

THE SUEZ CANAL IN WORLD POLITICS

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INTEREST is just now—intermittently but strongly—turned upon a narrow isthmus connecting two continents, and separating two inland seas: the region we know as “Suez”. According to the immortal song about Mandalay, it likewise divides the more austere western world from an indulgent East—an East that encourages thirst, has no Ten Commandments, and cares little to distinguish “good” from “evil”. Kipling’s account of Suez, which is known to everybody, needs to be supplemented—if we would follow our daily bulletins—by knowledge, less picturesque but more exact, about the history of the famous Canal.

I.

Seventy-one years ago, after a decade of engineering work, it was announced that the isthmus had been successfully pierced, and that the new route through it for ships was about to be thrown open to business. In England, whose Prime Minister (Lord Palmerston) had been among the fiercest opponents of the enterprize when it was started, a chorus of scornful vaticination greeted the formal opening of the Canal. The *London Globe*, in an editorial, warned those who had put money into it that they would never get a farthing of return on their investment. This “obvious fraud”, it said, had been a sample of what crafty puffing could achieve, for the subscribers to the stock were “mostly waiters from the cafés who have been deceived by the newspapers which they find lying around”. Or perhaps, it reflected, some of them were “grocers’ boys who are accustomed to read advertisements in the old papers with which they wrap their parcels”. Persons who like to collect past judgments which later experience has made funny may add this to their list. It deserves a place beside the warning of the Edinburgh reviewer to Wordsworth that such a poem as *The Excursion* “will never do”, or the rash pledge of Lord Derby that he would eat the boiler of the first iron ship to cross the Atlantic Ocean.

But absurd as the forecasts of failure of the Canal

had taken place. The frantic effort to prove that it would be a commercial failure was an effort to escape the all too sober conviction that its consequences—other than commercial—would be most perilous to world peace, and would bring special peril to Britain. Palmerston used to vary his argument that the scheme was financially unsound with a companion argument that Turkey—in whose province of Egypt the Canal would lie—must expect through it a sudden and terrific increase of dangerous attentions from many Powers. Adjuring the Turks to bear in mind that this might well be a first move towards the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, he induced the Sultan to concede less land for the project than had at first been intended. This, of course, made no difference to the issue, but it reflected intense British uneasiness. It is safe to guess that what Palmerston—of all men—had in mind was English rather than Turkish interest, and that the picture of a great French company managing a short-cut by sea through the soil of Egypt for ships *en route* for the East was what haunted his dreams. Fifteen years later, haunted by the same national anxiety, Disraeli bought for Britain, from a bankrupt Khedive, an enormous block of Canal shares.

The course of reflection and reasoning in Disraeli's mind is obvious. Suppose Turkey should lose Egypt, not to Britain, but to some other, some anti-British Great Power? There was no need for anxiety about that until the Canal made the isthmus so different: half a century ago, no account had to be taken of air communications. But the work of Lesseps had created a new international peril by sea. The alarm, though in the main British, was not British alone. When Ernest Renan welcomed the great promoter to the French Academy, he used language which, re-read now, makes one catch one's breath:

M.de Lesseps, since you have cut through it, the isthmus has become a defile, that is to say, a battlefield. The Bosphorus by itself has been enough to keep the whole civilized world embarrassed up to the present; but now you have caused a second and much more serious embarrassment. Not merely does the Canal connect two inland seas, but it serves as a communicating passage to all the oceans of the globe. In case of a maritime war, it will be of supreme importance, and everyone will be striving at top speed to occupy it. You have thus marked out a great battlefield for the future.

II.

Renan was, doubtless, thinking particularly of what had happened in Egypt just four years before.

The Khedive's wretched misgovernment had produced results such as one must expect to follow upon State bankruptcy, and discontented soldiers had found in the Egyptian Minister of War himself a willing as well as a capable chieftain of revolt. A color of patriotic idealism was lent to what began as no more than a mutiny, when the civil population showed favor to Arabi's rising on the ground that the Khedive had sold out the country for his personal advantage to foreign capitalists. The cry "Egypt for the Egyptians" referred primarily to the Canal, whose control was being disputed between British and French, with no regard whatever to natives. Peril from this rising nationalism could not be ignored by the foreign interests there, or by their home governments.

