PATRONS! The latest episode on the Suez Crisis is out NOW! Check your feeds for the latest juicy instalment of 1956, and make sure that you join up if you haven’t already! It only costs a fiver!

Episode 2.6: The Entente Rides Again looks at the increasingly close cooperation between Britain and France in light of the signal defeat of Western imperialist ambitions in Egypt. We open our episode with a defining scene – President Nasser’s nationalisation of the Suez Canal. From this moment, every event in the proceeding crisis would follow, so make sure you give it a listen and bring yourself up to speed! The nationalisation of the Canal, while foreign opinion did not favour the means, was not the moment that the world flocked to condemn Nasser’s regime, as Anthony Eden may have hoped. For a time, the Egyptian leader would be seen as unstable, aggressive and unreasonable, but this bad press would die down as the Egyptians proved themselves very capable in handling the new responsibilities which the Suez Canal Company represented.

After convincing himself that the nationalisation of the Canal represented a national humiliation for he and his government, Eden proceeded to cement the Anglo-French commitment in the days that followed. Only 24 hours after the nationalisation occurred, French government ministers and the French premier were talking of travelling to London. Within a week, military plans were being developed. These plans would be carried out by WW2 era weaponry, under WW2 era ideas of strategy, and even in the same secret bunkers under the Thames which had been used by Churchill to plan a resistance to the Nazis. Yet, this latest iteration of the entente cordiale was to prove anything but glorious, since at its heart was the desire to turn back the clock, and preserve the systems and status quo which held the developing world in permanent bondage. This mission was to doom Eden’s career and lead to the deaths of so many lives, and its planning stage began here.

Hello and welcome history friends patrons all to 1956 episode 21. Last time we examined the final tense few days before the storm erupted. Forced into making a rash decision after learning of the Anglo-American reneging on their deal to finance the Aswan Dam, President Nasser determined to make the most out of his decision to nationalise the Suez Canal Company, and take the profits back for the Egyptian people. This, at least, was what he said, in a speech in Alexandria on 26th July 1956 – four years to the day since King Farouk had been forced to abdicate. Since the West had proved so eager to intervene in Egyptian business, and since the treacherous Anglo-Americans had neglected to uphold their promises, it was time for Egyptians to fight back. Nasser went for the jugular, as hundreds of thousands of his countrymen looked on in rapture. Let’s see how this all went down then, as I take you to the moment of Nasser’s pivotal speech…

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While the speech was the signal to rush the Suez Canal Company offices in Port Said, Cairo and Alexandria, President Nasser’s speech, made in the evening of 26th July, was also a call to arms. It was an attack on imperialism, and a rousing cry to get the Egyptian people to believe in their country, and to fight for their independence if necessary. The speech ran for over two hours, but we’ll cover some of its main points in the following extract. Nasser said:

Imperialism has attempted to shake our nationalism, weaken our Arabism, and separate us by every means. Thus it created Israel, the stooge of imperialism. The battle in which we are now involved is a battle against imperialism and the methods and tactics of imperialism, and a battle against Israel, the vanguard of imperialism. Now Arab nationalism marches forward, knowing its road and its strength, knowing who are its enemies and who are its friends…The Suez Canal was dug by the efforts of the sons of Egypt – 120k Egyptians died in the process. The Suez Canal Company, sitting in Paris, is a usurping company. It usurped our concessions. When he came here de Lesseps [the French engineer who designed the Canal] acted in the same manner as do certain people who come to hold talks with me. Does history repeat itself? On the contrary! We shall build the High Dam and we shall gain our usurped rights. We are determined. The Canal company annually takes £35 million. Why shouldn’t we take it for ourselves? The company said they collected a hundred million $ every year for the benefit of Egypt. We desire to make this statement come true, and to collect this hundred million $ for the benefit of Egypt.[[1]](#footnote-1)

It was actually once Nasser mentioned the name of French engineer de Lesseps during the course of his speech that Egyptian soldiers moved into the offices of the Suez Canal Company in the key locations, holding its staff and contents to ransom in the process. ‘Today, Oh citizens’, concluded Nasser…

