

# THE SUEZ QUESTION

QUÆSTOR

**S**EVENTY years and more have passed since that anti-imperialist fighter and poet, Wilfred Scawen Blunt, wrote in *The Wind and the Whirlwind*, of the first bold efforts of Egyptian patriots, by a national revolution, to strike off the golden chains rivetted on their ancient land by foreign bondholders and royal parasites, and of their call which startled the whole world :

*There in the land of Death, where toil is cradled,  
That tearful Nile, unknown to Liberty,  
It spoke in passionate tones of human freedom,  
And of those rights of Man which cannot die.  
And in the streets, where still the shade of Pharaoh  
Stalked in his sons, the Mamelukian horde,  
Youth greeted youth with words of exultation  
And shook his chains and clutched as for a sword.*

Blunt wrote of their leader, Ahmed Arabi, son of a village headman, soldier-leader of the rising in 1881, reminding the people of their slave-like toil (the Suez Canal, for example, built from 1856-69 with the labour of tens of thousands of conscripted peasants):

*It was no law of God nor of the Nations  
That in this land, alone of the fair Earth  
The hand that sowed should reap not of its labour. . . .  
How have we suffered at the hands of strangers,  
Binding their sheaves—and harvesting their wrath!  
Our service has been bitter—and our wages  
Hunger and pain and nakedness and drouth.  
To live in ignorance, to die by service,  
To pay our tribute and our stripes receive:  
This was the ransom of our toil in Eden  
This, and our one sad liberty—to grieve.*

A new future opened before the Egyptians, one in which 'the men of usury shall fly your land', and their princes would be among their servants:

*You shall become a nation with the nations.  
Lift up your voices, for the night is past.  
Stretch forth your hands. The hands of the free peoples  
Have beckoned you, the youngest and the last.*

The hopes were shattered by treachery, by the British guns bombarding Alexandria in 1882, by a British invasion and the battle of Tel-el-Kebir. But Blunt warned Britain that a day of reckoning would come, and not only in Egypt:

*The nations of the East have left their childhood.  
Thou art grown old. Their manhood is to come;  
And they shall carry on Earth's high tradition  
Through the long ages when thy lips are dumb.*

Some of his other warnings were quoted in the February *Labour Monthly*.

Blunt was no socialist, and he could not conceive of Britain being reborn as a socialist country, under the guidance of the working class, no longer to be 'dumb': or even of British Labour, in its militant mood after the second world war, imposing on a weakened British imperialism the acceptance of some concessions to the rebelling 'nations of the East'. But his words had their prophetic strength nevertheless, as we are reminded today on an immensely greater scale than he could even imagine.

For in a flash the events of the last few weeks have lit up the true situation in the world. The Arab peoples striking blow after blow at the hideous misery in which they have been held by the imperialist Powers, for the latter's benefit, throughout the Near East: drawing after them the other semi-colonial countries of Islamic culture: through the Middle East (Libya, Persia, Afghanistan) to the Far East (Indonesia): their standard-bearer for the moment the people of Egypt, proud in the reconquest of its 5,000-year-old statehood (the oldest in the world)—as yesterday it was Jordan, one of the youngest and smallest among them—but all conscious of being the spokesmen of colonial peoples everywhere: India a very powerful spokesman for them amongst the Great Powers. Against them the block of powerful states of finance-capital, Britain, France, U.S.A. and their junior partners in world robbery—the Dominions, Holland and others: so recently the unchallenged masters of the natural resources and labour of these countries, arrogant in their panoply of 'reeking tube and iron shard', bomber-planes, tanks and landing-craft, itching to take any excuse to win back their supremacy, provided only the moment be favourable: and desperately conscious that behind the 1,500 millions who have shaken off colonial bonds since the last war, hundreds of millions more are waiting their turn in Latin America, Africa, the Caribbean. The third great camp, the one of socialism, with the U.S.S.R. and China at its head,

steadily, quietly and ceaselessly interposing its pressure for peaceful settlement of the quarrel, for reasonable discussion instead of bloody adventure: offering its own assistance to the under-developed countries irrespective of their social systems, in strict keeping with United Nations principles: yet ready, if the imperialist Powers wish it, to co-operate with them in raising living standards throughout the world.

