Gamal Abdel Nasser
1919-1970

“The first Egyptian to rule Egypt since Cleopatra.”

British Empire’s official control of Egypt
1882 - WW1

1919: Liberal Revolution
- Nationalist liberal revolution, ushered in parliament
- Nasser and Sadat born at around this time, grew up hearing about its glory but saw only its failures
- Popular anti-colonial uprising after the war led to a new reform era ushered in by English colonialists

Two Kings: Fuad (23-36) and Farouk (36-52)
- Liberal order with a constitution, but the king could dismiss parliament at his whim. These two kings ultimately served British masters.
- Tensions on the street throughout: demands for full independence, England unwilling to give up important controls.

WWII
- Nasser’s generation came of political age here, demanding liberation. Street fighting, fighting police, etc.
- Read deeply in history and literature. Engendered anti-colonial ideology and a nationalism born of Egypt’s ancient history.
- Was moving towards academia, but his heart wasn’t in it.

Military Career
- Joined Army in 1937
- Worked his way up in the legit army
- Always with Sadat nearby as a comrade
- In 44 Nasser and others joined the secret military wing of the Muslim Brotherhood
- At the time it stressed patriotism over Islamism. Some drifted towards Islamism; some towards leftism. But the Brotherhood provided institutional support for these men to figure out what they were doing.

Free Officers: founded in 1949
- Social and economic turmoil after WWII.
- Inequality terrible, cost of living worse. Students and workers joined forces in protests that grew louder and more violent.
Increasingly put down by police or British troops.
Country felt on the verge of collapse

Nasser founded the FO on the back of 2 events:
1. 48’ Palestine War
2. Gov crackdown on dissident groups, like the Brotherhood, and communist organizations

Palestine & Egypt
- Egyptian solidarity for the plight of Palestinians rose in the late 30’s, particularly during the Arab rebellion.
- Mood in Egypt turned against the Zionists there, who were close with high society and power.
- Students demanded the country arm them and send them into battle.
- This happened, but was thrown hastily together, the day after Israel claimed statehood.
- Nasser was a commander there, and had a hard time. Had to buy supplies from local merchants. Felt let down by the gov. Huge scandal over rumors that they had sold their good weapons and pocketed the profits.
- Soldiers returned from war to an ambivalent response and a bad situation.
- But important to note: the arab world hurt after the 48 war. Nasser was seen as the only leader strong enough to set things right.

FO Alliances
FO formed alliances both with the Brotherhood, and with the left, despite Nasser not himself being a Marxist.
- Their fight was against “twin enemies of imperialism and political corruption”

The Coup of 23 July, 1952: The Blessed Movement
- Precipitated by a period of real unrest
- Peaceful transition to power. The king was exiled.
- Relations with the communists were soured shortly after the coup owing to a strike that turned violent and led to workers being hanged. Nasser was against this, but let himself be out voted.

1953: The Movement becomes a Revolution
- Six months after seizing power they outlawed political parties, and decreed a three year “transition period” of martial rule.
- Nasser did not like cameras, and so stayed in the shadows in this first year. In 54 he became prime minister.

October 54 Speech: Nasser becomes Nasser
- Nasser negotiated withdrawal of the British; very effective negotiator
- Gave a big public speech in Alexandria. Started nervous and stilted. Then midway through 8 shots rang out, and he responded with full emotion. “God be with you gamal”, from the crowd.
- His famous response: “If Gamal abd al-Nasser should die, I will not die - for all of you
are Gamal abd al-Nasser - Egypt’s well-being is linked not to Gamal And al-Nasser but to you and your struggle”
- Assassin was from the Brotherhood
- Nasser’s fame grew from here. He was beloved for being approachable on the street, and being modest in taste.

British ambassador to Egypt: it reflected a “a breadth of vision, humanity and idealism”
US ambassador: “selfless and icily intelligent”

**Rise in World Affairs: Leader of the Non-Aligned Movement**
- Bandung conference of non-aligned nations: Indonesia, 1955
- With: Indonesia’s Sukarno, India’s Nehru, Yugoslavia’s Tito
- Together they conceived of the Non-Aligned Movement: a path for developing and newly liberated countries between the two poles of America and the Soviets.

