

The Connection between History and Economy in the Suez Canal¹²

Márk Alexander Gordon³

The Suez Canal,⁴ established in 1869, is one of the most significant strategic and military artificial waterways in the world. In this book, twelve studies discuss the role and function of the Suez Canal from various points of view. Some of these essays were presented at a conference,⁵ which marked the 150th anniversary of the Canal, while other studies are original contributions. This volume consists of a complex survey of the historical and economic circumstances necessitating the construction of the Suez Canal, which is being explained in four thematically separated chapters.

The editors of this book are Carmela Lutmar,⁶ a social scientist, and Ziv Rubinovitz,⁷ chair of the Department of Geo-strategy, at the University of Haifa. They clarify that the significance of their volume lies in the fact that no such systematic examination of the Canal has been done earlier. In the beginning of the volume, their research about the Canal's geostrategic importance as defined by the superpowers and regional actors is also included in the book. Several disciplines as well as a detailed survey examine the role of the most important artery and waterway for world trade between East and West.

The introduction provides a brief historical background on the Suez Canal, highlighting the ship routes that had existed before the Canal was constructed: *"The Sinan Peninsula connects Asia and Africa while separating the Mediterranean Sea from the Red Sea, and for thousands of years was making it hard to trade goods between South and Southeast Asia and Europe, forcing ships to circle around the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa"* (Lutmar and Rubinovitz, 2003, p. viii.). It is also mentioned that

¹ DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59569/jceas.2023.3.2.169>

² The Suez Canal: Past Lessons and Future Challenges. Edited by: Carmela Lutmar and Ziv Rubinovitz. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2023. ISBN: 978-3-031-15670-0 pp. 280.

³ PhD Candidate, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-0384-7180>; mgordon800@gmail.com

⁴ According to a Washington Post article from 2016, nearly ten percent of global shipping passes in the Suez Canal:

Tharoor, I. (2021) 'The Suez Canal, a chokepoint of history,' Washington Post, 28 March. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/03/26/suez-canal-history/> (Accessed: 19 January 2024)

The book at this point also mentions a recent event in March 2021, when a cargo tanker, the Ever Given got stranded in the Canal.

⁵ This unique conference was organized by the Chaikin Chair for Geostrategy at the University of Haifa, Israel, in November 2019.

⁶ For more information and publication list of Carmela Lutmar, see: University of Haifa (n. d.) *Carmela Lutmar*. Available at: <https://cris.haifa.ac.il/en/persons/carmela-lutmar> (Accessed: 19 January 2024)

⁷ For more information and publication list of Ziv Rubinovitz, see: ResearchGate (n. d.) *Ziv Rubinovitz*. Available at: <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Ziv-Rubinovitz> (Accessed: 19 January 2024)



in the ancient times, the Egyptians had already built a Canal but it was disused. In the 18th century, Napoleon also thought about a Canal: his dream was fulfilled by Ferdinand de Lesseps, on November 17, 1869. This introductory chapter also analyses in detail the circumstances of the Canal's planning by Napoleon and Lesseps, its financial background, the status of the British Protectorate and the nationalization of the Canal by Gamal Abdel-Nasser in 1956, followed by the Tripartite Aggression against Egypt. The hostile situation with Israel, which lasted until 1979, is also examined. Moreover, this chapter proceeds with a concise section⁸ on the role of the superpowers in the Suez Canal. In the next chapter, the book introduces the four parts of the book as well as their authors and contributors.

The first part, written by Shaul Chorev,⁹ focuses on political, economic,¹⁰ geopolitical,¹¹ and geostrategic issues,¹² including factors of threat such as terrorism. Ehud Gonen¹³ gives information about the Chinese investments, while Yehuda Blanga¹⁴ attempts to compare the Suez Canal and the Vietnam War, alongside with the Soviet supplies to North Vietnam. In the second part, Christopher Dietrich¹⁵ discusses the energy, mostly, the oil situation, as related to the strategic thinking of the United States. Yossi Mann¹⁶ portrays the economic impact of the Suez Canal with an emphasis on oil. In the third part, Benjamin Spanier¹⁷ concentrates on legal aspects, such as the difference

⁸ This section also mentions that the Canal would never have been built without the support of the great powers, such as France and Great Britain.

⁹ Shaul Chorev is an admiral and the former Head of the Israel Atomic Energy Commission, and also a professor in the International Relations Division of the School of Political Science: University of Haifa (n. d.) *Shaul Chorev*. Available at: <https://muchanut.haifa.ac.il/index.php/en/about-eng/first-row/researchers/item/19-chorev-shaul> (Accessed: 19 January 2024)

¹⁰ The alternation of Egypt's GDP is also discussed in this chapter.

¹¹ To increase the Canal's efficiency and increase the hard currency earnings, Egypt built a New Suez Canal, parallel to the old one and it was opened in 2015.

¹² An insightful pie chart displaying the seven types of ships and their amount passed through the Suez Canal in November 2019 can be also seen in this section. Further graphs indicate the traffic by ship type, as well.