Gladstone was then British premier, and the "Joint Note" to the Khedive had an unmistakably Gladstonian ring. It was the outcome, however, of interchange between London and Paris; an interchange which had shown that neither the risks chiefly apprehended nor the remedies chiefly favored by the two European Cabinets were the same. Gambetta was French Foreign Minister, and what he particularly desired in this tangle was to prevent further intervention by Turkey in Egypt. Abstractly, it seemed indeed obvious that a province of the Ottoman Empire whose local ruler could not control his own mutinous troops should have discipline restored by the forces of the Sultan. But the Sultan's suzerainty over Egypt had long been nominal, and Gambetta desired that it should remain so. He was altogether opposed to Gladstone's plan, that the European governments should advise the Sultan to assert himself in restoration of order: probably what exasperated him most was the proposal that Italy as well as France and Great Britain should participate in such joint pressure at Constantinople. He would join, however, in an Anglo-French note of remonstrance to the Khedive, hoping secretly that events might so develop as to further his own pet scheme—the establishment in Egypt of a joint Anglo-French occupation.

But to Gambetta's colleagues in the French Cabinet that scheme seemed far too daring. On the other hand, what occurred within the next few weeks made it impossible even for Gladstone

notes. In mid-summer, 1881, an anti-foreign riot broke out in Alexandria, and fifty Europeans were massacred. A sort of Egyptian Boxer movement! "Down with the foreign devils". The British fleet, taking no further account of either Khedive or Sultan, forthwith bombarded Alexandria, and quickly restored order. Since the French, though invited to cooperate, preferred to withdraw, the British did the needful job alone. M. André Siegfried, in his recent monograph, *Suez and Panama*, explains his country's refusal as due in part to a loss of confidence in its own strength, which the tragic defeat of French arms by Prussia a dozen years before had produced. The naval bombardment was followed by the crushing land victory of British forces over those of Arabi at Tel-el-Kebir, and for nearly forty years after that decisive battle the British direction of Egypt was not seriously challenged.

III.

With suppression of the insurgent nationalist and reestablishment of the docile Khedive, it might have been thought that the *Suez Canal Company* could look forward to a long period of peaceful commerce. It made some conciliatory adjustment—signed a new agreement for its working, reduced its toll rate, undertook territorial expansion, added seven more British directors to its Board so that it might not be distrusted as French in policies no less than in origin. Great Britain in turn, at the Convention of Constantinople in 1888, tried to appease by concessions on the same spot. Pledge after pledge was given regarding use of the Canal. It should be kept open both in peace and in war for the ships of all countries alike. No permanent fortifications should be built; the Canal must never be blocked up; no belligerent operations should be allowed to any Power (even to Turkey) during a time of war either in the Canal itself or within three nautical miles of the port at either end. Warships could never remain longer than twenty-four hours at Port Said or at Suez, and what they might load there must not exceed their immediate needs. These were extraordinary safeguards for international status of the waterway.

Yet in the French mind the outstanding grievance remained, that Egypt had acquired a British garrison! It was inferred, not without reason, that the Power which had rescued the Khedive in his hour of peril would be able to control the Khedive afterwards—especially when it maintained a garrison in his

in British hands. France had indeed been given, and had refused, the opportunity to cooperate at the critical moment; but recollection of this did not make her the less irritable. Shrill petulance in the Paris press about "the Egyptian scandal" and *perfidie Albion* became habitual, especially in the period of the Dreyfus affair when tempers rose high, and it was not calmed by Lord Salisbury's cynicism about evacuating Egypt "at the Greek Kalends". The bitterness was not abated until the cementing, in 1904, of that *Entente Cordiale* which dissipated minor bickerings under stress of a major common fear. For twenty years at least, the mood of a French statesman was like that of Haman at the court of Ahasuerus: "What doth all this avail while Mordecai sitteth at the King's Gate?" What mattered all the British blandishments to France while British regiments remained a garrison in Egypt?

