

To what extent did the Suez Crisis of October to November 1956 damage Britain's foreign relations?

20 marks

Section 1 Identification and evaluation of sources

The research question being investigated is: 'To what extent did the Suez Crisis of October to November 1956 damage Britain's foreign relations?'. British military intervention in Nasser's Egypt, together with France and Israel, was an attempt to regain control of the Suez Canal. This action brought international criticism and condemnation. It also led to the resignation of Prime Minister Anthony Eden, and seemed to fundamentally damage Britain's foreign relations. However, it has been argued that this damage was short-term. Two sources relevant to this investigation are US President Dwight D. Eisenhower's statement regarding Suez on 1 November, 1956, which offers insight into the immediate 'damage' to Anglo-American relations, and the book *The commonwealth experience, II: From British to multiracial commonwealth* written by Nicholas Mansergh in 1982, which offers an expert academic analysis of Suez in the broader context of Britain's relations with its empire and commonwealth.

A value of President Eisenhower's speech is that it gives the official government response to British actions from the chief executor of US policy. A value of the date, 1 November, 1956, is that it reveals the immediate perspective of the US at the time of British intervention. A value of the purpose is that it is a public statement of the US position and aimed to show an international audience that the US did not support British actions, and to distance it from Anglo-French impetuosity. It thus reveals the immediate damage done to Anglo-American relations. The content outlines the extent of disapproval, and the tone of the language clearly suggests criticism. A limitation of the origin and purpose is President Eisenhower had to make a statement condemning his Cold War ally publicly for breaching UN agreements, and the President's administration may have had a different private view of events than the position expressed to the international community. A limitation of the content is that it is a narrow statement of the US' immediate position during the crisis and does not identify nor suggest long-term implications for the relationship.

A value of the academic book, "*The commonwealth experience, II: From British to multiracial commonwealth*" is that it was written by an expert historian of the British commonwealth, Nicholas Mansergh. Mansergh is a specialist in British foreign relations in this period,¹ who taught at Cambridge University for thirty years. Another value of the origin is that it was published in 1982 and was written with the benefit of hindsight. The purpose is academic and educational and therefore may attempt objectivity. A limitation of the origin is that as a specialist in British policy the author may lack expertise in assessing the impact of Suez from the perspective of other powers such as the US. A limitation of the purpose is that it was written from a Western perspective, therefore it may be liable to pursuing a Western agenda; this might undermine the objectivity of the book. The purpose

¹ Nicholas Mansergh, interview by Tom McGrath, Dublin, Ireland, June 11, 1983.

may be limited in that the book has a broad scope and could subsequently lacks depth on the specific impact of Suez.

Section 2: Investigation

The Suez Crisis developed after President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt nationalized the Suez Canal on 26 July 1956, and the British, French and Israeli governments initiated an invasion plan to retake control of the vital asset. The ensuing conflict lasted until March 1957.² The British believed an occupation would enforce free navigation of the canal; a privilege that their economy depended upon.³ Indeed, Prime Minister Anthony Eden identified the continuing operation of the “great international waterway” as something that “the industrial life of Western Europe depends upon”.⁴ In addition, Britain could not tolerate this threat to their influence in the Middle East.⁵ Britain had neglected to consult its ally, the United States, prior to the attack. Despite Eden’s assurance that this unconventional action would not hinder British foreign relations, there was international condemnation,⁶ and Eden’s obituary in *The Times* [1977] stated: “He was the last Prime Minister to believe Britain was a great power and the first to confront a crisis which proved she was not.”⁷ This essay investigates the extent of the negative impact of the Suez crisis on British relations with the US, its position at the United Nations and with its Commonwealth and Empire.

