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## The Chosen One?: Reflections on Mid-Century Egyptian Nationalism, Gamal Abdel Nasser's Charismatic Leadership, and the Suez Crisis of 1956

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## THE CHOSEN ONE ?

Reflections on Mid-Century Egyptian Nationalism, Gamal Abdel Nasser's  
Charismatic Leadership, and the Suez Crisis of 1956

ooo

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Honors Thesis  
2022

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## PREFACE

### The Temporally Selfish Appeal of History

#### *Where We Stand*

This study is primarily conducted in service of the author and his time's own self-interest. Coming of age during the Trump presidency, the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, widespread American political and social strife, climate change, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this author is confronted almost daily with hundreds or thousands of examples of humanity's disastrous spiral towards our seemingly inevitable demise. Our most sacred institutions are under attack by those we ourselves elected to power; those closest to us are struck down by an invisible enemy; our society is drifting further and further apart from one another; our world is becoming inhospitable for many; war, contrary to the proclamations of some scholars, stubbornly persists.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Pinker. *The Better Angels of our Nature: Why Violence has Declined*. (New York: Viking Books, 2011); John Lewis Gaddis. "The Long Peace: Elements of Stability in the Postwar International System." *International Security* 10, no. 4 (1986): 99–142. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538951>.

The path forward is strewn about with hazards, roadblocks, and existential threats. The world of today, once full of promise and optimism, appears to grow ever darker.

Yet, we have walked this path before. The history of humanity is one of rugged survival against all odds. We have survived since time immemorial, our progeny carrying on our legacy far further into the future than one could reasonably expect. Humanity has proven particularly resilient to all manner of threats, from political and social instability to pandemics and natural disasters to dangerous new technologies and their implications for society. Our internal, life-giving fire, mythically bestowed to us by the Greek Titan Prometheus, has thus far proven inextinguishable.

For this we especially owe thanks to a great many members of humanity who seek to defy the odds, usher in radical, sometimes necessary change, and foster advancements in society. In ancient times they often took the role of king, Caesar, pope, or philosopher. In our time they are called moguls, activists, or Presidents. Fundamentally, all serve the same purpose: to better humankind through change; they are leaders. Change may take different forms—returning to conservative visions of a past that never existed, or moving towards progressive futures that, while they might yet come to fruition, are equally temporally distant—but remains one of most apparent shared qualities among historical examples of strong leadership. Strong leaders, in other words, possess a strong vision, in some capacity, for the societies to which they belong.

### *Leaders as Signifiers*

We presently observe strong leadership day by day, viewing Russia's invasion of Ukraine nearly first-hand through the miracles of twenty-first century social media. Specifically, many of us have likely come to know the Ukrainian president, Vladimir Zelensky, quite intimately—insofar as one can know any person halfway across the world whom they have never met. Zelensky's

world is tangibly darker than ours, and his task herculean. Journalist Sim Shuster writes that, “Zelensky understands his core responsibility... not as a military strategist empowered to move battalions around a map, but as a communicator, a living symbol of the state, whose ability to grab and hold the world’s attention will help determine whether his nation lives or dies.”<sup>2</sup> World opinion, to Zelensky, is what will win his war, more than any variety of armaments. While the population of Ukraine as a whole struggles in the face of Russian aggression, Zelensky has become the face of an entire people. We link the life of a single man to the fate of an entire society. In that sense, Zelensky represents *all* Ukrainians at this moment, certainly on the world stage. His vision for Ukraine is one of survival and prosperity, of a nation’s security upheld and its people safe and healthy. His tools, social and mass media, provide him the means by which he can most effectively realize that vision.

Zelensky is but one modern example of such a leader rising to the fore during times of pronounced crisis. During the Cold War of the mid- to late-twentieth century, similarly prominent leaders of smaller nations sought to affirm or attain power. Their tools were numerous, using force, strategic alignment with one of the major power blocs, or even Zelensky-esque, media narrative-focused tactics. Their leadership forged nations, guaranteed domestic sovereignty, and fought against the historical forces of old—namely imperialism and colonialism.

This study was at its outset concerned with the role of three individuals in the construction of national identity during revolutionary, Cold War-era decolonial struggles. It sought to examine and compare Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam, Fidel Castro in Cuba, and Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt to better understand the sort of leadership and nation-building undertaken by charismatic-type

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<sup>2</sup> Shuster, Simon Shuster. “Inside Zelensky’s World.” *Time*, April 28, 2022.

[https://time.com/6171277/volodymyr-zelensky-interview-ukraine-war/?utm\\_source=pocket-newtab](https://time.com/6171277/volodymyr-zelensky-interview-ukraine-war/?utm_source=pocket-newtab)

leaders, drawing lessons from their successes and failures. Such a topic, as the study progressed, proved too ambitious for the defined scale of the project. The author instead focused the study on Gamal Abdel Nasser and Egypt, a choice that reflected the parallel between Nasser's frequent employment and manipulation of mass media and Zelensky's contemporary strategy. The crisis of choice proved to be Nasser's finest moment, his 1956 resounding geopolitical, diplomatic, and legal victory over the nationalization of the Suez Canal.

Nasser's triumph at Suez presented more than a compelling case for the power of mass media and world opinion, additionally embodying the dichotomous relationships between the individual versus society and historical agency versus historical inertia. The study of *Nasserism* (including pan-Arab nationalism), his regime, and his leadership throughout the Suez Crisis hopes to offer the reader, and the author, insights on how and why radical change progresses through history. While Nasser remains a morally ambiguous character—exceedingly authoritarian in method (and antisemitic in mentality) yet populist, optimist, and even generous (to some) in ideology and policy—there is much one can learn through observing him in a time of great upheaval.

The nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956 does not directly parallel the issues our modern society faces; examining legal debates over the Suez Convention of 1888 will not directly enable us to offset our carbon emissions, reinvigorate our democratic processes, nor bring Zelensky victory. However, a detailed study of the Suez Crisis and the man who instigated it grants us tools and frameworks to use in our own trials and tribulations. For humankind has not changed biologically since long before the advent of civilization; in other words, Nasser shares very nearly everything in common with any and every one of us, genetically and neurologically speaking. Our thought processes and analysis could therefore be identical. Someone who reads this study (or

wrote it) could one day be in a similar position as Nasser, confronted with navigating a complex legal, geopolitical, and/or ideological conflict with a nearly unmanageable number of variables.

Yet Nasser succeeded in asserting Egyptian will while avoiding large-scale conflict and preserving international stability. The origins of his triumph run deep into the past, yet are uniquely brought about by the culmination of various twentieth-century world historical processes and the personal actions of a handful of influential individuals. The Suez Crisis' study, both historical and historiographical, offers compelling insights into the perception of one of history's more captivating examples of personal agency, and reflections on the degree to which one can influence the course of human events.



## INTRODUCTION

### The Evolution of Sentiments, Nasser, and Suez

*November 5th, 1956*

In November 1956, Gamal Abdel Nasser, President of Egypt, found himself assaulted from all sides. Earlier that year he nationalized the Suez Canal, a bold geopolitical gamble seeking to ameliorate Egyptian regional prestige, strike a blow against European imperialism, and secure a vital economic asset for the developing Egyptian nation. At the present moment, however, Nasser's ambition had been undone by his apparent hubris. As one might predict, the British and French shareholders of the Canal Company did not sit idly by and allow the upstart Egyptian populist to assert his will on two great European powers. After a lengthy period of negotiation, legal debate in the United Nations, and a vicious propaganda war on both sides, the Anglo-French alliance secretly convinced Israel to reignite still-smoldering tensions and invade Egypt.<sup>3</sup> Under

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<sup>3</sup> David Carlton. *Britain and the Suez Crisis*. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 161

the false pretext of an international police action, seeking to separate the belligerents and secure safe operation of the Canal, an Anglo-French force invaded Suez, reestablishing control of the Canal via Port Said.<sup>4</sup> Nasser was shaken by these developments and the increasingly likely prospects of an Anglo-French invasion of Cairo and Alexandria.<sup>5</sup> His regime, which had only solidified power in 1954, now appeared as if it would collapse almost as quickly as it had risen.

Perhaps the predicament recalled to Nasser a particular quote of his, published in his 1954 manifesto *Egypt's Liberation: The Philosophy of the Revolution*. Regarding the role of his modern Egypt in the grand scheme of Egyptian history, Nasser wrote, "these thoughts are an effort to explore within ourselves – to discover who we are and what our role is to be in the succeeding stages of Egyptian history... These thoughts seek to discover the pattern of our national environment and to make clear that we do not exist as an isolated island surrounded by troubled waters."<sup>6</sup> Nasser, then, looked towards the past for inspiration and guidance in the present.

Examining ancient philosophy, ancient history, and early modern history, as did Nasser, one might spot similarities between the Egyptian President's struggle at Suez and other examples of historical leadership. These resemblances across time and space not only place Nasser's actions in a wider historical context of leadership through conflict, but illustrate, to an extent, his historical exceptionalism in comparison to other monumental leaders. The proceeding thoughts, then, are an attempt to resolve Nasser's queries: an effort to discover who *Nasser* was, and what his role was in the succeeding stages of both Egyptian History *and* the interconnected histories of nationalism and charismatic leadership. The Suez Crisis, an essential point of differentiation, will serve as the focus of this inquiry.

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<sup>4</sup> Carlton. *Britain & the Suez Crisis*, 162.

<sup>5</sup> Carlton. *Britain & the Suez Crisis*, 161-162.

<sup>6</sup> Gamal Abdel Nasser. *Egypt's Liberation: Philosophy of the Revolution*. (Washington DC, Public Affairs Press, 1954), 11.

*We've Been Here Before*

“The one is made up of all things, and all things issue from the one,” said the ancient Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, of the dichotomous nature of life.<sup>7</sup> The many and the one, one of these dichotomies, were to Heraclitus one in the same. The many composed the one, and the one in turn informed and dictated the many. In describing what he believed to be one of nature’s fundamental laws, Heraclitus intuited a prescient and universal aspect not only of the natural world, but of the manmade world as well. Throughout time, so-called “great” individuals have drastically altered the axis of human progress, forever changing the course of history. These leaders, in turn, were forged by their circumstances, including by those who chose them to lead, uniquely enabling them to leave their mark on history. Some succeeded, implementing their ambitious visions for the future of humanity and observing the great reverberations. Others, conversely, saw their visions fade into nothingness, lost (in many cases, quite famously or infamously) to history. What determined some leaders’ success and others’ failure? Two particular examples of grand strategic failure by monumental leaders tend to reverberate across time, and are essential to understanding the fundamentals of leading.

In 480 B.C.E. the ancient Persian king Xerxes I, the “King of Kings,” crossed the Hellespont River from Anatolia into Macedonia and Greece with an army of (allegedly) over one and a half million men, intending to finally conquer the Greek city-states who had for decades resisted Persian domination.<sup>8</sup> Militarily Xerxes I proved successful, famously defeating the three

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<sup>7</sup> “An Examination of Dialectic.” CalPolyPomona.edu, <https://www.cpp.edu/~zding/teaching/318-2/Dialectic.htm>

<sup>8</sup> John Lewis Gaddis. *On Grand Strategy*. (United States of America: Penguin Books, 2018), 1.

hundred Spartans at Thermopylae and sacking Athens.<sup>9</sup> Yet the victory rang hollow: the Greeks had already evacuated Athens; Greece as a whole did not surrender; poor weather threatened to wreck the Persian fleet. Xerxes' massive army was now stranded in hostile territory with rumors swirling of the Greek fleet targeting their only way home: the pontoon bridges that spanned the Hellespont. Xerxes chose to flee before such an event, leaving his soldiers stranded, leaderless, and easy pickings for the reinvigorated Greek armies.<sup>10</sup>

In 1812 C.E. the French Emperor Napoleon crossed the Niemen River from Eastern Europe into Russia with an army of over six hundred thousand men intending to defeat Tsar Alexander I and force acquiescence to his "continental system"—an embargo against Napoleon's British nemeses. Napoleon's campaign initially proved a success; his army swept through the Russian countryside and occupied Moscow. However, he found himself far from home, facing daunting weather, occupying an area with few supplies and even fewer friendly faces, and, perhaps most importantly, having not secured a decisive victory. Thus, Napoleon made the humiliating, deadly march back to his Empire, losing hundreds of thousands of men along the way.<sup>11</sup>

Xerxes and Napoleon's struggles embodied many of the same potential pitfalls present in Nasser's nationalization. Their pursuit of ultimate objectives—conquering the known world, securing the continental system, and putting an end to British Imperial influence in Egypt—threatened to collapse under their own immense, aspirational weight. Xerxes, Napoleon, and Nasser's ends, in other words, threatened to outstrip their means. The acts of passing the Hellespont and Nieman rivers for Xerxes and Napoleon respectively, and the international declaration of nationalization for Nasser, both literally and metaphorically represent moments of crossing. These

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<sup>9</sup> There were, contrary to depictions in popular culture, far more than a mere three hundred Greek soldiers defending the narrow pass.

<sup>10</sup> Gaddis. *On Grand Strategy*, 11.

<sup>11</sup> Gaddis. *On Grand Strategy*, 195.

crossings, while manifesting quite differently for the first two leaders as opposed to Nasser, represent crucial inflection points in their respective reigns. Xerxes and Napoleon never recovered from their defeats; Xerxes never again threatened Greece, while Napoleon was forced into exile and (despite a brief, hundred-day stint in 1815) never again laid eyes on his beloved France. Nasser, uniquely, suffered not the fates of Xerxes or Napoleon. Rather, his crossing proved one of triumph, cementing his place as the most important ideological voice of pan-Arab nationalism and Middle Eastern decolonialism until his early death in 1970. The Suez Crisis, although possessing the same capacity for ruination as did crossing the Hellespont or Nieman, instead stands as Nasser's greatest victory.

### *The Notable Exception*

Nearly twenty-five hundred years after Xerxes crossed the Hellespont and over one hundred and forty years after Napoleon crossed the Niemen, in Autumn 1956, Nasser's crossing beget similar grand strategic concerns stemming from grand aspirations. He nationalized the Suez Canal, forcibly removed its British and French administrators, and jeopardized global trade and geopolitical stability. His reasoning was two-fold.

Firstly, and most practically, the United States and the United Kingdom had retracted funding for the Aswan Dam, an infrastructure mega-project that, upon completion, could regulate the flow of the Nile and drastically improve agricultural output and stability in Egypt.<sup>12</sup> Earlier in 1956, Nasser had agreed to purchase arms from Soviet-aligned Czechoslovakia, angering the

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<sup>12</sup> Keith Kyle. *Suez*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991).

Anglo-American bloc and causing them to renege on their commitment to fund the dam.<sup>13</sup> Revenue from the Canal would replace Anglo-American financing.

Secondly, and primarily ideologically, Nasser sought to create and lead an independent Arab republic composed of all Arab peoples, which necessarily required confronting and eliminating European colonial influence in the region. Controlling the region's most valuable, and internationally visible, economic asset, especially at the expense of its colonial administrators, would gain Nasser political clout in other Arab nations. The risks were great, however, and for a time after he set the plan in motion, it appeared as if Nasser's nationalization would end in failure and ruin; Suez would be his Hellespont.

For Nasser had prodded the British Imperial lion. The British saw the nationalization as a total affront to their waning imperial prestige and were prepared to make a stand in Suez. Public relations advisor to PM Eden, William Clark, summarized the strict British position as such:

The sad fact is that in the present state of international law and order, nationalism, which may destroy the world community's interest, is sacrosanct and Nasser could get away with theft before the UN. Equally, if Nasser does get away with it—in fact if Nasser is still dictator of Egypt next year—the Eden Government is doomed and British (and probably Western influence) in the Middle East is destroyed.<sup>14</sup>

Clark's writings indicate that preserving British influence were the United Kingdom's primary objectives during the Suez Crisis. The British government believed that only through removing Nasser from power could they accomplish this end. Secretly soliciting the Israelis to invade Egypt as a ruse, the British and French conducted operation Musketeer, an attack on the canal that sought to reestablish control with the covert aim of destabilizing Nasser's grip on Egypt.<sup>15</sup> The coalition

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<sup>13</sup> John Lewis Gaddis. *The Cold War: A New History*. (New York: The Penguin Press, 2005), 127

<sup>14</sup> Kyle. *Suez*, 166.

<sup>15</sup> Kyle. *Suez*, 167.

secured a clear military victory, occupying the canal and ostensibly “separating” the two belligerent powers (Egypt and Israel), attempting to cast the conflict as a peacekeeping mission.

However, within weeks Egypt (in particular Nasser) won a decisive political victory, as international pressure—specifically from the United States and the Soviet Union—forced the French, British, and Israeli forces to retreat from Egypt and return control of the Canal to Egypt’s government. The prospects of the regional conflagration erupting into global, potentially nuclear, war forced the two global superpowers to cooperate, a relatively rare occurrence in this era. Nasser’s personal fame skyrocketed, with him becoming an influential figure not only in the regional politics of the Middle East, but also in the wider Non-Aligned Movement that sought a third option apart from American capitalism and Soviet communism. With a cult of personality emerging around him akin to that of Mao Tse Tung, Ho Chi Minh, and Fidel Castro, Nasser cemented himself as the face of Egypt and wider Arab nationalism.<sup>16</sup> Suez, rather than spelling his doom, proved perhaps Nasser’s finest moment: a desert fox defeating the once-mighty British lion.

Suez presents a perplexing case for historians seeking to understand leadership through crisis and conflict. Surely intervention from the US and USSR helped, but the US was a staunch ally of Britain and the Soviets were by no means entirely supportive of Nasser’s Egypt, yet both were united against the British-led coalition. Nasser somehow brought the world’s two superpowers, engaged in a bitter rivalry that teetered on the verge of full-scale nuclear escalation multiple times, together in a rare moment of cooperation and agreement. The Egyptian President, however, is rarely remembered across time and space as an exceptionally skilled or influential

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<sup>16</sup> Henry Heller. *The Cold War and the New Imperialism: A Global History, 1945-2005*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2005), 91-93.

leader.<sup>17</sup> Yet he succeeded where Xerxes and Napoleon could not: in realizing abstract, ultimate ambitions.

### *Towards a Theory of Divergence*

The fictionalized experience of Napoleon's lesser-remembered adversary, general Mikhail Kutuzov, during the invasion of Russia, described in Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, offers a historically grounded explanation for the divergence between Nasser and the other notable leaders. Tolstoy writes:

[Kutuzov] understands that there is something stronger and more significant than his will—the inevitable course of events—and he's been able to see them, able to understand their significance, and, in view of that significance, is able to renounce... his personal will and direct it elsewhere.<sup>18</sup>

While Napoleon felt irrationally compelled by goals too large to realistically achieve at once, Kutuzov remained focused on the reality of Russia's situation. This adherence and attention paid to his limited means allowed Kutuzov to more effectively determine the degree to which he could meet his ends. A more proud or arrogant general may have attempted to engage Napoleon head-on, forcing a decisive battle that the Russians could have easily lost. Kutuzov instead recognized his ultimate goal was not necessarily to defeat Napoleon's army on the battlefield, only to make waging war so strategically impractical for the French Emperor as to force a retreat, which the Russian general proceeded to do. Kutuzov used the circumstances—Russia's vastness and frigidly inhospitable winters—to his advantage. The Russian general, to paraphrase a lesson from Sun Tzu, shaped his army to "resemble water," avoiding Napoleon's strengths and "striking" his

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<sup>17</sup> For despite the failure of the United Arab Republic in 1961, it certainly existed for a time. Nasser himself continued to rule until his death in 1970.