The Suez Canal has been nationalised…Today, Oh citizens, we declare that our property has been returned to us! We are realising our glory and our grandeur. [A new Suez Canal will be established], and it will be run by Egyptians, Egyptians, Egyptians![[2]](#footnote-2)

So enthusiastic was the response of the crowds, that it took Nasser 36 hours to travel from Alexandria to Cairo along the long stretch of road down to the south. The streets were thronged with Egyptians singing, dancing and revelling at the news – Nasser had never been so popular, so exalted by his people, and he knew exactly what he was doing, which was more than what could be said for Anthony Eden, British PM, who learned of the news of forced nationalisation through a telegram from Humphrey Trevelyan, the long suffering British ambassador to Cairo, who had written during the speech that:

In public speech at Alexandria tonight Nasser announced that Egypt would build [Aswan] Dam from her own resources. Funds would be obtained from operation of Suez Canal. Law nationalizing Canal and expropriating Canal Company was approved by [Egyptian] Cabinet this morning. Text as read out by Nasser follows. Police have just been posted round Canal Company's Cairo office.[[3]](#footnote-3)

By 9.45PM on 26th July 1956, the cat was out of the bag, and Eden would be told just how far his Egyptian foe had been willing to go in his quest to make his mark. If Eden has relished the opportunity to stick it to Nasser by reneging on the Aswan Dam loan deals, then this latest development was a stunning, wholly unexpected move, precisely because it was brazen, and the odds of it happening had appeared in the past far too remote to contemplate. It was typically bad luck for Eden that he received news of Nasser’s act just as he was wining and dining Iraq’s two most important figures. This was of course bad, because Eden had to be seen as strong in front of these allies, since the Baghdad Pact depended upon their friendship. Yet, it was also reassuring because Eden was able to take immediate solace from Nuri el-Said, the Iraqi premier, who insisted that Eden ‘hit Nasser hard and hit him now’.[[4]](#footnote-4) Anthony Eden did not need to be told twice.

Cutting off the meal with the Iraqis, Eden gave Nasser’s actions the grave attention they deserved when he immediately called a meeting of the senior ministers and the chief of staff. At that time it just so happened that the director general of the Suez Canal Company had been in London – he was coming to the realisation that he now no longer had a company to lead, Nasser had taken it from him. This act of taking something which by all accounts didn’t belong to him was bad, but it was the very brazenness of the action that really grinded Eden’s gears, and the gears of his colleagues. Imagine the scene in 1856 if an Arab leader had seized a foreign owned company, within which Britain possessed a considerable stock interest. That Nasser had acted at all signalled loud and clear that he didn’t care for this British interest, and that he was not afraid of the consequences – perhaps he believed that there would be no consequences? Perhaps he believed that Britain would allow this insult to slip by unanswered, but what then? Would Nasser ever stop? Would this abject humiliation ever end? How dare he, seemed to be the dominant feeling running through the men assembled for the impromptu meeting, and the ripples of this feeling were spreading fast.

Plentiful mention of the dirty word of appeasement was inevitable in not merely the post-war British governments of the 1940s and 50s, but also in a government led by an arch anti-appeaser such as Eden was believed to be. With this reputation in mind, it was Ivone Kirkpatrick in the FO who reminded Eden that Nasser’s act of nationalising the Suez Canal Company had occurred 20 years after Hitler’s reoccupation of the Rhineland in 1936. In practical terms, of course, the two events and the two men responsible for them were grossly unrelated, but in the emotive atmosphere created by Nasser’s decision, the anniversary poured more fuel on Eden’s fire. In a mood starkly similar to that of 1839 in the first opium war, 1877 with the Russo-Turkish War, or 1914 with the FWW, the only remedy for the damaged prestige and hurt feelings of the British leadership was the use of force. As one of Eden’s private secretaries later recalled:

