

WAR FOR MEN

Fortunately for the BBC, the actual crisis itself was inevitably of a higher priority than their reporting on it. The Gaitskell broadcast issue was eventually resolved through a meeting between the Opposition Leader and Rab Butler (leader of the House at this point) which thrashed out the basic guidelines for this sort of situation going forward, while sorting out the immediate problem with a compromise. Gaitskell would appear on the regular political interview programme Press Conference, where he would put forward his statement in that format, while for the sake of balance (any notion that this was Gaitskell responding to what Eden had said months earlier having been abandoned in the interests of sanity), Selwyn Lloyd would show up on Panorama.

By now it was Conference season. While Gaitskell fended off several speeches in praise of Nasser, the Conservative Party's (in Llandudno for some reason), acted as an echo chamber for Eden's position, culminating in Foreign Office minister Anthony Nutting giving a feverish speech about how "this country will not flinch", which he later came to regret. With the Government, or at least the governing party, working themselves up into a blood frenzy, it was time to start planning for the glorious British (and also French) military conquest. In other words, war was coming, again.

There was a certain reluctance to actually use the W-word itself in this case, mainly because a lot of people had vainly hoped Britain would last more than ten years without one - Korea notwithstanding, and that was technically a United Nations peacekeeping operation in which America very much took the lead, with Britain's total forces numbering less than fifteen hundred. This looked like it would involve an actual full-scale invasion, and entirely off Britain and France's own initiative - indeed, actively *against* the wishes of the United Nations.

But a War it was to be, at least that was the plan, and that meant potential headaches for the BBC. Suddenly their Overseas Service and Ogilvie's legacy, the Monitoring Service, were military assets again, moving back into the realms of espionage, propaganda and psychological warfare. And once the military actions were underway, the Corporation were left in no doubt whatsoever that they would be put on a wartime footing - censorship, vetting, strict controls - comparable to the one they'd left just over a decade earlier. To make matters worse, Ian Jacob was almost certainly going to be absent for the start of hostilities, at a Commonwealth Broadcasting Conference over in Australia.

An even nastier rumour started going around that Eden had ordered his Lord Chancellor to "prepare an instrument" by which he could, as his uncle-in-law had wanted for so long, annex the BBC and convert it into an entirely Government-controlled State Broadcaster. This seems to have

been just a rumour - apart from anything else, Eden had that power at his disposal any time he wanted it - but it still did the rounds in both Parliament and Broadcasting House and never for a moment seemed implausible.

The one thing the Government didn't have, but urgently needed, was a *casus belli* - an actual concrete reason for going to war. The mere seizure of the canal wouldn't cut it, as the UN had made abundantly clear. Fortunately, Egypt's neighbours and the Western powers' allies Israel did - they had been at loggerheads with Nasser since his accession, to the extent that some kind of confrontation was inevitable. The perfect pretext for Britain and France to ride piggyback and sort out their own differences. So that's what they did.

For a little while it went okay. Israel "spontaneously" took some pot-shots at some targets in the Sinai. Britain and France responded by sending separate ultimatums demanding a cessation of hostilities *to both sides*. Israel bowed their heads and accepted censure, fingers crossed behind their backs. Nasser told them to sod off. Simultaneously, the USA sponsored a resolution in the UN Security Council to tell Israel to withdraw. Britain and France both vetoed it, saying they'd only accept a ceasefire if the UN sent in a permanent peacekeeping force on the Egypt-Israel border. The UN accepted, and agreed that the British and French troops who had mysteriously materialised in the vicinity could stand in until their peacekeepers arrived.

This didn't go down brilliantly with everyone back home.