<sup>18</sup> Gaddis. *On Grand Strategy*, 207.



emptiness.”<sup>19</sup> It is unknown if Nasser *War and Peace* or *The Art of War*, however he certainly intuited the principles laid out therein.

Indeed, Nasser pounced on the British, who frequently ignored the turbulent conditions of domestic and global opinion, impeding the once-proud Empire’s chances of their military operation resulting in long-term strategic victory. Domestically the British were far from a unified front. Despite early successes in stirring up pro-war sentiments, by late autumn 1956 British media outlets and government officials frequently accused each other of blindly pro-British, anti-Egyptian bias.<sup>20</sup> By November, a significant portion of the British press had already uncovered and publicized the secret collusion between Israel and the Anglo-French coalition, undermining the Eden government’s narrative of the Suez operations as a peacekeeping mission.<sup>21</sup> So great was the failure of British propaganda and the success of Egypt’s that British General Keightly, in his 1957 post-mortem report on the Suez Crisis, bluntly stated:

The one overriding lesson of the Suez operations is that world opinion is now an absolute principle of war and must be treated as such. However successful the pure military operations may be they will fail in their object unless national, Commonwealth and Western World opinion is sufficiently on our side.<sup>22</sup>

Britain, merely a score prior considered the most powerful empire on Earth, found itself shamed and humiliated by Egypt, a nation that it had subjugated and controlled for over seven decades.

Nasser, sensing this weakness, masterfully manipulated and swayed world opinion to his side. He accomplished this in part due to an unlikely and egregiously overlooked primary source. The *White Paper on the Nationalisation of the Suez Maritime Canal Company*, published on August 12, 1956, by the Egyptian government press in Cairo, has proven the subject of curiously

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<sup>19</sup> Gaddis. *On Grand Strategy*, 64.

<sup>20</sup> Tony Shaw. *Eden, Suez, and the Mass Media: Propaganda and Persuasion during the Suez Crisis*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996), 117.

<sup>21</sup> Shaw. *Eden, Suez, and the Mass Media*, 87.

<sup>22</sup> Keightly, Charles. AIR 8/1940. United Kingdom National Archives, Kew.

little historical scholarship, yet is rife with vivid historical insights. It provides a single document through which one can observe the confluence of an astounding number of historical processes at work throughout the Suez Crisis—Britain’s imperial legacy, decolonial Egyptian nationalism, Nasser’s leadership, and the waning tides of imperial power, to name a few. The brief pamphlet proves the documentary embodiment of nationalism, charismatic leadership, and the tangible historical agency of certain exceptional individuals. Through the *White Paper*, Nasser emerges as an exceptionally significant historical figure, confirming the place individuals have in the creation of history *and* as a product of both long-term and short-term historical processes. His strategy throughout the Suez Crisis, illuminated by the *White Paper*, points towards a better understanding of his circumstances when compared to his British counterparts, the unconscious cooperation of contemporary historical forces, along with no small measure of good fortune as the primary reasons for Nasser’s success.

As an influential decolonial, revolutionary, and non-aligned leader Nasser is in company with Fidel Castro, Ho Chi Minh, Mao Tse Tung, and others, yet the Egyptian President is often omitted from Western studies referencing those other leaders. Consider an excerpt from the Pulitzer Prize winning work *Leadership* by American historian James MacGregor Burns on revolutionary leaders: “Revolutions seem to produce first generations of leaders who not only represent but embody the higher ends of the cause; who else could have led their revolutions than Lenin, Mao, Bolivar, Castro, Ho Chi Minh?”<sup>23</sup> Why is Nasser’s name not included here? The Suez Canal and Egypt, if not quite as geopolitically significant as Russia and China, are certainly on par with South America, Cuba, and Vietnam. Likewise, Xerxes and Napoleon are famously remembered for the disastrous execution of their ambitious visions, yet Nasser is not-too-popularly

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<sup>23</sup> James MacGregor Burns. *Leadership*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 240.

remembered (within Western circles) despite his resounding (but still flawed) success in achieving his vision. This thesis seeks to illuminate Nasser's role in the formation of Egyptian, Middle Eastern, and global decolonial history. Through the lens of the Suez Crisis, one will observe both the culmination of several long-term historical processes—and their embodiment in Nasser and Egypt—and the emergence of a most peculiar sort of charismatic leader—a *Raïs*, as described by historian Jean Lacouture—during the Crisis proper.<sup>24</sup>

### *Organization and Methodology*

This thesis will be divided into two chapters. The first chapter, *Long Causes*, examines the development of nationalism in England and Europe, its spread across the globe and subsequent emergence in Egypt, and evolution into the potent, Nasserist cocktail known as pan-Arab nationalism. Tracing nationalism's long development frames Nasser's struggle within one of the most paramount interwoven histories of the modern era. That England originally “invented” nationalism only to see its concept coopted by Egyptians (and Nasser) and used against them proves one of history's more potent ironies. It is primarily a synthetic effort, laying out debates and summarizing the works of other scholars to establish the wider, long-term historical context in which the Suez Crisis exists. It additionally draws on Nasser's *Philosophy of the Revolution*, a crucial primary source explaining Nasser's political ideology in his own words.

The topic then shifts towards a more narratively driven discussion of British grand strategic failure, Nasser's leadership, and changes in the Cold War international system as the *Short Causes* of the Suez Crisis. Chapter two will focus on the period immediately preceding the Suez Crisis

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<sup>24</sup> Jean Lacouture. *Nasser: A Biography*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), 149.

along with the Crisis proper. The second chapter ties together the longer-developing threads of nationalism and charismatic leadership into a contemporarily focused picture, examining the singular, short-term advent of the Suez Crisis and its immediate causes and effects. While Nasser himself is no doubt imperative to understanding the Crisis, this chapter extensively covers British, American, and to a lesser extent Soviet, French, and international objectives, policy, and responses throughout the event as well, ultimately tying it back to the central theme of discerning an individual's role in creating history. It will interrogate primary sources from the British National Archives at Kew along with selections from Cold War and decolonial scholars.

Chapter two will additionally focus on the Egyptian White Paper, *Livre Blanc*, identifying its significance, examining key arguments and legal documents, and exploring instances in which the document presents examples of Nasser's wider ideology and Egyptian national and social history. The document, strangely understudied, possesses lasting significance in the interconnected histories of the Cold War, nationalism, decolonization, and third-world charismatic leadership. This portion of the thesis draws primarily from the White Paper itself, along with several pertinent journal articles and contemporary scholarly works on relevant provisions of international law.

## *State of Literature*

### I. Nationalism and National Identity in Egypt and the United Kingdom

Existing literature covers the history of nationalism regarding Egypt and the United Kingdom in depth. Ernest Gellner's *Nations and Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, and Liah Greenfeld's *Nationalism: A Short History* are several of the eminent historical works on nationalism, providing analytical frameworks useful in examining the rise of

Nasser's pan-Arab nationalism while, particularly in Greenfeld's work, surveying the history of nationalism as well.<sup>25</sup> Gellner broadly argues that nationalism is primarily a cultural force emerging from the technological and social upheaval of the industrial revolution, adding that the democratization of high culture, literacy, and education precipitated the rise of a mass society as a unitary socio-political force.<sup>26</sup> Anderson famously conceived of a nation as "an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign."<sup>27</sup> *Imagined* in that no member of a nation will ever know personally every other member. *Limited* because every nation, no matter how vast, has defined boundaries. *Sovereign* due to the desire of nations to be free from influences beyond their limited borders. And finally, *community*, or the overriding mentality that members of a nation fundamentally have more in common with one another than they do with non-members. Greenfeld, meanwhile, contends that the fundamental characteristics of nationalism are national consciousness, or the ability of a group of people to view themselves as a nation, and democratic equality.<sup>28</sup>

Greenfeld devotes a great deal of *Nationalism: A Short History* to the development of British national identity, as she argues it is the first instance of such a mentality in human history. Stemming from a fifteenth-century feudal war between various aristocratic families in England, many of whose supposedly "noble" bloodlines died out during the conflict, English national identity formed, according to Greenfeld, out of a notion of equality among all English people regardless of class.<sup>29</sup> Greenfeld frames this as a pragmatic political tactic used to justify common

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<sup>25</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983).; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2006).; Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: A Short History* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2019).

<sup>26</sup> Gellner. *Nations and Nationalism*, 142-43.

<sup>27</sup> Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities*, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Greenfeld. *Nationalism*, 133.

<sup>29</sup> Greenfeld, *Nationalism*, 15.

folk or peasants ascending to ruling positions previously reserved for nobility. This view fostered stronger political organization domestically, precipitating the notion of the British people as one singular political entity. Soon, the British came to view other states as nations, fostering sentiments of increased international competition in England and a tendency to act aggressively against other perceived nations (although most states at the time did not yet view themselves as nations).<sup>30</sup>

Paul Gilroy, in his “One Nation under a Groove: The Cultural Politics of ‘Race’ and Racism in Britain,” adopts a post-colonial, racial lens in analyzing British identity during and after decolonization, arguing that as the Commonwealth broke up, notions of Britishness became far more insular. He argues: “Nationalism and racism became so closely identified that to speak of the nation is to speak automatically in racially exclusive terms.”<sup>31</sup> While speaking towards primarily white versus black racism, Gilroy’s argument could explain, in addition to economic and geopolitical considerations, Britain’s insistence on maintaining control of the Canal. Handing over the perceived lifeblood of the British economy to a foreign, non-white population could perhaps have been a prospect unacceptable to many in the British government, supporting Greenfeld’s characterization of the British as—perhaps irrationally—internationally competitive.

Hendrik Spruyt’s *Ending Empire: Contested Sovereignty and Territorial Partition* addresses British decolonization with a more political focus. Spruyt proposes that, due to a variety of factors, pressure for decolonization on the British most often resulted in “calibrated withdrawal [and] incidental conflicts.”<sup>32</sup> He pragmatically argues that decolonization was an inexorable force, unstoppable after anti-colonial forces achieved relative parity in technology and political

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<sup>30</sup> Greenfeld, *Nationalism*, 33.

<sup>31</sup> John Gilroy. “One Nation under a Groove: The Cultural Politics of ‘Race’ and Racism in Britain,” *Becoming National*, ed. Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 357.

<sup>32</sup> Hendrik Spruyt. *Ending Empire: Contested Sovereignty and Territorial Partition*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 37.

organization.<sup>33</sup> Nationalism often emerged in these nations prior to, or in conjunction with, full-fledged independence movements. Implicitly asserting the degradation of British imperial power, Spruyt argues that after 1945, the United States pressured the British into accepting “noncommunist nationalism” to ideologically combat the Soviets in the emerging Cold War.<sup>34</sup> This shift in strategy, ironically, fostered a stronger focus on Suez as one of the few remaining strongholds of British power, along with perhaps the most important economic asset to the nation.<sup>35</sup> But, following the Suez Crisis in 1956, Spruyt argues that British policy shifted again, this time prioritizing Europe over formerly colonial parts of the world.<sup>36</sup> One can hardly imagine a more embarrassing retreat from the global stage for a power which once ruled over a quarter of the world.

## II. Nasser’s Leadership

Nasser himself has drawn the attention of many historians who seek to understand and analyze his impact on the Cold War, decolonialism, and his leadership style. Jean Lacouture’s *The Demigods: Charismatic Leadership in the Third World* examines several “third world” leaders and the science (or art, if one prefers) of leadership. Specifically, Lacouture analyzes Nasser’s rule in Egypt, arguing that it illustrates a complex democratic give-and-take, in which the “masses” bestow power on a strong individual so that he (in Nasser’s case) may construct the necessary institutions that will eventually bequeath power back into the people’s hands. According to Lacouture, Nasser took this power and made it his own, making himself and Egypt, for a time,

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<sup>33</sup> Spruyt. *Ending Empire*, 39.

<sup>34</sup> Spruyt. *Ending Empire*, 53.

<sup>35</sup> Spruyt. *Ending Empire*, 118.

<sup>36</sup> Spruyt. *Ending Empire*, 123.

inseparable, with the issues plaguing either party reflected in the other.<sup>37</sup> That Nasser was the individual chosen to lead Egypt was not a given; Lacouture illustrates the dispositions of the Egyptian people towards accepting a charismatic, authoritarian leader through an anecdote told by a famous Egyptian stage actor during the period of political upheaval following the abdication of King Farouk in 1952: “Send me into the street in the general’s uniform I wore in my last play; show me the Gardens of Ezbekieh and let me repeat the same speech there: I guarantee that Egypt is mine!”<sup>38</sup>

Despite this predisposition towards *any* strong, authoritarian-leaning leader, over time Nasser seems to have uniquely implanted himself in the Egyptian national consciousness. P.J. Vatikiotis, a historian of Egypt who worked at the University of Cairo prior to Nasser’s rule, argues in *Nasser and His Generation* (1978) that, titularly, Nasser had such a profound impact on Egyptian society as to say that an entire population was *his*. As the prominent Egyptian writer Tawfiq al-Hakim put it: “Nasser enjoyed greater power and adulation than any ruler of Egypt before him... even the pharaohs.”<sup>39</sup> Vatikiotis contends that this adulation stems from the perception that Nasser satisfied the Egyptian people’s desire for a pseudo-prophetical, semi-mythical leader that would resurrect Egyptian society and return its pride and respect.<sup>40</sup> Policy and tangible achievements (positive or negative) did little to shake this constructed image of Nasser in the eyes of everyday Egyptians.<sup>41</sup> Broadly, Vatikiotis’ work argues for the effectiveness of “great men” in history, wherein a single individual can radically alter the course of history.<sup>42</sup> His focus

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<sup>37</sup> Jean Lacouture. *Nasser*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), *The Demigods*, 135.

<sup>38</sup> Lacouture. *The Demigods*, 82.

<sup>39</sup> P.J. Vatikiotis. *Nasser and His Generation*. (London: Croom Helm, 1978), 265.

<sup>40</sup> Vatikiotis. *Nasser and His Generation*, 268

<sup>41</sup> Vatikiotis. *Nasser and His Generation*, 268

<sup>42</sup> Mario D. Zamora and Glenn D. Deane. “Nasser and His Generation by P.J. Vatikiotis” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Nov. 1979, Vol. 446, The Uneasy Boundary: Church and State: 180.



on the psycho-social relationship between Nasser and his people, with whom Nasser often conflated himself, has been praised by other historians.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, Nasser and the Egyptian nation prove difficult concepts to separate. Further, the fervent sense of nationalism Nasser instilled in both Egypt and the wider Arab world defined the lasting impact of his rule. Nasser's Egypt would be nothing without citizens comprising the Egyptian nation, and the Egyptian nation would not exist as it does today without Nasser. Assessing histories of nationalism and its development, then, is crucial to understanding Nasser's reign as a whole. As Heraclitus stated earlier in this thesis, the one includes the many, and the many composes the one.

Some historians view Nasser as an individual rising at the right time. P.J Vatikiotis, in *Nasser and His Generation*, contemplates Nasser's role in the modern Egyptian mythos, stating, "Since heroes are not born, only constructed, he had the necessary qualities and opportunity, for he appeared at the right coincidence of events and convergence of conditions the Egyptians needed for their hero-making."<sup>44</sup> This falls in line with Tolstoy's characterization of Kutuzov, as the savvy opportunist, rather than the depiction of Xerxes or Napoleon, prisoners (during their respective crossings, at least) of their own machinations. It also speaks in a more mystical, divine tone, portraying Nasser as the savior of Egypt, albeit through action and skill rather than birthright. Indeed, Vatikiotis continues that the Egyptian people bear significant responsibility for the rise of Nasser, arguing that:

Together with post-war notions of integrative nationalism at a time of decolonization and the retreat of Europe from Asia and Africa, the needs of Egyptian society were such as to create a mood highly receptive to the radical exhortations and salvationist promises of a new, young native ruler.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Vatikiotis. *Nasser and His Generation*. Page 270; Zamora and Deane. "Nasser and His Generation by P.J. Vatikiotis" *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 180.

<sup>44</sup> Vatikiotis. *Nasser and His Generation*, 153.

<sup>45</sup> Vatikiotis. *Nasser and His Generation*, 155.

Perhaps this is a situation where having one is impossible without the other—the one is made up of all things, and all things issue from the one—where Nasser chose to lead the Egyptian people, and the Egyptian people chose Nasser to lead them. Nasser himself recognized his role as the sole standard-bearer of the Egyptian people, responding to criticism from Western media outlets in an interview with the *Daily Herald* in July 1956 by saying: “I don’t know, you must judge. Foreign papers say I am a dictator, a Pharaoh. But a dictator is one who governs his country in spite of its people. It is up to you to find out if this is so in my case.”<sup>46</sup> Here Nasser implicitly derived his right to rule through the consent of the governed (the Egyptian nation). Yet, for Egypt especially, the relationship between a people and their leader proved far more complex, and possessing of deep historical roots.

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<sup>46</sup> Vatikiotis. *Nasser and His Generation*, 194.

## CHAPTER 1

### Long Causes

In the long-winded, narratively nebulous conclusion to his foundational work *War and Peace*, author Leo Tolstoy ponders the ancient question of free will versus determinism in human affairs and history. He finds it analogous to Newtonian physics, arguing:

When Newton formulated the law of gravity, he did not say that the sun or the earth has the property of attraction; he said that all bodies, from the largest to the smallest, have this property of attracting each other... History stands on the same path. And if history has for its subject of study the movements of peoples and of mankind, and not the description of episodes from people's lives, it should set aside the notion of causes and seek for the laws common to all the equal and inseparably bound together infinitely small elements of freedom.<sup>47</sup>

In other words, just as every object possessing mass also possesses gravity (even to an infinitely small extent), so too does every person, action, or event possess a degree of freedom from its causes or initial positions. The world is, according to Tolstoy, if not entirely free from the effects

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<sup>47</sup> Leo Tolstoy. *War and Peace*. Pages 1212-1213. The particular online edition cited in this thesis lacks all publisher information, but is openly available at:

<https://freeclassicebooks.com/Tolstoy/War%20and%20Peace.pdf>

of laws and causes, certainly not entirely deterministic either. Historian John Lewis Gaddis agrees, adding that while there may be historical laws governing patterns and processes so minute that one may never notice, this lack of awareness of the laws further cements the fact that freedom and free will exist in history. “Our perception of freedom,” Gaddis writes, “is, in practice, freedom itself.”<sup>48</sup>

In this framework, it would seem as though the wider world can both influence individuals via near undetectable laws and causes *whilst* the individual still maintains the agency to act and affect the wider world. Surely, then, the evolution of the Egyptian nation informed Nasser, so that Nasser was eventually able to guide and influence the Egyptian nation? Scholars have engaged in rigorous debate on this general interplay between individual and society, along with the role of nationalism as a mass movement, in many cases discussing Nasser specifically. A gap exists, however, in bridging the study of Egyptian nationalism with the study of Nasser’s charismatic leadership and individual role as a socio-political actor in Egypt’s history. The Suez Crisis here represented a key moment of differentiation, resulting in both Nasser’s ascension to personal fame and international prominence *and* Egypt’s ascension to a leading role in Middle Eastern and anti-colonial politics.

