

The Suez Crisis (1956) as a Threatening Challenge to the Commonwealth

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Abstract

Adopting the analytical narrative approach, this paper explores how the Suez Crisis (1956) created a rift within the Commonwealth. This latter is an association that emerged after the Second World War (1939-1945) to encompass some of the ex-British colonies as one family rather than being under a colonial rule. Under a set of diverse principles, this association was supposed— and still is —to participate in promoting peace instead of waging wars, and its decisions should be built upon consultation and mutual consensus between its different members. However, in 1956, Britain broke those rules by fighting with France and Israel against Egypt in a war named as the Suez Crisis. By doing so, the unity of the Commonwealth was highly shaken.

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1. Introduction

Being the empire on which the sun never sets, the British Empire could stretch its power and control over almost the globe for more than two centuries starting from the seventeenth century till after the end of the Second World War in 1945 when a process of decolonization took place, leading to the shrunk of the Empire's expansion. Consequently, a new association named 'the Commonwealth' was engendered. It was an alternative way for Britain to gather its ex-colonies back. However, this new emerged body had to face a crisis threatening its position in its early beginning; Britain had to take a firm stance whether to take part in the war against Egypt in 1956 over the Suez Canal or not. Indeed, since Britain had formed the Commonwealth, it was supposed to resort to peace whenever it was possible, but it opted for the opposite instead. Hence, reactions of the Commonwealth's members diverged on the topic, intimidating the unity of the association. In this regard, the present paper endeavors to answer the following question: To which extent did the Suez Crisis represent a threatening challenge to the unity of the Commonwealth?

Tackling this issue not only will offer insight on how such an entity could preserve its unity despite the odds but also will contribute to the literature of the field

for no apparent study approached the topic by relating the Crisis to the Commonwealth. For instance, in his "Suez and Britain's Decline as a World Power," author G. C. Peden from the University of Stirling argues that the Crisis contributed in a great deal to the emergence of new superpowers and to the decline of Britain (G.C.Peden, 2012). In the same vein, Sarianna M. Lundan from the University of Bremen and Geoffrey Jones from Harvard University reported on trade and investment relationships within the Commonwealth in their article "the Commonwealth Effect on the Process of Internationalism," in which they confirmed the overall tendency of this association for high level intra-trade and investment (Lundan & Jones, 2001). Based on the premise of this lack in literature regarding the kernel of this work, this paper was written.

2. The Evolution of the Commonwealth till 1956

The Commonwealth owes its origins to the early nineteenth century when Canada in 1867 was granted a dominion status followed by Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa in 1901, 1907, and 1910, respectively (Puvellé, Niemeyer, & Park, 2003, p. 81). This status was redefined by the Declaration of Belfour in 1926, wherein the countries were declared to be "autonomous ...within the British Empire, equal in status, in no way subordinate one to another in any aspect of their domestic

or external affair; though united by a common allegiance to the crown and freely associated as members of the British Commonwealth.” (Bosque, 2014, p. 33).

Five years later, another act was passed by the British Parliament, named as the Statute of Westminster. It emphasized that the relationship between the Parliament of the United Kingdom and the different dominions that were members of the British Commonwealth at that time (Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South African, the Irish Free State and Newfoundland) should be built upon a mutual consensus, and a full recognition of the status of the different dominions (Statute of Westminster 1931).

Meanwhile, Britain in the twentieth century fell under internal and external pressure; its position was shaken by the presence of new powers: the United States and the Soviet Union (O'Driscoll, 2009, p. 9). Indeed, being involved in two World Wars would inevitably have bad effects. This was the case with Britain, mainly after the Second World War (1939-1945) when a decolonization movement took place leading to Britain's loss of nearly all its colonies, and thus to its decline as an empire. Hence, as Sophie Loossouam states, “for Britain, its [Commonwealth] was a means of retaining its links with the former colonies.” (Fichaux, 2003, p. 33).

Besides, from that time onward, this association noticed apparent changes leading to the emergence of the Modern Commonwealth. This new shift occurred particularly after the Independence of India in 1947, and its partition into India and Pakistan. These latter joined the Commonwealth in 1947, followed by Sri Lanka in 1948 (see appendix). Subsequently, India expressed its wish to be an independent republic while remaining member of the Commonwealth. To tackle this issue, another declaration was held, the London Declaration in 1949 where the word ‘British ‘ was omitted from the term ‘British Commonwealth,’ leading to the creation of the term ‘the Commonwealth of Nations’, as a sign to the new relationship between Britain and its ex-colonies which should not be built upon an imperial rule (Smith, 1946). Furthermore, as an outcome of diverse views and suggestions, India's wish was fulfilled after it accepted the British Monarch, King George VI (r. 1936 – 1952) at that time, as a symbol of the association and as the head of the Commonwealth (Smith, 1946).

Consequently, under the umbrella of the aforementioned declarations, the different members of the Commonwealth of Nations were bound together as one unity by the following set of principles: equality, autonomy, self-sufficiency, co-operation and consultation (Bosque, 2014, pp. 43-45). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these principles was challenged by the Suez Crisis

of 1956 that put the Commonwealth's unity under a serious test.