Nor was Paris the only European capital in which the effect of this irritant became dangerous. Germany, under her new Kaiser, Wilhelm II, began to stir uneasily, and the phrase *Drang nach Osten* began to resound in her discussion of policies abroad. "We must have a fleet", declared the ambitious Emperor, but he had begun to think of other measures too: already, in 1903, German challenge of the British "Life Line to the East" was being proclaimed by a land route through the Balkans and Turkey. Negotiations had been opened with Constantinople for concession of right to build on Turkish soil, through a German company, the Berlin-to-Baghdad railroad. There was something ominous in the close German-Turkish intimacy one could observe developing fast in those years. Everyone knew that it went far to explain the feeble result of remonstrances by the "Concert of Europe" in regard to Armenian massacres. The Sultan Abdul Hamid knew all about this widening rift between British and German purposes, while in London men like Lord Salisbury were more and more nervous about the advantage Germany might take of British involvement in the Middle East. Risk from this new quarter had thus almost from the beginning of the twentieth century made British Foreign Ministers less anxious about France and Russia—the Powers which had kept their predecessors at such strained attention. Russia in particular had ceased to trouble when Japan reduced her to collapse abroad, and there had followed fierce disorder in Russian industrial cities. Almost simultaneously with this, that admirable diplomatist King Edward VII had

go—exceptionally reliable. But Germany was continuing to darken the skies, and her obvious concern was with Northern Africa, especially with Morocco. Her immediate complaint was against France—as the Delcassé incident of 1905 and the Agadir incident of 1911 served to illustrate. But ultimately then, as now, her goal was to settle accounts with Great Britain.

The Berlin-to-Baghdad railway, and all that developed round that enterprize, was the German reaction to the Suez Canal.

IV.

When Turkey entered World War No. 1 on the German side, in 1915, next step for the British garrison in Egypt was clear. The Canal was then in enemy territory, and the only course for the British, if they would ensure its safety—for them a very grave matter indeed—was to annex Egypt. So a Protectorate was at once proclaimed, and preparations were made to repel the Turkish attack which was certain, sooner or later. Egypt during the next three years became accustomed to the exactions of an "Army of Occupation".

It was an extraordinary fate which had thus befallen Egypt, to be—as Lord Lloyd said—"neither combatant nor neutral . . . in the heart of the strife, yet not of it". Her Turkish suzerain of yesterday was fighting the British, whose officials had been her Khedive's "advisers", and whose troops had been a garrison safeguarding Egyptian order—nominally for the Khedive—for the previous thirty years. It was promised, on proclamation of the Protectorate (for "the period of the war", as the British were careful to explain) that no native military service would be required: but soon the burden of economic service was becoming heavy upon natives, and when a Turkish army, bent on capture of the Canal, swept across Egyptian soil, the distinction was hard either to preserve or to recognize. To be non-combatant and yet to be the arsenal of which one combatant can make exclusive use is a rôle always difficult to explain, especially to the excluded Power. Egypt was under martial law; 200,000 Allied troops were encamped there, and they would exact what they needed, without constant concern about the fine points of "non-combatancy". Tales multiplied about the price at which the whole cotton crop of Egypt had been "bought", about the commandeering of corn, about conscription of labor, about the requisitioning of . . .

minds of Egyptian fellahen, not to be counterbalanced by the sudden pro-British enthusiasm among newly-rich hotel proprietors and shopkeepers of Cairo and Alexandria. Once again it was that most dangerous possession, the Canal, which accounted both for the abruptness of treatment to which Egypt was subjected and for the casuistry with which such abruptness was justified.

It was the Canal, too, which kept "the Egyptian Question" so difficult in the years that followed the *Treaty of Versailles*. But for the peril which that waterway had created, the skill and courage of adjustment which had been adequate to settle with a Louis Botha in South Africa, with a Michael Collins in Ireland, would not have proved so long unequal to the challenge of a Zaghlul in Egypt.

Once peace had been made, there arose the question what was to become of the Protectorate which had been announced at Cairo in 1915 as a war-time necessity. At the Versailles Conference, where "self-determination" was the new magic word, delegates from Egypt were clamoring to be heard: they would, beyond doubt, have been heard at once, but for the haunting thought in the mind of Mr. Lloyd George that the Canal made it impossible to grant the demand they were sure to make, and this for reasons at the moment most undesirable to set forth. That an audience of "the Big Four" should be denied to Egypt, though freely conceded to Abyssinia and to the Hedjaz, was indeed hard to demonstrate in terms of the reasoning about "legitimate aspirations" of Poles and Czechs and Yugoslavs: here was one of those decisions at Versailles whose grounds everyone understood, but only trouble-makers insisted on stating. It was a decision at once inconsistent and inevitable, like the one which at the same time repelled similar appeals in the name of "self-determination" from Ireland. The Egyptian agitators who organized that movement with the strange name *Wafd*, especially their leader, Zaghlul, were quick to proclaim that the principle invoked by the British premier elsewhere against the pretension of other races was being set at naught by that shameless opportunist where its obvious requirement touched British interests in the Valley of the Nile.