This chapter of the study begins with an overview of the development of nationalism in Europe, its spread across the globe, and leading conceptual theories of nationalism, providing frameworks one can apply to the development of Egyptian nationalism. It then focuses on the roots of Egyptian nationalism and pan-Arabism prior to the Free Officers’ revolution and Nasser’s rule, arguing that the development of Egyptian nationalism and pan-Arabism indeed adhered to aspects of the previously discussed conceptual theories of broader nationalism. Moving into an exploration of Nasser’s regime following the 1952 revolution, this chapter will identify relevant theories of

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<sup>48</sup> Gaddis. *On Grand Strategy*, 213.

leadership and assess the degree to which a single individual can affect historical change, juxtaposed with examples of Nasser's own philosophy of leadership and history.

The conclusion to this chapter will tie this primarily theoretical, synthetic discussion of nationalism, charismatic leadership, Egyptian and pan-Arab nationalism, and Nasser's individual agency into a more pointed, narratively driven study of the Suez Crisis proper as a standout example of the confluence of the aforementioned processes, wherein chapter two will begin.

### *Exclusivity, (In)Equality, and the Emergence of Nationalism*

Tracing the emergence of nationalism back to fifteenth-century England, Liah Greenfeld argues that, due to a dearth of nobility because of civil war, the remaining members of the ruling class sought a new alliance to maintain their grip on their fiefdoms: an alliance with the lower classes.<sup>49</sup> Still residing in a pre-industrial, feudal society, elites primarily divided society along horizontal, class-based lines. Peasants comprised the vast majority of society, while a select ruling class, so-called "blue bloods" for their supposed inherent superiority over the lower classes, made up a far smaller percentage, forming the upper echelon of English society. Ernest Gellner's figure displaying societal makeup during this period can be found below:

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<sup>49</sup>Greenfeld. *Nationalism*, 16-17.

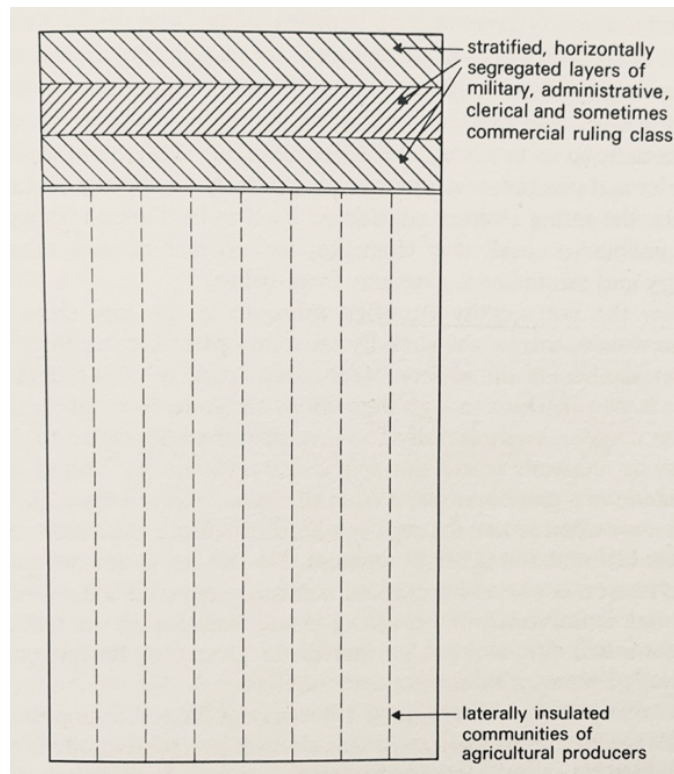


Figure 1. A general form of the social hierarchy in agrarian, feudal societies.<sup>50</sup>

Feudal English society imagined and exacerbated divisions where none existed to preserve the status quo. Yet such a radical shift in the status quo in fifteenth-century England necessitated a shift in strategy. The English aristocracy made a revolutionary concession, allowing the lower classes to have a hand in ruling. To justify this change, rhetoric shifted towards egalitarianism and equality rather than rigid social stratification. Between all members of the English *nation*, there existed a mentality that all within were fundamentally the same.<sup>51</sup> With this equality came the opportunity for social mobility and destratification; people in such societies could *choose*, to an extent, their lot in life, unbound by the confines of exceedingly rigid social hierarchies.<sup>52</sup> While numerous factors remained that hampered freedom and social mobility, including many within

<sup>50</sup> Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 9.

<sup>51</sup> Greenfeld. *Nationalism*, 16-17.

<sup>52</sup> While not addressed by Greenfeld directly, this sort of freedom primarily, perhaps exclusively, applied to men in society well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

society itself, the root of individual agency and the antithesis of outside determinism forever integrated itself with the concept of the nation.

Throughout the intervening centuries, and exponentially during the nineteenth century, other Europeans forged their states into nation-states and, between 1815 and 1914, for the most part avoided large-scale wars with one another. Instead, taking advantage of superior technologies, economies, and political organization, Europeans acquired through force or coercion much of the world as colonies.<sup>53</sup> In these colonies Europeans extracted resources and revenue at a voracious pace, but often ran into an issue similar to that faced by England in the fifteenth century: a numbers dilemma. There were simply not enough Europeans to oversee the ever-growing colonial bureaucracies. So Europe began educating colonial subjects, slowly and perhaps unconsciously closing the technological, economic, and, perhaps most importantly, the political-ideological gap between colonizer and colonized. The effective exporting of ideas from Europe to its colonies brought about a similar, yet more unintended, consequence as that exhibited in England some four hundred years earlier: there began to emerge in the colonized world a steadily-building sense of national consciousness.<sup>54</sup> This took different forms in different states and over different lengths of time, yet in the long-term this often bore the same result: widespread, nationalist resistance against European hegemony.

In contrast to Greenfeld's characterization of European national emergence as (initially, at least) inclusive and egalitarian, Ernest Gellner and Elie Kedourie argue that nationalism in European colonies emerged out of opposite forces: exclusivity and inequality. Kedourie posits that, rather than socially and politically elevating those who had achieved sufficient education,

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<sup>53</sup> Spruyt. *Ending Empire*, 39.

<sup>54</sup> Anderson. *Imagined Communities*, 116.

qualifications, and skills—as England had done during their national emergence—European colonial administrators instead continued to subjugate *all* members of colonized populations.<sup>55</sup> It is unclear how one ought to interpret this statement, excerpted from Kedourie’s 1970 monograph *Nationalism in Asia and Africa*, as Kedourie does not clearly explain whether or not he believes the exclusivity and inequality present in European colonial systems is a disadvantage to ruling colonies. Gellner, for his part, interprets Kedourie’s work as critical of such a system, believing that the ideology of nationalism, beginning in Europe, spread across the globe with such ferocity and staying power as to make any attempt to contain or eliminate it futile.<sup>56</sup> Nationalism was, in other words, a Pandora’s box; once Europe succeeded in spreading it, it could not continue to justify the subjugation of millions.<sup>57</sup>

Kedourie identifies theoretical inconsistencies in his 1970 work *Nationalism in Asia and Africa*, criticizing scholars who further the notion that nationalism and nationalist revolt in colonial states stems from conquest and occupation by systems of so-called “alien rule,” or a ruling class composed of non-native groups. To say that alien rule alone is sufficient to cause nationalism in these areas is, to Kedourie, to ignore thousands of years of history, such as the formation of the Roman Empire, the United States of America, and even England, the original nation according to several scholars.<sup>58</sup> Kedourie cites a popular English poem by Daniel Defoe, in which he praises ethno-cultural diversity as a foundational characteristic of the English nation, ironic to Kedourie

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<sup>55</sup> Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 128.

<sup>56</sup> Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 129.

<sup>57</sup> Extending Kedourie and Gellner’s thinking, Greenfeld writes in *Nationalism: A Short History*: “The fundamental principles of democracy are the principles of popular sovereignty and of the fundamental equality of membership (or fraternity) in the community. Nationalism made them the moral and political canon of the modern world... Every nation—a community based on the principles of popular sovereignty and fundamental equality of membership—is a democracy by definition.” Greenfeld. *Nationalism*, 85.

<sup>58</sup> Kedourie. *Nationalism in Asia and Africa*, 21.



considering that similar sentiments were responsible for the collapse of many British colonies.<sup>59</sup> Instead, Kedourie posits that, among other factors, the radical social disturbance introduced to traditional societies by Europe through its proliferation of ideals and mentalities during its colonial period bears much of the blame for the seemingly exceptional brevity of European colonial rule and rapid emergence of anti-colonial nationalism.<sup>60</sup>

So nationalism permeated the globe, latching onto and inciting nationalist movements in most states on Earth, including Egypt. But what characteristics comprised a nation? How could one determine whether they were part of one nation versus another? Framed in the context of Europeans versus colonized peoples: what exactly differentiated members of, say, the Egyptian nation from their British occupiers?

On this subject Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* bears considerable weight in historical circles, continuing to be a seminal work on nationalism despite its relative age. Anderson sees the Americas as a potential origin for peoples viewing nations in a geo-racial lens, a view that came to dominate much of the globe throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Specifically referencing Spanish colonies and their metropole, Anderson notes that, should an ethnic Spaniard have found himself born in Mexico City rather than Madrid during the period of Spanish colonialism, he would forever be known as a *creole*, or an ostensibly ethnically European borne in the Americas.<sup>61</sup> Such a distinction would follow the man throughout his whole life, an insurmountable strike against his European heritage. Likewise, and of interest in our study, Anderson also notes that a person of Latin-American origin born in Spain at the time would forever

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<sup>59</sup> Kedourie. *Nationalism in Asia and Africa*, 21-22.

<sup>60</sup> Kedourie. *Nationalism in Asia and Africa*, 23-24.

<sup>61</sup> Anderson. *Imagined Communities*, 47 and 58

be a *peninsular*, and could not have been a “true American.”<sup>62</sup> One can understand nationalism in this sense as, like observed by Gellner, an exclusive phenomenon.

Anderson continues that this geographic exclusion, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, blossomed into primitive notions of racism as well, further cementing the idea of a nation as an ethnic community in addition to a geographic one.<sup>63</sup> Europeans soon came to view colonized peoples as distinctly different from, and inferior to, themselves simply because of the latter’s ethnic and geographic differences.<sup>64</sup> The inverse of this force, however, could potentially explain the explosion of anti-European nationalism throughout the twentieth century. Colonized peoples, influenced by European nationalist ideology, soon too viewed themselves as different, but at the very least equal to, their European occupiers. With respect to this Anderson sees a direct line of causation: his so-called “last wave” of nationalisms, those in Africa and Asia, were originally formulated as responses to global European imperialism.<sup>65</sup>

In stark contrast to Anderson, social scientist Anthony Smith advances the idea of the nation as both a real and constructed institution.<sup>66</sup> Rather than Anderson’s idea of the nation as entirely *imagined*, Smith argues that the nation arises from the formation of *ethnies*, or distinct ethnic communities. These ethnies may be either artificially constructed—imagined—or, contrary to Anderson, have genuine historical roots. In some cases, ethnies may comprise elements of artificial construction *and* long-standing historical precedence.<sup>67</sup> Specifically, these ethnies may be either vertical or horizontally aligned. Vertical ethnies constitute a significantly stronger basis

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid. Page 58.

<sup>63</sup> Anderson. *Imagined Communities*, 59-60.

<sup>64</sup> Anderson. *Imagined Communities*, 60

<sup>65</sup> Anderson. *Imagined Communities*, 139

<sup>66</sup> Anthony D. Smith, “The Origins of Nations,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 12, 3 (July 1989), pp. 340-67. In *Becoming National*, edited by Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 124.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

of nationhood, as it transcends social stratifications and barriers (hence the verticality).<sup>68</sup> A horizontal ethnîe, in contrast, projects its rule across a wider breadth of space while sacrificing socio-cultural unity.<sup>69</sup> Smith offers the Armenians as an example of a vertical ethnîe, possessing a unified sense of identity across all social circumstances (including a strong diaspora community), and the Normans as an example of a horizontal ethnîe, believing their multi-ethnic state not constitutive of a cohesive nation.<sup>70</sup> Owing to his identification of the nation as at least partially tangible in terms of longer-term historical legitimacy, some have argued that Smith rejects the equating of Western and non-Western nationalisms.<sup>71</sup>

Greenfeld, Gellner, Kedourie, Anderson, and Smith examine wider patterns of nationalism, despite their regional specialties primarily devoting their studies to the global phenomenon rather than a deep exploration of nationalism in a single country. Do these broader theories hold up in the case of Egyptian nationalism? Before delving into its impact on and subsequent cooption by Gamal Abdel Nasser, this study first provides a brief history and summary of debates on the pre-Nasser origins of Egyptian and pan-Arab nationalism.

### *The Roots of Egyptian Nationalism and Pan-Arabism*

The roots of Egyptian nationalism and pan-Arabism remain nebulous. Some scholars see continuity in independence movements dating to the period of Ottoman rule in Egypt and Arabia,

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 111-112.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Charles D. Smith. "Imagined Identities, Imagined Nationalisms: Print Culture and Egyptian Nationalism in Light of Recent Scholarship." A Review Essay of Israel Gershoni and James P. Jankowski, *Redefining the Egyptian Nation, 1930-1945*, Cambridge Middle East Studies (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995). PP. 297. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Nov., 1997, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Nov., 1997), pp. 607-622, 609.

while others, adopting a more Andersonian view, depict Egyptian and Arab nationalism as a decidedly modern development.<sup>72</sup> This study, primarily concerned with the advent of Egyptian and Arab nationalism in the modern sense, as generally laid out by Greenfeld, Gellner, Kedourie, and Anderson, does not attempt to resolve this debate. Rather, this study addresses the recent history of Egyptian and Arab nationalism as it pertains to Nasser and the Suez Crisis; for all intents and purposes, then, modern Egyptian nationalism begins in the early twentieth century, with particularly noteworthy transformations occurring throughout the nineteen-twenties and thirties. The emergence of nationalism and later pan-Arabism in Egypt presents at various points support for the previously discussed theories of nationalism, and frame Nasser's role in the evolution of Egyptian and Arab identity as but one chapter, still possessing outsized importance, in a circuitous lineage of national development.

Laurie Brand identifies two primary forces that influenced the development of the Egyptian national mythos prior to 1952 and the ascension of Nasser: the often-conflicting legacies of pharaonic and Islamic influence. Proponents of Egypt's pharaonic legacy furthered the notion that Egypt had once been sovereign and free from foreign meddling, offering an ancient example that served to legitimize the concept of a modern Egyptian state—analogous to the philhellenist movement that permeated much of Europe during the nineteenth century.<sup>73</sup> This proto-nationalist ideology was relatively secular in nature, and found adherents across the myriad religious, class, and racial distinctions found in Egypt at the time. Just as Greek heritage provided romanticized

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<sup>72</sup> Laurie A. Brand. *Official Stories: Political and National Narratives in Egypt and Algeria*. (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2014), 28. C. Smith, "Imagined Identities," 610. These sources present two differing and, in the case of Smith, severely critical viewpoints on the emergence of Egyptian nationalism. Both will be addressed in this subchapter.

<sup>73</sup> Brand. *Official Stories*, 28. Curiously (but only tangentially related to this study), Brand notes that some "pharaonists" during the early twentieth century viewed Egypt as the precursor to the Greek and Roman civilizations, thus tying Egypt more closely to the Mediterranean and the West. Subscribers to this theory might construe nationalism, then, as a process for which Egypt was partially (albeit distantly) responsible.

memories of a common past to Europeans at the time, so too did ancient Egyptian memories prove a unifying influence on contemporary Egypt in the early twentieth century.

Brand continues that this discourse shifted throughout the 1920s and 1930s from insular and exclusively Egyptian ideas of nationhood to wider, Muslim and Arab-influenced transnationalism, closer in line with what would become Nasser's pan-Arabism. Arabic Language and Islamic religion, Brand argues, became the primary binding factors in Egyptian society, inextricably linking Egyptians both to one another and to the wider Arab world.<sup>74</sup> In contrast, Kedourie finds that Islam is the sole factor in the construction of Arabic nationhood, arguing that the influence of Arab language in the Middle East stemmed directly from Muhammed and the proliferation of Islam, succinctly stating: "without Islam, no Arab 'nation.'"<sup>75</sup> Leaving the dispute over whether the Arabic language's influence is due solely to Islamic influence for another study, the fact remains that Egypt possessed the twin unifying factors of language and religion throughout the early to mid-twentieth century, allowing first the Egyptian state to coalesce into a nation, then for the nation to begin to view itself as a part of the wider Arab world.

However, some scholars disagree with such a clear-cut dichotomization of these two ideological movements in pre-Nasser Egypt. Ralph Coury, in his two-part article "Who 'Invented' Egyptian Arab Nationalism?", implicitly disagrees with Brand and explicitly with Kedourie by arguing that the secular and Islamic nationalist forces in Egypt, exemplified by the Wafd party and Muslim Brotherhood respectively, shared more in common than it initially seemed. Secondly, Coury contends that the enflamed Arab nationalist sentiments among Egypt's ruling class

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<sup>74</sup> Brand. *Official Stories*, 29.

<sup>75</sup> Kedourie. *Nationalism in Asia and Africa*, 64.

throughout the inter-war period reflect socio-political changes in Egypt and the wider Arab world, rather than a resurgence in temporarily suppressed Islamist ideology.<sup>76</sup>

Coury cites the 1925 Syrian revolution against French colonialism as a watershed moment in Egypt's evolution towards a pan-Arabist state. During this conflict, the leader of the secular Wafd party, Saad Zaghlul, delivered impassioned speeches in favor of Syrian independence from France, and advanced the idea of a shared Syrian-Egyptian identity, believing the two states were bound by common geography, history, language, religion, and culture.<sup>77</sup> In essence, Zaghlul argued for the existence of a common, pan-Arabic heritage and, perhaps implicitly, for a unitary Arab *nation*.

Zaghlul's speeches inadvertently allude to Benedict Anderson's definition of a nation, specifically its *imagined* component; it is likely that a significant portion of the Egyptian populace had little to no first-hand experience with Syria or the Syrian people, and yet Zaghlul began to tie the two nations together through invented notions of commonality. While such commonalities certainly existed to a degree, the perception of commonality on the part of Egypt, existing primarily in the minds of Egyptians, is essential in this instance, and supports Anderson's theory of nationalism.

Coury continues in the second of his two-part article that this sense of nationhood was in fact novel and developed over time into a distinct pan-Arab nationalist ideology separate from Islamic influence. Looking at contemporary linguistics, Coury notes that throughout the nineteen-twenties and thirties Egyptians and Middle Eastern peoples came to use the term "Arab," once

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<sup>76</sup> Ralph M. Coury, "Who 'Invented' Egyptian Arab Nationalism? Part 1." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 14, no. 3 (August 1982): Pages 249-281. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/163673?seq=1>, 250.

<sup>77</sup> Coury. "Who 'Invented' Egyptian Arab Nationalism? Part 1," 252.

reserved for the nomadic Bedouin peoples, to describe *all* Arabic speakers.<sup>78</sup> Coury believes this to be either a conscious effort at reeducation by Arabic leaders or a transition in nationalist sentiments through which Arabic leaders were themselves passing.<sup>79</sup> While this question of intentionality takes on elevated relevance in this study's discussion of Nasser, in this particular instance, in either case, the shifting meaning of the word "Arab" was emblematic of the wider pattern of a rapidly coalescing pan-Arabic identity.