3. The Commonwealth During the Suez Crisis (1956)

3.1 The Suez Crisis (1956)

The Suez Crisis would not have happened if the Suez Canal was not constructed. Actually, for many years ago, mankind strove to erect a waterway that would enhance them to traverse the desert which stretches between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea (Smith, 1946). However, it was until the 19th century that this dream turned to a tangible reality when the viceroy of Egypt Said Pasha (1854-1863) vouchsafed two acts of concessions to the French entrepreneur Ferdinand de Lesseps permitting him to construct the Canal. Thereby, Ferdinand founded the Suez Canal Company that was responsible for the execution of the construction that lasted for 10 years. Eventually, the canal was opened in 1869, and the division of the Suez Canal Company's shares was estimated as follows: 400,000 for France, 4,161 for Spain, 2,719 for Italy, and the remaining shares were for the Egyptian government (L.G, 1938). Yet, this latter – due to financial problems– was urged to sell its part to Britain making it one of the main shareholders in the company in 1875 (L.G, 1938, p. 10). This position was strengthened when Britain, under the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936, was allowed to keep 10000 troops and 400 Royal Air Force pilots in the Suez Canal (Anglo-Egyptian Treaty).

Notwithstanding, the investors acquiesced in the decision that entailed the reversion of the canal to Egypt after 99 years of its inauguration (The Suez Crisis: A Brief Comint History, 2013). Since then, the canal's importance grew increasingly. As a short and an easy waterway, it served the European powers by facilitating their access to their colonies. Moreover, because the European economy's hub revolved around the Middle East's oil, the European powers relied on it heavily, chiefly Britain and France (Pierre, 2004, pp. 43-44). Consequently, the only way that would ease their task to transport this oil was the Suez Canal. However, when Gamal Abdel Nasser (p. 1954-1970) became the president of Egypt, his objectives threatened the European interests in the canal; he was driven by the desire of strengthening the position of his country and of drifting away the colonial powers from the Middle East and from Africa (Pierre, 2004, p. 22). In order to achieve his aim, Nasser succeeded in getting the British forces removed from the canal (Varble, 2003, p. 13). Furthermore, he crippled Israel from shipping through the Suez Canal and the Straits of Tiran (Varble, 2003, p. 9). In addition to that, Nasser, as believed by France, was responsible for backing up rebels in the French colony, Algeria (The Suez Crisis: A Brief Comint History, 2013).

Along the same line of thought, what made matters worse was Nasser's deal with the Soviet Union to buy weaponry in 1955. Following it, the United States along with

Britain and the World Bank withdrew the loan that they offered to Egypt for the construction of the Aswan Dam on the Nile River. As a response, Nasser made a speech in Alexandria on 26th July 1956 wherein he announced the nationalization of the Suez Canal. This decision was based on his previous estimation that the Egypt's takeover of the canal would provide it with 91\$ (Shupe, M. Wright, W. Hipel, & M. Fraser, 1980, p. 481); thus, in so doing, Nasser would be able to compensate the loan that was pulled out.

Nasser's decision was a huge blow for France and Britain who were the main shareholders in the company. As a result, a series of negotiations were made in order to solve the problem peacefully, and to prevent Nasser from implementing his decision; however, the negotiations ended with attaining no laudable results (The Suez Crisis: A Brief Comint History, 2013).

Subsequently, Britain opted for force to secure the canal (MacMillan, 1995, p. 101), and when the United States expressed its refusal, Britain and France were urged to organize secret meetings. After suggesting diverse plans to conduct the war against Egypt, they acquiesced in the decision of carrying out the Revise Plan that encapsulated three phases: destroying the Egyptian air forces, overthrowing Gamal Abdel Nasser, and finally occupying the canal (Varble, 2003, pp. 21-25).

Furthermore, the requisite need of a legitimate excuse to wage the war pushed the two allies to collude with Israel (Varble, 2003, p. 25) who considered Nasser as a serious hindrance that impeded it from moving freely in the Strait of Tiran. Thereby, another meeting was held in Sevres, France in 1956 in which the allies outlined their military operations under the Sevres Protocol Plan. They agreed that the first step would be the Israeli onslaught of Egypt followed on the next day by Britain and France's ultimatum demanding the retreat of the Egyptian and Israeli forces from the canal, and the last step would be the intervention of the Anglo-French forces to implement the first phase of the Revise Plan (Varble, 2003, p. 27).

When the plan was put into action on 30th October, 1956, the military forces' imbalance of the two sides was palpable. On the one hand, the collusion of the three allies provided them with the opportunity to use miscellaneous and modern weaponry, including military parachute regiments, powerful navy such as aircraft carriers and battleships, armored tanks, and military air forces (Varble, 2003, pp. 15-19). On the other hand, despite the Egyptian arms' deal, Egypt did not only lack expertise to use the new armaments, but also had weak leadership (Varble, 2003, pp. 19-20). However, with the British parliament's strong opposition (Anastasiou), the diverse reactions of the members of the Commonwealth (Dommerques, 1991, p.

