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ABSTRACT

British military interventions changed qualitatively after the Second World War. According to realism, this transformation should be rooted ultimately in a difference between pre and post-war British power. However, an analysis of domestic British opposition to the 1956 invasion of Suez indicates that ethical, not realist considerations may be responsible for less aggressive British foreign policy. Much of the British public opposed the Suez intervention because of a perception that it violated liberal norms of international law. This finding suggests that public opinion is informed by non-realist considerations, and that these attitudes may powerfully affect international relations.

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The Effect of Liberal Opinion on Post-War British Interventions

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The History of British military intervention changed qualitatively after the Second World War. Although Britain has intervened 34 times since 1950, these interventions primarily occurred within British imperial territory, with the consent of local authorities, and only after political violence.¹ Whereas pre-war British intervention pursued national interest without qualification, post-war Britain tended to decline the use of force to protect its interests unless these criteria had been met. Such limitations defy realist expectations by confining British power with normative force. The mechanism responsible for this policy shift is therefore important to understanding the limits of realism, as well as recent British history.

Because long-term trends are usually the result of long-term causes, intuition suggests that the limitation of British post-war intervention cannot be explained by outstanding individuals, governments, or events. Instead, we should look to historical factors that were constant throughout the post-war period, but not before it.

The most obvious constant in post-war British politics was the relative decline of British power. Second-rank powers tend to be less capable of projecting force than great powers, and the Second World War had left Britain a second-rank power. A more circumspect British foreign policy might therefore be thought unremarkable. However, the post-war change in British policy did not cause Britain to become a simply less active version of its former self, as the power hypothesis would suspect. Britain intervened extensively throughout the post-war period; in purely quantitative terms no change in British behavior is perceptible. Whatever the state of post-war British power, the high number of post-war British interventions demonstrates that Britain still possessed the capacity to intervene. A reduced military capability would predict a quantitatively different but qualitatively similar British intervention policy—we see the opposite.

¹ John Van Wingen, and Herbert K. Tillema, “British Military Intervention after World War II: Militance in a Second-Rank Power,” *Journal of Peace Research* 17, no. 4 (1980): 300.

It is probable however, that Britain's decline limited its interventions to its former imperial territories. Second-rank powers tend to avoid confrontation with great powers, and British intervention in either the Soviet or American spheres of influence would have invited such confrontation. The geographic limitation of post-war British intervention can therefore be explained as a manifestation of Britain's 'second-rank power' status in the Cold War order.

The logic of power cannot as easily explain either Britain's reluctance to undertake "hostile" interventions or its reluctance to intervene in the absence of political violence in the target country. These criteria instead suggest an ethical dimension to British policy; both the consent of the intervened and the presence of ongoing political violence augment the moral justification for intervention. I hypothesize that the limited character of post-war British foreign policy can be explained by transformation of domestic attitudes towards aggressive intervention. The invasion of Suez was a high-profile hostile intervention. If the British public had any reservations about aggressive interventions, Suez should have brought them to the surface.

Before examining the domestic opposition to Eden's intervention, it will be helpful to give a brief outline of the events leading to and constituting the Suez Crisis, both to aid the reader and establish firmly Suez as a hostile intervention.

When Gamal Nasser succeeded at installing himself president of Egypt in 1954, the strategically and monetarily valuable Suez Canal was controlled by British interests. Nasser quickly embarked on a program of reforms, including massive infrastructure investment. His projects stalled, however, when the international community refused to tender the loans upon which they depended. . Faced with domestic pressure to complete the Aswan Dam and deteriorating diplomatic relations with the West, Nasser decided to nationalize the Suez Canal on July 26, 1956 in order to gain control over its considerable income.

This action provoked Britain, where it was portrayed by Prime Minister Eden's Conservative government as a 'communist attack' against vital British interests. By August 1st, Eden had secretly determined to use force in concert with France and Israel. On October 29th, Israel attacked Egypt, providing Britain and France with a necessary pretext to seize the Canal. This was quickly accomplished, but mounting domestic and international pressure forced Eden to withdraw before the end of the year, effectively ending his career and confirming the end of the British Empire.