This assessment both consciously and implicitly alludes to Benedict Anderson's description of the development of "print-capitalism" in Europe throughout the enlightenment: a process he argues in large part established the conditions for modern nationalism. Supporting his assertion of the nation as an *imagined community*, Anderson asserts that print media, mass-produced in Europe by the sixteenth century—and steadily increasing in popularity in Egypt and the Arab world throughout the nineteen-twenties and thirties—allowed individuals to develop more nuanced images of others in their society, over time contributing to a wider sense of national solidarity.<sup>80</sup> Coury further teases out the connection, believing that the export of cultural products—books, newspapers, and other print media—from Egypt to the rest of the Arab world not only fostered a sense of Egyptian nationalism, but Egyptianized Arab national identity as well.<sup>81</sup> Already, then, Egypt began to take on a leadership role in general Arab affairs, a role that Nasser intentionally sought to not only maintain but expand. Moreover, Anderson's theory proposing the significance of uniform cultural imaginings stemming from universal print media

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<sup>78</sup> Ralph M. Coury, "Who 'Invented' Egyptian Arab Nationalism? Part 2." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 14, no. 4 (August 1982): Pages 459-479. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/163673?seq=1>, 460.

<sup>79</sup> Coury. "Who 'Invented' Egyptian Arab Nationalism? Part 2," 461.

<sup>80</sup> Anderson. *Imagined communities*, 33-35

<sup>81</sup> Coury. "Who 'Invented' Egyptian Arab Nationalism? Part 2," 460.

consumption seems congruent with the development of early-twentieth-century Egyptian and pan-Arab nationalism.

However, Coury's arguments and the applicability of Anderson's theory are not universally accepted. Reviewing Israel Gershoni and James P. Jankowski's two-part work *Redefining the Egyptian Nation, 1930-1945*, Charles Smith challenges the authors' imposition of both Anderson's and Anthony Smith's nationalist theories on the specific history of Egyptian nationalism, arguing quite harshly that Gershoni and Jankowski's work refutes rather than proves those theories.<sup>82</sup> Gershoni and Jankowski essentially argue that Egyptian cultural nationalism, represented first through Pharaonism and subsequently through blanket Islamic-Arabism, is, throughout the nineteen twenties-through-forties, synonymous with Egyptian territorial nationalism, forming the ideology of "supra-Egyptianism." The combination of the two ideologies emphasized the shared Muslim-Arab heritage of much of the Middle East, while implicitly asserting Egypt's role as a leader in regional affairs—in that sense proving a predecessor of Nasser-era pan-Arab nationalism. The authors then suggest that supra-Egyptianism as a result did not consider historical or contemporary Egyptian territorial boundaries when constructing their notions of Egyptian national identity.<sup>83</sup>

C. Smith identifies Anderson and Anthony Smith's theories of nationalism as particularly influential in Geshoni and Jankowski's work, yet criticizes their application therein. Specifically, C. Smith contends that the authors' usage of Anderson's theory serves more as a shaky confirmation of preexisting ideas rather than a critical comparison of the theory's viability in the specific instance of Egyptian nationalism. Turning to Anderson, and implicitly Coury's, assertion

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<sup>82</sup> C. Smith, "Imagined Identities," 610.

<sup>83</sup> C. Smith, "Imagined Identities," 611.



of the significance of print culture and print capitalism, C. Smith sees little correlation between theory and practice; he notes that Anderson believed print culture to create “languages of power,” as seen in the widespread proliferation of common-language pamphlets and books in enlightenment Europe. However, in Egypt print capitalism failed, according to C. Smith, to produce the same effect. Rather, it simply reaffirmed the power of the Arabic language as a cultural and religious force.<sup>84</sup> Additionally, the two authors, according to C. Smith, misconstrue A. Smith’s concept of the *ethnie*, contradictorily arguing that the same Egyptian *ethnie* that adopted a Pharaonist ideology entirely eschewed it for an supra-Egyptian, proto-pan-Arabist concept within the span of two decades.<sup>85</sup> C. Smith observes a contradiction in that A. Smith’s conceptual ethnies cannot evolve into another, separate *ethnie*, rather that any *ethnie*’s journey must necessarily end in the formation of a nationalist movement. Further, ethnies are by definition insular constructions, meaning an *ethnie* whose central tenets are transnational in nature is illogical in A. Smith’s conceptual framework.<sup>86</sup> C. Smith would also disagree with Kedourie, who primarily credited Europe with the proliferation of nationalism across the globe. Instead, C. Smith sees pre-modern historical evidence for Pharaonism, arguing that despite its apparent invention in the nineteen-twenties, it was not entirely modern nor entirely inspired by Europeans.<sup>87</sup>

Michael Doran assesses the roots of pan-Arabism prior to Nasser’s rule in his aptly, if dryly, titled *Pan-Arabism before Nasser*. Doran, adopting a wider lens compared to previously discussed scholars, contends that Nasser-era pan-Arabism emerged from a relatively uncontroversial vision of the regional order established during the reign of King Farouk.<sup>88</sup> This

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<sup>84</sup> C. Smith, “Imagined Identities,” 617.

<sup>85</sup> C. Smith, “Imagined Identities,” 611-612.

<sup>86</sup> C. Smith, “Imagined Identities,” 611.

<sup>87</sup> C. Smith, “Imagined Identities,” 618.

<sup>88</sup> Michael Doran. *Pan-Arabism before Nasser: Egyptian Power Politics and the Palestine Question*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 4.

regional order placed Egypt at the forefront of Middle Eastern affairs, naturally bringing them into conflict with the waning British Empire. The 1948 war with Israel—the point at which the study concludes—defined the shape of things to come: that Egypt was prepared to assert its national will in pursuit of its vision of regional politics.<sup>89</sup> Doran paints a vivid picture of Egyptian foreign policy, primarily focusing on the post-World War II period prior to a full British retreat. The two main political factions, the secular-nationalist Wafd and Islamist Muslim Brotherhood, along with numerous smaller parties, at this time adopted a uniquely aligned stance; Doran contends that despite all other divisions, these factions were exceptionally united on an anti-imperialist, staunchly nationalist stance against the British and, in soon to be less than hushed tones, the British-backed monarchy. Moreover, these factions were composed of a new generation of Egyptians, who grew up around, accustomed to, and expecting an ever-loosening British grip on the nation.<sup>90</sup> It is no wonder then that Nasser, eighteen at the time of the transformational Anglo-Egyptian treaty of 1936 and in university throughout the formative late nineteen-thirties, was a part of this generation.

Although it may have drawn Charles Smith's ire, history bore out the fact that many well-educated, young Egyptians flocked to nascent nationalist, Islamist, and fundamentalist political parties during this time, having voraciously consumed the blossoming Egyptian print culture of the day. One could walk into a bookstore or newsstand in Cairo and walk out with Muhammed Heikal's essays on the French Revolution and Rousseau, Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi's Islamic Nationalist *The Nature of Tyranny*, the latest issue of the Wafd's *al-Jihad*, Hafez Ibrahim's nationalist poetry, or even Egyptian-written, Arab-language biographies of such monumental

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<sup>89</sup> Doran. *Pan-Arabism before Nasser*, 5-6. Doran argues that Egypt went to war with Israel not to destroy the young nation, but to preserve its own status as the primary native actor in Middle Eastern geopolitics.

<sup>90</sup> Doran. *Pan-Arabism before Nasser*, 18-19.

historical figures as Napoleon, Alexander, Caesar, and Hannibal.<sup>91</sup> Anderson's concepts of print culture and print capitalism, then, while perhaps not essential in the initial emergence of Egyptian and Arab nationalism in Egypt, are no doubt crucial understanding in the processes' popularization.

Additionally, the two most prominent forces in Egyptian nationalist politics, the Wafd and Muslim Brotherhood, embodied the ideological split between proponents of secular nationalism, influenced by the Pharaonic legacy, and the Islamist sect. Both parties, though, were strongly aligned against British influence and furthered visions of a Middle Eastern regional order dominated not by European empires, but Egyptian leaders. During this period, the fundamental tenets of Egyptian nationalism adopted expansion and an exceptionalist quality: Egyptian nationalists, such as Zaghul, viewed Egypt as a natural steward of the rest of the Arab world. Coury's identification of Egypt as an exporter of cultural nationalism during this period illustrates the nation's role, conscious or otherwise, as a leader in its region.

Likewise, the spread of European notions of national identity and community, such as those theorized by Gellner and Kedourie, further twisted and iterated by internal Egyptian forces, established a national consciousness accepting of, and demanding, change and total independence. Anthony Smith's comparatively rigid definition of an *ethnie* is not the most useful concept to understand this pattern. Rather, a more pragmatic coalition formed; Egypt, owing to its position as a nation possessing both a storied ancient history along with a world-religious population ethnically similar to its neighbors, developed conceptions of nationhood influenced by both

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<sup>91</sup> Vatikiotis. *Nasser and His Generation*, 28. This characterization of Egyptian society stands in direct contrast with Charles Smith's criticisms of numerous authors' application of Anderson's theory. Vatikiotis' seminal work was published prior to Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1978 versus 1983), meaning that any conclusions drawn by Vatikiotis could not have been influenced or biased by having read Anderson's work. In fact, Vatikiotis' history would reinforce the significance Anderson places on print culture in the development and, in this instance, proliferation of nationalism.

domestic and international factors. In other words, if an *ethnie* is a solely insular construction, the Egyptian nation does not qualify as one during this period.

Ultimately, the national self-conception as a unified, if diverse, and expansionist, if not imperialist, power did not only emerge during Nasser's reign. Its roots extend decades prior, spiraling ever closer towards visions of full independence and regional power-wrangling from the moment the British ended their formal occupation in 1922. Popular perceptions of Egyptian history and the European ideology of nationalism informed Egypt's unique Pharaonic legacy, which, along with the regional influence of general Islamic nationalism, coalesced into a potent ideological cocktail of anti-imperial, Arab-focused, Egyptian exceptionalist nationalism that Nasser would incorporate into his Pan-Arab nationalist ideology.

### *Nasser's Revolutionary Leadership, Egyptian Nationalist Legacy, and the Winds of History*

Mohamed Heikal declared the conclusion to *The Cairo Documents*, an account of Nasser's relations with numerous world leaders and statesmen, "An Epilogue to an Era."<sup>92</sup> He writes almost nostalgically of the time when world leaders "were men of a certain character, of what came to be called, too glibly, 'charisma.'"<sup>93</sup> He argues that true leadership was quickly going out of fashion; anonymous technocrats now governed the world, not magnetic personalities.<sup>94</sup> Where leaders once represented individuals who fought their way to the top through war, revolution, or regular political

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<sup>92</sup> Mohamed Heikal. *The Cairo Documents*, (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1973), 358.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> Heikal. *The Cairo Documents*, 359. This book was published in 1973. Through the roughly five decades that have elapsed since, one can still see numerous examples of charismatic leadership, making Heikal's claim of a monumental shift in the nature of leadership dubious. With the "return" of personality-driven leaders such as Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin, the study of such forms of leadership is more relevant than ever.

sparring and maintained a readily identifiable public image, the “new” wave of influential actors, such as Henry Kissinger, ruled through bureaucracy and by-passing open political challenges.<sup>95</sup> Esoterically, this development seemingly ushered in the “end” of individual agency in history, instead granting agency to committees and collectives. Yet, Heikal’s observation echoes across time; others temporally distant from the Egyptian journalist too have noticed a shift away from individualism and towards what this study terms the concept of “collective determinism” or the progression of history through movements and processes larger than, and uncontrollable by, any single individual. However, collective determinism, while not without its merits, does not adequately account for the demonstrable capacity of individuals to profoundly affect and alter history. Nasser proves both a product of these macroscopic “winds of history” *and* a contributor to their creation.

Returning first to Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, wherein the author’s ruminations on “great men” provide an influential, often critical basis for the modern study of leadership and the influence of individuals on history—in line with collective determinist thought. Tolstoy writes that,

In historic events the so-called great men are labels giving names to events, and like labels they have but the smallest connection with the event itself.

Every act of theirs, which appears to them an act of their own will, is in an historical sense involuntary and is related to the whole course of history and predestined from eternity.<sup>96</sup>

Tolstoy here argues in favor of the “winds of history,” so-to-speak, or that patterns and processes inform the course of human events far more than could a single individual. The misconception of history as mere stories of individuals, evident in the makeup of the word “history” itself, frustrates

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Tolstoy. *War and Peace*, 1256.

Tolstoy. Such oversimplification, to the author, risks compromising the field's use as a tool for understanding and predicting human behavior. He continues,

'But every time there have been conquests there have been conquerors; every time there has been a revolution in any state there have been great men,' says history. And, indeed, human reason replies: every time conquerors appear there have been wars, but this does not prove that the conquerors caused the wars and that it is possible to find the laws of a war in the personal activity of a single man. Whenever I look at my watch and its hands point to ten, I hear the bells of the neighboring church; but because the bells begin to ring when the hands of the clock reach ten, I have no right to assume that the movement of the bells is caused by the position of the hands of the watch.<sup>97</sup>

So by confusing the wider historical patterns as mere actions of leaders, or so-called "great men," people lose sight of the forces guiding history. Tolstoy's sentiments here foster a distinctly deterministic view of human history—minimizing the influence of individual historical agency and contradicting views he himself expressed to open this chapter.

Yet Tolstoy perhaps misconstrues the role of "great men" in history. Granted, they may be servants to grandiose ideologies or abstract historical laws unintelligible to any one person, but why should that preclude them from making an outsized impact on history? Determinism to Tolstoy indeed begets larger historical forces, imperceptibly influencing the vast majority of individual human actors. However, by the author's own admission certain individuals, subconsciously or otherwise, perceive these patterns.<sup>98</sup> Surely, if beholden to "inseparably bound together infinitely small elements of freedom," such leaders throughout history have acted as conduits for movements greater than themselves. And while the sentiments they espoused may have proven beyond the realm of precise comprehension, individuals, even if they functioned as pure mouthpieces, as Tolstoy would argue, could not help but further their own relatively narrow interpretation of unknowable historical forces. Such is the nature of synthesis; one *cannot*

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<sup>97</sup> Tolstoy. *War and Peace*, 1700-1701.

<sup>98</sup> Tolstoy. *War and Peace*, 2248.

physically, mentally, or intellectually express the entire breadth of any subject, so they must *choose* certain characteristics to emphasize.

Nasser quite helpfully synthesized his worldview into *The Philosophy of the Revolution*. Published in 1954, the hastily compiled manifesto sought to clearly define and elaborate the President's vision for the future of Egypt. However, Nasser begins with the past, "to discover who we are and what our role is to be in the succeeding stages of Egypt's history."<sup>99</sup> His rhetoric assents to Tolstoy's characterization of "great men" in history, as vicarious vessels through which larger processes act. Nasser rhetorically wonders of both himself and the entire Egyptian people:

When was the day on which I discovered the seeds of revolution within me? The truth is that these seeds were not only hidden in me; I found them also in the hearts of a great many others, who in turn could not pinpoint the beginnings of their existence. Is it not clear then that these seeds were implanted in us when we were born, and that they were a hope concealed in our subconscious, put there by the generation before us?<sup>100</sup>

From this one observes the dichotomy embodied by Nasser—one that would come to embody all of Egypt as a result—and the centrality of revolutionary ideology in constructing *his* modern Egyptian national mythos. Nasser clearly cites the influence of previous national and revolutionary movements in creating the conditions for his contemporary struggle.<sup>101</sup> He continues:

I am one of those who believe that nothing can exist in a vacuum; even truth cannot so exist. Truth is that which we feel and know in our hearts to be right, or to be more exact, that which our souls embrace. Our souls are the vessels in which everything we are is contained; and everything we are, everything placed in these vessels, must take their shape, even truth. I try as much as humanely possible to prevent my soul from altering the shape of the truth very much, but how far can I succeed?... I want to be fair to myself and fair to the philosophy of the revolution. So I leave it to history to draw up its outlines as I see them, as others see them, and as they are demonstrated by events—and then to distill from all this the full truth.<sup>102</sup>

<sup>99</sup> Nasser. *Philosophy of the Revolution*, 11.

<sup>100</sup> Nasser. *Philosophy of Revolution*, 27-28

<sup>101</sup> For more, see Nasser. *Philosophy of Revolution*, 18 and Heikal. *The Cairo Documents*, 14.

<sup>102</sup> Nasser. *Philosophy of Revolution*, 28-29.

Nasser's words harken back to Tolstoy's, presenting his actions as "predestined from eternity" and himself as a mere automaton that may take action only once filled (by some esoteric force) with the truth. Yet he, unlike Tolstoy, recognizes the bias inherent in such a process. For one cannot express the *whole* truth; despite their best efforts they unconsciously distort and corrupt it. But one can express *their* truth—the truth about which Nasser speaks. By appealing to history, Nasser acknowledges that, while his ideology and vision purport to be superior to pre-existing ones, such an assertion can only be proven by the passage of time. Nasser essentially argues for an experiment of sorts: a test of the new order versus the old. Society is the independent variable. Historical perception is the dependent variable. Even with such incredibly large-scale instruments of analysis, he who conducted the experiment is still crucial in determining its outcome.

Historian James Burns writes extensively on the art of leadership and, in contrast to Tolstoy, the profound role of (certain) individuals in history. Of interest to this study is his analysis of revolutionary leadership. Burns argues that revolutions necessitate societal conflict, and that the origins of such conflict must, at least in theory, reflect the will of the populace to change a fundamental characteristic of the society in which they live. The leader, to Burns, understands the crux of the population's frustration, perhaps even before the population itself, and can rouse them to action when the moment beckons.<sup>103</sup> Further, revolutionary conflict begets the movement of individuals or systems towards normative extremes; the old leader is wholly evil; the revolutionary leader is wholly good. This allows the population to easily observe and delineate the "right" and "wrong" sides, even if those two descriptors are entirely constructed. The essence of revolutionary leadership, in Burns' own words, is "the raising of social and political *consciousness* on the part

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<sup>103</sup> James MacGregor Burns. *Leadership*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 202.



of both leaders and followers.”<sup>104</sup> In other words, successful revolutions replaced an older worldview with a newer, ostensibly more refined one. The leader observes grand inconsistencies in their current society, and through radical change seeks to reconcile them. Burns writes that “the cardinal responsibility of leadership is to identify the dominant contradiction at each point of the historical process and to work out a central line to resolve it... Leaders are not pale reflectors of major social conflicts; they play up some, play down others, ignore still others.”<sup>105</sup>

To Nasser, the central contradiction lay in the conflict between the “millstones” of the so-called two revolutions. “Every people on earth,” Nasser writes, “goes through two revolutions: a political revolution by which it wrests the right to govern itself from the hand of tyranny, or from the army stationed upon its soil against its will; and a social revolution, involving the conflict of classes, which settles down when justice is secured for the citizens of the united nation.”<sup>106</sup> The aspirations of these two revolutions are diametrically opposed; the political revolution seeks to immediately unite the populace against an easily identifiable, morally simplistic enemy from without—moving towards normative extremes. Nasser’s “tyrant” likely represents King Farouk, while the mention of the army refers to the era of Britain’s “soft” occupation of Egypt from 1922-1952. The social revolution, on the other hand, uproots existing values and principles, sowing discord amongst a society’s inner workings; it causes “us to hate each other and think only of ourselves.”<sup>107</sup>

Yet these revolutions occur in tandem, demanding simultaneously a united front against tyrannical, in this case foreign, aggression *and* radical upheaval of existing domestic social structures. Nasser, identifying and constructing this dualistic revolutionary ideology, proudly

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<sup>104</sup> Burns, *Leadership*, 203.

<sup>105</sup> Burns, *Leadership*, 237.

<sup>106</sup> Nasser. *Philosophy of Revolution*, 41.