It was decided that, in default of other solutions, eventually there would have to be a military solution to reverse what had happened. Other solutions would be explored first, but from day one they were committed to a military solution, if all else failed.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Military solutions may appear drastic in the grand scheme of things, since on the one level, Nasser was forcibly nationalising a company in his own country, that Britain happened to own a stake in. Would Eden have reacted so strongly if the Portuguese, for instance, had forcibly nationalised a bank partly owned by the British state? But of course, this was not like every other nationalisation – in the first place, because it was Nasser who had done the deed, and Eden had been given the run around by Nasser for the last year. In addition though, there was the feeling that Nasser had not acted appropriately in his mission to return the Canal to the Egyptian people – as one Labour MP put it at the time: ‘Nasser really did grab it [the canal] in an intolerable way and, if he got away with that grab, might well launch a war against Israel.’[[6]](#footnote-6) Of course, the cherry on top was that Nasser had acted in a sensitive region – that not only was the Suez Canal Company partly British owned, it was also responsible for a waterway which was central to British interests…or was it?

By 1956, a quarter of all British imports came through the Suez Canal. This of course made the waterway important, but not critical to the survival of Britain, as the Canal would have been at the turn of the century. One grave concern which was at the forefront of the strategic thinkers in Britain, when they kept their emotions in check for a moment, was the implications for Britain’s oil supply. Three quarters of Britain’s oil supplies came through the Canal, and if this line was cut, then her middle eastern suppliers would be in something of a bind. They could either take the much longer route around the Cape, or they could stop selling altogether. Ending the sale to Britain, even for a time, could have a knock-on effect on the price and availability of oil across the world, and it was this idea, captured by Eden when he claimed that the ‘Egyptian had his thumb on our windpipe’, that really seemed to strike a chord. A closer examination of the facts would have reduced a great deal of the hysteria though; perhaps the greatest surprise was the figure that on 13% of Britain’s energy needs were actually made by oil – the rest still relied upon coal.[[7]](#footnote-7)

This trend would have room to change of course, but in 1956, considering the immediate interests and dangers, a pacific British government would have no reason to fear for their future, especially since Nasser’s decision to nationalise the Canal Company did *not* mean that he was closing the Suez Canal itself, or being prejudiced as to who could access it. Taking this into consideration then, Britain’s supply lines were safe, but this didn’t matter so much as who this safety depended upon – it depended upon the goodwill and sense of one of Eden’s least favourite stately figures. Eden couldn’t stand Gamal Abdul Nasser, hardly surprising considering how ridiculous and feeble Nasser had made him look since the Anglo-Egyptian relationship had begun to seriously deteriorate. What is perhaps more surprising is how the nationalisation turned Eden from a pathetic and unsympathetic figure into a PM which parties on both sides of the spectrum sought to get behind.

This ‘rallying to the colours’ when British interests in the region appeared to be threatened, demonstrated two key things above all – first, that the kind of imperialistic chauvinism normally associated with only the Conservatives actually ran through all the parties like a kind of political current – to the extent that Labour MPs were talking about the nation’s rights and damaged reputation. Second, all this kerfuffle over the nationalisation demonstrated that Eden, his peers, and his rivals in opposition had absolutely no clue about what was going on – if they did look at the bare facts of the matter, they would see that Britain’s practical interests remained unchanged. If anything, the biggest change in the Suez situation had come when Britain had pulled out her troops in 1954. Now though, it didn’t matter who owned the Canal, as long as it was kept open.

The Suez Crisis, in a strikingly similar vein to the events of 1839 or 1877, involved a great deal of men crying foul, without taking all that much time to explain why there was good cause to be so upset. Emotive arguments took the lead initially, and then retrospectively, particularly when the actual military operations were being justified, the economic and strategic interests of the British and of the French were put forward to explain the reaction. Speaking of reaction, the mood of hurt feelings was carried away with in the papers. *The Times*, to start with as the most predictable drum beater, noted that the nationalisation was ‘a clear affront and threat to Western interests.’ The liberal *News Chronicle*, more surprisingly, urged ‘retaliatory action’, and the *Herald*, the organ of the Labour Party, declared that it wanted ‘no more Hitlers’. Hurt feelings had been twinned with past humiliations, and Nasser was compared, without all that much thought going into the comparison, with Adolf Hitler. Appeasement now, Eden insisted, would be as disastrous as it had been twenty years before.

