

THE 4 ½ -DAY WAR

Have you ever heard of the 6-Day War? Of course you have. You probably know that this was the one in which Israel defeated Egypt, Syria and Jordan, occupied all of the Sinai desert and the West Bank of the Jordan river and reached the Suez Canal in, yes, just 6 days.

So are you also familiar with the 4 ½ -Day War also known as the 100-hour War? No? I am not surprised. Somehow this war hasn't affected our psyche as strongly as the 6-Day War although in many ways it had at least as big an impact on the history of our planet.

The 1956 100-Hour War – marked the end of Great Britain and France as global powers. It proved that the Soviet Union was a superpower willing to use its military might to suppress its dissident European colonies. And it boosted post-colonial nationalism by showing that the former colonial rulers were paper tigers when confronted by both U.S. and the USSR.

The world was a very different place 50 years ago. The World War II had ended just a decade ago with an overwhelming victory by the Allies – Germany was a defeated enemy clawing its way to reconstruction. Colonial powers were competing for influence in Africa and Asia with the Soviet Union. Jordan ruled the West Bank and East Jerusalem it had occupied and annexed in 1948; all Jews were expelled from these areas but there was no mention anywhere of a Palestinian state or a Palestinian nationality. And tiny Israel was much tinier – just 1 ½ million Jews and 150,000 Arabs – and subjected to ongoing boycotts, blockades and bloody terror attacks by *fedayeen* from Egypt and Jordan.

The Soviet Union tried hard to replace Britain and the U.S. as the most influential force in the Middle East. In 1955 the first substantial shipments of Soviet arms arrived in Egypt and several other Arab countries.. Within a few months Soviet arms gave the Arabs a 6:1 superiority over Israel, which had neither the money nor the influence to get Western help. President Eisenhower is quoted as saying to the French Prime Minister Mollet that it was futile to sell arms to Israel since 1,500,000 Jews couldn't possibly defend themselves against 40 million Arabs.

In 1955, Egypt was granted a World Bank loan – mostly U.S. and British funds – to finance the building of a major project – the Aswan Dam. As Soviet – Egyptian relations blossomed, the West threatened to cancel the loan. In response, the Soviet Union offered to provide an interest-free \$120 million loan and Egyptian ruler Nasser seized the British and French-controlled Suez Canal. He then urged the U.S. to “go choke on its fury!”

Great Britain and France were outraged and began planning a joint military action to regain control of the Canal and the overthrow of Nasser, the “Hitler of the Nile”. President Eisenhower, facing an imminent election, was conciliatory – less than 15% of American shipping went through the Canal, U.S. investments there were negligible and the U.S. felt that the dispute could be settled by the United Nations.

Meanwhile Egypt’s closure of the Suez Canal and the Strait of Tiran to Israeli shipping was destroying Israeli economy by stopping trade with Africa and Asia, terrorist acts were on the increase and Egypt was acquiring overwhelming weapon superiority.

In August 1956 the French secretly informed Israel that military action against Egypt was contemplated and asked whether Israel would be prepared to join the fight. Israel eagerly accepted but asked France for immediate and larger shipments of arms. France agreed and large quantities of armor, artillery, trucks and transport planes were shipped to Israel. Britain initially opposed the French scheme of collaboration with Israel but on October 16, after a five-hour conference between the Prime Ministers and foreign ministers in Paris, Britain changed its mind and agreed to joint military action.

The scheme involved an Israeli attack in the Sinai on October 29. On October 30, Britain and France would present a joint ultimatum to Israel and Egypt to stop all military activity and withdraw all troops to a line 10 miles from the Canal. Israel would have already reached that point after 12 hours but Egypt would surely reject the demand to withdraw its troops from its own territory. The Allies would then attack Egyptian airfields and, finally, troops would be landed to retake the Canal and enforce the ultimatum.

On the night of October 29 a battalion of Israeli paratroopers was dropped near the Mitla Pass, 40 miles from the Canal. This was followed by the movement of Israeli army into the Sinai and after just 100 hours the Egyptian army had collapsed, the Israelis had reached the agreed 10-mile distance from the Canal and the Sinai War seemed to be over. In the initial stages the opposing forces were of roughly equal size but the Israeli quality was incomparably higher. Israel's losses were 180 killed, 20 planes and 2000 worn-out vehicles lost. Its gains were the entire Sinai and Gaza, 3 Egyptian divisions destroyed, over 2000 killed and over 6000 captured – many thousands more were ignored and sent towards the canal. Just some of the booty included 7000 tons of ammunition, half a million gallons of fuel, 100 armored cars, 200 artillery pieces, 100 tanks, over 1000 other vehicles and an Egyptian frigate that was trapped off Haifa by a French destroyer and then rocketed into surrender by Israeli planes.

Much else was happening in the world that very week. Hungary revolted against Soviet occupation and the Soviet Union sent tanks into Budapest to put a bloody end to reincorporate it into the Evil Empire.

Washington was much more furious at the ostensible friends who dared to disregard American policy by attacking Egypt than at the Soviets. On November 2, by a vote of 64 to 5 the General Assembly approved an American resolution for an immediate cease-fire and withdrawal of all occupying forces from Egyptian territory. Still, on November 5, almost a week after presenting the joint ultimatum, a wave of French and British paratroops and amphibious commandos landed without opposition and occupied Port Said. Later that same day, in reaction to brutal pressure from both Washington and Moscow, Britain announced that it would abide with the U.N. cease-fire demand and withdraw.

Israel was adamant at first. Washington warned that there would be no American help for Israel in case of a Soviet attack, that a refusal to withdraw would “end the friendly cooperation between our two countries” and that even private donations by American Jews may be prohibited. By November 22, the last of British and French forces left Egypt and Ben Gurion announced Israel's decision to leave Sinai – with the exception of the crucial Sharm es-Sheik area - by January 22, 1957.

After the Sinai War, Nasser emerged as the unquestioned leader of the nationalist Moslem movements for standing up against Britain, France and Israel – the war is celebrated as a great Egyptian victory. The European powers were exposed as impotent and unimportant and their puppet post-colonial regimes in the Middle East were soon overthrown by nationalist coups. Soviet rule in Europe was reinforced by the Hungarian events that never became a topic for discussion or criticism at the U.N. Emerging countries eagerly sought Soviet support that seemed more important and profitable than America's friendship. Israel enjoyed a decade of expansion and economic growth that was facilitated by the ability to trade with Asia and Africa. And the Sinai War – the 100-Hour War – the 4-Day War was largely forgotten.