<sup>107</sup> Nasser. *Philosophy of Revolution*, 41.

offers his central line to resolve it. Caught between a revolution “which obliges us to unite in one phalanx and to forget the past, and... another revolution which demands that we restore lost dignity to our moral values by not forgetting the past,” Nasser proposes that “our only salvation lies... in maintaining our speed of movement and our initiative, and our ability to travel through two revolutions simultaneously.”<sup>108</sup> The Egyptian leader, then, sought to toe a careful line between unity and discord, holding opposing ideological goals in his own, and Egypt’s, consciousness. “Salvation,” as it were, would necessarily be achieved by one with the ability to rapidly adjust to and pragmatically resolve unforeseen contradictions in the two revolutions; to succeed, Nasser needed to become, at least in part, a fox (to borrow historian John Lewis Gaddis’ verbiage).

Gaddis, eschewing the dense, conceptual prose of Burns, instead offers narratively driven lessons and ruminations on leadership across time and space. He recounts the life of Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997), a political scientist, historian, and philosopher who reinvented the theory of the “fox and the hedgehog” in modern times. While attending a high-class London dinner party, Berlin, who had a penchant for conversation and learning from others, met the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Oxford and Asquith, who relayed to him an intriguing line from the Ancient Greek poet Archilochus of Paros. It read: “The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.”<sup>109</sup> This excerpt prompted Berlin to investigate the nature of how people construct and synthesize their perception of the world. In his 1953 *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, Berlin elaborated on the differences between the two groups of people. Hedgehogs, he said, “relate everything to a single central vision [where] all that they say and do has significance.”<sup>110</sup> Foxes, conversely, “pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory, connected, if at all, only in some *de facto* way.”<sup>111</sup> The two philosophies,

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<sup>108</sup> Nasser. *Philosophy of Revolution*, 44-45.

<sup>109</sup> Gaddis. *On Grand Strategy*, 4.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

to Berlin, represented entirely different manners through which one viewed the world. Either every pattern, process, and event connected via a unified point of reference (to a hedgehog), or connections between such observations proved trivial and contrived (to a fox).

Berlin applied this theory to *War and Peace* specifically, arguing that the literary leviathan lost itself in the minutia of peculiarities, details, and descriptions that defy theory and manifest contradiction. These contradictions, apparent even in the comparatively few excerpts cited in this study—the version of the book used presently runs two-thousand five-hundred-twenty pages, after all—appeared to Berlin emblematic of a mind broken from years of attempting to reconcile the two philosophies.<sup>112</sup> Hedgehogs and foxes illustrate conceptually the ever-present contradiction between theory and practice. Hedgehogs prefer theories, forcing reality to conform to their high-minded ideological principles; Xerxes, when presented with the need to transport his armies over the natural obstructions of Hellespont river and Athos peninsula, chose to bridge the river and cut a canal through the peninsula, enforcing his supposed dominance over the surrounding environment.<sup>113</sup> Foxes, on the other hand, rely entirely on the circumstances of the present, constantly shifting attention to any number of simultaneous, often competing objectives; Xerxes' advisor during the Peloponnesian campaign, Artabanus, frequently became paralyzed by indecision, attempting to prepare for every eventual calamity and failing to see if and how those events related.<sup>114</sup>

Gaddis and Berlin's philosophy of leadership was therefore predicated on reconciling contradictions and balancing the often simultaneous, conflicting impulses of hedgehogs and foxes. A great leader must be able to see the horizon, keeping his objectives in mind, while also

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<sup>112</sup> Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy*, 5.

<sup>113</sup> Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy*, 7.

<sup>114</sup> Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy*, 13.

maintaining the aptitude and awareness to maneuver around nearby obstacles and challenges that inevitably arise along the way. Essentially, it is sometimes impossible to reconcile and live without *all* contradictions, “and learning to live within that condition—let’s call it *history*—requires adaptation to incompatibles.”<sup>115</sup> Gaddis ultimately believes that true leadership involves aligning potentially infinite ends with physically limited means; Xerxes, even if possessing an infinitely strong will, could not have become the impossibly ambitious “King of Kings” due to the physical bounds of reality.<sup>116</sup> Those leaders who, unlike Xerxes, keep these guiding principles in mind, to Gaddis, tend to remain examples of positive leadership throughout time, only able to implement their beneficial visions for humankind so long as they are mindful of these larger “laws” of history.

Jean Lacouture would likely describe this sort of leader as “chosen by history.” The predisposition of this sort of person to “feel” the winds of history bellowing at his or her side and to not take actions that force them to go against it to Lacouture necessitate a figure who “is shaped more by events than his convictions.”<sup>117</sup> Lacouture believes Nasser fit into this category, writing that he seemed “a cautious prophet chosen at the *n*th hour and who would have preferred to be a *raïs* rather than a *zaïm*, to play the cards rather than merely deal them. But once he became a symbol, how quickly he made up for the period of hesitation!”<sup>118</sup> Interestingly, Lacouture draws a distinction between *raïs*, Arabic for “president” or “malik,” and *zaïm*, Arabic for “leader.” This would imply that Nasser displayed more of a predilection towards concrete, institutionalized power

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<sup>115</sup>Gaddis concludes *On Grand Strategy* with a criticism of Robert Kennedy’s claim that the United States should not be proud of the territory it took from Mexico in the Mexican-American War. Considering the alternative, giving the territory back, Gaddis believes that most Americans would not, “for satisfying the claims of justice in this instance would not only disrupt the present and the future, but also the past: wouldn’t the Mexicans then have to give it all back to the Spanish, and then the Spanish to the indigenous populations they decimated, and then those people to the flora and fauna they displaced after crossing the land bridge from Siberia thousands of years earlier?” Gaddis. *On Grand Strategy*, 312

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Lacouture, *The Demigods*, 23.

<sup>118</sup> Lacouture, *The Demigods*, 24.

rather than a more nebulous, socially constructed power dynamic. Indeed, Lacouture points towards Nasser's Islamic faith as further evidence of this sentiment. He describes three Islamic concepts associated with authority: *hukm*, *beya*, and *ijma*. *Hukm* represents the individual characteristic of authority bestowed upon individuals by God. The *beya*, or oath of faith, sanctions this, solidifying the sentiment within the individual. Finally, the authority is subject to *ijma*, or the consensus of the people, positive or negative.<sup>119</sup> Lacouture argues that, to Nasser, *hukm* and *beya* “almost always” supersede *ijma*.<sup>120</sup>

The concepts of *hukm* and *beya* adhere to sociologist Max Weber's theory of charismatic leadership and extraordinary individuals. Weber famously defines “charisma” in his seminal work *Economy and Society* as:

a certain quality of individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a “leader.”<sup>121</sup>

Nasser's Islam-informed *hukm*, drawing “exceptional powers or qualities” from God, fits this description of charisma; Weber specifically mentions such characteristics’ perceived “divine origin.” In other words, leaders possessing these qualities cannot avoid their natural ability to attract, carry, and convince an audience. This sort of leader, according to Weber, generally comes from a society's elite or ruling class—only there might one be able to effectively wield the instruments of change.<sup>122</sup> Weber argues powerful ideas, rather than material power, behoove this revolution from the top. Citing the 1905 Russian revolution as an example, Weber states that:

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<sup>119</sup> Lacouture. *The Demigods*, 91.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Paul Joosse. “Becoming a God: Max Weber and the social construction of charisma,” *Journal of Classical Sociology*, Vol. 14 (3) (2014): 270.

<sup>122</sup> Randall Collins, “Weber and the Sociology of Revolution.” In *Max Weber's 'Economy and Society'*, edited by Charles Camic, Philip S. Gorski, and David M. Trubek. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005),

This example is evidence of what the power of an 'idea' which unites the classes, and the cooperation of broad strata of the bourgeoisie can achieve, and how little [the alleged material indispensability of the workers] can achieve without that uncertainty in the established cadres of the existing social order which is brought about by such cooperation among bourgeois elements.<sup>123</sup>

The same principles Weber lays out above apply to Nasser's Free Officer Revolution in 1952, a revolution led by a group of officers in the Egyptian military that swept across the nation, deposing King Farouk. The revolution there, as Weber posited, stemmed from the top, albeit with no clear identification of an individual ringleader (although Nasser would in time establish himself as such). Nasser and the Free Officer's philosophy, combining the forces outlined in the previous section (see pages 42 and 43), widely appealed to the Egyptian nation, enabling their success in securing power while adhering to Weber's theory of charisma and revolution.

Despite his emergence as the head of the Free Officers, Nasser ironically distanced himself from the term "leader" in *Philosophy of the Revolution*. Describing the predicament faced by Revolutionary Egypt and the Arab World following the removal of King Farouk, Nasser believes there to be a "role, wandering aimlessly in search of a hero."<sup>124</sup> "This role," Nasser continues, "is not one of leadership. It is rather a role of interaction with and responsibility to all the above-mentioned factors."<sup>125</sup> Here Nasser appears to intuit Gaddis' lessons in leadership; he grounds himself in principles and history. The "above-mentioned factors" reference the preceding subchapter *Geographical Limits*, an exploration of Egypt's unique location and its status as an intersectional power, at the junction of the Arab World, Africa, the Middle East, and the Islamic

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302. Collins identifies the dominant theory of revolution as a "revolution from the top," wherein a particular subset of a society's elite convinces the public that some sort of radical societal change is necessary.

<sup>123</sup> Collins, "Weber and the Sociology of Revolution," in *Max Weber's Economy and Society*, ed. Camic, 310.

<sup>124</sup> Nasser. *Philosophy of Revolution*, 87.

<sup>125</sup> Nasser. *Philosophy of Revolution*, 88.

World.<sup>126</sup> So while Nasser's principles may have differed from Gaddis' in their more temporally and geographically restricted nature, the overriding lesson remained the same: to keep one's ends within means by way of looking back at history.

Nasser's Islamic, conservative upbringing engrained in him the Muslim notion of authority, conjuring a more cosmic ideology of leadership, based on fundamental, immutable qualities that individuals either possess or lack. His observation of the centrality of Egypt's role in overlapping worlds and the not-at-all veiled call to action implies a different sort of historical collectivism: that of the convergence of patterns in a specific time and place and the need to act on it. One need not possess Weberian "exceptional" or "superhuman" characteristics; they need only be able to observe the path of history and offer a compelling vision for its future.

### *Lighting the Fuse*

Nasser personifies this balance between individual agency and the collective winds of history. His pan-Arab ideology, evident in *Philosophy of the Revolution*, is but the latest form of a process possessing old sources. Nationalism, initially a fundamentally European idea, spread across the globe, adopting new meaning to people such as members of the Wafd Party and Muslim Brotherhood. These factions and more fomented the modern beginnings of Egyptian Arab nationalism through a print culture that concretized the nebulous concepts of an Egyptian ethnîe, eventually coalescing into a nation with roots, contrary to many nations, both domestic and international. Once firmly in power, Nasser took up the reigns of these early reformers, coopting Egyptian Arab nationalism and advancing its cause under a new name: pan-Arabism. He

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<sup>126</sup> Nasser. *Philosophy of Revolution*, 84-86.

accomplished this through a primarily intuitive philosophy of leadership, sensing the winds of history swirling around him and building a sailboat upon which he could ride them.

The Egyptian nation bears a strong resemblance to Nasser's own path through history. As Nasser himself said, the task he saw Egypt facing was "a role such as to spark this tremendous power latent in the area surrounding us; a role tantamount to an experiment, with the aim of creating a great strength which will then undertake a positive part in the building of the future of mankind."<sup>127</sup> The conditions from which modern Egypt emerged as a nation, therefore, left a gap of agency and responsibility that only an active society could advance. At the center of that society, microscopically, there existed a gap large enough for only one; only a single individual could occupy the role Egypt left for him. The only thing keeping Egypt from realizing its potential as leader of the Arab world was filling the leadership gap in society; it needed only a fuse to be lit.

By the end of 1956, as British soldiers withdrew from the Suez Canal Zone, not a soul in Egypt, nor the Middle East, nor the world at large doubted that Premier Gamal Abdel Nasser fit that role, filled that gap, and through his own will, meticulously well-executed statecraft, and good fortune, led the Egyptian people towards their presumptive collective destiny.

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<sup>127</sup> Nasser. *Philosophy of Revolution*, 88.



## CHAPTER 2

### Short Causes

What Nasser accomplished during the Suez Crisis presents an enduring and eminently significant example of superbly effective leadership in a pressing domestic and international emergency. The Egyptian President ushered the British Empire to (in the eyes of many scholars) its ignominious end. His understanding of the prevailing international system enabled him to tilt the balance of power in his favor, expertly manipulating international opinion and playing the two global superpowers off one another and against the Anglo-French coalition. Through these efforts he catapulted himself and his nation to regional supremacy; *Nasserism*, as his pan-Arab nationalist ideology came to be known, spread across the Arab world, tangibly manifesting itself in the formation of the United Arab Republic, a (shortlived) union between Egypt and Syria, in 1958. The Suez Crisis exhibited that a potent mixture of nationalism and charismatic leadership could result in radical regional change with global geopolitical implications. The event, in particular

Nasser's leadership throughout, maintains an indispensable role in the interconnected histories of decolonial movements, the Cold War, and the development of global nationalism.

This chapter will begin with an examination of Britain's shifting national identity and the British and American positions in the Middle East in the early 1950s before delving into their policies during the Suez Crisis proper.<sup>128</sup> The following section will detail broader Cold War geopolitics and ideology, identifying the role of the Soviet Union and other international powers. The next section addresses the international legal debate, described in minutes on the floor of the UN, the documents governing the Canal's operation, and the Egyptian government's *White Paper* on the Canal's nationalization. Finally, the chapter concludes with a final assessment of Nasser's individual role in instigating the Suez Crisis, and his personal culpability for its myriad consequences in Egypt, the Middle East, and the world at large.

The Suez Crisis shook the already rocky foundations of European empires, namely the British and the French. European colonialism and imperialism, having weathered significant blows in both World Wars, had begun to decline long before 1956.<sup>129</sup> In fact, scholars have argued that global imperial enterprise, while previously serving primarily to make metropolises extravagantly wealthy, during the post-World War II era functioned as "essential for the smooth running of Western capitalism."<sup>130</sup> Britain and France, in other words, had become dependent on their imperial holdings for economic stability following World War II. The United States too propped up much of Western Europe, including Britain and France, via economic support initiatives such

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<sup>128</sup> The ramifications of the Suez Crisis on French imperialism are numerous and worthy of a detailed study of their own. Owing to the author's time spent in London, rather than Paris, conducting primary research, this study will focus primarily on the Crisis' consequences for the British.

<sup>129</sup> John Lewis Gaddis. *The Cold War: A New History*. (New York: The Penguin Press, 2005), 121.

<sup>130</sup> Guy Laron. *Origins of the Suez Crisis: Postwar Development Diplomacy and the Struggle over Third World Industrialization, 1945-1956*. (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 2.

as the Marshall Plan and general access to financial liquidity.<sup>131</sup> This granted the United States a considerable degree of control over these nations' foreign policy, as the Americans could threaten to withdraw financial support should Britain or France cross them on the international stage.

Indeed, during the Suez Crisis the United States threatened to cut off the supply of Venezuelan oil, on which Britain especially had come to depend, increasing the pressure on the two powers.<sup>132</sup> These power plays signified the influence America maintained in the new international economic order, and demonstrated not only that they would flex their economic muscle to achieve geopolitical goals, but that they would do so at the expense of their staunchest allies, and their imperialist aims, if necessary.<sup>133</sup> These actions exemplified a rare period of tension between the Western bloc during the Cold War,<sup>134</sup> illustrating that neither the United Kingdom nor France could use force to further their foreign policy objectives, a radical departure from the decidedly imperialistic state of the world mere decades earlier.

More than proving only that European imperialism was dead, Suez illustrates the pivotal changes in the international system following World War II, providing a microcosm of the growing power of decolonial nationalism, the non-aligned movement, and the pragmatism of American foreign policy. America feared that developing nations, recently free from the shackles of imperial rule, would choose to align themselves with the Soviet Union or China, viewing the United States

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<sup>131</sup> Laron, *Origins*, 50.

<sup>132</sup> Britain had, since the attempted nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) in 1951 and subsequent legal arbitration at The Hague, become more dependent on American-extracted Venezuelan oil imports. Interestingly, The International Court of Law blocked the nationalization of the AIOC because of several articles in the AIOC concession stipulating exact arbitration and dissolution procedures for the company—none of which permitted wholesale nationalization. The concessions and convention governing the Suez Canal contained no such stipulation. Katayoun Shafiee. "Technopolitics of a Concessionary Contract: How International Law was Transformed by its Encounter with Anglo-Iranian Oil." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 50, no. 4 (11, 2018): 627-648. doi.org/10.1017/S0020743818000909, 630.

<sup>133</sup> Heller. *Cold War and the New Imperialism*, 93.

<sup>134</sup> Heller. *Cold War and the New Imperialism*, 327.

as an imperialist power in the same vein as the old powers of Europe.<sup>135</sup> Such a potentiality “put decolonization in a new context: the emergence of nationalism, from Washington’s perspective, could cause as much trouble as the persistence of colonialism.”<sup>136</sup> Colonialism and decolonial nationalism formed a vicious cycle from the American perspective, wherein the continued existence of the former only exacerbated potentially anti-American sentiments in the latter.

Anti-American sentiments could have potentially led “third-world” nations into the waiting arms of the Soviet Union; “I’m not an adventurer,” Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev once exclaimed, “but we must aid national liberation movements.”<sup>137</sup> Yet some nations in this emerging third world were wary of either superpower’s hegemonic ambitions, opting to walk a different path. The first conference of these so-called “non-aligned” powers convened in Bandung, Indonesia, in April 1955, discussing and advocating neutrality as a means to preserve national sovereignty; non-aligned powers, their leaders hoped, could balance the competing interests of the two superpowers, courting favor with both in a precarious balance that at its core advanced domestic national interests. Nasser, as it were, “would soon prove to be the most skillful of all the practitioners of ‘non-alignment.’”<sup>138</sup>

In standing up to perceived Anglo-French imperial aggression, Nasser showed the rest of the Arab world, and the entire third world, that the days of European supremacy had long passed, and that nations once at the mercy of those powers now possessed and could assert power of their own. He exhibited tact and cunning in maneuvering within the United States and the Soviet Union’s bipolar international system, operating within the marginal spaces between the two and exploiting each other’s geopolitical fears to his advantage. Personally, the Crisis enabled the rise

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<sup>135</sup> Gaddis. *Cold War*, 123.

<sup>136</sup> Gaddis. *Cold War*, 123-124.

<sup>137</sup> Gaddis. *Cold War*, 122.

<sup>138</sup> Gaddis. *Cold War*, 127.

of Nasser as an influential international actor. To paraphrase a scene in Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins*, the Egyptian President became more than a man; he became a symbol. That symbol signified the emergence of global, decolonial nationalism, the trust of a nation placed in a single individual, and the ability of that individual to navigate the winds of history towards their ultimate objectives. Indeed, Nasser did not accomplish such a herculean task as cementing the decline of the British Empire entirely through grand strategic ingenuity; his primary adversary, British Prime Minister Anthony Eden, took several painful missteps that made Nasser's path far less treacherous.