Even the *Spectator*, the same paper Randolph Churchill had used to snipe Eden from in the past year, had a glowing report on Eden’s affirmative action. It issued a congratulations on Eden for regaining…

…every yard of the ground he has lost inside the Tory Party during the past year. He has established a hold on Tory loyalties firmer and warmer than he has ever had before. So far he has acted about Suez in complete conformity with one of the basic tenants of Toryism and by doing so he has secured the support of the great majority of British citizens. For the party this result is seen as a vindication as well as an achievement.[[8]](#footnote-8)

It wouldn’t have been hyperbole to state that, at this stage, the nationalisation of the Suez Canal Company and Eden’s swift, bullish reaction to it appeared to be as much of a saving grace for his career as the Falklands War had been for Margaret Thatcher, or, perhaps more appropriately for Eden, as the outbreak of the SWW had been for Churchill’s career. This *Spectator* article was released on 10th August, a fortnight since the nationalisation had been announced, but Eden and company had been engaged in debates since 27th July, and the PM had met with the higher levels of his government that very night, as we saw. In this fortnight-sized window Eden was at his best – he was confrontational and defiant at a time when these qualities were very important to a Britain smarting from past defeats, however minor and insignificant in practical terms. Not only had he proved effective at rousing and channelling anger at home, he had also successfully connected abroad with a key, soon to be infamous, ally, the French.

We saw last time that in France, the road to the Suez Crisis began in Algeria. Still, at this point in mid-1956, Algeria continued to be a problem for Guy Mollet’s government, and it was soon to get worse. After several efforts to contain the revolts had failed, the French appeared resigned to a war of attrition against the FLN, and in this struggle, as we’ve seen, the person of Gamal Abdul Nasser featured prominently. It wouldn’t have been a stretch to state that Nasser was already a hated figure in France before the nationalisation was announced. A leader of pan-Arabism, Nasser was linked to several campaigns of support launched from outside Algeria in the name of aiding the Algerians and ending the colonialist legacy in the North African region. Nasser had offered his support for similar campaigns in Tunis and Morocco, but it was in Algeria that his actions really rankled French opinion. Now, the nationalisation of the Suez Company seemed to be the confirmation that French interests would never be secure so long as Nasser was in place.

While apparently removed from its interests, the French did hold the HQ of the Suez Canal Company in Paris; the Canal had been built with French capital and under French instruction, and it had been a manifestly French investment until the British had arrived a few years after its establishment, and made the venture their own. That said, the Company retained a French flavour, to the extent that a great number of the technicians and engineers on site in the Canal Zone were French trained citizens. In addition, French shareholders retained a large stake in the Company, and it was seen, perhaps inaccurately, as the last representation of the Napoleonic civilising mission – as the last, most significant engineering accomplishment of the French Empire. It was, as one historian has called it, the ‘last great international stronghold of French capital.’[[9]](#footnote-9)

On 27th July 1956, after a stressful and eventful enough day for the PM, he had received a call from the French FM Christian Pineau, who had signalled his support for British efforts to claw back their reputation at Nasser’s expense. It was almost as if the more one said it, the more it could be believed that Britain had suffered a defeat by Nasser’s hands. Yet, as any amateur diplomatist knows, the best way to suffer defeats was to suffer them quietly, especially when the defeat meant little for the status quo along the Canal. Perhaps it was because Eden was so genuinely outraged at Nasser’s act – the culmination of several months’ worth of defiance. Or perhaps it was because Eden didn’t feel comfortable having to stand on the defensive again, and explain why this wasn’t a defeat for Britain when so much of his peers – and the press – were keen to argue that it was. Rather than argue the point, Eden would fall in line and accept that an injury had been suffered, and he would then go determinedly on the attack in a bid to right the wrong. This was probably why Eden saw Nasser’s act benefit him – the PM’s peers were not used to seeing Eden go on the attack, since he had spent the last year in office definitively on the back-foot.