Castro on the purpose of the NAM:
“To ensure the national independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and security of non-aligned countries in their struggle against imperialism, colonialism, neocolonialism, racism and all forms of foreign aggression, occupation, domination, interference or hegemony as well as against great power and bloc politics”.

NAM now: 120 countries; 55% of the world population.

**Nasser to CBS in 56: 6 Principles of the Revolution**
In perfect English, he outlined:
1. Anti-colonialism
2. Anti-feudalism and the domination of capital and monopoly over government
3. Anti-corruption
4. Social justice
5. Creation of a strong national army
6. Clean democracy, not “the game of democracy”

**Why an Egyptian Army?**
Nasser said it was necessary to defend from Israel
The West refused aid, so they turned to the Russians

**Cold War Politics in the Middle East**
- US and Britain thought Egypt would sign on to the Baghdad Pact of pro-western security alliance states (in 1955: Pakistan, Iran, Iraq).
- But Nasser saw it as the colonialists that they had booted out the front door coming around and trying to climb back in through the window.
- He launched a major propaganda mission against it that convinced Syria, Jordan and Lebanon to not sign, thus rendering it tangential to central Arab affairs.

**Nasser and Pan-Arab Solidarity**
- Voice of the Arabs radio station
- Publicized the liberation struggles of colonized and newly independent peoples across the world
- This pretty much turned the whole colonial world against him. Especially in France, for his support of the Algerian Revolution

**How was he seen by the US**
Sec of State Dulles: “a fanatic” and “dangerous” and a “virus who might infect others”
Eisenhower called Egyptian support for Nasser “a campaign of hatred against us”

**US viewed “Arab nationalism” as the enemy of status quo**
Just as they did in Latin American and SE Asia.
And for good reasons
Supporting Israel as the regional superpower was the response

**Anti-Colonialism and the 1950’s**
As Britain’s puppet regimes were overthrown
(Iran, Iraq, Egypt)
The US was working out systems to install the same thing
CIA in 58: “a logical corollary” of opposing Arab nationalism “would be to support Israel as the only reliable pro-western power left in the Middle East.”

Chomsky: “The Us took over the British framework, but the basic principles remained. That is, the West must control events in the Middle East. Furthermore, the wealth of the region must flow primarily to the west, to the US and Britain; their energy corporations; investors, the US Treasury, which has been heavily dependent on recycled petrodollars; exporters; construction firms, and so on. That is the essential point. The profits have to flow to the West, and the power has to remain in the West, primarily Washington, insofar as possible”

**Israeli Sabotage in Egypt— 54 and 55**
- Familiar story from Hirst
- Israelis were trying to turn the celebration of Nasser’s revolution into a day of mourning
- Led to an increase in sternness of Nasser’s denunciations of the “Zionist Enemy”
- This led to an arms race between Israel and Egypt, and war was building
- Nasser was left with no choice but to turn to the Russians for arms
- In 55, after one final plea to the west, Egypt bought 200 million Egyptian pounds worth of arms, from the Czech Gov.
- Ben-Gurion went crazy here, and ordered pre-emptive war, thinking Israel’s existence was threatened.
- The French, looking for revenge for Algeria, started supplying the Israelis with weapons, just in time for the Suez War.

**1956: Nasser nationalizes the Suez Canal**
- In response to American and British suspending aid for the construction of the Aswan Dam. Egypt had resisted terms, which were stuffed with Cold War caveats.
- After Dulles withdrew American assistance, Nasser nationalized the Canal.
- Gave his most famous speech from the same square in Alexandria where he survived
the assassination attempt.
- “we will build the high damn”
- Egyptians across political boundaries poured into the streets in jubilation
- Nasser promised to not interfere with shipping, and to protect the safety of all ships, but US, Britan and Israel sought to provoke a crisis that could bring down the Nasser regime

Suez War: October 1956
- Israel invaded Egypt. Nasser thought it was nothing, thought it was a diversion from an attack they were planning in Jordan.
- The next day, Britain and France delivered an ultimatum: both sides withdraw ten miles from the Canal on respective banks. Israel, still advancing, agreed, while Egypt refused.
- British and French then bombed Egyptian air bases
- The conspiracy was clear to many in Britain, protests in London, ministers resigned, etc.
- Eisenhower blackmailed the British into stopping the assault. Soviets threatened to drop nukes.
- European forces pulled out in late December

Suez turned Nasser into an international superstar
- Because he exposed the conspiracy
- Which in turn strengthened his claims to have defeated the forces of imperialism
- His speeches — “We’ll fight on and on” - were turned into popular anthems and slogans.
- Crowds mobbed Nasser everywhere he went.

