

When was Britain last the Instigator of Aggression Against Another Country?

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Critics often claim that Britain has a poor record when it comes to initiating wars, accusing the country of being too quick to engage in military conflicts. These critics argue that Britain's history is marred by instances of unprovoked aggression, driven by imperial ambitions or strategic interests. However, a closer examination reveals that many of Britain's military interventions were in response to specific provocations or broader security concerns, rather than acts of aggression initiated without any preceding threats. Here, we explore several conflicts involving Britain to provide a nuanced perspective on its role as an alleged aggressor.

Iraq War (2003)

In 2003, Britain joined the United States in a military invasion of Iraq. The justification for the war was the suspicion that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and posed a significant threat to international security. Despite extensive debates and investigations, no substantial evidence of WMDs was found. The invasion was widely criticized and sparked significant international controversy. The aftermath of the war led to prolonged conflict and instability in Iraq, raising questions about the legitimacy and motivations behind the intervention. It is important to note that we only know in hindsight that there was no immediate threat. At the time, the concerns were considered real and the actions were justified based on the information available. So the Iraq War does not qualify in our definition of Britain's involvement as the instigator, since at the time it was reactionary to a perceived threat from others.

Falklands War (1982)

The Falklands War between Britain and Argentina began on April 2, 1982, when Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands, a British overseas territory. Britain responded by dispatching a large naval task force to the South Atlantic to reclaim the islands. The decision to launch a full-scale military operation to retake the

territory was seen by some as a strong and aggressive response, showcasing Britain's determination to assert its sovereignty over the islands. The conflict resulted in significant casualties on both sides and ended with the British recapture of the Falklands. However, Britain was reacting to Argentina's initial aggression in defence of its territory.

Invasion of Iceland (1940)

During World War II, Britain was deeply concerned about the strategic importance of Iceland. The fear was that Germany might occupy the neutral country, giving them a significant advantage in the North Atlantic. On May 10, 1940, British forces launched Operation Fork, the invasion of Iceland. The invasion was not in response to any aggressive action by Iceland but was a pre-emptive move to secure the island and prevent it from falling into German hands. Although Iceland protested the invasion, British forces quickly established control and remained until American forces took over in 1941. Although a pre-emptive move, Britain and its Allies were already at war with Germany, so this was a reaction to Germany's prior aggression in starting WWII.

Malayan Emergency (1948-1960)

The Malayan Emergency was a guerrilla war fought in British Malaya between Commonwealth armed forces and the Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA), the military wing of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP). The conflict began in 1948 when the MCP started an insurgency against the British colonial government. The British response was characterized by aggressive military operations aimed at suppressing the rebellion and maintaining colonial control. Measures included large-scale relocations of villagers and extensive counter-insurgency tactics. While the conflict was a reaction to an internal uprising, the British actions were pre-emptive, aimed at defending and retaining their colonial territory.

Suez Crisis (1956)

The Suez Crisis in 1956 is a notable example of British aggression in the post-World War II era. Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal, previously controlled by British and French interests. In response, Britain, along with France and Israel, planned and executed a military intervention. On October 29, 1956, Israeli forces invaded the Sinai Peninsula, followed by British

and French demands for a ceasefire, which Egypt rejected. Subsequently, British and French forces bombed Egyptian positions and landed troops to seize control of the canal. The intervention faced significant international condemnation, particularly from the United States and the Soviet Union, leading to the withdrawal of British, French, and Israeli forces and leaving the canal under Egyptian control. While Britain and France failed in their objective, their aggression was a reaction to defend their control of the Suez Canal which they saw as economically strategically important.

Anglo-Zanzibar War (1896)

The Anglo-Zanzibar War, fought on August 27, 1896, is the shortest recorded war in history, lasting between 38 and 45 minutes. The conflict arose following the death of the pro-British Sultan Hamad bin Thuwaini and the succession of Sultan Khalid bin Barghash without British approval. Britain demanded Khalid's abdication in favour of a more compliant leader. When Khalid refused, British forces bombarded the Sultan's palace, quickly defeating his forces and installing a ruler more aligned with British interests. This conflict was a clear instance of British aggression aimed at maintaining control over its protectorate without there having been any real aggression from others beforehand. As such this was the last notable conflict in which Britain was the instigator of aggression.

Conclusion

With the exception of the Anglo-Zanzibar War, all these historical events illustrate instances where Britain acted with force, initiating military actions driven by strategic defence of its interests, but in reaction to direct threats or acts of aggression from other nations.

While the nature of international conflicts has evolved, these examples highlight moments where British intervention, all be it proactive and pre-emptive on occasion, was defensive in nature shaped by the geopolitical landscape of their respective eras.

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Afghanistan War (2001)

In response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States, Britain joined the US-led coalition in invading Afghanistan. The primary objective was to dismantle al-Qaeda and remove the Taliban from power, as they were harbouring the terrorist group responsible for the attacks. While the initial invasion was a reaction to the 9/11 attacks, the subsequent military actions and prolonged presence in Afghanistan involved significant pre-emptive and aggressive strategies aimed at stabilizing the country and preventing it from becoming a safe haven for terrorists. The war lasted for two decades, drawing criticism for its prolonged nature and the challenges in achieving lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan. Despite this it was a reaction to aggression, arguably the worse in modern times, by others.