Firstly, the crisis damaged Britain’s foreign relations with the United States. This was primarily due to Britain intentionally neglecting to inform its ally of the plan to thwart Nasser’s nationalization of the canal. Following Britain’s primary air attacks on Egyptian airfields, President Dwight D. Eisenhower released a statement on 1 November, 1956, expressing his disapproval of British actions, declaring that “It is our right ...to dissent”.⁸ The US administration believed Anglo-French deception in their collusion with Israel revealed British ignorance towards the potentially

² Helene von Bismarck, "The Suez Crisis – A Turning Point for the End of Empire in the Middle East?," The British Scholar Society, last modified February 2013, accessed April 15, 2016, <http://britishscholar.org/publications/2013/02/28/the-suez-crisis-a-turning-point-for-the-end-of-empire-in-the-middle-east/>.

³ Paul Harper, *The Suez Crisis* (East Sussex: Wayland, 1986), 8.

⁴ United Kingdom. House of Common Debates, 2nd August 1956, vol. 557, cols. 1602-43.

http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1956/aug/02/suez-canal#S5CV0557P0_19560802_HOC_243

⁵ United Kingdom. House of Common Debates, 2nd August 1956, vol. 557, cols. 1602-43.

http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1956/aug/02/suez-canal#S5CV0557P0_19560802_HOC_243

⁶ Pnina Lahav, *The Suez Crisis of 1956 and Its Aftermath: A Comparative Study of Constitutions, Use of Force, Diplomacy and International Relations* (Boston, UK: Boston University Law Review, 2015), 1307, PDF.

⁷ David Carlton, *Britain & the Suez Crisis*, ed. Anthony Seldon and Peter Hennessy, Making Contemporary Britain (London: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 111.

⁸ “11.01.1956: Suez Crisis - USA Reacts,” video file, 2:37, YouTube, posted by Russel Tarr, August 2, 2010, accessed May 2, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GXlcMEEv1EY>.

catastrophic consequences of the invasion.⁹ Professor Richard H. Immerman claimed the US government felt a strong sense of 'betrayal'.¹⁰ Relations between Britain and the US deteriorated in the months following the intervention,¹¹ evidenced in the shift in British policy towards a closer relationship with Europe.¹² As British Newspaper the *Mirror* remarked on 25 January 1957, Britain should now attempt to "link ourselves more closely" with Europe.¹³ The British viewed the lack of support from the US as due to minimal dependency on foreign oil reserves held by the Suez Canal Company.¹⁴ The US refused an IMF emergency loan¹⁵ requested by Britain due to its loss of over \$2 billion in the Suez fiasco, further divided the former allies.¹⁶ Britain's actions had isolated them, according to journalist Donald Neff, from "the major Western power in the Middle East".¹⁷ Historian Keith Kyle concludes that British miscalculation of the US response to the plan had "long-lasting effects" in Anglo-American trust.¹⁸

In addition, the crisis damaged Britain's credibility within the United Nations. On 22 December 1956, the UN initiated and oversaw the evacuation of British and French troops from the canal zone.¹⁹ Britain's use of armed forces had been an overt violation of the Charter of the United Nations.²⁰ Under such circumstances, it seems clear that as historian William Roger Louis argues,

⁹ Harper, *The Suez Crisis*, 60.

¹⁰ "The Other Side of Suez," video file, 58:58, YouTube, posted by BBC 4, 2004, accessed May 2, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ETOUALw2EIs>.

¹¹ "Suez Crisis, 1956," U.S Department of State Archive, last modified January 20, 2009, accessed May 2, 2016, <http://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/lw/97179.htm>.

¹² K. Srinivasan, *The Rise, Decline and Future of the British Commonwealth* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2005), 40.

¹³ George Roberts, "Suez, Britain and Europe: Historicising, Debating and Remembering the Suez Crisis, 1956 to the Present" (master's thesis, College of Europe, 2013), 29, accessed May 2, 2016, https://www.academia.edu/3424370/Suez_Britain_and_Europe_Historicising_Debating_and_Remembering_the_Suez_Crisis_1956_to_the_present

¹⁴ Rose McDermott, *Risk-taking in International Politics: Prospect Theory in American Foreign Policy* (Ann Arbor, USA: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 145, accessed May 2, 2016, <https://www.press.umich.edu/pdf/0472108670.pdf>.