Here is the conflict with Egypt. For how many months have the imperialist Powers not been telling each other that they must 'bar the way to world Communism' by economic aid to the under-developed countries, the ex-colonies and semi-colonies? How long have they not been boasting that the days of imperialism are past? Yet when Egypt asks for aid for the Aswan Dam, it turns out that first the United States, then Britain and finally the World Bank refuse their promised loans—because Egypt will not put her economy under their supervision, or (shall we say) arrange it to their liking. Yet look back fifty years to an age of unquestioned imperialism—and you will find foreign controllers-general in Egypt (as in Turkey and China) doing precisely what the Western Powers wanted to restart in 1956. 'New presbyter is but old priest, writ large.'

Of course Egypt could have turned at once for aid to the Soviet Union; but Nasser is not a socialist either. He wants to develop his country's backward economy on state capitalist lines. He proclaims nationalisation of the Suez Canal Company, so as to use for productive purposes the net revenue from this huge enterprise dug on Egyptian soil with Egyptian labour—and, by the way, with Egypt providing at that time over £3,500,000 out of the £8,000,000 required, by taking up nearly 178,000 shares out of 400,000 (France subscribed £4,100,000).\* He undertakes to compensate the shareholders at a rate far higher than even the poor victimised mine-owners got in Great Britain—and the latter holds 'frozen' in her sterling balances far more Egyptian money (£110 millions) than would be needed to pay them off. The Egyptian Government takes over the company's offices—and what a howl of fury rises from the British and French Tories (and to their undying shame, from the Labour leaders too)!

Listen to the charges—which resemble nothing so much as the charges of the cat Fury against a mouse, in *Alice in Wonderland*.

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\*Palmerston and the British Government fought to the last against building the Canal: Britain bought its present shares from the bankrupt ruler of Egypt, once the Canal was a going concern.

‘A threat to free and unfettered passage!’ Utter nonsense, when you remember that Egypt relies on the revenue from Canal tolls to build the Aswan Dam. But it is a threat to the shareholders, who (for example) in 1955 received dividends totalling £10 millions (25 per cent. more than what was paid for the shares): and to the Board, who include directors of some of the biggest British banks, insurance and shipping companies, etc.

‘One nation must not control an international waterway!’ Pretty cool, considering that Britain controlled it alone from 1882 to 1952—dragging Egypt into the war of 1914-18 as a result, and expressly rejecting internationalisation under the League of Nations in 1924 (when the Egyptian Premier Zaghul proposed it to Ramsay MacDonald): considering too how Britain has opposed international supervision of the Dardanelles.

‘You can’t trust Nasser!’ Look who’s talking, the Egyptians could retort. In 1910 Blunt already listed 16 broken pledges by Britain to evacuate Egypt: by 1952 they had grown to nearly 50—and even then the troops only left because Britain was in a tough spot, internationally. Look who’s talking, all the Arab peoples are saying—mindful of the swindling exploits of Col. Lawrence in the first world war, which even today make the Tories blush.

‘We aren’t challenging nationalisation, it’s only this particular case we object to.’ Is that so? It was a different story that was told when the Russians nationalised foreign companies in 1918: Britain and France invaded the country to get back the factories and mines. It was a different tune heard in 1938, when most violent threats were uttered against Mexico for nationalising British oilwells.

‘Nasser’s action is against international law!’ Then why don’t you take him to the International Court at the Hague, as he challenged you to do? The ludicrous wriggings of Selwyn Lloyd on the B.B.C. are sufficient answer: he daren’t.

‘Egyptians aren’t capable of running the Canal!’ What about the obligation on the Company, then, under the 1856 Charter and the 1888 Convention—an obligation recognised by Britain as signatory to the Convention (article 16)—to hand back the Canal to the Egyptian Government in 1968? Was the British Government preparing to use the same argument then? Probably it was: 45 years ago already, when in occupation of the country, it tried through a subservient Egyptian Government to engineer an extension of the concession from 1968 to 2008. The scheme was only dropped when a young patriot, Wardani, shot the pro-British premier.

‘Britain’s task is to persuade the Egyptian Government not to confuse sovereignty with jingoistic nationalism, which can only provoke general hostility’ (Morgan Phillips, Labour Party secretary, August 12). Physician, heal thyself! Was it Egypt which concentrated troops, planes and warships in preparation for invading Britain—or vice versa? As for general hostility, it seems, by cold arithmetic, mostly to be directed against Britain, rather than Egypt.