Regardless of Eden’s struggles, he affirmed with Pineau a desire to meet in person – both Guy Mollet and FM Pineau travelled to London over the next few days. In their enthusiasm, the French delegation even proposed a union similar to that proposed by Churchill in the dark days of 1940, but as Christian Pineau recalled in his memoirs, ‘the reaction of our English friends lacked enthusiasm.’[[10]](#footnote-10) Eden wished to sort out Nasser before any Anglo-French crusade to preserve colonialism was launched, and this was tacitly accepted by the French visitors. Like Eden, the Premier and his colleague had much to answer for with this latest brazen act by a clear enemy of France – the French papers were presenting Nasser as relentless enemy of French interests and security, and the nationalisation as the confirmation of all of their worst fears. If they did not act now, then matters would get far worse. However, if they did act and if Nasser was removed, then matters in Algeria could well calm down, and French prestige could carry the day. It was a deluded, desperate set of notions that led the way in Guy Mollet’s government. The meeting in London had been the rubber stamp on Anglo-French cooperation against Egypt – the entente cordiale was resurrected, with a brand new target.

When we take into account the storm of fury and pride directed in Nasser’s direction among the British public, it may surprise us to learn that in the British Cabinet, a disarming realisation was beginning to bubble to the surface. Despite the grand gestures and threats, Eden was informed in early August that the British Joint Chiefs of Staff had no plans for a reoccupation of the Canal Zone that they had evacuated two years before. More disconcerting and damaging for Eden’s reputation as a statesman, since he was tasked with launching a swift punitive campaign against the Egyptians, was the information that detailed just how thinly spread, technologically inadequate and wholly unprepared the British military establishment was, for any kind of military operation of the kind Eden desired.

If forces were to be sent – from Cyprus, from Libya, from West Germany etc. – then these forces would have to be replaced by others, or Britain would be at a strategic disadvantage, and both European defence and NATO would suffer. The alternative to siphoning forces from one region and placing them in Egypt was to call up and train reservists, as had been done on a limited scale during the KW. One idea which was floated at the first emergency meeting was to move the fleet from Malta, take some royal marine commandos from Cyprus and sail to attack Port Said. This would have sent a clear message to Nasser, and Eden initially jumped at it, before abandoning it due to a critical flaw in the plan – after the 1,200 commandos were dropped in key position, how could they then hope to survive the Egyptian response? There was no question, as Eden was discovering, of a swift strike followed by a more methodical build-up of men in the Zone. Even in terms of air power, Eden’s bubble was burst, as he was informed that Britain’s long-range jet fighters stationed in West Germany couldn’t be moved to the Mediterranean in less than ten days.

Thousands of miles away in Cairo, Nasser was developing a theory on how safe his regime was. With every week that passed, he told his top aides, the risk of war decreased. War with whom? At that moment, Nasser was confident that it would be with the French or British, perhaps both, but not with Israel, as the Western allies would want to keep the conflict European. To a degree, Nasser was correct in perceiving that it was important in London and Paris that the operations to come be seen as originating from Europe, and as having a distinctly European flavour, which in short meant that the Anglo-French wanted to be seen to act without American aid or, it transpired, approval. Yet, in terms of the predictions regarding Israel, Nasser couldn’t have been more wrong. While he had been wily and adept at manipulating the situation up to this point, Nasser had yet to learn an important point – that a war could be and mean whatever one wanted, so long as that war was won. While Eden abhorred the idea of striking through the aegis of the Baghdad Pact for example, he was certainly not above conspiring with Israel to create the situation that he desired, as we’ll see.

The military operations to come were launched with WW2 era equipment and arms, led by WW2 era officers, and based upon WW2 era tactics and estimations. Yet, the actual planning of the operations was also undertaken in distinctly SWW-esque surroundings. Under the Thames, in the old offices constructed by Churchill’s wartime government, designed to withstand prolonged bombing, did the French and British military planners gather and discuss strategy for two and a half months. The air was recycled, with the smell of damp tension filling any fresh pockets that were filtered in. The lazily hanging stale air proved to be an effective metaphor for the actual work done in the complex of secret bunkers, as the allied commander General Sir Charles Keightly was given scant information by Eden to work with, resulting in a slowdown in the General’s productivity, and a resulting bitterness on Eden’s side.