Suez as a turning point in colonial history
- For Britain, the end of empire. “The Lion’s Last Roar”
- Anthony Eden, Churchill’s heir, resigned in disgrace. His downfall was his monomaniacal obsession with Nasser, who he thought of as Hitler on the Nile.

Egypt after Suez: secular nationalism
- Huge infrastructure projects
- Flourishing of the arts: music, film
- Some filmmakers began to explore taboo social issues: poverty, crime, sex.
- Minister of Culture described a trip to Bayreuth to hear Wagner’s Ring Cycle as his personal hajj.
- Modern art, jazz bands, dance troupes all toured
- Pop magazine had local starlets on the cover and American actresses on the back
- Regime nationalized the major theological seminary and oversaw its conversion into a secular university with faculties of arts, sciences, medicine and engineering
- Egyptianization: many non-Egyptians left, or were expelled. Some saw this as the righting of past wrongs, some saw it as a regression from cosmopolitan values.

Three Circles of Egyptian Influence, from Philosophy of The Revolution
1. Islamic
Problematic b/c of secular image, crackdown on Brotherhood and worsening relations with Saudis

2. African
Problematic b/c African leaders didn’t want to get involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict

3. Arab
So this came to dominate Nasser’s attention

**Union with Syria: United Arab Republic**
- Lasted from 58 - 61, with Nasser as the President
- This is him at the peak of his steamroller power
- At this point it seemed only a matter of time until he swept into the leadership of the entire Arab world.
- Iraq nearly joined after their revolution in 1958. King was killed.

**Second Revolution: 1960’s**
- Complicated regional power politics led to the dissolution of the UAR.
- It took a toll on Nasser. He gained weight and walked less erectly.
- And so he turned his attention inwards, to building the socialist state of Egypt. Previously he had been more tolerant of nationalist Egyptian capitalists, “Guided Capitalism” trusting them to promote economic development with a human face
- Attention towards infrastructure projects
- Nationalized banks, insurance companies, real estate export firms
- This amounted to a second Revolution. Called the “July Laws”
- He drew sharp distinctions between Arab socialism and Marxism. The revolution was not rooted in class struggle; the enemies were imperialism and its agents and religious fanaticism
- This was a difficult decade, marked by increasing authoritarianism, accusations of corruption and rising cost of living

**But the gravest setbacks came from abroad**
- 1960’s called The Arab Cold War
- Quagmire in Yemen starting in 64, Yemen civil war. Nasser felt compelled to offer support b/c they were imitating his revolution. “Egypt’s Vietnam”
- Problems with relations with Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon.
- All this lead to...

**1967: Israel destroys Nasser**
- 60’s also were a decade of mounting militarism for Palestinian self determination
- Nasser and Egypt loudly supported them
- Launched the Voice of Palestine radio station in 63
- 67 Arab-Israeli war: “al-naksa” - the setback. As compared to “al-nakba” - the catastrophe
- Egypt was crushed in the war, within 3 hours the Egyptian air force was destroyed
- Lost 80% of its armed forces
- The devastating loss exposed the shaky foundations of the socialist garden state
- June 9th: Nasser accept full responsibility for the defeat and announces his
resignation.

“The aspiration for Arab unity began before Nasser and will remain after Nasser. I always used to tell you that the nation remains and that the individual—whatever his role and however great his contribution to the causes of his homeland—is only a tool of the popular will and not its creator.”

Reinstitution
- Millions poured into the streets the next day, demanding his stay in office
- He accepted the referendum of the streets
- But it took its toll. A year later he called himself “a man walking in a desert surrounded by moving sands not knowing whether, if he moved, he would be swallowed up by the sands or would find the right path.

Died in 1970
- Mourning just like the day after he announced resignation

Sadat’s betrayal of the Arab world
- Dramatic trip in 1977
- Held in the context of his comrade’s dedicated to Arab unity