But enough of these humbugging charges against Egypt, which remind one of the biting remarks of a famous English propagandist of socialism:

The Britisher has a special relish for hypocrisy. He thoroughly enjoys it as a sweet morsel. Other nations take their hypocrisy more or less sadly, as a conventional lie of civilisation, getting over it as quickly as possible, like a black draught, and saying little about it. The Anglo-Saxon chews it and gets the full flavour out of it.

(E. Belfort Bax, *History of the Nonconformist Conscience*, 1896).

More important is the following.

The very first paragraph of the Anglo-Soviet communiqué signed on April 27 this year runs:

The representatives of the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom recognised that the strengthening of Soviet-British relations in political, trade, scientific, cultural and other fields would be in the interests of both countries. They were also convinced that this would help to consolidate general peace and security.

Moreover the section dealing with the Near and Middle East (at that time it was ‘peace in the region of Palestine’ which was the main practical worry) began with this declaration of principle:

The Soviet Union and the United Kingdom have the firm intention to do everything in their power to facilitate the maintenance of peace and security in the Near and Middle East.

In his farewell message to Bulganin and Khrushchov on April 27, Eden expressed his hope that the Anglo-Soviet talks ‘will prove the beginning of growing confidence between our countries’.

Now here, at the end of July, three months later, was a remarkable chance to strengthen that confidence. Did the Tory Government take it? Did it use ‘the strengthening of Soviet-British relations’ in the political field to consult the Soviet Government about agreement over the Suez Canal, and thus ‘consolidate general peace and security’? Did it suggest that the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom should now co-operate in finding a solution ‘to facilitate the maintenance of peace and security in the Near East’?

No it didn’t. Its pledges proved merely waste paper. Just as if

it hadn't signed them, it ignored the Soviet Union. Just as if the cold war were still raging, it turned to gang up first with France and the United States—and then tried to present the U.S.S.R. and the other countries with a *fait accompli* (including war-like concentrations in the Mediterranean). And this is the Government which dares to talk of 'international confidence'—and for which Mr. Gaitskell on August 2 proclaimed his backing, in terms which sent the Tory press into raptures!

If the British Government had remembered its obligations: if it had had preliminary consultations with the U.S.S.R. at least on the scale that it had with France and the United States: an element of moderation and prudence, of concern for opinions in Asia, Africa and the smaller countries of Europe, would have entered into the discussions from the very first. The world would have been spared a new bout of sabre-rattling and hysterical abuse, British homes and British public finances would have been spared new alarms, worries and needless strain.

Why can't you keep your promises, Sir Anthony? Because your Government is based on moneybags and warmongering—and if we are kept out of war this time, it will be only thanks to the opposition of the British people and to Britain's shameful isolation among the nations, save for a few other Powers breathing the leprous effluvium of imperialism.

We write before the final outcome of the conference at Lancaster House. But the proceedings up to August 20 have brought out the essential issues quite clearly.

On the one hand the old imperialism—armed bullying to protect the rights of foreign investors in colonial misery—produced the 'Dulles plan' published that day, after a week of juggling with texts. Its essence? An international board of states to control 'operation, maintenance and development' of the Canal, including repayment of the shareholders of the old Suez Canal Company—precisely the same scheme of 'collective colonialism', control of native enterprise in the interests of foreign bondholders and merchants, as was set up in the old Egypt of the Khedives, the old Ottoman Empire of the Sultan, the old China of the Manchu Emperors, in the 19th century. And the thinly disguised ultimatum behind it: if Egypt does not accept, then 'concerted measures' to be taken, by 'all or some' of the Powers.

On the other hand the voice of socialism and peace in the speeches of Shepilov, in unison with the voice of outraged ex-colonial nations, the voice of the 29 states and 1,500 million people represented at

the Bandung Conference in April, 1955, speaking through Krishna Menon. The Soviet warning against the 'irreparable negative results' for Britain and France from aggression against Egypt, against violation of peace which might go beyond the Near and Middle East, against the attempt to overthrow Nasser: the Soviet and Indian plea to seek a settlement by negotiation, starting from recognition of 'the inalienable rights of the Egyptian state with regard to the Suez Canal': and the practical plan for such negotiations, tabled by Menon—its essence an Egyptian State Corporation *co-operating* with foreign users, ensuring free unhampered transit through the Canal.

Could there be a sharper contrast in the world—two-thirds of its working population on the one hand, the spokesmen of the European and American Stock Exchanges and money markets on the other?

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