### *The Aging British Lion*

Anthony Eden held office during the Suez Crisis, an event that, as characterized by historian David Carlton, "cruelly punctured most of the [United Kingdom's] remaining pretensions to being a power of the first rank."<sup>139</sup> The conflict, in other words, cemented the end of Britain's status as a global power in her national consciousness. Yet, if Suez was truly Britain's Hellespont, the roots of the calamity ran deep. Throughout the Crisis and through the lens of Anthony Eden himself, one observes numerous echoes of earlier mentalities, patterns, and events that shaped Britain's contemporary perception of their imperial status. This obsession and widespread misconstruing of the lessons of the past heavily contributed to Britain's grand strategic failure during the Suez Crisis. British national identity at this time was still informed by the legacy of World War II and their global empire; it was the pursuit to maintain the latter drove them to their drastic actions at Suez. Moreover, the British, unlike Nasser, failed to observe the macroscopic

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<sup>139</sup> Carlton. *Britain & the Suez Crisis* 3.

structural changes in the global system, namely the ever-rising tide of decolonial sentiment and frustration with the empires of olde. The nation's oblivious foreign policy directives enabled Nasser to manipulate the crisis to his advantage.

Eden's mentality throughout the crisis proved decidedly stuck in a previous conflict; specifically, his erroneous characterization of Nasser as a fascist despot, reminiscent of Hitler or Mussolini, was a driving factor in Eden's insistence of the use of force against Egypt. Appeasement in any form appeared to Eden ineffectual and even dangerous, or so the terrible lessons of the nineteen-thirties and World War II ingrained in him.<sup>140</sup> In a personal telegram to President Eisenhower dated August 5th, 1956, Eden espouses that "Nasser has embarked on a course which is unpleasantly familiar. His seizure of the Canal was undoubtedly designed to impress opinion not only in Egypt but in the Arab World and in all Africa too."<sup>141</sup> There is little doubt that Eden viewed Nasser's nationalization of the Canal as akin to the German annexation of Austria, the Sudetenland, or Czechoslovakia: the three actions that proved merely the prelude to a disastrous, general European war. Later in the same message, Eden explicitly teases out Nasser's supposed connection to his fascist "peers," writing "I have never thought Nasser a Hitler... But the parallel with Mussolini is close. Neither of us can forget the lives and treasure he cost us before he was finally dealt with."<sup>142</sup> The living memory of World War II and the miscalculated passivity of British strategy prior to that conflict left a discernable mark on Eden and wider British policy during the Suez Crisis.

In line with concerns of appeasing a supposed dictator, Eden's government also acted in the interests of preserving the remnants of their once globe-spanning empire. This philosophy

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<sup>140</sup> Ashton. *Eisenhower, Macmillan, and the Problem of Nasser*, 8.

<sup>141</sup> Eden, Anthony. PREM 11/1098 T352/56. United Kingdom National Archives, Kew.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

forced them into a situation in which their grand imperial ambition outstripped their now comparatively humble economic, militaristic, and geopolitical capabilities. For despite granting independence to the Indian subcontinent in 1947, thereby freeing up a vast amount of resources to be allocated in pursuit of colonial objectives elsewhere, the nation remained “a front-rank global power if judged by its commitments. But it was certainly not so if judged by its capacity to fulfil them.”<sup>143</sup> The disastrous economic reality of Great Britain in 1945 contributed to this, fostering an increasingly unilateral dependence on American financing and trade; the United Kingdom owed £15 billion to the United States in 1945.<sup>144</sup> It could therefore ill afford to give up its other colonial possessions, despite the significant cost to project the necessary power to such spatially disparate areas. Indeed, in 1947 chancellor of the Exchequer, Hugh Dalton, estimated that the British government spent £1 billion each year to deploy over 1.5 million British colonial administrators, including soldiers, across the colonies.<sup>145</sup> The British government placed much hope in Egypt specifically, believing the area ripe for economic development and more easily governable than their colonies in Asia and elsewhere in Africa.<sup>146</sup> Taking those factors into account, the domestic British economy could not support their still sizeable colonial apparatus, but neither could it support their financial commitments to the United States—commitments essential to preventing economic collapse—*without* revenue from the colonies: a Catch-22. Thus the British Empire during the mid-twentieth century failed to abide by one of Gaddis’ most prescient lessons in grand strategy: keeping ends within means.

Perhaps the disconnect between idealism and reality stemmed from erroneous assumptions on the part of Eden and the British government regarding the state of decolonial movements. In

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<sup>143</sup> Carlton. *Britain & the Suez Crisis*, 4.

<sup>144</sup> Laron. *Origins*, 14.

<sup>145</sup> Laron. *Origins*, 15.

<sup>146</sup> Laron. *Origins*, 23. In short order, though, Egypt would become ungovernable.

1951, less than a year before the Free Officer Revolution and deposition of King Farouk, British intelligence in Cairo relayed countless messages to their superiors in London exclaiming the apparent elitism of Arab nationalism. Ralph Stevenson, then-British ambassador to Egypt, believed that,

In claiming to represent the feelings of 20 million Egyptians when they accuse Britain of refusing to grant Egypt her rights, ministers and newspaper editors are indulging in demagogic exaggeration. They represent, in fact, the feelings of a minority of professional politicians, would-be politicians and journalists... The majority of people, both in town and country, are quite evidently pre-occupied with other matters.<sup>147</sup>

The mass appeal of Egyptian nationalism seemed incomprehensible to contemporary British observers. Such a failure of intelligence speaks to, among other factors, the lack of British unity on the issue of Nasser and Arab nationalism, and display the total naivety in dealing with Middle Eastern geopolitics.

The French too displayed the same lack of awareness during the Suez Crisis proper. In an August 2<sup>nd</sup> meeting between the United States, France, and the United Kingdom, the French foreign minister, Christian Pineau, discussed a linguistic amendment to a communique to be sent to Nasser, offering a potential solution. According to the minutes, Pineau “in referring to the interests of Egypt wished there to be a specific mention of the Egyptian people.”<sup>148</sup> To this US Secretary of State John Dulles “considered that it was difficult to make a distinction between a nation and its people.”<sup>149</sup> While not explicit, the French Minister appears to characterize the Egyptian people’s interest as distinctly different from the Egyptian *nation*’s. Perhaps Pineau began to subscribe to the notion of inseparability that came to exist between Nasser and Egypt. By distinguishing between the nation and the people, Pineau implicitly assented to British

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<sup>147</sup> Laron. *Origins of Suez Crisis*, 25.

<sup>148</sup> JE14211/1832. United Kingdom National Archives, Kew.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.



characterizations of the Egyptian government (and Nasser) as operating without the will of the people backing them. Dulles correctly points out, as the United States often did throughout the crisis, that the Egyptian people were not mere pawns to some individual or group of individuals, but indeed supported the nationalization of the Suez Canal.

In mid-1956, before tripartite military operations commenced, MI6 proposed staging a coup in Syria to topple the pro-Nasser government in the country, a plan that would have ostensibly swayed regional opinion back against the Egyptian president and his campaign in Suez. However, MI6's proposed timing illustrated their lack of awareness, and perhaps literal communication, with other British agencies. Indeed, at the same time the Foreign Office was in the midst of convincing Israel to stage an attack on Suez for the British and French to "break up." The Israeli invasion would no doubt be seen as connected to the British plot and arouse suspicion in Syria. Indeed, exactly that scenario played out once Syrian authorities received news of the Israeli offensive, leading to the arrest of many potential usurpers before the plot could coalesce (it was planned to occur on October 29<sup>th</sup>).<sup>150</sup>

There exists a continuity in British policy from the early 1950s through Suez: poor intelligence and poor native cultural understanding. Had Britain grasped the volatility of Arab nationalist sentiment in Egypt almost immediately prior to Nasser's revolution, their forces may have been able to respond and perhaps even prevent it. Moreover, their foreign-facing agencies failed in understanding the regional dynamics of public opinion and the potential fallout of their incredibly ill-coordinated, negatively compounding endeavors during the Suez Crisis proper.

Additionally, the British had buried themselves in too deep a hole. Henry Spruyt (of *Ending Empire*) describes a paradox in which many empires find themselves as they expand: the inverse

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<sup>150</sup> Ashton. *Problem of Nasser*, 83.

relationship between the ability to administer colonies and local populations' opinion of their colonial administrators. Spruyt writes that, "The greater the center's desire to control and develop its subject peripheries the more it unites the periphery against it."<sup>151</sup> In other words, the greater the investment in colonial holdings, the greater the chance that the investment would result in a hostile native population. And throughout the post-war era, Britain continued to invest vast amounts of resources into her colonies. During the peak of the 1950s and 1960s, for instance, the United Kingdom invested approximately 10 percent of the value of its exports on defense abroad.<sup>152</sup> The uptick to international economic historians P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins, reflected "continuing gentlemanly fantasies about great-power status."<sup>153</sup> This sentiment, echoing Napoleon's invasion of Russia, represented the abandonment of concrete objectives for abstract goals—ends outstripping means. For all of Eden and Britain's grand strategic failures in assessing Nasser and Egypt's anti-imperialist movements, and for all the ill-conceived economic and ideological rationale clouding their vision, perhaps the greatest challenge to British preeminence in the Middle East throughout the Suez Crisis, apart from Nasser himself, came from one of Britain's staunchest allies, the United States, working in concert with its greatest adversary, the Soviet Union.

Winston Churchill delivered a speech to the House of Commons on June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1940, regarding the state of the British military's evacuation from Dunkirk. In it he vowed never to surrender, and if "this Island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the oceans, armed and guarded by the British Fleet, will carry on the struggle until in God's good time the New World with all its power and might sets forth to the rescue and liberation of

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<sup>151</sup> Spruyt. *Ending Empire*, 226.

<sup>152</sup> Cain and Hopkins. *British Imperialism*, 282.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

the Old.”<sup>154</sup> Churchill sensed that the sources of power were moving away from Europe, Westward towards America, Eastward towards Asia, and Southward towards Africa. While he still believed this power would serve the whims of great European empires, time would bear out that Europe would no longer be so disproportionately the focus of global power politics.

In seeking to explain the relative brevity of European imperial rule compared to other empires throughout history, Elie Kedourie believes it to be the result of “two world wars which were started and conducted by the European Great Powers and which left them in a position of inferiority, not indeed to their colonies, but to the USA and the USSR—two Powers that, albeit for different reasons, have equally adopted the slogan of “anticolonialism.”<sup>155</sup> The Cold War, a conflict stemming from the ideological battle between American free market capitalism and Russian state-controlled communism, accelerated the end of European empires and forged an international system in which the United States and the Soviet Union, in exceedingly rare instances of agreement, held unilateral power over other states. The Suez Crisis exemplified the features of the new global system, to the dismay of the British.

### *The Cold War via Suez*

The Cold War began almost immediately after the conclusion of World War II in 1945. As Berlin lay in rubble and Tokyo in smolders, the victorious powers, a grand alliance of the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union, set out to rebuild the world under a new global order. As the only nation that emerged from the conflict more powerful than before, the United States maintained an enviable position in the post-war world; America possessed a flourishing

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<sup>154</sup> Gaddis. *On Grand Strategy*, 181.

<sup>155</sup> Kedourie. *Nationalism in Asia and Africa*, 23.

economy, control of the oceans via its impressive navy and wide-reaching network of foreign military bases, and a (temporary) monopoly on the atomic bomb, the hitherto most powerful weapon wrought by human hands.<sup>156</sup> America's position as global hegemon seemed all but assured. However, the Soviet Union challenged this assumption. While the Russian economy lay in tatters in 1945, by 1950 Soviet industrial production had surpassed prewar levels by an astounding 71 percent.<sup>157</sup> Russia was the world's second largest economy by GDP in 1960.<sup>158</sup> The two nations respectively comprised the leaders of the twentieth century's great ideological movements: capitalism and communism. America sought to spread neoliberal, free-market capitalism across the globe to expand its economic influence and open new markets for trade, while Russia believed that nominally egalitarian communism, primarily based on state-controlled planned economies, offered better prospects for the future.

Beyond ideology, the two nations became increasingly afraid of a potential war between one another, leading to a decades-long arms race akin to the Anglo-German naval arms race of the early 1910s (trading dreadnoughts out for thermonuclear weapons). In short, both the United States and the Soviet Union pursued the proliferation of their respective worldviews as a means to ensure their national security and international geopolitical position, all the while wary of engaging one another in direct conflict over these aspirations.

The Suez Crisis lies within this deeper context of the Cold War, an example of the international bipolar power structure's pervasiveness and intrusion into nearly every pivotal event of the era. Indeed, the United States and the Soviet Union's world system hampered Britain's ability to enforce their agenda at Suez, facilitating and enabling Nasser's victory without his direct

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<sup>156</sup> Heller. *Cold war and New Imperialism*, 28.

<sup>157</sup> Heller. *Cold war and New Imperialism*, 36.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

involvement. American involvement prior to and during the Crisis proved an increasingly irksome thorn in the British government's side, considering their dated delusions of imperial grandeur. The Soviet intervention, along with consensus international opinion, while less influential than America's, delivered the knockout punch, shattering the at one point tangible illusions of a coalition victory. And while it may seem that the Cold War dimension of the Suez Crisis minimized the impact Nasser's leadership throughout, this is far from the case.

### *American Involvement in the Middle East Prior to Suez*

The United States and United Kingdom initially appeared to share common goals for the post-war Middle East's structure. In the late 1940s both envisioned a "Middle East Command" to defend against communist influence, led by a British Supreme Commander and staffed by officers from the United States, France, Turkey, Egypt, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand—incredulously, only two of the nine could call themselves "Middle Eastern."<sup>159</sup> Yet the origins of future discontent already existed; the United States adopted an unflinchingly anti-colonial stance, to better position themselves as an alternative to the more overtly anti-imperial communists.<sup>160</sup> And over time the Americans began to suspect that the MEC may simply be a cover for the British to advance their own imperial and economic interests in the region, rather than a bulwark against the international spread of communism and Soviet influence.<sup>161</sup> Indeed, in 1953 US policy in the Middle East remained committed to their worldwide doctrine of containment, even when that put

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<sup>159</sup> Ashton. *Problem of Nasser*, 39.

<sup>160</sup> Lenin's *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, as the title suggests, tied together the two ideologies. The United States could ill afford to ally themselves with an imperial power, for fear of alienating an emerging, independent faction in global politics made up of former colonies.

<sup>161</sup> Ashton. *Problem of Nasser*, 38.

them at odds with British interests. While the British believed maintaining a base at Suez the most strategically sound step towards maintaining their regional power, the Americans cared relatively little for it.<sup>162</sup>

By 1955 the MEC had manifested itself in the Baghdad Pact, a defense agreement between Arab nations and the United Kingdom that sought to solidify the regional order under British dominion. While ostensibly a pact among equals—Jordan and Iraq were the primary potential signatories, while Nasser’s Egypt had bluntly rejected membership— the United States was, by mid-1955, entirely convinced that it represented nothing more than a cleverly disguised imperial takeover of the Middle East by Britain. President Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Dulles concurred that “the British had taken [the Baghdad Pact] over and run it as an instrument of British policy – that has drawn down upon it a tremendous amount of criticism.”<sup>163</sup> It is evident, then, that the Americans had the British on a short leash. The British still relied on American financing to prop up their economy and continued fantasies of great power status, which made them particularly reliant on American support in the Middle East or, more specifically, America *not* withdrawing their support for British policy. Unfortunately for Eden and the British government, the Suez Crisis would force America’s hand, testing the degree to which the Anglo-American alliance could bend before ultimately breaking under the immense pressure of the Cold War international system.

### *American Involvement in the Middle East During Suez*

While the United States never directly involved itself in military action against either side during the Suez Crisis, it brought its immense geopolitical influence to bear in the negotiation and

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<sup>162</sup> Ashton. *Problem of Nasser*, 40.

<sup>163</sup> Ashton. *Problem of Nasser*, 46.

ultimate resolution to the conflict, to the detriment of the British. Indeed, the withdrawal of American support spelled disaster for the advancement of British aims, as the United States' assent to British policy in the Middle East had hitherto been a key assumption in the formation of British policy; the UK could act more aggressively if they knew America stood behind them.

Over the course of the crisis, the three principal Western powers, the US, UK, and France, held numerous so-called "tripartite talks," often headed by French Foreign Minister Christian Pineau, British Foreign Minister Selwyn Lloyd, and American Secretary of State John Dulles. The meetings generally discussed how the three powers were to navigate the crisis. Observing records of these meetings, one notices the same behaviors that characterized earlier interactions between British and American diplomats concerning Middle East policy. Moreover, the meetings during Suez showcase the heightened tensions that would eventually result in America turning against the British.

In August, only weeks after Nasser nationalized the Canal, most of the talks revolved around negotiation, communication with Nasser, and organizing a conference between nations with a vested interest in the operation of the Canal. The seventh meeting of the tripartite delegation, dated August 2, 1956, discussed in detail a proposed conference between the various belligerent powers, whose economies relied significantly on the smooth operation of the canal.<sup>164</sup> In this meeting, Pineau and Lloyd pushed Dulles on several issues that, while not expressly aggressive, certainly rang of imperialist undertones (that the Americans would not support). For example, when Dulles thought that "the conference should not be held in the capitals of any of the Powers principally concerned," preferring Geneva or Rome, "Both the Foreign Secretary [Lloyd] and M.

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<sup>164</sup> The proposed conference would ultimately become the First London Conference, a congress Nasser chose not to attend. Kyle. *Suez*, 181 & 185.

Pineau expressed their preference for London.”<sup>165</sup> Dulles’ proposal would have extended an olive branch to Nasser, as such a venue would espouse an inherent neutrality and express that the French and British sought genuine negotiations as a means to resolve the Crisis. Lloyd and Pineau’s choice of host city, on the other hand, would have instantly alienated the Egyptian President and made negotiations more standoffish. Indeed, Nasser rejected the invitation once London was ultimately chosen as the host city for the conference because he suspected bad-faith mediation.<sup>166</sup>

In the same meeting, Lloyd expressed incredulity at Dulles’ suggestion of including the Soviet Union in the conference, with the minutes stating that he “had the greatest difficulty in accepting the United States suggestion that the Soviet Union should be invited to the conference. He considered that this would be most dangerous”<sup>167</sup> Counterintuitively, it was the British who exhibited trepidation at the prospects of inviting a power friendly to Nasser’s cause. As the conference would inevitably come to some consensus and set a course of action, it behooved the British and French to have as few states aligned with Egypt as possible. They also accomplished this by attempting to pack the conference with their own allies; when Dulles suggested Saudi Arabia and Iran ought to be invited, the other two men retorted that “Iraq would also have to be invited.”<sup>168</sup> As a British-backed monarchy, Iraq would be yet another friendly face at the conference. While this level of political bickering at first appears innocuous, it proved only a taste of events to come.

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<sup>165</sup> JE14211/1832. United Kingdom National Archives, Kew.

<sup>166</sup> Kyle. *Suez*, 185. While the choice of city is not expressly mentioned, it certainly lent itself to the perception that the British and French wanted little to do with placing themselves and Egypt on equal footing.

<sup>167</sup> JE14211/1832. United Kingdom National Archives, Kew.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*



Indeed, the initial crack in Anglo-American relations soon developed into an increasingly wide rift. In an October 8 telegram from the United Kingdom's UN delegation, addressed to Eden, diplomat Pierson Dixon elaborates rumors of a split in American and British relations. He writes,

I saw Dulles alone before our meeting last night. I said that I was increasingly worried at the talk of a rift in the Security Council between the United States and the United Kingdom. For example, after our meeting on Friday morning, at which there had been agreement on tactics in the Security Council, the papers had been full of our alleged differences. I had been told that much of this came from the United States delegation and that Dulles himself had told his inner circle of Press men privately that the British would have to accept the Indian proposals of last August.<sup>169</sup>

Dixon here appears fraught at the potential of discontinuity in the Anglo-American camp. While Dulles later assured Dixon that these rumors were unfounded,<sup>170</sup> the United States' later actions appeared to confirm Dixon's doubts.