¹⁵ John G. Stoessinger, *The Might of Nations: World Politics in Our Time* (New York, USA: Random House, 1962).

¹⁶ James M. Boughton, "Was Suez in 1956 the First Financial Crisis of the Twenty-First Century?," International Monetary Fund, last modified September 2001, accessed August 30, 2016, <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2001/09/boughton.htm>.

¹⁷ Carlton, *Britain &*, 99.

¹⁸ "The Other Side of Suez," video file.

¹⁹ Carlton, *Britain &*, 163.

²⁰ Harper, *The Suez Crisis*, 59.

“their credibility had been destroyed in 1956”.²¹ Britain’s demise as a power at the UN was evident upon being accused of behavior similar to that of the USSR in Hungary in 1956.²² Britain’s initial response to this allegation was an expression of indignation towards the UN, deeming the organization a “biased institution” working against civilization and democracy, a view taken up by the *Daily Express* newspaper on 27 November 1956.²³ British representatives attempted to avoid official liability for their ‘colonial policy’ in UN councils, but failed to do so due to the lack of legitimacy resulting from the crisis.²⁴ Nevertheless, Britain had to increase its diplomatic efforts and adopted a policy: to avoid UN isolation.²⁵

Furthermore, Britain’s relations with its empire and the commonwealth were also damaged. Firstly, Nasser’s refusal to cooperate with the British, as described by historian Keith Kyle, marked the collapse of Britain’s relationship with one of its most valuable territories.²⁶ Despite Britain’s refusal to accept “opposition towards their actions in Suez”, the subsequent decline in its military capability resulted in the loss of its credibility from the Middle to its Far East territories.²⁷ Historian Roger Louis argues that without American support for its colonial interests, Britain lost their power overseas.²⁸ In terms of Britain’s relations with the commonwealth, Professor Joseph Frankel highlights that Britain’s underestimation of the commonwealth additionally had a negative impact.²⁹ On 5 November 1956 Eden deliberately avoided discussion of the invasion with Britain’s dominions due to what he deemed to be ‘inevitable disapproval’.³⁰ The historian Nicholas Mansergh argues that

²¹William Roger Louis, *Ends of British Imperialism: The Scramble for Empire, Suez and Decolonization* (London: I.B Tauris, 2006), 697.

²² Ben Cosgrove, "A Rip in the Iron Curtain: Photos From the Hungarian Revolution, 1956," *Time*, October 22, 2013, accessed August 30, 2016, <http://time.com/3878232/the-hungarian-revolution-of-1956-photos-from-the-streets-of-budapest/>.

²³ "Let's Quit UNO – Now," *Daily Express* (London, UK), November 27, 1956, 6.

²⁴ Srinivasan, *The Rise*, 40.

²⁵ Srinivasan, *The Rise, Decline and Future*, 40.

²⁶ Gamal Abdel Nasser, "Speech after the War of 1956" (speech, Cairo, Egypt, December 23, 1956).

²⁷ United Kingdom. House of Common Debates, 2nd August 1956, vol. 557, cols. 1602-43.
http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1956/aug/02/suez-canal#S5CV0557P0_19560802_HOC_243

²⁸ W. R. Louis, 'Public enemy number one: the British empire in the dock of the United Nations, 1957-1971', in M. Lynn, ed., *The British empire in the 1950s: retreat or revival?* (Basingstoke 2006), pp. 186-213

²⁹ G. C. Peden, "Suez and Britain's Decline as a World Power," *The Historical Journal* 55, no. 04 (November 15, 2012): 1074, accessed August 30, 2016, doi:10.1017/S0018246X12000246.