Domestic opposition to British role in intervention in Suez was from the outset associated with the Labour party. Although Adamthwaite suggests that the intervention “alienated Conservative supporters,”² his only evidence for the claim is the fact that the overwhelming majority of letters sent to members of parliament opposed the intervention, and that some of these were authored by Conservatives. Unfortunately Adamthwaite did not take selection bias into account; if we consider that a citizen might be more likely to write his representative when he opposes government policy, Adamthwaite’s claims of widespread bipartisan opposition becomes unconvincing.

Instead, a highly partisan narrative emerges from Suez scholarship. Open political opposition to the government’s policy first became visible in mid-September, shortly after Eden’s declaration that, in the event of Egypt refused to restore Western control of the canal, “Her Majesty’s Government and others concerned will be free to take such further steps as seems to be required either through the United Nations, *or by other means*, for the assertion of their rights.”³ The implication of unilateral military action produced an immediate reaction in parliament, which pressured Eden to renounce “force outside of the United Nations.”⁴ While this early parliamentary opposition included some Conservatives, its overwhelming majority was drawn from Labour’s ranks.

Labour had by this time quietly but firmly established its hypothetical opposition to any potential unilateral use of force. Even in the unanimously anti-Nasser atmosphere of early August 1956, Labour party leader Hugh Gaitskell reminded the House that “We are signatories of the United Nations Charter... we must not, therefore, allow ourselves to get into a position where we might be denounced in the Security Council as aggressors.”⁵ Labour’s position was further defined a few weeks later when the party unsuccessfully sent a delegation to Eden to extract his promise that the government would not use force outside of the United Nations.⁶

When Eden did exactly that two months later, partisanship dominated the parliamentary debate. On October 31st, two days after the initiation of hostilities in Egypt, Gaitskell issued the Labour party’s official position. In the statement he

² Adam Adamthwaite, “Suez Revisited,” *International Affairs* 64, no. 3. (1988): 455.

³ Leon Epstein, “Partisan Foreign Policy: Britain in the Suez Crisis,” *World Politics* 12, no. 2 (1960): 203. Author’s emphasis.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 205-08.

⁶ *Ibid.*

unequivocally reaffirmed Labour's opposition to intervention in Suez, and promised to use "every constitutional means," to make that opposition effective.⁷ Labour immediately brought its dissent to parliament, where its MP's unanimously and vocally attacked the government. Their efforts succeeded in bringing the Suez intervention to a vote, where the policy carried by a strictly partisan vote of 270 to 218.⁸ Conservatives MPs overwhelmingly supported the intervention, while Labour MPs overwhelmingly opposed it.

This partisanship was also evident in the British public. When asked in December 1956 if the government was "right to take military action in Egypt," 81 percent of Conservatives said yes, as opposed to only 22 percent of Labour voters. Labour supporters were also more skeptical of the Eden's motivation for intervention, the majority citing "to get control of Suez," as the government's main reason for intervening.⁹

This is important for two reasons. First, partisan policy offers a reasonable mechanism for the change in British intervention behavior. To explain the variable, public opinion must at some point be translated into policy making. In a parliamentary system this implies that anti-intervention voters chose representatives with whom they ideologically identify. Had political opposition to Suez not divided along ideological lines, public opinion would therefore not be a compelling explanation for the limitations of post-war British policy.

Partisanship is also helpful in isolating the character of the opposition to Suez. Because Labour *was* the opposition, the statements of its leaders can be taken as the arguments of the opposition itself. It is also important that the opposition came from the Left, where moral anti-imperialism has a long intellectual history. If the self-imposed limits of post-war British intervention were the product of a moral change in British public opinion, we would expect that change to manifest in Labour.

The actual arguments employed by Labour were not, however, technically moral. Instead Labour emphasized the illegality of the action according to international law. From the beginning Gaitskell had insisted that military force proceed only within the framework of the United Nations, citing the United Nations charter and the importance of Britain's commitment to international law in world

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Guillaume Parmentier, "The British Press in the Suez Crisis," *The Historical Journal* 23, no. 2 (1980): 440.

opinion. Labour never declared itself against force, as long as force came with UN sanction.

