1956: Suez and the end of empire

In the decade after the second world war, as Britain struggled to square its diminishing empire with belt-tightening measures at home, it found time to get involved in a war in Egypt. Derek Brown writes about the end of the postwar political consensus.

Introduction

The Suez crisis is often portrayed as Britain's last fling of the imperial dice. In 1956, the globe was indeed still circled by British possessions and dependencies, from the Caribbean in the west to Singapore, Malaya and Hong Kong in the east. Much of the African map was still imperial pink.

In reality, though, the sun had long since begun to sink over the British empire. The greatest possession of them all, the Indian subcontinent, had taken its freedom. Nationalist movements were flourishing in most of the rest, patronised by Soviet Russia and encouraged by the United States in its self-appointed role as leader of the free world. Britain itself was only beginning to emerge from postwar austerity, its public finances crushed by an accumulation of war debt.

Still, there were powerful figures in the "establishment" - a phrase coined in the early 1950s - who could not accept that Britain was no longer a first-rate power. Their case, in the context of the times, was persuasive: we had nuclear arms, a permanent seat on the UN security council, and military forces in both hemispheres. We remained a trading nation, with a vital interest in the global free passage of goods.

But there was another, darker, motive for intervention in Egypt: the sense of moral and military superiority which had accreted in the centuries of imperial expansion. Though it may now seem quaint and self-serving, there was a widespread and genuine feeling that Britain
had responsibilities in its diminishing empire, to protect its peoples from communism and other forms of demagoguery.

Much more potently, there was ingrained racism. When the revolutionaries in Cairo dared to suggest that they would take charge of the Suez canal, the naked prejudice of the imperial era bubbled to the surface. The Egyptians, after all, were among the original targets of the epithet, "westernised (or wily) oriental gentlemen. They were the Wogs.

**Background**

King Farouk, the ruler of Egypt, was forced into exile in mid-1952. A year later, a group of army officers formally took over the government which they already controlled. The titular head of the junta was General Mohammed Neguib. The real power behind the new throne was an ambitious and visionary young colonel who dreamed of reasserting the dignity and freedom of the Arab nation, with Egypt at the heart of the renaissance. His name was Gamal Abdel Nasser. Nasser’s first target was the continued British military presence in the Suez canal zone. A source of bitter resentment among many Egyptians, that presence was a symbol of British imperial dominance since the 1880s. In 1954, having established himself as uncontested leader of Egypt, Nasser negotiated a new treaty, under which British forces would leave within 20 months.

At first, the largely peaceful transition of power in Egypt was little noticed in a world beset by turmoil and revolution. The cold war was at its height. Communism was entrenched throughout eastern Europe; the French were being chased out of Indo-China and were engaged in a vicious civil war in Algeria; the infant state of Israel had fought off the combined might of six Arab armies, and Britain was trying to hold down insurgents in Cyprus, Kenya and Malaya.

British politics, too, was in a state of flux, with a new generation of leaders emerging to preside over belated postwar prosperity. But when Winston Churchill resigned as prime minister in 1955, at the age of 80, he was succeeded by the last of the old guard: Anthony Eden.

After a lifetime at the cutting edge of British statesmanship, Eden was a curiously inadequate man. He had the vanity that often accompanies good looks, and the querulous temper that goes with innate weakness. He had been foreign secretary throughout the war
and again, under the old imperialist Churchill, from 1951 to 55. For all his experience, he never absorbed the simple postwar truth: that the world had changed forever.

In July 1956, the last British soldiers pulled out of the canal zone. On July 26, Nasser abruptly announced the nationalisation of the Suez Canal Company. Eden was scandalised and, riding a wave of popular indignation, prepared a grotesquely disproportionate response: full scale invasion.

**Military operations**

Nasser's nationalisation of the canal was followed by intensive diplomatic activity, ostensibly aimed at establishing some kind of international control of the strategically vital waterway. It turned out to be a smokescreen for military preparations.

In September, Nasser made a defiant speech rejecting the idea of international supervision of an Egyptian national asset. By then, the die was cast. British and French troops, spearheaded by airborne forces, invaded the canal zone on October 31. Their governments told an outraged world that they had to invade, to separate Egyptian and Israeli forces, and thus protect the freedom of navigation on the canal. The reality was that the British and French, in top secret negotiations with Israel had forged an agreement for joint military operations. Israel, in fact, had the most legitimate grievance of the three invaders, for since the establishment of the Jewish state in 1948, Egypt had denied passage through the canal to any Israeli-flagged or Israel-bound ships. Israeli forces swept into the Sinai desert on September 29, two days before the Anglo-French invasion, and raced towards the canal. (One column was headed by a young brigade commander who would go on to become prime minister: Ariel Sharon). In less than seven days, the entire Sinai peninsula was in Israeli hands.

