EGYPT

The British in Egypt  In 1859 the Ottoman viceroy of Egypt authorized a French company to dig a canal across the strip of land that separates the Mediterranean and Red Seas. The Egyptian government had part-ownership of the Suez Canal, which opened in 1869. The canal cut the distance between Great Britain and India in half. When heavy debts forced Egypt to sell its share in 1875, the British government bought it and became the canal's largest single owner. By 1881, more than 80 percent of the traffic through the canal was British.

In 1879, Egypt's debt problems caused the European powers to demand that the viceroy be removed. The Ottoman sultan appointed a new viceroy. However, Egyptian nationalists, angered over the Europeans' influence, rose in revolt. British troops invaded Egypt in 1882 to protect the Suez Canal and put down the rebellion. They remained for 74 years. The occupation made Egypt part of the British Empire. It was not a colony because officially the viceroy's government continued to rule. However, the real power in Egypt was a British governor called an "agent," backed by British troops. The British put Egypt's financial problems in order. They cut spending, paid the debt, and used what money remained on agriculture and railroads. Education received little attention. This policy upset many Egyptians. They were also angered by the number of British in important government jobs, which denied Egyptians the opportunity to gain experience in self-rule.

In the early 1900s, Egypt's nationalists began calling on the British to get out. Instead, when the Ottoman Empire joined the Central Powers in 1914, Britain made Egypt a protectorate and placed it under martial law. Egypt's Legislative Assembly was suspended and nationalist leaders were temporarily silenced. Thousands of Egyptians were forced into work supporting the British war effort.

Egyptian nationalism emerged from the war even stronger. A nationalist political party called the Wafd formed in 1918 to seek independence. It quickly became a powerful political force. Britain's arrest of Wafd leaders in 1919 set off weeks of strikes, demonstrations, rioting, and acts of sabotage across Egypt. British troops crushed what Egyptians call the 1919 Revolution. Hoping to head off further trouble, Britain ended its protectorate and declared Egypt independent in 1922. A constitution was written and a legislature elected. An Egyptian king, Fu'âd I, took the throne. Little else changed, however. British troops remained in Egypt and the power struggle continued until World War II. This time the struggle was among the British, the Wafd, and the king.

The Wafd controlled Egypt's legislature until the mid-1930s. Both the king and the British worked to break its power. In 1925 and again in 1928 Fu'âd dissolved the legislature and ruled alone. He also encouraged the formation of other political parties. Meanwhile, the British lured the Wafd into supporting an unfavorable treaty. When Fu'âd died in 1935, his son Farouk took the throne and signed the Wafd-backed treaty. Although the treaty reduced British control, it still did not give Egypt full independence. Many Egyptians blamed the Wafd. Some began to support newer, more radical nationalist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and Young Egypt. The Wafd lost control of Egypt's legislature in the elections of 1936.

The Wafd returned to power, with British support, during World War II. Early Axis victories in Europe increasingly convinced Egyptians that Germany would win the war. Many were pleased at this prospect because of their dislike for the British. Some groups, such as Young Egypt, openly supported the Nazis. The British were determined to prevent Egyptian cooperation with Germany. In 1942, as German troops advanced on Egypt, Britain ordered King Farouk to form a Wafd-controlled government. New elections at the end of the war ended the Wafd's power and the party split into competing groups. Popular support swung toward organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood, which continued to push for the end of British control.

Nationalism in Egypt  President Gamal Abdel Nasser and his nationalist policies defined postwar politics in Egypt. As a young army colonel in the 1940s, Nasser was troubled by political corruption and foreign influence in his country. He joined together with other army officers to seek change. In 1952, he helped lead a military coup that toppled the government. Two years later, he had taken charge of Egypt.
Nasser wanted to build a strong, independent Egypt, free of Western control. He became a vocal critic of the West and a leader of the nonaligned movement during the Cold War. He also carried out social and economic reforms designed to promote national development along socialist lines. He passed land reform, nationalized private industries, and built a state-run economy.

One of Nasser’s main goals was to build a large dam on the Nile River. The Aswan Dam would help prevent flooding and provide Egypt with hydroelectric power. Hoping to win Nasser’s loyalty, the United States offered loans to support this project. But Nasser angered the U.S. by forging ties with the Soviet bloc and communist China. When the United States withdrew its loans, Nasser struck back at the West. In July 1956, he nationalized the Suez Canal, which crossed Egyptian territory but had been controlled by the French and British.

Thus began the Suez Crisis. In part due to a blockade Egypt had imposed on Israeli shipping, Israel invaded the Sinai Peninsula. Britain and France followed with their own invasion of Egypt. These actions provoked an international outcry and charges of imperialism. Fearing that the crisis could advance Soviet interests in the region, the United States put pressure on the invaders to withdraw their troops. Egypt kept the canal, and Nasser became a hero across the Middle East.

Now recognized as the leader of the Arab world, Nasser began to promote the cause of Pan-Arabism. This was a movement to unite Arab countries around common goals. Nasser took control of the Arab League, a group of Arab member-states founded in 1945 with British support. The league was designed to promote Arab unity while keeping Arab states in the Western orbit. Nasser sought to mold the league to his own interests.

Inspired by Nasser’s leadership, Syria joined with Egypt in 1958 to form a new Arab state, the United Arab Republic (UAR). This union was a testament to Nasser’s Pan-Arab vision, but it was flawed from the start. The two countries had done little to prepare for unification. Egypt—the bigger, stronger state—dominated the UAR. Syria was politically unstable and difficult to control. Many Syrians also resented Egyptian rule. In 1961, Syria pulled out of the UAR, and the union collapsed. Nasser’s image as an Arab leader suffered.

Other setbacks followed. In 1962, Nasser sent Egyptian troops to fight in a civil war in Yemen. The war became a quagmire, with no end in sight. Again, Nasser’s image suffered. But the biggest blow came in the Six-Day War with Israel in 1967. The Arab loss hurt Nasser’s reputation in Egypt and the Arab world. He remained in office, but his power and stature were diminished. In 1970, he died of a heart attack.

The presidents who followed Nasser largely abandoned his policies. President Sadat, who took over in 1970, made peace with Israel and developed close relations with the West. Hosni Mubarak (HOHS-nee moo-BAH-rakh), who took power after Sadat’s death, continued Sadat’s foreign policies. He ruled Egypt with an iron hand, holding on to power for three decades until public protests finally drove him from office in 2011. His overthrow was part of the “Arab Spring,” a broad, regional uprising against dictatorship that spread across the Middle East.

Questions:

1. Describe the history of the Suez Canal from the time it was built through Nasser’s rule. Why has the Suez Canal been so important to countries around the world?
2. Egypt was controlled by various groups/people between the end of the Ottoman Empire and the Arab Spring. Explain who had political control and describe the change each brought about in Egypt during the period of their control.
3. Describe the role nationalism played in Egyptian history from the Ottoman Empire to the Arab Spring?