangements, military withdrawals, humanitarian concerns, lay groundwork for a future peace treaty

Sanctions:

- Implementing political or economic sanctions to punish responsible parties or to use sanctions in order to deter further escalation of conflict, for example by preventing other countries from involvement

Deployment of humanitarian aid:

- Minimize harm done to civilians through provision of housing, food, medicine and other essentials

Deployment of peacekeepers:

- As a last resort, delegates can vote to deploy United Nations Peacekeeping Forces to the Falkland Islands in order to protect civilians and deter further military actions

Further research suggestions

<https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/israel-invades-egypt-suez-crisis-begins>

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