

## EUROPEAN IMPERIALISM: EGYPT AND CONTROL OF THE SUEZ CANAL

The Suez Canal is one of the most important waterways in the world. The 120-mile (originally 102 mile) canal connects the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea. It is often called the “crossroads to Europe, Africa, and Asia” because the route is used to transport goods to and from all three continents.

Before the creation of the Suez Canal, British ships had to make a long journey around the Horn of Africa to reach India. A canal through the Isthmus of Suez would cut the journey from Great Britain to India by over 5,000 miles, making trade much more profitable. (An isthmus is a narrow strip of land connecting two larger pieces of land.) In ca. 1850BC, there was an attempt to build a canal in the region. But that attempt, like many others, failed because desert winds blew in and clogged the canal.

In 1859, a French company led by Ferdinand de Lesseps made a deal with Egypt to build the Suez Canal. After ten years of work, and the removal of 100 million cubic feet of sand and dirt, the canal opened in 1869, costing twice the original estimate. To pay for the canal, Egypt went into significant debt – securing loans from European banks at extremely high interest rates. Egypt was unable to pay, and was forced to sell its share of the Suez Canal to Great Britain.

The Suez Canal made it easier for nations to trade with each other. It also made it possible for European armies to colonize East Africa. In 1936, the British stationed soldiers along the Suez Canal in order to protect their investment. For the British, the canal was very profitable; however, the Egyptian people were unable to share in most of the profits, and were angered because they felt they were forced to sell their controlling share of the canal.

In 1956, Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser asked the United States and Britain for financial assistance to build a dam to control the annual flooding of the Nile River. When they refused, Nasser seized the Suez Canal and declared it to be the property of the Egyptian people. This led to the invasion of Egypt by Britain,

France and Israel. Many people feared the Suez Crisis would lead to a third World War, which could be catastrophic in the context of nuclear warfare. Due to this concern, several nations voted to authorize the United Nations to send peacekeeping forces to the Suez and to call for Britain, France and Israel to leave the region. Their departure allowed Egypt to gain control of the canal, but because of damage inflicted by the war, the waterway remained closed for many months.

In 1967, the Suez Canal closed again during the Six-Day War between Israel and Egypt. Fourteen ships passing through were forced to anchor in the middle of the canal and were stranded for more than 8 years until the canal reopened for international trade in 1975. Egypt continues to control the Suez Canal, but now international treaties assure that the canal may be used "in time of war as in time of peace, by every vessel of commerce or of war, without distinction of flag."