It was too much to expect, or hope, that Zaghlul and his successors would admit the force of arguments held so conclusive at Westminster—about "threat to the British Life Line": about

vital British interests in the Far East might incur if armed forces could not be sent by the shortest route for defence of Australia or India in war. Leaders of the *Wafd* received with cynical mockery the plea that no one could predict what might happen to Egypt if she were left to look after her own new-born independence; that the long dominance of Turkey, from which she had been delivered, might prove to have given place to dominance by Soviet Russia; and that at least until Egypt should have developed strength adequate to maintain her own sovereignty, it would be unwise to dispense with the garrison she had kept for the previous forty years—sent by the European Power which was most considerate towards Egyptian nationalism. All such reasoning fell on deaf ears. What Zaghlul could see was one thing—that the British meant to exploit Egypt, and to let no other Power share in such exploitation. Talk from London about the risk that Turkish dominance would give place to some other dominance conveyed to the Egyptian patriot only that Britain having the monopoly was set upon keeping it. His answer, like that of the leaders of Sinn Fein about the same time in Ireland, was the organization of disorder, to bring the hated alien government to a stand-still.

Zaghlul, with his closest associates, was deported, but sabotage of railways and roads around Cairo, especially of all communication routes between Egypt and the Sudan, became worse in his absence. When half-a-dozen Englishmen had been murdered, Lord Allenby was commissioned to take the needful military measures, and having done so, he sent back a Report which—like many a military despatch about the same time from Ireland—apprized the British government that a problem far beyond one of mere military control had arisen. Downing Street was so given to construing new developments as just an old, familiar situation, to be met by some minor adjustment of the remedy which had been effective before! Against this besetting sin of the official mind, Lord Allenby insisted that here was by no means just Arabi *redidivus*, with a group of young and restless Egyptian agitators, whom a populace that hardly realized what was afoot had joined more or less mechanically in a rising. Here was a whole country—even the normally placid Egyptian farmers and laborers—ablaze with rage at “the foreigner”. The John Redmond of Egypt had given place to Egypt’s Michael Collins.

was appreciated by the men whom Mr. Lloyd George sent in 1919 and 1920 to deal with it. In the wake of Lord Allenby, Lord Milner came to Egypt, with a Commission, and quickly reported that the Protectorate must be dropped. That sounded like real pacification. But the ever haunting outline of the Canal was to obtrude itself again, as skeleton at the feast. Certain matters, said the *Milner Report*, must for the present be "absolutely reserved to the discretion of His Majesty's Government": first and foremost, "security of the communications of the British Empire in Egypt". That obviously meant the Canal. It did, said Lord Lloyd (who was then Egyptian High Commissioner), but it meant more than that. It meant "all communications by sea routes, air routes or land routes, with India and Australia within the Empire, and with Persia, Mesopotamia and China . . . also our aerial communications with African territories". The response in Egypt was immediate and bitter, once the reservations were announced (February 28, 1922). The new scheme had indeed to be formally accepted: Lord Allenby had done his military job of repression well enough to ensure that. But it was a different matter to make the scheme work. Zaghlul, whose deportation had been revoked that an effort might be made to enlist him as co-promoter of peace, and who had been again deported for organizing boycott of the *Milner Commission*, came back from his second exile to take up under new circumstances his revolutionary rôle.

For the next eight years in Egypt, one watched Palmerston's melancholy forecast being fulfilled to the letter. The presence of the Canal forbade British concession of Egyptian rights, which Egyptians could not be expected for the same reason to forego. If there had been no waterway there, only the narrow land connection of two continents, the risk in Egypt which not even the great Napoleon had been able to turn to Britain's destruction would have been accepted with composure, and Egypt would not have been denied on that account the constitutional evolution which Britain was willing not only to permit but to promote in South Africa, in Saudi Arabia, even in Southern Ireland. Can we wonder at the mood of Zaghlul and his successors, governing under the British *Declaration of 1922* with the same ungracious acquiescence shown by Mr. De Valera in the Treaty which set up the Irish Free State? Or at the high temper of Egyptian Nationalists when the Irish naval bases—Cobh, Lough Swilly, Berehaven—"surrendered" under the Treaty to British Admiralty

transferred to the Government of Eire, but the Government of Egypt was still treated as unfit or undeserving to have charge of a like vital interest in the Suez Canal?

