

Six Moments of Crisis: inside British foreign policy

Gill Bennett

Oxford University Press, 2013, £20

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The author is a former chief historian at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, holding that post from 1995 to 2005. I have always had rather a soft spot for the FCO's support crew of non-diplomatic professionals ever since the Seventies, when my mother (a librarian and indexer) worked for some years from home indexing the India Office library, part of the Foreign Office.

A pass was needed for her occasional visits to London and, on one occasion, she was stopped by a police roadblock in the part of rural Sussex in which we lived, driving whichever of our rather hopeless family cars we owned at the time. Unable to remember her number plate, she was asked for identification (rather less common then than now). Flustered, she fished in the depths of her handbag and, on production of her FCO pass, was rewarded with a smart salute from the PC in question.

Gill Bennett's moments of crisis are: the decision in July 1950 to send British forces into Korea; the decision in July 1956 to invade the Suez Canal area; the decision in July 1961 to apply for British membership of the European Community; the decision in January 1968 to withdraw British forces from 'East of Suez' (other than Hong Kong); the decision in September 1971 to expel 105 Soviet diplomats for alleged espionage and the decision in April 1982 to despatch a naval task force to the South Atlantic.

Two things should be said at the start. First, this is a fascinating book, full of telling vignettes and illuminating sidelights. Second, I am not sure how many of the six events can be properly described as 'moments of crisis', as opposed

to being simply important moments of policy choice, although the 'crisis' word makes for a more interesting title.

Thus on Korea, this is her take on the attitude of both Clement Attlee and Ernest Bevin, respectively Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary: 'It was almost unthinkable for Britain not to support the United States in a conflict affecting both their interests and, potentially, the interests of world peace.' Korea in itself may have threatened a world crisis, but there seems little sense of crisis about Britain's decision-making: we were going to row in alongside the Americans.

At the opposite end of Gill Bennett's timeline, the invasion of the Falkland Islands was undoubtedly a domestic political crisis of the first magnitude with a response to match, even if one believes that the 'civilised' course of action would have been to cut a deal with Argentina's fascist junta (I don't, as it happens, nor did I at the time).

But between these two poles – crisis Falklands and non-crisis Korea – is something of a mixed bag, to say the least. Suez? Well, it turned into a crisis all right but largely one of Britain and France's own making. The process leading up to the invasion, as the author makes clear, showed Prime Minister Anthony Eden veer away from a course of action that may have borne fruit – the forceful internationalisation of the canal as a vital global artery, with essential American support – towards a policy primarily concerned with unseating Egypt's President Nasser. Other than the lack of American involvement, it rings a faint bell, doesn't it?

Less plausible still as a moment of crisis is the 1961 decision to apply to join the European Community. One could argue that it arose out of a long-running crisis of British confidence, but that is hardly a crisis moment, more a crisis *longeur*.

Slightly more presentable as a crisis moment was the East of Suez decision, forced on a reluctant Cabinet by the need to make cuts after the November 1967 devaluation of sterling. Even in the pre-monetarist Sixties, it was thought necessary to counterbalance the inflationary impact of the lower pound with cuts to domestic demand, including public

expenditure. Labour's left would buy cuts in domestic spending only at the price of a drastic reduction in overseas defence commitments. Many resisted, but, as the author points out, by mid-1967: 'There was no avoiding the conclusion that Britain's global responsibilities were unsustainable.'

The 'Soviet spy' affair of 1971 certainly had potential to turn into a foreign-policy crisis. In the event, the Edward Heath government gambled that it would not and was proved correct.

Rejigging the six 'moments' in ascending 'crisis' order, rather than chronologically, gives us, I suggest, Korea, EC membership application, the 'spies' affair, 'East of Suez', Suez proper and the Falklands. Another way of approaching these 'moments' is in terms of the response of our principal ally throughout this period, the United States. In ascending order, with the worst reaction first, I would suggest the sequence is Suez, then 'East of Suez', then the Falklands, then the 'spies' affair, then the EC membership application, then, at the apex, Korea.

Bang in the middle of both sequences is the 'spies' affair, of which more later.

The author's technique is to take the reader through the political discussions about each event, outlining the positions and arguments of the main players, right up to the moment of decision. What Katie – or rather, Clem, Anthony, Harold and the rest – did next is for other books to cover, as indeed they have.

