

## Key Events in Egypt in the Mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century

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#### World War II

Before World War II broke out, there were numerous foreign nationals living for many generations in Cairo and Alexandria. When World War II broke out, Egypt became implicated when Italy (part of the Axis) sent forces stationed in Libya to launch an invasion into British-held Egypt in September 1940. The Allied forces led a counterattack (Operation Compass) that proved successful and allowed the Allies to advance further into Egypt. Also during this time, the Italians of Egypt, who were substantial in number, were greatly affected. Nearly all of the men were arrested, and nearly all Italian property was seized. This left many Italian women and their children in poverty.

The end of World War II greatly altered the political alignment and social structure of the world, particularly as the victors of the war – the United States, the Soviet Union, China, the United Kingdom, and France – became the permanent members of the Security Council of the newly formed United Nations. The USSR and the United States emerged as rival superpowers, setting the stage for the Cold War, which lasted for the next 46 years. Moreover, many countries began to decolonize in Asia and Africa, eroding the influence of the European great powers. This also set the stage for emerging revolution in Egypt.

#### Revolution in Egypt

The Egyptian Revolution of 1952, also known as the 23 July Revolution, began on 23 July 1952, with a military coup d'état by the Free Officers Movement, a group of army officers led by Muhammad Naguib and Gamal Abdel Nasser. The revolution was initially aimed at overthrowing King Farouk. However, the movement had more political ambitions, and soon moved to abolish the constitutional monarchy and aristocracy of Egypt and Sudan, establish a republic, end the British occupation of the country, and secure the independence of Sudan. The revolutionary government adopted a staunchly nationalist, anti-imperialist agenda, which came to be expressed chiefly through Arab nationalism and international non-alignment. The revolution was seen as problematic for Western imperial powers, especially the United Kingdom which had occupied Egypt since 1882, and France. Both of these countries were feeling the effects of rising nationalist sentiment in their colonies throughout the world and were threatened with losing them. Western powers were also cautious of the Free Officers Movement's strong support of the Palestinian cause. Many of the foreign nationals in Egypt were starting to leave under the new regime.

### **Suez Crisis of 1956 and Nationalization**

Things came to head between Egypt and the Western powers in 1956, when crisis erupted over the Suez Canal. Though free passage at that point was normally granted to all who used the canal, Britain and France desired control of it for both commercial and colonial interests, though the new regime definitely felt it should be under Egyptian control. Meanwhile, in an attempt to persuade Egypt to ally with the West, the United States and Britain promised to give aid to Egypt to construct the Aswan High Dam in the Nile. However, when Nasser accepted an arms deal with Czechoslovakia, fueling Cold War flames, the U.S. retracted this aid. In response, Nasser nationalized the canal, making it the property of the Egyptian State. Nasser intended to use the funds raised from the operation of the canal to pay for the Dam, and he did intend to compensate the Suez Canal Company for its loss.

As a result, British and French forces joined with Israel in an attack to overthrow Nasser and gain control of the Suez Canal. The joint effort defeated the Egyptian army quickly, and within ten days, British and French forces had completely occupied the Suez region. Egypt responded by sinking 40 ships in the canal, blocking all passage. The United Nations, as well as the U.S., sought to resolve the conflict and pressured the two European powers to back down. Eventually, Britain and France backed down and withdrew, and control of the canal was given back to Egypt in March 1957. The Egyptian government was allowed to maintain control of the canal as long as they permitted all vessels of all nations free passage through it.

The Suez Crisis brought forth a host of new issues with regard to residency in Egypt. Nasser brought in a set of regulations that imposed rigorous requirements for residency and citizenship in Egypt. This affected many of the groups living there, including British, French, Greek, and Italian nationals, as well as both Egyptian and foreign-born Jews. These groups were forced to leave the country, greatly diminishing the multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature of Egypt. This greatly affected Alexandria, in which so many foreign nationals lived.