It is hard indeed to exhaust the suggestive points of that last comparison. An insuperable difficulty of Anglo-Irish adjustment was the one known as "Ulster", and the Ulster of Anglo-Egyptian difficulty was the Canal. Negotiations between London and Cairo broke down many times, like those between London and Dublin, when settlement had been thought in sight, because the extreme concession which dignity permitted one side to make could not reach the minimum which safety required the other side to demand.

Marvellous to relate, a real adjustment was reached at length, quite suddenly, in the Anglo-Egyptian case, and the very sanguine are daring to hope that the precedent may have its use for the Anglo-Irish. The Canal, having so often occasioned international animosity and threatened world peace, served for once as a reconciler. Only in so chaotic a scene as Europe is just now witnessing and suffering could such a thing have happened.

V.

Four years ago, the quarrel between British and Egyptians seemed to vanish, and there arose instead the spirit of eager cooperation which was shown and continues to be shown in countless deeds of sacrifice and glory against the common foe. Egyptians, so long enraged by British intrusion, became desirous that British forces should remain with them on guard over the Canal. It was hard to believe one's eyes as one read the terms of the Treaty signed August 26, 1936. What would have been the feelings of Arabi, of Zaghlul, even of the pro-British King Fuad, if he had foreseen that his countrymen would gladly authorize Great Britain to maintain a force of 10,000 troops and 400 air pilots on Egyptian soil, would make the Egyptian treasury responsible for building the needful barracks of this foreign army, and would guarantee in advance every sort of military facility to British purposes in time of war? The piquancy of the situation is intensified when one observes that the agent of reconciliation (unintentional, unwilling, but not for that reason less effective) was Benito Mussolini!

This most remarkable bond for Anglo-Egyptian relations

Selassie appealed in vain for "collective" intervention in his country's cause. "A few weeks of discussion", writes M. André Siegfried, "produced agreement, where fourteen years of bitter negotiating had failed." No one of course can prove, and yet no one who takes note of the rapid sequence in the change is likely to doubt, that the spectacle in Ethiopia was what brought Egypt to hurried and cordial settlement with Great Britain.

Next to the Canal, control of the Sudan had been the chief matter of dispute between Cairo and London. That "Black Country" was claimed by the Egyptians as kin to Egypt in race, in religion, in language. That it had been preserved by British military skill, half a century before, from lapsing to the barbarism of the Mahdi, was a recollection on which the leaders of the *Wafd* did not choose to dwell: the Sudan, they insisted, ought to be theirs. But suddenly, in 1936, they began to see it in an altogether new light. The joint responsibility for control of the Sudan, which had been accepted with such reluctance even when Omdurman was a recent event, was taken as natural. Those British forces whose presence as a "garrison" was so objectionable were invited to make themselves altogether at home in Egypt as the troops of "our gallant ally".

It was a mixture of alarm and disgust at the prospect of possible dominance of Egypt by the Italians that had made the difference. Mussolini's administration of Libya, and the knowledge of Italians acquired through their presence on so large a scale in the lowest social strata of Cairo and Alexandria, made the likeliest alternative to a horror such as that seem acceptable. Already the German-Italian friendship was becoming ominous. By far the most probable safeguard was to come to an arrangement with the British, and for this purpose such offers from London as would have been scorned ten years before were hailed as not only fair but generous. British tact, naturally, met the new mood of conciliation at least half-way.

Reference has been made repeatedly in this paper to the parallel between Anglo-Egyptian and Anglo-Irish negotiations, in their period of clash, of compromise, of diplomatic failure passing into violence, of violence issuing later—through weariness—in new diplomatic negotiation. Correspondence has been noted, point by point, in these stages. Will the correspondence extend to ultimate settlement? Will the menace of Hitler act upon Sinn Fein as the menace of Mussolini acted upon the *Wafd*?