³⁰ United Kingdom. House of Common Debates, 12th September 1956, vol. 558, cols. 2-149.
<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1956/sep/12/suez-canal>

Eden had thus breached the 'doctrine of commonwealth partnership' causing major divisions and ultimately leading to Harold Wilson's failure to revitalize the organization in 1964.³¹

However, the negative impact of Suez on Britain's foreign relations may have been in reality only short term. Britain's relations with the US were quickly repaired; as Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd suggests, 'Suez led to closer cooperation between the British and US governments'.³² This could be due to the fact that the strain put on Anglo-American relations was limited, based on Britain's role as a key Cold War ally in NATO and this was of a higher priority to the US.³³ In addition, Harold Macmillan embraced and pursued a policy that sought to appease the US.³⁴ President Eisenhower addressed a conference on 20 March 1957 asserting: "we can do much to strengthen the long-term bonds that bound together the British Empire and my country."³⁵ On 21 March 1957, Eisenhower formally 'restored' the Anglo-American friendship.³⁶ Professor Vernon Bogdanor, who teaches contemporary British history at King's College London, concludes that relations were quickly restored, as Eisenhower himself assented, "Those British, they are still my right arm".³⁷

Britain's relations within the UN were also repaired fairly quickly after Suez. A violent critic of the intervention was a member of the Soviet bloc in the UN – India. However, India and other countries had arguably only shown hostility towards Britain because they received assistance from the Soviet Union, and therefore this opposition did not undermine Britain's relations with the anti-Soviet bloc.³⁸ In the short-term, although Eisenhower imposed a ceasefire resolution within the UN, Britain remained the key ally for the West in the Security Council.³⁹ Ultimately, Britain retained its influence within the United Nations. In the broader context of the Cold War, the Suez intervention became 'normalized' and later seen as a 'preventative' measure by Western powers.⁴⁰

³¹ N. Mansergh, *The commonwealth experience, II: From British to multiracial commonwealth* (London, 1982), p. 171.

³² Chalmers Roberts, "Suez in Retrospect: Anthony Eden's Memoirs," *The Atlantic*, April 1960, 104, accessed April 14, 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1960/04/suez-in-retrospect-anthony-edens-memoirs/305585/>.

³³ Laurie Milner, "The Suez Crisis," BBC History, last modified March 3, 2011, accessed May 2, 2016, http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/modern/suez_01.shtml.

³⁴ Bismarck, "The Suez," The British Scholar Society.

³⁵ Dwight D. Eisenhower, President, "Eisenhower Address in Bermuda," address presented at Big Two Summit Meeting Address, Bermuda, March 20, 1957, *Peace Meeting: Ike and MacMillan Seek Rift Solution*, Universal International News, March 21, 1957 (originally aired March 20, 1957), narrated by Ed Herlihy.

³⁶ Carlton, *Britain & the Suez*, 163.

³⁷ Vernon Bogdanor, Prof, "The Suez Crisis, 1956" (speech, Post-War political crises in Britain lectures, Gresham College, London, UK, November 10, 2015)

³⁸ Louis, *Ends of British Imperialism*, 700.

³⁹ Louis, *Ends of British Imperialism*, 703.

⁴⁰ Peden, "Suez and Britain's," 1092.

Furthermore, Britain's relationship with its empire was not significantly changed by the crisis. After Britain's withdrawal from the canal zone, British soldiers went on fighting for approximately 25 years in various corners of its diminishing empire, including in Aden, East Africa, Borneo, Malaya and the Falkland Islands. The distinction was that after Suez they no longer fought to impose the will of London but generally to 'defend local regimes'.⁴¹ Eden had already recognized before Suez the "emergence of independent nations" as a "political fact" and Britain cooperated in the creation of the independent state of Ghana on 6 March, 1957.⁴² This effectively marked the beginning of the British empire's degeneration over the next 10 years. Thus Britain's decision to actively pursue decolonization meant that Suez can be seen as a 'dramatic hiccup' in an otherwise 'well-managed transition to a post-imperial medium [sized] power'.⁴³

In conclusion, the main impact of the Suez Crisis, although not fully appreciated at the time, was to expose the limitations of British power and to catalyze acceptance within government to relinquish control of certain colonial territories. Britain continued to fight to defend local regimes and reshaped its relationship with the Commonwealth. While the crisis damaged Britain's relations with the US and within the UN in the short term, its role as a key US ally and its role in the Security Council were not undermined due to the broader context of the Cold War.