Less than a month later, after British and French paratroopers had established a foothold at Port Said, to great international condemnation, their need for their American ally was at its greatest. Instead, Eden's government were met by a stubbornly uncooperative Eisenhower. For the British operated under the assumption of unflinching American support. Instead, in early November 1956, they received economic sanctions. The previously discussed British reliance on American financing had finally come to a head, as the value of the pound sterling had plummeted with the increasing probability, then eventual reality, of British military action in Egypt. As a direct result of the campaign, the United States blocked British access to international loans via the IMF, severely inhibiting Britain's ability to prosecute the military campaign and threatening to tank their entire economy.<sup>171</sup> So the ally on which Britain depended for support in the conflict, who once

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<sup>169</sup> JE 14214/236. United Kingdom National Archives, Kew. The "Indian proposals of last August" referred to Prime Minister Nehru's message to Nasser, advocating an Egyptian-led international conference to rectify the situation. Kyle. *Suez*, 157.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Kyle. *Suez*, 464-65.

enabled the development of a unified Western geopolitical front in the Middle East, had turned its back on Britannia when she most needed help. Yet anti-imperial leanings alone did not dictate the American position during Suez; the Soviet Union and wider international opinion too remained stacked against the Anglo-French coalition, to Nasser's delight.

### *The Soviet and International Response to the Suez Crisis*

The Soviet Union, while not as directly involved as the Americans in discussions with the British, nonetheless made their opinions known throughout the Crisis. In minutes during a UN security council meeting on October 8, 1956, the Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dmitri Shepilov, expressed his support for the Egyptian cause, stating that:

The Western Powers had put forward several different plans for a settlement but these differed only in form, while retaining the same substance, i.e. an approach to Egypt on an unequal basis. The real meaning of the plan presented to Egypt by the Menzies Mission was to deprive Egypt indefinitely of the right to operate the canal.<sup>172</sup>

Shepilov denounced the British, French, and presumably American attempt at negotiation, furthering an anti-imperial, implicitly pro-Soviet message when he argued that the tripartite powers did not view Egypt as an equal. These sentiments belie the general predilection of Russia to support Nasser's regime, particularly after Nasser decided to purchase weapons from Czechoslovakia, a member of the Eastern bloc (an act that precipitated Western withdrawal from the Aswan Dam project, and indirectly, the entire Suez Crisis).<sup>173</sup> Indeed, the Soviets used the Crisis as an opportunity to flex their geopolitical muscle, making sweeping, inflammatory statements about the

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<sup>172</sup> JE 14214/237. United Kingdom National Archives, Kew.

<sup>173</sup> Gaddis. *Cold War*, 127

West perpetuating colonialism in nations that had firmly rejected it.<sup>174</sup> Khrushchev, for his part, publicly threatened Britain and France with utter nuclear annihilation.<sup>175</sup>

Other nations also supported Nasser's cause, albeit with less terrifying threats. The Indian government, for example, stood firmly on Nasser's side. When the Australian Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, approached Nasser with a proposed convention to resolve the Crisis—to be held in London and whose agenda to be set by British interests—Nasser balked at the offer, instead proposing a conference between powers who possessed vested interests in the operation of the Canal.<sup>176</sup> The Indian government, led at the time by noted decolonial Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, supported Nasser's counter-proposal both privately and inadvertently in a public statement. The British Embassy in Cairo relayed a cable back to London on September 14th, believing that, "Nasser's proposal for negotiation made directly with the Menzies Mission... was worked out previously with the Indians, [and] received some support from the statement made a few days ago by an Indian spokesman here that Nasser's proposal had been made with the Indians' full support."<sup>177</sup> India, once the crown jewel of the British Empire, had, during the Suez debacle, turned their back on the British cause. Instead, they threw in their lot with the rising, decolonial power in Nasser's Egypt.

This inflection point illustrated at once the waning power and prestige of the British Empire along with the emerging power of Egypt as an influential regional, even global, actor. Some of Egypt's Arab neighbors, too, offered their support. Libya, for example, refused to assist British preparations for war in any capacity, despite the divisions of British armored vehicles stationed there; the British ambassador exclaimed that should Libyans see British military materiel in

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<sup>174</sup> Kyle, *Suez*, 402.

<sup>175</sup> Gaddis, *Cold War*, 128.

<sup>176</sup> Kyle, *Suez*, 313.

<sup>177</sup> JE 14211/1830. United Kingdom National Archives, Kew.

operation, “it would be certain to precipitate a wave of violence.”<sup>178</sup> The wider world, apart from a handful of dependent allies, began to turn against Britain and France. Tito’s Yugoslavia supported Nasser’s right to nationalize the Canal.<sup>179</sup> Press in the Netherlands, slow to side against the British or French, made clear their condemnation of the use of force to achieve a resolution.<sup>180</sup> This was due to in no small part the relative soundness of Egyptian legal argument, espousing Nasser’s sovereign right to nationalize the Suez Canal.

### *Livre Blanc: The Egyptian White Paper*

Nasser’s initial decision to nationalize the Suez Canal appealed to both his anti-imperialist and economically socialist leanings. More so than the ability to defend the Canal’s nationalization with force, Nasser recognized the need to defend his proclamation legally. To that end, his Ministry for Foreign Affairs published the *White Paper on the Nationalization of the Suez Maritime Canal Company* on August 12, 1956. The document provided a copy of the Egyptian government’s decree nationalizing the Canal, copies of the various concessions and conventions governing the canal’s operation, and legal justifications for the course of action (that directly cited previously mentioned operational precedents). While military power had often proved an unsurmountable obstacle in imperialist relations in the prior century, Nasser successfully defended his bold, calculated risk of nationalization through plain logic and (mostly) sound legal understanding.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> FO 371/121291. United Kingdom National Archives, Kew.

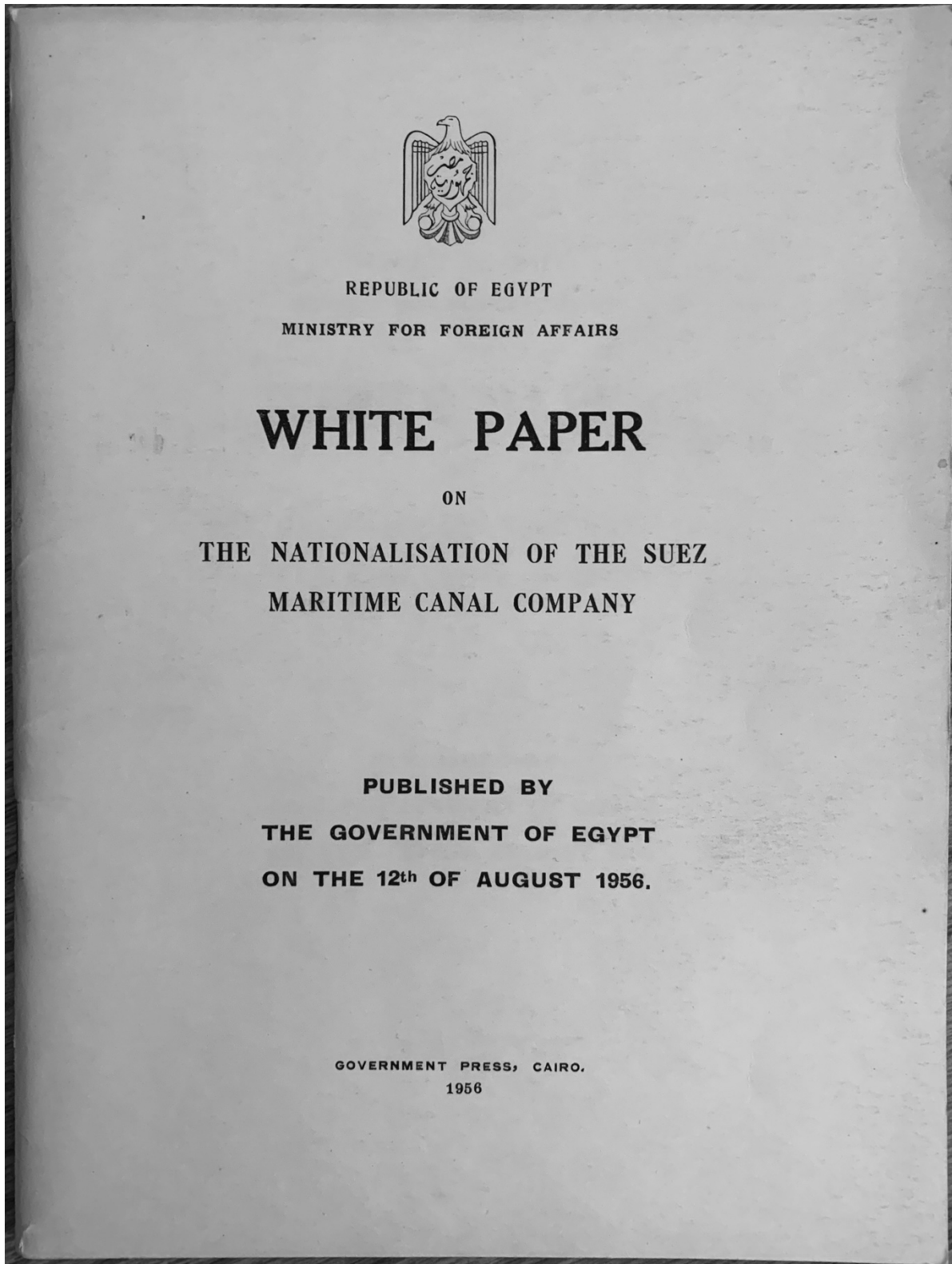
<sup>179</sup> Kyle. *Suez*, 157.

<sup>180</sup> JE 14211/1308. United Kingdom National Archives, Kew.

<sup>181</sup> Nasser was fortunate to have possessed a quality legal and political argument, as his army was utterly incapable of defending the Canal through conventional warfare.

The *White Paper*, often referred to as *Livre Blanc* contemporaneously, presents a compelling, yet oddly forgotten case study as the documentary embodiment of Nasser's revolutionary, pan-Arabist, anti-imperialist ideals. Built on the precedent of four main pieces of legislation—Egypt's 1956 Constitution, the Suez Canal Concessions of 1854 and 1866, and the Suez Convention of 1888—Law No. 285 tersely elaborated the Egyptian act of nationalization. While the decree itself is quite short, at only four pages, *Livre Blanc* runs at seventy-two. The other sixty-eight pages contain fascinating, if occasionally jargon-filled, legal documents, explanatory notes, and ideological statements justifying and defending nationalization.

The document itself remains understudied by the wider historical community and its significance underappreciated. Its publication, while not solely responsible for Nasser's geopolitical triumph, illustrated the overwhelming success of the Egyptians in propositioning and convincing international causes of the merits of their case. The White Paper additionally illustrates examples of the wider procession of Egyptian society, redolent of Nasserist nationalist sentiment.



Pictured Above: The cover of the *White Paper on the Nationalisation of the Suez Maritime Canal Company*. Photo by Author.

*The Legality of Nationalization*

Nasser's path towards forever cementing himself in history via the Suez Crisis began in earnest in January 1956, when he proposed a new Egyptian state constitution. This document contained provisions that later enabled Nasser to assume total executive power during the Crisis, while also providing much of the historical context that precipitated nationalization. The executive, according to the 1956 constitution:

has the right to propose, veto, and promulgate laws. The Assembly may overrule his veto by a two-thirds vote. In collaboration with his ministers, the President lays down general policy and supervises its execution. Between sessions of the Assembly he may issue recess decrees which have the force of law but require the confirmation of the Assembly within 15 days of its reconvening. The Assembly may in special circumstances delegate the law-making power to the President.

The President is the supreme commander of the armed forces. He appoints and dismisses civil, diplomatic, and military officials, has the right to issue pardons and commute sentences, declares war with the consent of the National Assembly, concludes treaties which become law after approval of the Assembly, declares a state of emergency subject to the approval of the Assembly within 15 days or at its next sitting, and has the right, after consulting the Assembly, to take major issues to the people by referendum.<sup>182</sup>

These provisions paved the way for an exceptionally powerful executive body, which many (rightly) presumed Nasser would head.<sup>183</sup> Specifically, the lines permitting the President to “[lay] down general policy and [supervise] its execution” offer an immense grey area where one may act outside the bounds of the standard legislative procedures established earlier in the constitution. Additionally, that the assembly may “delegate law-making power to the President,” in the context

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<sup>182</sup> “The New Egyptian Constitution.” *Middle East Journal* 10, no. 3 (1956): 300–306.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4322826>, 303.

<sup>183</sup> Osgood Caruthers. “NASSER DISCLOSES NEW CONSTITUTION: BASIC LAW, TO BE APPROVED BY EGYPTIANS, WOULD END 3-YEAR JUNTA RULE ONE-PARTY ASSEMBLY SET PRESIDENT TO HEAD STATE.” *New York Times* (1923-), Jan 17, 1956.

<https://colby.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/nasser-discloses-new-constitution/docview/113597802/se-2?accountid=10198>.

of a charisma-driven regime such as Nasser's, even prior to Suez, facilitated Nasser's proclivity to taking matters into his own hands.

Indeed, Law No. 285, declaring nationalization, presented an example of this unilateral law-making. The text of *Livre Blanc* read:

**SUEZ CANAL COMPANY  
NATIONALISATION LAW**

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DECREE LAW NO. 285 OF 1956

Respecting the Nationalisation of the Universal Suez Maritime Canal Company.<sup>184</sup>

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The text recognizes the law as a “decree law,” implying Nasser's personal passage and stamp of approval. This action was in accordance with the 1956 Constitution, specifically the lines permitting the President to “issue recess decrees which have the force of law.”<sup>185</sup> Thus, the clauses within the 1956 constitution bestowed Nasser, the “heir”-apparent to the Egyptian Presidency, the proper legislative mechanisms with which he could enact a law nationalizing the Suez Canal Company.

The constitution referenced the so-called “six-point program of the RCC,”<sup>186</sup> principles that closely aligned with the philosophy of Law no. 285. Laid out in the preamble to the constitution, the “six points”—in quotations because the following quote mentions seven—advocated for “the abolition of imperialism, "feudalism", monopoly, and the control of capitalist influence over the system of government, and the establishment of a strong army, social justice,

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<sup>184</sup> *White Paper on the Nationalisation of the Suez Maritime Canal Company*. (Cairo: Egyptian Government Press, 1956), 3.

<sup>185</sup> “The New Egyptian Constitution.” *Middle East Journal*, 303.

<sup>186</sup> RCC stood for “Revolutionary Command Council,” and was the committee in charge of transitioning Egypt from military rule into “representative” democracy.



and a democratic society.”<sup>187</sup> The Egyptian government could have written the three of the first four points in regards to the foreign operation of the Suez Canal directly, as imperialism, monopoly, and “capitalist influence” characterize the contemporary Egyptian conception of the Canal.

Indeed, the Egyptian Foreign Minister, Mahmoud Fawzi, delivered a speech to that effect to the United Nations Security Council on October 8, 1956. In the speech he defended the Egyptian act of nationalization, pointing towards the disastrous decades of British imperialism, total control, and economic exploitation as the actions Egypt attempted to stifle. A British observer recounted that:

Mr. Fawzi spoke of the historical significance of the Suez Canal questions which was in essence the struggle between domination and freedom... During the nineteenth century Britain’s attitude to the Canal had [changed] from fierce opposition to violent love. Egypt had sacrificed her sons and given security, money, and above all her pledge to keep the Canal always free for international navigation- a pledge which had been scrupulously honoured. The Company by contrast after squandering a good deal of the revenue gulped practically all the rest, leaving Egypt only a trickle. Now France and the United Kingdom together with a segment of the former Company, were trying to ensure that the Canal should be finally amputated from Egypt.<sup>188</sup>

Examples of the three aforementioned patterns exist in Fawzi’s remarks. “Domination and freedom” describe the period of British control—never truly ending until June 1956 when the last British troops evacuated Suez.

Nasser used the *White Paper* to exactly articulate the Egyptian position on nationalization, exploiting the complicated interactions of different articles of several concessions and conventions to build a well-argued case in favor of his decree’s legality on the international stage. In addition to the Egyptian constitution, Nasser drew upon 19<sup>th</sup>-century documents governing the operation

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<sup>187</sup> “The New Egyptian Constitution.” *Middle East Journal*, 300.

<sup>188</sup> JE 14214/237. United Kingdom National Archives, Kew.

and legal status of the Canal. Article 10 of the original 1854 Firman of Concession—signed by the Viceroy of Egypt Mohamed Said and the Canal’s visionary, Frenchman Ferdinand De Lesseps—stipulates that:

Art. 10. – At the expiration of the concession the Egyptian Government will take the place of the Company, and enjoy all its rights without reservation, the said Government will enter into full possession of the Canal of the two Seas, and of all the establishments connected therewith. The indemnity to be allowed the Company for the relinquishment of its plant and movables shall be arranged by amicable agreement or arbitration.<sup>189</sup>

Upon the termination of the 99-year lease, laid out in article 3 of the same Firman,<sup>190</sup> the Egyptian Government would have for all intents and purposes nationalized the Canal, being solely responsible for its operation and maintenance. The lease term, beginning the day the Suez Canal opened, would have expired in 1968, only twelve years after Nasser’s declaration. So while Article 10 of the 1854 Firman established the right of the Egyptian Government to take ownership of the Canal, it did not grant Nasser the express right to nationalize it when he saw fit.

The legal right to do so, to Nasser and his party, lay in Article 16 of the Agreement of February 22, 1866, establishing the final terms of the Suez concession. Under a bolded header in the White Paper that states “**The Company is Subject to Egyptian Sovereignty and to Laws and Customs of the Country**”<sup>191</sup> the original text of the concession reads:

Art. 16. – Since the Universal Company of the Maritime Suez Canal is an Egyptian Company, it remains subject to the laws and usages of the country. However, regarding its constitution as a Company and the relation of shareholders among themselves, it is—in virtue of a special convention—governed by the laws regulating joint stock companies. It

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<sup>189</sup> *White Paper*, 19. Also found in: Barbara Harlow & Mia Carter, *Archives of Empire Volume 1*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 624. Contrary to the author’s initial thought that the Egyptian government may have published only certain sections of the concession documents that favored their views, Nasser instead published them in their entirety. The Archives of Empire sourcebook, moreover, cited the original Egyptian White Paper as the source for their publication of the concession documents. Both citations have been provided above to highlight this peculiarity, but moving forward the archives of empire citation will be used except where necessary.

<sup>190</sup> Harlow & Carter. *Archives of Empire*, 623.

<sup>191</sup> *White Paper*, 32.

has been agreed that all disputes resulting thereof will be submitted to arbiters in France for judgement and with appeals before the Imperial Court of Paris as being a superarbitrator...

As regards the disputes that may arise between the Company and the Egyptian Government, these must in like manner be referred to Egyptian judiciary and settled in accordance with Egyptian law.<sup>192</sup>

This article contains contradictory language on the subject of the Company's adherence to Egyptian law. While it acknowledges explicitly that the Company "remains subject to the laws and usages of the country," it then states that disputes regarding the Company's "constitution as a Company and the relation of shareholders among themselves" is subject to French jurisdiction. This is confusing, as the Egyptian White Paper attempts to paint this article as firm evidence in favor of nationalization, as evidenced by the bolded header that precedes the passage. To be certain, Nasser's party likely saw the latter portion of the passage ("disputes that may arise... in accordance with Egyptian law.") as a sort of *carte blanche* in favor of Egyptian legal supremacy over the Company, although the exact phrasing proves nebulous.