So concerned with secrecy was Eden that he hampered Keightly’s ability to know what to actually prepare for – while he knew the destination was Egypt, what he didn’t know was that the plan was to hold the Canal Zone until Nasser could be replaced. This lack of information compelled Keightly to affect a generic build-up of arms and soldiers rather than a dedicated task force. This lack of communication or trust also meant that affairs were far from speedy, as Eden had desired. Had they gone as Eden had wanted, a fait accompli could well have been launched by the middle of August, or even before, if the forces had been near at hand. Speaking of near at hand, mentions of Egyptian possession of Soviet arms and jet planes in particular spooked some of Keightly’s underlings, who lobbied for greater air power before the aircraft carriers were committed to the battle.

Figures received from well-placed informants in Egypt put the Egyptian forces at possessing 300 tanks and 200 fighter jets, but less consideration was given at high level for the shortage of trained Egyptian pilots or tank crews to operate this hardware. Similarly, even the supply of the latest Czech semi-automatic rifles to Nasser’s men was meaningless unless each individual soldier was properly trained in the use of this weapon. The British may have bitterly resented the fact that they *still* were made to go to battle with the Lee Enfield breech loading rifle from a decade before, but at least they had been fully appraised of its strengths and weaknesses. In line with this idea, Nasser could boast that on paper, Egypt possessed an army half a million men in strength, but a closer examination of the facts highlighted the hollowness of such a claim, as many were reservists, raw recruits or reluctant conscripts who had had little choice other than to join the National Guard or Liberation Army.

There wasn’t enough of an appreciation of the paper tiger aspects of Nasser’s military capabilities, and there was the added danger that the longer the Anglo-French waited, the more time Nasser would have to train, to prepare and to invigorate those Egyptians who had signed on to bulk up the numbers. Whatever the shortcomings though, a week after Nasser’s nationalisation speech had been made, Eden could be quietly confident that the plan had been struck. Nasser would be overthrown, and Port Said, what we would consider as the entrance to the Suez Canal if you’re coming from the Mediterranean, would be the major target, to be secured with an air and naval bombardment. Port Said was soon swapped for Alexandria as the major target and the staging post for the operation, and the codename was given as Musketeer, supposedly inspired after the commander allied of land forces, who hosted a hefty moustache. Up to this point, thanks to their major contribution of resources, the plans had been mostly British. Eden agreed to the plan first, on 10th August, seconded by Guy Mollet on 18th August. D-Day was set for 15th September, but there was still a good bit of work – and sneaky conspiring – to be done before the boats would be launched.

In the next episode, we’ll return to examine the intense, and now infamous, scheming which went on behind the scenes between the British, French and, increasingly, the Israelis. Amongst the wily diplomatists, security concerns and quest for political consensus on the need for military action was added the perspective of the two CW powers – the Americans and the Soviets. Officially, these two powers did not exist – this was an Anglo-French operation, and the entente cordiale was determined to ride again. Until next time then history friends and patrons, my name is Zack and you have been listening to 1956 episode 21. Thanks for listening and I’ll be seeing you all soon.

1. Cited in Barry Turner, *Suez 1956*, pp. 179-180. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cited in *Ibid*, p. 180. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cited in Howard J. Dooley, ‘Great Britain's 'Last Battle' in the Middle East: Notes on Cabinet Planning during the Suez Crisis of 1956’, *The International History Review*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Aug., 1989), pp. 486-517; p. 486. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cited in Barry Turner, *Suez 1956*, p. 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Cited in *Ibid*, p. 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cited in *Ibid*, p. 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See *Ibid*, pp. 184-185. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Cited in *Ibid*, p. 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Paul Johnson, *The Suez War* (London, 1957), p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Christian Pineau [Robert Laffront translated], *1956 Suez* (London, 1976), p. 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)