⁴¹ Derek Brown, "1956: Suez and the end of empire," *The Guardian* (London, UK), March 14, 2001, accessed May 12, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2001/mar/14/past.education1>.

⁴² David Pierce, "Decolonization and the Collapse of the British Empire" (PhD diss., Northeastern University, 2009), 1, accessed August 30, 2016, <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/5/decolonization-and-the-collapse-of-the-british-empire>.

⁴³ Carlton, *Britain &*, 97.

Section 3: Reflection

This investigation allowed me to appreciate the methods and challenges faced by historians. My own familial context influenced how I viewed the Suez Crisis. My Egyptian heritage affected my attitude towards the British invasion of Egypt in 1956, and I had the preconception that British foreign relations would have been seriously damaged by its actions. This premise was challenged by the evidence I found in my research. In addition, I find that I had to omit material due to word count restrictions, and selected evidence on the basis that it supported my main lines of argument. For example, I left out public opinion in Egypt, as elucidated by Egyptian Historian Dr. Abde El-Wahib Bakr, as it did not directly develop Britain's foreign relations with the US, UN and commonwealth.⁴⁴ This selection process is an obstacle historians face as they create a historical account.

In addition, I lacked access to Egyptian and Israeli government and intelligence sources as these archives remain classified.⁴⁵ My evidence draws conspicuously from Western documents as many have become declassified. I had free access to debates held in the British House of Commons before, during, and after the crisis, including the key debate on 2 August 1956.⁴⁶ Therefore, I was able to get direct insight into the perspective of Prime Minister Eden and other influential Members of Parliament at the time. Nevertheless, certain political documents are still redacted, including intelligence documents from this period. A challenge for historians is that the evidence documented by the leaders involved, such as the speeches, communiqué, and memoirs of Eden, Eisenhower, and Nasser, may present a censored view, or at least a perspective that presents their administrations in a positive light. Indeed, several of my primary sources were statements of 'position' and therefore the official response may have been different to the 'unofficial' stance. Eisenhower's statement on 1 November, 1956 openly threatened the Anglo-American relationship, but did not articulate specific consequences, and historians such as Professor Vernon Bogdanor have suggested that this statement was merely rhetoric. Indeed, historians of the Suez Crisis have also developed different conclusions regarding its impact on Britain's foreign relations. William Roger Louis argues that Britain's credibility was destroyed due to its breach of the Charter of the UN,⁴⁷ whereas Professor Vernon Bogdanor disagrees and affirms that Anglo-American relations were repaired quickly in the greater context of the Cold War.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ "The Other Side of Suez," video file, 58:58, YouTube, posted by BBC 4, 2004, accessed May 2, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ETOUALw2EIs>.

⁴⁵ "The Other Side of Suez," video file.

⁴⁶ United Kingdom. House of Common Debates, 2nd August 1956, vol. 557, cols. 1602-43. http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1956/aug/02/suez-canal#S5CV0557P0_19560802_HOC_243

⁴⁷ William Roger Louis, *Ends of British Imperialism: The Scramble for Empire, Suez and Decolonization* (London: I.B Tauris, 2006), 697.

⁴⁸ Vernon Bogdanor, Prof, "The Suez Crisis, 1956" (speech, Post-War political crises in Britain lectures, Gresham College, London, UK, November 10, 2015)