In a later passage, under the header **"ENGLAND RECOGNIZES THE EGYPTIAN NATIONALITY OF THE CANAL COMPANY BEFORE MIXED COURTS IN EGYPT,"** the White Paper references a 1940 legal case in which the British Government asserted the following principles in defense of their position: "The Suez Canal Company is a legal person in accordance with Egyptian law. Its nationality and character are solely Egyptian. It is therefore subject to Egyptian laws."<sup>193</sup> In contrast to Article 16 of the 1866 agreement, the British here seemingly cede any right to regulate the Company under British or any other nation's law. However, it is difficult to discern which portions of this particular section of the White Paper are

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<sup>192</sup> Harlow & Carter. *Archives of Empire*, 634.

<sup>193</sup> *White Paper*, 59.

precisely quoting the 1940 British legal case, and which portions are the Egyptian government's own views; there is an inconsistent and potentially erroneous employment of quotation marks.<sup>194</sup>

Halford Hoskins, a professor of law at Tufts University, assessed this 1940 legal case in multiple articles published in *Geographical Review* and *The American Journal of International Law* in 1940 and 1943, respectively. Hoskins writes in the former article that, "Being of world-wide importance, [the Suez Canal] cannot be submitted to a nationalistic solution if it is to be solved in the general interest in accordance with the basic concepts of our present type of civilization."<sup>195</sup> While not imposing a strictly legal interpretation in this instance, Hoskins nonetheless espouses a version of the vague "internationalist" argument Britain selectively employed during the Suez Crisis.

In the latter article, Hoskins provides a more legally grounded opinion, believing that the British minimized Egyptian sovereignty over the Canal, arguing that public declarations expressing the British retention of control over the Canal as

based on the assumption that, since the special position occupied by Great Britain relative to the Canal since 1888 (then lately re-acknowledged by the Powers in being embodied in the post-war treaty settlement) had existed prior to the protectorate, it would be unaffected by the establishment of Egyptian independence.<sup>196</sup>

The British declarations do not apply to a particular *version* of Egypt's government, only Egypt as a whole. As such, the fact that Farouk and the monarchy still held power would not bolster Nasser's argument. Still, the British seemed to rely on the projection of soft power and *status quo* administration as their basis for operating the Canal, rather than specific legal arguments.

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<sup>194</sup> *White Paper*, 60-61. The portion quoted in the section above is the only one that the British case no-doubt stated.

<sup>195</sup> Halford L. Hoskins. "Suez Canal Problems," *Geographical Review*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (Oct. 1940): 671.

<sup>196</sup> Halford L. Hoskins. "The Suez Canal as an International Waterway," *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Jul. 1943): 380.

This lack of tangible standing ensured that the British legal argument faltered, also due to the imprecision of the concession and convention's language—the fact that the British argued against their case in Suez a mere sixteen years prior is simply the final nail in the coffin. For while there *may* have been (weak) merits to the British (and French) arguments, there existed no definitive act that precluded Egypt from nationalizing the Canal. So long as the nationalization of a company was legal, as Nasser ensured when he drafted the new Egyptian constitution in January 1956,<sup>197</sup> Law no. 285, nationalizing the Suez Canal was legal.

Nasser's legal gambit relied on what amounted to circular reasoning; the canal was subject to Egyptian laws, and Nasser unilaterally (but legally) passed a law nationalizing the Canal, therefore Law no. 285 was legal under Egyptian law. In contrast to earlier cases of nationalization, such as the Iranian nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (on which a brief background was provided in footnote 131), where there existed specific provisions forbidding unilateral nationalization, no such clauses exist in the documents governing the operations of the Suez Canal; that Nasser could legally nationalize the Company spoke more to the shrewd employment of loopholes than any internationally recognized legal "right."

The British, however, largely ignored the Egyptian legal argument, instead focusing their propaganda might on portraying Nasser as an evil fascist, akin to Hitler or Mussolini (as Eden espoused in a previously referenced telegram).<sup>198</sup> Such an oversight was intentional, but unfortunate. While the British believed they could better sway public opinion through their visceral, emotional propaganda, rather than admittedly dry legal jargon, challenging Nasser's legality in the public sphere would have at the very least offered a different narrative from a legal

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<sup>197</sup> *White Paper*, 60-61.

<sup>198</sup> Tony Shaw. *Eden, Suez, and the Mass Media: Propaganda and Persuasion During the Suez Crisis*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996), 190.

perspective. Indeed, the legal debate in the United Nations primarily heard voices from Egypt's camp. Meeting minutes dated October 8, 1956 read: "The morning was occupied by lengthy Egyptian and Russian speeches."<sup>199</sup> While the Egyptian delegation appeared entirely comfortable discussing their legal argument, the British instead appeared to shy away, content in their character assassination of Nasser.

*Livre Blanc*'s significance extends beyond its mere utility as an expression of Egypt's legal defense of nationalization. Between its frequent appeals to Egyptian nationhood and sovereignty, the document stands as a potent reminder of the strong assertion of Egyptian will against the seemingly indomitable British Empire. Law no. 285, contained in the White Paper does not, after claim to be advancing the interests of elites, monarchs, aristocrats, or any other stratified sect of society. Instead, it claims the Canal "in the name of the *nation*," implying, if examined within Greenfeld's nationalist framework, its shared (primarily metaphorical) ownership by *all* Egyptians.<sup>200</sup> One Egyptian, however, bore more responsibility than most for the success of the defiant act.

### *The Nimble Desert Fox*

The Suez Crisis solidified in the eyes of nearly all Egyptians, and observers the world over, the primacy of Nasser's power in the nation and the region. Nasser's personal decision-making, as all major decisions during the crisis were his and his alone, "brought Nasser total domination."<sup>201</sup> Far from any semblance of checks, balances, or division of power, Nasser relished in this absolutism, allowing him to act far more quickly and decisively than any legislative body. While

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<sup>199</sup> JE 14214/237. United Kingdom National Archives, Kew.

<sup>200</sup> *White Paper*, 3.

<sup>201</sup> Lacouture. *The Demigods*, 110.

some historians disagree on the degree to which Nasser held sway over the Free Officers movement—the contingent of military officers responsible for ousting King Farouk in 1952—before Suez, few if any doubt that the Crisis cemented his emergence as a national and regional hero.<sup>202</sup> Some scholars observed alternative routes the Egyptian Revolution may have taken, including those without Nasser at the helm, but by 1956 the Colonel had successfully cut off those options, in the eyes of P.J. Vatikiotis “highlight[ing] his ambition and perhaps vision, and suppl[ying] the momentum for his personal rule for another decade.”<sup>203</sup> The Suez debacle, then, represented the ultimate ascension of Nasser to absolute power in Egypt; afterwards there would be no Egypt without Nasser. The man’s actions throughout the event produced reverberations that soon spread across the region as a whole. Just as Egypt would never be the same after Nasser, so too did he profoundly and irreversibly alter the wider Arab world. The Crisis brought with it a massive outpouring of public support from all corners of the Arab Middle East, from Syria to Jordan to Saudi Arabia.<sup>204</sup> So visceral was the Saudi Arabian reaction to Nasser’s September 1956 visit and public appearance with King Sa’ud that Mohamed Heikal remarked—albeit perhaps to bolster Nasser’s public image even further—that the meeting was “embarrassing for Nasser, because everyone knew that the [Saudi] people were there to cheer him, not their King.”<sup>205</sup>

Nasser received such praise because he constructed a narrative in which he bore sole responsibility for the Suez Crisis (for better or worse). French Historian Jean Lacouture summarizes the state of Nasser’s triumph as such:

All the major decisions had been made by him alone: the rejection of the Anglo-French ultimatum of October 30, the secret appeal to President Eisenhower on November 1, and

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<sup>202</sup> Joel Gordon. *Nasser’s Blessed movement*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 13. Historian Joel Gordon argues that Nasser’s leadership was not set in stone prior to 1956, but believes there is no doubt of his significance in the Egyptian government following the Suez Crisis.

<sup>203</sup> Vatikiotis. *Nasser and His Generation*, 196.

<sup>204</sup> Jankowski. *Nasser’s Egypt*, 83.

<sup>205</sup> Mohamed Heikal. *Cutting the Lion’s Tail: Suez through Egyptian Eyes*. (New York, 1987), 157.

the commitment of the same date to withdraw from Sinai, which was followed by acceptance of a cease-fire on November 6.<sup>206</sup>

To Egyptians the Canal represented much more than a mere economic asset; it represented the plight of the Egyptian people, who had suffered under various forms of foreign domination for centuries (if one includes Ottoman rule).<sup>207</sup> Nasser, to them, was the man who ended that dark period. Moreover, the fact that he did it acting primarily *by himself*, solely possessing the instruments of power in the Egyptian government, further bolstered his image in the eyes of the Egyptian nation.

The calculated risk paid off immensely. On November 6, the cease-fire went into effect, and the Anglo-French began preparations to withdraw. For while thousands of Egyptian soldiers had died in the relatively brief fighting, Nasser's reputation was that of a hero. For he had, in the apt summation of John Lewis Gaddis, "kept the canal, humiliated the colonialists, and balanced Cold War superpowers against one another, while securing his position as the undisputed leader of Arab nationalism."<sup>208</sup> In other words, Nasser accomplished everything at the cost of comparatively little. His seizure of the Canal enabled rapid economic development, along with facilitating the construction of the Aswan Dam (determining the sources of funding for which contributed to Nasser's decision to nationalize the Canal in the first place).<sup>209</sup>

Indeed, the Canal and the Dam represented the two primary public-sector successes under Nasser's ambitious, so-called "second revolution," wherein the Egyptian economy would transition into a competitive, albeit state-run, planned economy.<sup>210</sup> It is ironic that one of Nasser's few economic successes proved to characterize the popular perception of his rule as a whole, and

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<sup>206</sup> Lacouture. *The Demigods*, 110.

<sup>207</sup> Lacouture. *Nasser*, 173.

<sup>208</sup> Gaddis. *Cold War*, 128.

<sup>209</sup> John Waterbury. *The Egypt of Nasser and Sadat*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 101.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid. Lacouture. *The Demigods*, 111.



this was no doubt the result of careful manipulation of public opinion. Speaking to his people the Friday after the cease-fire, Nasser “struck up a song of triumph: Egypt had vanquished her enemies,” proclaiming that Egypt had finally rid itself of its violent imperialist oppressors.<sup>211</sup> While Nasser claimed the victory for himself and his nation at the time, in hindsight he held a different opinion. When asked in 1964 what event most contributed to the outcome of the Suez Crisis, Nasser responded instead: “Eisenhower.”<sup>212</sup>

For all the immense, incomprehensible patterns and processes at work during the Suez Crisis, it is telling that Nasser believed the most important factor to be the actions of a single person. While the British contended with a legacy of anti-appeasement policy and imperialist insecurity combined with ineffective propaganda; while America asserted itself over its older brother as the preeminent Western superpower; and while the Soviet Union and the world at large gave Egypt their support (in Russia’s case with nuclear assurances), the most pivotal actor in the Suez Crisis insisted that a single man’s choice to threaten severe economic sanctions on the United Kingdom influenced the conflict’s resolution to the greatest extent. A “great man” believed in the power and historical agency of another “great man.”

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<sup>211</sup> Lacouture, *Nasser*, 181.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*

## EPILOGUE

### Reflections on Nasser's Charismatic Legacy

Omar Khalifah's *Nasser in the Egyptian Imaginary* explores the Egyptian President's rule through his portrayal and perception in popular media. "Nasser," Khalifah writes, "was a larger-than-life character, a legend whose image, voice, ideals, accomplishments, deeds, misdeeds, and defeats have been shaping Egyptian and Arabic life to date."<sup>213</sup> Published in 2018, Khalifah's work comprises one of the few studies of Nasser to emerge since the early 2000s.<sup>214</sup> Despite this relative dearth, Nasser the historical figure proves eminently influential up to the present. "Nasser," Khalifah goes on, "continues to be an essential component of the Egyptian imaginary."<sup>215</sup> Surely, were the winds of history entirely responsible for the creation of history, one would not celebrate figures such as Nasser; nor would the man possess such a potent and lasting gravitas of personality.

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<sup>213</sup> Omar Khalifah. *Nasser in the Egyptian Imaginary*. (Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 9.

<sup>214</sup> Insofar as the author could find; perhaps these studies exist in languages other than English.

<sup>215</sup> Khalifah. *Nasser in the Egyptian Imaginary*, 219.

And yet monumental figures, “great men” as Tolstoy would term them, exist throughout humanity’s long history. From Xerxes to Napoleon, to Churchill, Eden, Eisenhower and Nasser, these people have unquestionably altered the course of human events in significant ways. Yet all, Nasser especially, have their circumstances to thank for placing them in the right place at the right time (or, for Xerxes, Napoleon, and Eden, the wrong place and the wrong time). Consider the path that led to Nasser’s ultimate triumph at Suez. It may easily have diverged at any moment, forever changing the course of history. However, the path, while long and circuitous, placed Nasser in exactly the right moment to create his spectacle. The history of Nasser’s Suez Crisis is in fact the history of the confluence of nationalism, charismatic leadership, the British empire, American hegemony, and the Cold War in Egypt in 1956.

Tolstoy himself might have condemned this sort of historicizing. In *War and Peace* he wrote that:

If we assume as the historians do that great men lead humanity to the attainment of certain ends--the greatness of Russia or of France, the balance of power in Europe, the diffusion of the ideas of the Revolution, general progress, or anything else--then it is impossible to explain the facts of history without introducing the conceptions of chance and genius.<sup>216</sup>

“Chance and genius,” to Tolstoy, then degraded the utility of historical theory. How could one propose a theory, even, when “random” events often occur? This is Tolstoy’s crucial mistake. Chance and genius do not entirely discredit the use of theory; in fact, their existence emphasizes theory’s importance. How else might one sort through the practically infinite, oftentimes random, catalog comprising the sequence of human events?

Historical theories can accomplish the impossible: creating order from chaos by emphasizing certain pieces of knowledge over others. This act is never perfect. As the American

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<sup>216</sup> Tolstoy. *War and Peace*. 1243.

historian Eric Foner put it: “the very selection and ordering of some ‘facts’ while ignoring others is itself an act of interpretation.”<sup>217</sup> Yet, without theory there would be only chronology, an art in and of itself but ineffective in constructing a cohesive vision from humanity’s shared past.

“Chance and genius” could aptly describe Nasser’s success during the Suez Crisis if one considered the events in a vacuum. Nasser could not have predicted the effectiveness of *Livre Blanc* and the Egyptian legal argument among the international community, nor the poor reception of the British propaganda campaign, nor could he have deduced that the United States would make a temporary, localized alliance with their Soviet adversaries to push for an Anglo-French withdrawal. That many, from Lacouture to Heikal, attribute the success overwhelmingly to Nasser’s person grants the man too much credit. Credit is also due for the system in which he lived, maneuvered, and manipulated.

From pan-Arab nationalism, a Nasserist movement with roots dating to medieval Europe, to the Cold War and a global movement against imperialism; from British imperial and societal decline after World War II to America claiming the leading role in the Western world; from Nasser’s modern revolution with old roots to Britain’s new crisis with old leaders; from a Suez Crisis enabled by the howling winds of history surrounding it, to the document that symbolizes both the long and short causes, *Livre Blanc*. Nasser’s Egypt’s seminal work of legal, geopolitical, and ideological argumentation tied together patterns and processes from 16<sup>th</sup>-century England through 20<sup>th</sup>-century Europe into a tight, cohesive, seventy-two-page pamphlet. The document simplified the immense preponderance of information available to solely what *needed* to be included. In that sense, *Livre Blanc* was a work of historical and legal theory: one whose significance and centrality in the history of the Suez Crisis still eludes historians. For while it may

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<sup>217</sup> Eric Foner, *Who Owns History?* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002). Preface xvii.

be only a single document, its ability to weave together the various disparate narrative threads of the Crisis into a unified package grants it exceptional prescience. *Livre Blanc* then becomes a symbol of wider historical forces, including some that a single document could not hope to alter.

That description fits Nasser as well: a man who played a significant, historically active role in his time due to his skill, perception, and fortunate placement in the currents of history. Nasser's employment of *Livre Blanc*, and his general leadership throughout the Suez Crisis, serve as a lesson for the ages that, despite the power of larger forces, people always have, and ultimately always will, create history. Individuals too serve as vessels through which others perceive the winds of history—in a sense theories in their own right. Nasser was more than the President of Egypt; he embodied the aspirations and power of an entire generation of Egyptians.

Heraclitus intuited this principle in ancient Greece, and proved accurate in his assessment. Nasser contained the vast, collectively incomprehensible forces of history in a single man—the one is made up of all things. The man, in turn, would irrevocably alter the course of Egyptian history, dramatically influencing twentieth-century national, geopolitical, imperial, and economic history through his historical activism—all things issue from the one. Nasser embodied, and to a degree is responsible for, his nation's shared history.

History itself is a “large” subject, meaning one can spend their whole life learning and still feel as if they know little to nothing of the course of human events. There are many ways to focus this largeness, coalescing disparate pieces of knowledge into a single intelligible story. Historians accomplish this translation by employing signifiers, symbols that represent more than the sum of their parts. Nasser was one such signifier. He exemplified the profound role a single person could play in human affairs, and reminds one that, in the face of seemingly insurmountable, deterministic historical forces, there will always be (some) room for the individual.

Returning briefly to the present: Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelensky's struggle has, in historical terms, barely begun, and historians have yet to critically assess his impact in stymieing Russia's aggression. However, examining Nasser and the Suez Crisis can perhaps offer a glimpse of the future. Through the skillful employment of mass media and shrewdly-constructed appeals to the international community designed to influence their opinion, Zelensky (subconsciously, perhaps) seeks to follow in Nasser's footsteps—not as a commander of armor, men, or materiel, but as a commander of the microphone, the podium, and the mass media. While Zelensky cannot save his nation without the help of the wider world, including international processes far beyond his control, he can, like Nasser, manipulate those to his advantage. While technology has advanced immensely since 1956, General Charles Keightly's "overriding lesson," emphasizing the primacy of courting world opinion in modern war, remains startlingly accurate; Zelensky is holding the line, with assistance from his newfound international allies swayed by his propaganda campaign.<sup>218</sup>

Nasser knew that lesson as well—and without reading Keightly's report. His response to a reporter's inquest into his outward disdain towards then-Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri es-Said, spoke not only to the importance of influencing world opinion, but to the historical legacy potentially defined by perception and constructed narrative. Nasser proclaimed, "Nuri is a dictator. He censors the press; he imprisons political opponents..." The reporter enquired, "More than you do?", to which Nasser replied, "No, not more, but less efficiently."<sup>219</sup> By 1958 Nuri's mutilated corpse would be paraded through the streets of Baghdad by his own people,<sup>220</sup> while Nasser would receive

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<sup>218</sup> Paul Baines. "Ukrainian Propaganda: How Zelensky is Winning the Information War Against Russia." *The Conversation*, May 11, 2022. <https://theconversation.com/ukrainian-propaganda-how-zelensky-is-winning-the-information-war-against-russia-182061>

<sup>219</sup> Ashton. *Problem of Nasser*, 21.

<sup>220</sup> Geoff Simons. *Iraq: From Sumer to Saddam*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 218.

the adulation of the Egyptian nation, that he in large part built, for decades to come—with no sign of stopping.

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