158), the American ultimatum to stop the war (Anastasiou), and the Soviet Union's threats to use nuclear power in both London and Paris (The Suez Crisis: A Brief Comint History, 2013), the war ended on 7 November 1956 by the withdrawal of the allies' forces. Yet, although it ended in favor of Egypt, its casualties did not. In effects, Egypt lost nearly 1000 civilians and 1650 deaths from the military forces, whereas the three allies' deaths were estimated as follows: 189 Israeli, 16 British, and 10 French persons (Varble, 2003, p. 91).

3.2 Commonwealth Members' Reactions

The British under the Prime Minister Anthony Eden in the war against Egypt received diverse reactions from the parts of the members of the Commonwealth at that time. Australia and New Zealand supported the British policy (Dommerques, 1991, p. 158). The Australian politician Robert Menzies stated that "It was-and I will say it if I am the only left to say it- brave and correct." (Walker, 1978, p. 15).

Unlike its counterparts, the Canadian government abstained from supporting Britain by taking a firm decision and by expressing its refusal publicly. It opined that since it had neither interests nor tangible benefits in the canal, it would be futile for it to interfere in the war (MacMillan, 1995, p. 102). India, Pakistan and South Africa were also loath to take part, believing that this canal was not part of their interests (MacMillan, 1995, p. 99). Ceylon (later Sri Lanka) also denied the use of force and

aggressive ways (MacMillan, 1995, p. 113). Notwithstanding, the British government continued its plan. It considered force as the only solution to secure its interest and to debar Gamel Abdel Nasser from putting his decision into action.

Adding fuel to the flame, Anthony Eden opted for secrecy (Strongman, 2020, p. 181). He preferred not to inform the members of the Commonwealth about any news or plans concerning the war. Thus, the lack of consultation was apparent, and the Commonwealth's divergent opinions reached its pinnacle. It was described by the Canadian Diplomat Mr Lester Pearson as being "on the verge of dissolution (Walker, 1978, p. 15).

4. The Commonwealth after the Suez Crisis (1956)

The war ended by Gamel Abdel Nasser's victory and by British disappointment since it could not attain its aim to retain the canal for its interests. Its failure proved the fact of the decline of its position as a world superpower (McDowall, 1989, p. 169). However, it was time for it to reconstruct the Commonwealth which following the Suez Crisis was about to be divided, yet it did not.

On January 9th, 1956 Eden Anthony resigned to be superseded by Harold Macmillan. This latter strove to reconstruct the Commonwealth, and to retain good relationships between its members (Strongman, 2020, p. 810). During the following years, new members joined the

Commonwealth (see appendix). Furthermore, in 1956, a Commonwealth secretariat was established to be the main intergovernmental agency with the aim of maintaining a good peaceful relationship between the different members of the Commonwealth and of enhancing cooperation and consultation between them (Commonwealth of Nations).

From that time onward, other additional declarations have been issued. Today the Commonwealth family has been extended; it embraces diverse countries “which support each other work together towards international goals. It is also a family of people.” (Commonwealth of Nations).

4. CONCLUSION

Although the Suez Crisis was a serious challenge to the Commonwealth's cohesion and unity, it proved the apparent survival of this association. The Prime Minister who was responsible for waging the war did not respect the different members' opinions, and this certainly affected the association and shook its principles. Yet, learning from this mistake, the new Prime Minister was sensitized that the Crisis was a reminder for Britain to relinquish its imperialistic spirit, and to the vital necessity of protecting the unity of the Commonwealth. Succeeding in doing so, new members joined the association. In addition to that, the different disputes that arose within the body of the Commonwealth during the Suez Crisis substantiated the fact that the existing

members were driven by the desire to promote peace, and to work as a one family and not under an imperial rule.

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6. Appendix

Table 1. Members of the Commonwealth

Country	Year of Joining
Antigua and Barbuda	1981
Australia	1931
Bahamas	1973
Bangladesh	1972
Barbados	1966
Belize	1981
Botswana	1966
Brunei Darussalam	1984
Cameron	1995
Canada	1931
Cyprus	1961
Dominica	1978
Fiji Islands	1970 and suspended in 2009
The Gambia	1965
Ghana	1957
Grenada	1974
Guyana	1966

India	1947
Jamaica	1962
Kenya	1963
Kiribati	1979
Lesotho	1966
Malawi	1964
Malaysia	1957
Maldives	1982
Malta	1964
Mauritius	1968
Mozambique	1995
Namibia	1990
Nauru	1968
New Zealand	1931
Nigeria	1960
Pakistan	1947 and 1989
Papua New Guinea	1975
Rwanda	2009
St Kitts and Nevis	1983
St Lucia	1979
St Vincent and the Grenadines	1979
Samoa	1970
Seychelles	1976
Sierra Leone	1961
Singapore	1965
Solomon Islands	1978
South Africa	1931 and 1994
Sri Lanka	1948
Swaziland	1968
Tonga	1970
Trinidad and Tobago	1962
Tuvalu	1978
Uganda	1962
United Republic of Tanzania	1961
Vanuatu	1980
Zambia	1964

Source: (Newson, 2011)