

'How a world war was averted', from France Observateur (8 November 1956)

Caption: On 8 November 1956, the French weekly publication France Observateur assesses the military operations and analyses the implications of the diplomatic fiasco that was the Franco-British Suez Campaign.

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How a world war was averted

It was early on Tuesday afternoon that the French and British Governments ordered their troops to cease fire and thus put a stop, for the time being at least, to a global trial of strength which Paris and London had themselves triggered and which, so it seemed on Monday night and Tuesday morning, might well have ended in a third world war.

We were a long way by then from the brave new war started by irresponsible and incompetent leaders eight days before, with the issuing of a harsh ultimatum to Egypt and — make no mistake about it — Israel. The upper classes and their spokesmen were delighted at this ‘return to virility’: now we would really show them. Colonel Nasser would be hauled over the coals; years of ‘humiliation’ would be wiped away, order would triumph in Algeria, and Bourguiba and the Sultan would have to like it or lump it. Eight days of eager anticipation, songs, imminent landings, troops raring to go, eight days of energetic jingoism, opportunely muffled somewhat by the noise of the guns in Budapest, without which there would have been an even more painful awakening.

It took those eight days for our fears to be realised and for the warnings to come true that we had been issuing non-stop since 26 July against this madness in Egypt, which we knew some French politicians wanted so badly. It was not the mindless defeatism that people were so quick to accuse us of that made us talk in such terms; we never tried to conceal Nasser’s military weakness, any more than we tried to conceal the few immediate benefits that we might at most have hoped for from the Egyptian expedition. In the face of such recklessness, such stupidity and triviality, our realistic assessment of the facts has, alone, proved correct.

We are delighted that a ‘ceasefire’ has finally been declared, but we bitterly regret the irreparable harm that has been done to France: its prestige ridiculed, its honour undermined, its loyalty questioned, its future relations with the Muslim world and with the peoples of Africa and Asia — all its future interests — compromised. We rue what this last outburst of colonialism has cost France.

What we have lost

While we may find it difficult to see exactly what the benefits are that the government now claims to have gained from the operation, we can see all too clearly what we have lost. First of all, no actual objective has been achieved. Blood has been shed, but Nasser has not yet been driven from power. There are French parachutists in Port Said — for how long? — but this time it is we who are to blame for stopping free movement along the Suez Canal. As far as I know, we do not occupy all of the Canal Zone. We were determined to assert our presence in the Middle East under the very noses of the Americans and to consolidate our oil interests, yet now it is the IPC’s production that has been slowed down and Aramco that is benefiting enormously. Our oil supplies are in jeopardy. The solution to the Algerian problem has not progressed one iota; on the contrary, having been made more uncertain by our intervention, it has now been further complicated by our failure. We wanted to prevent the Russians from gaining a foothold in the Middle East, yet here they are, closer than ever to moving in as conquerors, or rather as arbitrators.

We have lost a great deal of what we had held on to in the Middle East and compromised the cultural and economic positions that we still maintained; we have even — oh, the shame of it! — enabled Britain, with the arrival of the Iraqi troops in Jordan, to gain control of the ‘Fertile Crescent’, which our diplomats have been fighting against for thirty years. We have, by our own actions, deliberately destroyed our influence in countries where, in spite of everything, it still meant more than just a form of words to be used in official speeches. Do we really think that French pilots who were paid three years’ wages to leave will ever see the banks of the Suez Canal again? Do we really think that Egypt will come running to us and ask us to build its dams and its factories and to train its managers? We made fun of Nasser’s ‘jeering’ laugh, but I see nothing now to bring even a smile to the face of Mr Mollet or Mr Pineau.

There is more. We have dealt the UN a blow that could have proved fatal; we deliberately treated it with contempt, ignored it and flouted it. I know. It is fashionable to run this institution down, to criticise its

inadequacies and blame it for being ineffective. However, it was still perhaps thanks to the UN that the Egyptian expedition became bogged down, without having done too much damage, as soon as it set foot in the sand of the Canal Zone and that people in Paris and London did not look up to find their skies full of the guided missiles about which Marshal Bulganin reminded us so tactfully.

I am sorry to say that there is even worse to come, but people need to be told that, throughout the world, in London, Washington, New York, Bonn, Berlin, New Delhi, even in Warsaw, the newspapers are writing, and people are reading and thinking, that Mr Mollet's and Mr Pineau's strike in Egypt directly encouraged the Soviet attack on Hungary, that the first blow against the UN smoothed the path for the second and that, all in all, the firebrands in the Middle East are no better than the killers in Budapest. And this is serious, because it is partly true and because Mr Mollet and Mr Pineau are, in a way, France itself.