The Anglo-French invasion was a good deal more ignominious. Just eight days after the first airborne lands, the operation was halted under a ceasefire ostensibly ordered by the United Nations, but in fact dictated by the Americans. The Egyptian air force had been destroyed and its army mauled - though it put up spirited resistance both in the canal zone and in Sinai. There is little doubt that the invading allies, who had overwhelming military advantage, could have
gone on to take undisputed control of the canal zone - albeit at a cruel cost.

The greatest irony of the operation was that it was totally counterproductive. Far from bolstering Anglo-French interests, it had badly undermined the political and military prestige of both countries. And far from ensuring international freedom of seaborne passage, it had done just the opposite: under Nasser's orders, 47 ships were scuttled in the waterway. The Suez canal was totally blocked.

**The diplomatic crisis**

Though Eden scarcely seemed to appreciate it, Britain was simply no longer capable of mounting a solo imperial adventure. In the Suez operation, British soldiers fought alongside French ones. More importantly, both fading European powers were allied with the youngest but already most potent force in the Middle East: Israel.

But it wasn't Britain's military allies which mattered in the final analysis; it was her political foes. They most obviously included the Soviet Union and its allies, who were given a glorious opportunity to attack western imperialism (and deflect world attention from their own brutality in crushing the simultaneous Hungarian uprising).

Much more telling than Soviet condemnation was the disapproval of the Eisenhower administration in the USA. Washington was appalled by the Anglo-French-Israeli invasion of the canal zone and the Sinai. The action threatened to destabilise the strategically vital region, and strengthen Soviet links with liberation movements around the world. It raised global tensions in an age dominated by the nuclear arms race and recurring superpower crises. More viscerally, it was viewed with distaste as a nakedly imperial exercise in a post-imperial age.

Eden, a master of self-delusion, thought he had received a nod and wink of approval for the invasion from John Foster Dulles, the US secretary of state. He should have checked with Dwight D Eisenhower, who was enraged by the action. He forced through the UN resolution imposing a ceasefire, and made it clear that in this matter at any rate, Britain would have no 'special relationship' with the USA.

The final straw for Eden came when the Treasury told the government that sterling, under sustained attack over the crisis,
needed urgent US support to the tune of a billion dollars. 'Ike' had a crisp reply: no ceasefire, no loan. The invaders were ordered to halt, and await the arrival of a UN intervention force.

**The political crisis**

The Suez crisis provoked a mighty, if predictable, wave of jingoistic fervour in the rightwing British press. There was a tide of genuine public support for "our boys" and a widespread mood of hostility towards Nasser. But at the same time - and arguably for the first time - there was a countervailing popular wave of revulsion against imperialist aggression. Hugh Gaitskell, not exactly the most radical of Labour party leaders, railed passionately against the war. So did Liberals and leftwing groups. Their stand was not hugely popular - the circulation of the Manchester Guardian, which fiercely opposed the war, fell markedly during the crisis - but the anti-war movement was a dramatic, even traumatic, shock for the nation.

What fatally undermined the Conservative government, however, was the dissent in its own ranks. Less than 50 years ago, there were plenty of Tories who still believed in the virtues of empire. But there was also a new generation which recognised the damage being done to Britain's real interests in the new world, and which was outraged by Eden's blinkered approach. Two junior ministers, Edward Boyle and Anthony Nutting, resigned from the government in protest against Suez. Among those who stayed on, but who expressed deep reservations about the Suez enterprise, was RA 'Rab' Butler, the man widely seen as Eden's heir apparent.

Eden himself was shattered by Suez, politically, physically and emotionally. On November 19, just three days before the last of the British invaders finally left the canal zone, he abruptly took himself off to Jamaica to recover, leaving behind Rab Butler in charge of the cabinet. On January 9, 1957, Eden resigned. The Conservative mandarins who controlled the leadership promptly took their revenge on Butler, seen as the leading liberal in the party, by elevating the more rightwing Harold Macmillan to Downing Street.

**Conclusion**

It may now seem astonishing to those who were not alive during the Suez crisis that Britain was prepared to take part in such an imperial adventure so recently. Even to those who clearly remember it - including this writer - it seems an anachronism; an atavistic throwback.
In 1956, after all, Elvis Presley was already a star, Disneyland had been opened in California, and British theatre was in the throes of the 'kitchen sink' revolution. And yet, though it took place well within living memory, Suez was also a link with a not-so-distant past in which imperialism was a matter of pride rather than a term of abuse. Indeed, it marked definitively the transition between those two things.

British soldiers would go on fighting in various corners of the shrinking empire - east Africa, Aden, Malaya, Borneo and the Falklands - for another 25 years or so. The difference, after Suez, is that they fought largely to defend local regimes and systems, rather than to impose the will of London.

The years immediately following Suez saw a slew of new countries on the world stage which had formerly been colonies and dependencies. There is little doubt that the end of the imperial era was greatly accelerated by the squalid little war in Egypt.