The concentrated nature of the material yields some marvellous anecdotes and demolishes a few myths along the way. Thus those to whom the pre-Thatcher Tories were suave internationalist moderates may be surprised to learn that Selwyn Lloyd, Foreign Secretary at the time of Suez, 'spoke no foreign languages, had never been abroad except in wartime and did not like foreigners'. By contrast, Eden was 'an Arabic speaker with a deep knowledge of Middle Eastern history and politics, and had a long association with Egypt'.

So Harold Wilson grovelled in front of American President

Lyndon Johnson at every opportunity? As Washington huffed and puffed over 'East of Suez', insisting Britain ought to stay, the British Prime Minister told his Cabinet that 'if the US tried to punish the British economically, the latter could reply in kind'. Later, according to the diaries of colleague Barbara Castle, quoted here, 'he "cheerfully dismissed" the US threats... "After all, America was very good at looking after number one and would respect us for doing the same."'

Still, a good thing Margaret Thatcher was about in 1982 to ignore those jellyfish from the Foreign Office and insist that she knew in her bones that the Falklands were ours, right?

'Now Mrs Thatcher was fully focused. Were the Islands really British? Once Carrington [Lord Carrington, then Foreign Secretary] had assured her that the British claim was good ("because", as she told him, "there is no earthly point in sweating blood over it if it's not ours") she had no doubts that the Falklands must be defended, by force if necessary.'

All wonderful stuff, of which there is much, much more.

But along with querying the 'crisis' nature of most of these moments, I have two other niggles. One, the author – perhaps inevitably, in a work of this type – seems over-reliant on what may be called the official-unofficial record. Here is an example from the EC membership application chapter. We learn that:

'The decision to apply for British membership of the EEC [European Economic Community] was taken at a meeting held in the Prime Minister's room in the House of Commons at 3pm on Friday 21 July 1961.....A hot Friday afternoon is an unusual time to hold a Cabinet meeting except in times of crisis, particularly just before Parliament rises for the summer recess.'

She concludes:

'It is hard to avoid the impression that the timing was a deliberate ploy on Macmillan's part; he knew his colleagues would want to go home, not engage in lengthy discussion.'

Absolutely spot on, I should have thought.

Later, however, she tells us that it would be an 'oversimplification' to say that Macmillan called the meeting having become committed to British membership, that 'he also knew that a British application might not be successful' and that he noted in his diary the following day that the chances were against an agreement, largely because of the French leader Charles De Gaulle.

The French veto did come to pass, but it seems implausible that Macmillan would have gone to all the trouble of a carefully-staged meeting that could have been designed to curtail debate simply in order to prepare the way for something to which he was not committed and which he thought may well fail. Far more likely, I suggest, is that Macmillan was chivvying his fellow Tories from nostalgia for the empire that had been lost after the war to acceptance of a substantial shareholding in a new European power bloc.

My second niggle relates to the 1971 'spies' affair, that bizarre episode that, as we saw above, sits neatly in the middle of the crisis-America grid. In plain language, what was it all about? It seems 'the numbers employed in Soviet missions in the UK had by the mid-1960s reached record levels, and though a ceiling was imposed on the size of the embassy in 1968 the Russians had side-stepped it by filling the Soviet Trade Delegation with intelligence officers and by making use of "working wives".'

By 1971, MI5 estimated that of the near-1,000 Soviet officials (and wives) in the UK, a quarter were involved in 'undiplomatic activities'. How had this been allowed to happen? Some had few doubts:

'[T]he Prime Minister [Edward Heath] felt resentment towards his predecessor, Harold Wilson. Soviet espionage was, in Heath's view, only one of many issues the Labour government had handled badly between 1964 and 1970. Wilson and his colleagues, *though well aware of the problem caused by increasing numbers of Soviet spies*, [my italics] had done little to tackle it, principally to avoid disrupting Anglo-Soviet relations.'

It's that slander again!

Thus the weirdly named operation FOOT (their capital letters, not mine), which remains, writes the author, 'the single largest expulsion of intelligence officials by any country'. Heath later described it as 'the most important security action ever taken by any Western government'. In which case, one wonders why the Soviet reaction was so muted, with little of the feared reprisals against British diplomats and other nationals on Soviet territory – 'on the whole, there was more noise than action'. Doubtless FOOT gets plenty of analysis in other books, but I should have liked to read more in this one.

In conclusion, this is a book full of solid information and intriguing sidelights. The author, as an insider, seems confident in handling the former material, but unaware of quite how much of the latter she has unearthed.

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