The set-up job

How did we reach this point? No one has contradicted our analysis last week of the set-up job with Israel, which was approved on 16 October at the meeting between Mollet and Eden. The fact is that, on a number of occasions, preparations for the operation went ahead behind the backs of the mandarins at the Quai d'Orsay. More than Mr Pineau, the instigator was Mr Bourgès-Maunoury and his national defence staff, chief among them his departmental head Mr Abel Thomas. He it was who saw to the technical side of the operation, both militarily and politically. He is alleged to have authorised the delivery of Mystère fighters to Israel, often unbeknown to the Quai d'Orsay, and allowed Israeli pilots to receive training for several months in south-west France.

The result was not exactly a resounding success. Two vital factors were underestimated: American opposition and the Soviet reaction.

Mr Eisenhower and Mr Dulles, who were in favour of eliminating Nasser as the Egyptian leader, never gave in to colleagues at the Department of State and the Pentagon who planned to use any means, including military, to achieve this end. Although convinced of the need to bring Nasser down from the moment the Egyptian dictator's actions jeopardised oil interests in the Middle East, they insisted on doing this correctly in order to avoid handing the USSR any 'colonialist' arguments in their struggle for influence in the underdeveloped countries. After a few days of wavering the United States, furious at the Anglo-French invasion and unhappy at not having been involved, brought all possible pressure to bear to find some sort of solution to the conflict, and succeeded.

The Soviet reaction

The Soviet reaction, too, was underestimated. Whatever temporary problems it might have been facing in Eastern Europe, the USSR had become too deeply involved with the Arab states to ignore them at the very time when one of their main representatives was the target of open aggression from the West. Its prestige was at stake, its entire policy at risk. It was not by chance that the start of the Anglo-French invasion coincided with the events in Hungary, but the USSR immediately deflected the threat it was facing. Its reaction in Hungary was all the more brutal because of the speed needed in the Middle East, and the fact that the Western powers went unpunished in Egypt meant that it would go unpunished in Budapest. This also explains the aggressive tone of the Bulganin note, which was surely designed to create a smokescreen around events in Hungary, although, in the end, the British, French and Americans all clearly recognised the real threat that it implied. If the ceasefire had not been ordered on Tuesday evening, massive numbers of Soviet volunteers would have arrived in Egypt and Syria, there would probably have been an Israeli bombardment, and the conflict would have become much more widespread. Whatever form the intervention had taken, it would have meant a Soviet military presence in the Middle East, and that was what the Americans wanted to avoid at all costs.

It should also be pointed out that the extreme language used in the Soviet note indicates a certain degree of disarray and wavering in the line followed by the Kremlin, and this suggests that there are changes afoot in the balance of power within the Politburo; we might well fear the worst.

But, even before the Soviet intervention, when there was no deliberate intention to widen the conflict, other factors were helping to promote a speedy end to hostilities in the Middle East of which Paris and London were well aware, although, before accepting the inevitable, they were trying to push their troops further along the Canal and, if possible, complete its occupation. The United Nations resolutions could not go on being ignored for much longer; plans were being formed for an international force; Israel was looking for an easy way out, was the first to agree to a cease-fire, was offering to enter into negotiations with Egypt and was trying to free itself from its cumbersome allies. Not everything was going well for the allies; Eden was facing increasingly broad and vigorous opposition at home; on the foreign policy front, he was not allowed to forget that Britain's intervention had not been designed to help Israel (Britain remains its bitterest enemy), but to swing the balance of power between the Arab countries in Iraq's favour instead of against it; Iraq's occupation of Jordan meant that some of Britain's objectives were achieved, and, even at the end of last week, Mr Selwyn Lloyd was warning Mr Pineau that Britain would very quickly be asserting its freedom to take action against Israel; the order which London gave Israel on Monday to evacuate Sinai was the first demonstration thereof.

Concerns for the future

Under these circumstances, the progress made in the UN towards the creation of an international replacement force and Switzerland's proposal on Tuesday morning, perhaps at America's behest, that a five-nation conference be held on the Middle East seemed to offer a way to end the hostilities without, it was felt, losing too much face. After putting up a token fight for a final few hours, Mr Mollet and Mr Pineau agreed to Washington's entreaties, which Sir Anthony Eden accepted with relief.

At the time of writing, we do not know what the Peace Conference will be like or what form it will take. The USSR has accepted the principle of a five-country conference, but the Western nations may prefer a more formal meeting under the aegis of the Security Council. The worst has been avoided, but everything is far from settled. The third world war did not start, but we felt the draught as it blew past. The shaky balance of power has shifted more or less everywhere, and, until it is restored, tensions will persist. However the conference, its aims and its composition turn out, there will be Soviet attacks about the Middle East and American attacks about Hungary in return. The acute crisis of these last three weeks has released some worrying forces. The fact that the Republican Administration has another four years in power will encourage the USA to be less careful, while the destalinisation crisis will encourage the USSR to be more suspicious. Our sorcerer's apprentices have started something which is far from being finished.

H. de Galard