

'Defence of legitimate interests' from Il nuovo Corriere della Sera (25 August 1956)

Caption: On 25 August 1956, the Italian daily newspaper Il nuovo Corriere della Sera speculates on the reasons for the Suez Canal crisis and emphasises the strategic importance of the canal for the supply of oil to Western countries.

Source: Il nuovo Corriere della Sera. 25.08.1956, n° 200; anno 81. Milano: Corriere della Sera. "Difesa di legittimi interessi", auteur:Bartoli, Domenico , p. 1.

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Defence of legitimate interests

From our special correspondent

London, 24 August, evening.

For almost a century, the old Suez Canal Company was described as 'universal'. As we know, such terms are often a rhetorical device concealing private and international interests. But it is important to realise that the term 'universal' represented an idea in which de Lesseps and the others believed just as strongly as Nasser and Nehru now believe in African and Asian nationalism. Every age has its own convictions and superstitions. Then, the credo was universal progress, opening up land and sea to expansion and trade; now, it is the jealously guarded independence of peoples emerging from colonial status. The conflict over Suez must be seen against that historical background if it is to be fully understood.

The old Company had some merits, which are forgotten in the heat of argument. To mention but one: the tariff for ships passing through the Canal still stands at 7 shillings (about 630 lire) per tonne, as it did in 1938. If you compare that extreme regard for world trade interests with the general increases in the system of prices, you must acknowledge the virtues of the moderation shown by the universal Company, which earned its name in one respect at least.

There is, of course, a solid reason for this: the British Government controls the largest block of shares, though not enough to constitute a majority and, when it comes to determining Company policy and prices, is mindful of Britain's own interests as a great seafaring nation and the main user of the Canal. Indeed, that is the decisive argument for allowing clients who use the Canal to participate in its management. The Company is moribund and even the principal shareholder, the British Government, has given up trying to resuscitate it. But some at least of its universal character, that is to say the concern its directors have shown for the general interest, should survive.

Two separate interests have been confused in the Suez crisis: the imperial interests of the British and, to some extent, the French, as ruling political powers in the Canal zone and the surrounding region; and the commercial and maritime interests, not just of the British and the French, but of all the countries that use the Suez Canal as a vital line of communication. The Lancaster House Conference distinguished between these interests only up to a point. But the distinction must be drawn clearly in future, during the forthcoming negotiations with Egypt, if a satisfactory solution is to be reached.

The political interests of what are, or were, the two ruling powers in the Near East and North Africa can be restored only by force. But the opportunity to act with some chance of success, without provoking conflict throughout the Arab world, passed weeks ago. The time for intervention was just after the Canal was nationalised. Nasser's challenge ought to have been met with an immediate show of force, one *fait accompli* for another. It seems that this was impossible because the necessary forces could not be marshalled. It was better, then, to abandon plans for an attack and claim that the military preparations were purely defensive, in other words that the sole purpose of intervening was to protect the right of free passage or defend foreign settlements against violent massacres.

There has, as yet, been no explicit renunciation of the use of force and one has, on the contrary, the impression that more subtle and Machiavellian plans are afoot. But the result of military action would be to engulf almost all the Near East in a series of guerrilla wars and bring about a permanent alliance between the coloured peoples of the world and Communism, with disastrous consequences for Europe and even the United States.

It seems clear, therefore, that what remains of British hegemony in the Middle East cannot last much longer. That is a loss for everyone but the inevitable facts must be accepted, as the British among others have done or are doing in half the world. It is dangerous to fight the superstitions of our century in the name of the superstitions of some other century. But that does not mean that there is nothing more to be done. Of course, a lack of imagination and a failure to act promptly are disastrous. And the West has so far fallen short in

both respects. If Egypt had been presented with a proposal like the Dulles plan, which provides for an international regime, a few days before Nasser seized power, Suez would not have been synonymous with danger and crisis but with bonds of friendship and collaboration. To present a proposal of this kind before Egypt made a move would not have been as absurd as it may seem. The problem would in any case have arisen in 12 years' time when the Company's contract was due to expire, and it would have been sensible to seek a reasonable solution in advance.

The Dulles plan must distinguish between imperial interests, now in decline, and economic interests, which on the contrary are increasingly important. The policy of launching a swift strike, while not contrary to the American plan, is certainly somewhat different. Among other things, it would disrupt, and possibly interrupt for some time, the flow of trade between Europe and the world beyond the Canal.

The list of economic interests that would be affected by a Suez crisis is quite short. Almost all Europe's oil comes from the Middle East and most of it passes through the Canal. Europe consumed 117 million tonnes of oil last year and 94 million tonnes came from the Middle East via Suez or through oil pipelines. In the event of serious complications, the passage through the great waterway and the use of the oil pipelines is likely to become difficult, if not impossible. We would all have to depend on America for our supplies.

We Italians are in fifth position in the overall traffic through Suez, or even fourth place if one leaves out Liberia, which is a flag of convenience. Our share is 8 %, as against the UK's 28 %, Norway's 13 % and France's 9 %. Oil is the most important constituent in our traffic, as in that of the other countries. It is thought that a quarter of all the goods landed at Italian ports pass through Suez and 11 % of all Italy's exports have to go through the Canal.

The use of force to defend our interests and those of all the maritime countries could be disastrous. But it would be no less disastrous for the Canal to remain completely in the hands of the Egyptian Government, since it is reasonable to suppose that it may not have the necessary technical competence or show the required moderation and impartiality in setting tariffs and guaranteeing free passage. We were therefore right when we refused to support the moves to intervene. But we were wrong when we hesitated to support diplomatic action to defend maritime interests. In the end, we took the right course.

Domenico Bartoli