There is however reason to question whether the justification given by Labour politician's necessarily reflected the full motivations of their opinion. Labour's position as the left of center active opposition to an ongoing war naturally placed them in an awkward political position. In this context arguments of international illegality might appear more politically viable than explicitly ethical claims of universal self-determination and anti-imperialism. At the time, maintaining imperial prestige was a point of pride for the Conservative party, which enjoyed a comfortable majority. If anti-imperialist conviction played a part in Labour's unanimous opposition, it would have been politically foolish to articulate it.

Arguments concerning international law would have entailed far less risk. While moral anti-imperialism limits the scope of British self-interest on ethical grounds, arguments that Britain ought not to violate international law can be seen as an attempt to prevent Britain from foolishly harming its diplomatic position. Because the argument from international law is politically safer but indistinguishable in terms of policy, it is reasonable to question whether Labour's rhetoric expressed all aspects of its collective mind.

Reasonable doubt is not, however, genuinely confirming evidence. Although anti-imperialism was an important ideological component of the contemporary British Left and almost certainly motivated opinions, it is very difficult to know the extent of its role in the absence of open articulation.

Against this difficulty Adamthwaite's mailbag analysis becomes invaluable. The letters of private citizens are less inhibited by political expedience, and should therefore reveal whatever ethical opinions were held by the British public. Surprisingly, Adamthwaite's findings overwhelmingly support arguments of international law. Only one letter fixed solely on moral outrage, demanding the resignation of "those dragging Britain's name in the dust," but the author does not elaborate on how, specifically, this was being done.¹⁰ International law meanwhile was a common theme. Elector's attacked the "blatant disregard of the terms of the UN charter," and charged the government with jeopardizing "the only possibility of maintaining international law and justice in our time," by

¹⁰ Adamthwaite, 455.

sidestepping the Security Council.¹¹ The tenor of the British public opposition matched Labour rhetoric.

Although this does not necessarily deny the relevance of anti-imperialist attitudes given the degree to which such opinions accord with the liberal world order envisioned by the UN, it does clearly establish concern for international law as the dominant force of the argument. This offers a possible explanation for the entire phenomenon. The United Nations was a creation of the post-war world, and also a historical constant within it. It is chronologically well positioned to explain the post-war restriction of British interventions.

It is unclear however, why the popular appeal of the rule of international law would manifest as a reluctance to intervene without consent or ongoing violence. If international law was the dominant criteria, we should expect instead to see a pattern of British intervention in accordance with the will of the Security Council. That we do not validates instead the earlier possibility that rationale centered on international law is actually a manifestation of ethical political feeling. In other words, the contradiction is best resolved by understanding that part post-war British opinion opposed to Suez as what Adamthwaite termed “liberal-minded.”¹² Liberalism tends to perceive interventions as being more justified if they have the consent of the target country, and occur only in response to violence. A post-war liberalism could therefore explain post-war Britain’s reluctance to intervene in the absence of these conditions. Liberalism also explains Labour’s tendency to emphasize the norms of international law, while not necessarily advocating strict adherence to the letter of the UN charter.

The pattern of limited intervention which has emerged in post-war Britain is profoundly unusual both within British history and international relations theory. While realist notions of power help explain the ‘where’ of post-war British intervention, the when and the why appear to follow non-strategic, ethical criteria. This preference for at least a superficially ethical policy is best explained by liberal attitudes within the British electorate.

Why the Second World War is associated with an increase in liberal attitudes is a far more complicated question. It is possible that the experience of fascism discredited the political right generally, but any claim stronger than possibility demands research. At any rate, the forces which liberalized British attitudes seem

¹¹ Adamthwaite, 455.

¹² Ibid.

to have influenced Britain's post-war foreign policy. The finding that ideological opinion limits military intervention imposes important qualifications upon realist claims, and suggests that a better understanding of public opinion and the forces which motivate it may considerably further the study of democratic foreign policy.

Jeff Ostrove is a sophomore interested in ethics, history, and international relations. He hopes to pursue postgraduate studies in political theory.