¹³ Ehud Gonen is Ph.D. candidate at the Department of Asian Studies at the University of Haifa and a Researcher at Haifa Maritime Policy and Strategy Research Center: Academia (n. d.) *Gonen Ehud*. Available at: https://haifa.academia.edu/Ehud_GONEN (Accessed: 19 January 2024)

¹⁴ Yehuda Blanga is a lecturer at Faculty of Jewish Studies, Bar Ilan University: Bar-Ilan University (n. d.) *Yehuda Udi Blanga*. Available at: <https://cris.biu.ac.il/en/persons/yehuda-udi-blanga> (Accessed: 19. January 2024)

¹⁵ Christopher Dietrich is an Associate Professor of History, Fordham University: Google Scholar (n. d.) *Christopher Dietrich*. Available at: <https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=ZR9OFvoAAAAJ&hl=en> (Accessed: 19 January 2024)

¹⁶ Yossi Mann studies at Bar Ilan University: Google Scholar (n. d.) *Yossi Mann*. Available at: <https://scholar.google.co.il/citations?user=4FceSKkAAAAJ&hl=en> (Accessed: 19 January 2024)

¹⁷ Benny Spanier is a Senior Research Fellow at the Maritime Policy and Strategy Research Centre at the University of Haifa: University of Haifa (n. d.) *Benny Spanier*. Available at: <https://cris.haifa.ac.il/en/persons/benny-spanier> (Accessed: 19 January 2024)

between a canal and a strait.¹⁸ Robbie Sabel¹⁹ sums up Israel's right to pass through the Canal. Eitan Barak²⁰ analyses Israel's struggle to gain the freedom of passage in the Suez Canal between 1956 and 1967. The impact of the Suez Canal on human affairs and the environment is examined throughout the fourth chapter, written by Arnon Soffer,²¹ including the urbanization and demographic policy of Egypt. Bella Galil²² mentions the environmental print of the Canal. Semion Polinov²³ focuses on anthropogenic activity in the Mediterranean, and Aleksander Gerson²⁴ evaluates the consequences and the lessons of the six-day long congestion the cargo tanker called Ever Given caused, in March 2021. The editors are aware that not all articles explicitly address the Suez Canal, albeit this volume is fascinating because it addresses issues that go beyond history, such as environmental hazards and anthropogenic activity. In addition, the lessons of the chapter, as mentioned in the conclusion, may not be applied to other waterways.

This reviewed work definitely achieves its goal since it provides detailed studies carried out by distinguished scholars from different disciplines. The topics discussed, for example, the geopolitical and legal issues, are closely related to each other. The authors also employ useful graphs and maps, e.g., about the density of the population in the Mediterranean Sea Basin in 2008, or impact scores by ecoregions. One of the maps shows the shipping routes, whereas other thematic maps demonstrate environmental impacts. All of them are useful aids for the reader to expand their knowledge about the Suez Canal. One of the biggest strengths of this book is the elaborated presentation of the research results, which are summarized in the conclusion section entitled as 'What have we learned?' in five questions.²⁵ The concluding section also suggests directions for

¹⁸ It is important to discuss the right to navigate through these types of waterways, and the maritime conventions.

¹⁹ Robbie Sabel is a Professor of International Law, Faculty of Law Hebrew University, Jerusalem: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem (n. d.) *Robbie Sabel*. Available at: <https://en.law.huji.ac.il/people/robbie-sabel> (Accessed: 19 January 2024)

²⁰ Dr. Barak Eaton is a faculty member in the Program in Strategy, Diplomacy and Security, the Shalem College, Jerusalem:

The MirYam Institute (2019) *Eitan Barak*. Available at: <https://www.miryaminstitute.org/eitan-barak> (Accessed: 19 January 2024)

²¹ Arnon Soffer is an Israeli geographer and professor of Geography and Environmental Sciences, Hebrew University:

Samuel Neaman Institute (n. d.) *Arnon Sofer*. Available at: <https://www.neaman.org.il/EN/Arnon-Sofer> (Accessed: 19 January 2024)

²² Bella Galil works at the Steinhardt Museum of Natural History, Tel Aviv University: <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Bella-Galil>

²³ Semion Polinov works as a Technicon at Israel Institute of Technology:

Research Gate (n. d.) *Semion Polinov*. Available at: <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Semion-Polinov> (Accessed: 19 January 2024)

²⁴ Aleksander Gerson is an associate professor at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst:

University of Massachusetts Amherst (n. d.) *Alexander R. Gerson*. Available at: <https://www.umass.edu/biology/about/directories/faculty/alexander-r-gerson> (Accessed: 19 January 2024)

²⁵ The answers are the historical development of the Suez Canal, the regional players, along with the Egypt Israel conflict, the increase of the volume of commodities, the future role of the Suez Canal decided in the hands of powers, and the challenges such as China's Belt and Road Initiative.



future research in four parts, entitled as Interaction, Strategies,²⁶ Intervention²⁷ and Stability.²⁸ It is necessary to prove the importance of the Suez Canal in an interdisciplinary work since connections between maritime history and security²⁹ are also examined in this book. The division of the studies into certain parts makes them more concise for the reader. The chapters themselves also end with a conclusion providing the most important result of the research.

One minor drawback of this volume is that the editors only summarize the main points of the chapters but they do not compare the various studies, for example, in what sense they are related to each other or which studies are the most practical for scholars. The interdisciplinary approach including several fields such as history, trading, geopolitics, environmental and anthropogenic activity, underlines the complexity of the problematics of the Suez Canal. The significance of this work lies in the fact that no such systematic examination of the Canal has been done earlier thus filling in the research gaps in the available literature. As stated before, the thorough analysis and detailed results as presented make this book an intriguing manual for both historians and scholars of other sciences.

²⁶ Redefining the concept of various strategies is considered to be a further goal of the research.

²⁷ Understanding great power politics are an important factor in this case. The editors also include the basic questions of the intervention of great powers.

²⁸ The editors discuss what should be implemented to reduce violence in the less stable period of the trading.

²⁹ The current events in the Middle East are also mentioned to some extent.