

The decreasing British influence on Cyprus 1955–1974

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Once the Mediterranean Sea was the “lake” of the British Empire. Their ships were patrolling the most important sea straits, meanwhile the British Colonies were controlling the most important trading routes of the sea. The British Empire was the most significant great power in the region for centuries, however, British influence suffered important losses in the World War I. Nevertheless, London was able to keep her positions until the Second World War, but after that London lost – as a result of financial crisis – her strength to keep the Empire in one block. The decreasing British influence on Cyprus was already noticeable after the World War II, however, it only became unquestionable in the mid-1950s.

The decreasing British influence on Cyprus in the period of 1955–1974 could be divided into three main stages: (2.) the period of 1955–1960, when London still attempted to keep her colonial leadership over Cyprus but already realized the possibilities and acted to solve the problem; (3.) the period of 1960–1964 when Great Britain was still a significant regional power in Cyprus but by the end of the era London had to realize her loss of power; (4.) and the period of 1964–1974, when the British were intentionally reducing their influence on Cyprus to keep their positions and obtain a neutral standing on the Cyprus Question.

1. Introduction

The first sign of decreasing British influence in Greek issues was the change of British role during the Greek Civil War. However, London was one of the main reasons why the first stage of the Civil War broke out in December 1944 and continued in 1946, but in 1947 the British government had to realize that financially she was not able to support the Greek Royal government anymore against the rebellious Greek communists of KKE. Nevertheless, Washington replaced London, and – after the promulgation of Truman doctrine in 1974 – decided to keep the positions of western allies in Greece, meanwhile started to sponsor the Greek Royal Government with political, economic, financial, and armed subsidy.¹ After all, British geopolitical influence suffered significant losses in Greece, which was obvious for the nationalist and Enosis supporter Greek and Greek Cypriot politicians and army officers. Separate Greek groups were certain that time had

¹ KOLIOPULOS; VEREMIS (2010): 121–122.

finally come for the annexation of Cyprus by Greece, however, the first impulse – which started the struggle for Cyprus – came from abroad.²

After the promulgation of the Truman doctrine, the US government was concerned that the expansion of the Soviet Union will not stop in Eastern Europe, and they were sure that Greek Civil War was part of this process. In the late-1940s – learning from the Greek lessons – the government of the USA started to form and financially support several underground paramilitary groups all over Western and Southern Europe, to avert a political advance of Western European Communist Parties. The secret Washington based organization's name was "Stay Behind", which led several underground squads all over Europe with a close operational cooperation of the CIA. Each paramilitary squad had a different name, in Greece they chose to call themselves "Provia" which means sheepskin. The Provia was well connected to Greek Cypriot nationalists, who had already chosen the leader of their struggle. It was the Cyprus born Colonel Georgios Grivas, who was well-trained during the Greek Civil War and learned the guerrilla warfare very well from the Communist counterpart. In 1954, when he left Greece for Cyprus and formed the EOKA, he was still connected to Provia and to different Greek political parties. It is obvious that the CIA knew that the Greek officials were sponsoring the EOKA struggle against the US main alliance since the AMAG,³ the JUSMAPG,⁴ and the Provia was filled with numerous CIA agents and the Greek government – who supported the EOKA – was controlled by American advisers.⁵

However, the CIA did not sponsor directly the foundation and struggle of EOKA, but indirectly did. The policy was based on the US fears that the decreasing British influence in the region will be replaced by the Soviet Union. The popularity of AKEL just enhanced the concerns of the USA. On the other hand, the British colonial leadership was also uncomfortable with AKEL's power and started to rebuild the structure and popularity of the Orthodox Church. The attempt ended with full success, moreover, the religious intelligentsia became the other significant supporter of Enosis with the leadership of Archbishop III. Makarios.⁶ The Archbishop saw the UN General Assembly as an option to settle the raising case of Cyprus. The first success of his policy was when the Greek Prime Minister announced the Greek claims on Cyprus in 1951, and resorted to UN General Assembly to discuss the question of Cypriot self-determination. Nevertheless, the UN did not negotiate the case, but the attempt changed London's view, who took Turkey into the Cyprus Question and raised the potential ethnic conflict in the island.

Greece attempted to adopt the case of Cyprus at UN General Assembly several times since 1954, however she was not successful. In the meantime the sowing seeds of ethnic conflict produced their first results: Grivas and the EOKA started their struggle in Cyprus against the British and Turkish Cypriots, and the Turks of Turkey committed serious attacks on the Greek minority of Istanbul.

² TOFALLIS (2002): 122–126.

³ American Mission for Aid to Greece.

⁴ Joint U.S. Military Advisory and Planning Group, Greece.

⁵ DROUSIOTIS (2006): 2–4., 6–8.

⁶ ANDERSON (1992): 192.

2. The period of 1955–1960

As we mentioned above, this was the period when London still attempted to keep her colonial leadership over Cyprus, but already realized the possibilities and acted to solve the problem. It is obvious that the British policy toward Cyprus was not organic in this period, moreover a parallelism is noticeable. If we divide our period further, then (2.1.) between 1955–1957 three main versions of opinion determined her Majesties foreign policy towards Cyprus:

2.1.1. The policy of unchangingness, which was favored especially by Sir John Harding, Governor of Cyprus, who was appointed in 1955. As a former soldier, Harding preferred orderliness in Cyprus. During the riots in Istanbul he immediately declared state emergency, while 37,000 British soldiers were controlling and inspecting the cities and the countryside, which ended with numerous arrests. The strict policy continued when the EOKA – as an answer for Harding’s policy – intensified its actions in 1956. The result was serious: frequent guerrilla attacks in the cities and the countryside, numerous battles in Troodos, and executions of EOKA members by British authorities.

Moreover, Harding saw the resistance as an organic unity and he decided to expel Makarios, who was the only person who would be able to mediate between Grivas and Harding.⁷ After all Makarios’ exile to Islands of Seychelles and the strict policy against EOKA was not just Harding’s decision, on the contrary, he got straight orders from London to keep the situation of Cyprus under control during the Crisis of Suez.⁸

2.1.2. The policy of negotiation, which derived from the fact that London obviously lost her regional power and she had less and less financial resources to handle her military actions in Cyprus and to hold back the growing Greek and Turkish demands. On the other hand, London was also indirectly forced by Washington, mostly because the US governments favored the process of decolonization. The conference of London in 1955 was a clear attempt to satisfy every claim of the participants since Great Britain offered the possibility of double Enosis to Greece and Turkey, while she would have kept military bases on the island. Athens immediately protested against the plan, claimed to annex Cyprus only by herself, but accepted the terms of British military bases and offered the same possibility for NATO. Although the conference failed to bring any resolution since Turkey threatened with preventive airstrikes if the consultations accepted the Greek demands of enosis, but definitely changed the British authority’s view who started to accept the fact that the Cyprus Issue should be solved by political solution and not by armed force.⁹

2.1.3. The policy of self-government, appeared after the Conference of London when Alan Lennox Boyd, Secretary of State for the Colonies appointed Lord Radcliffe constitutional expert to find an operable solution for self-determination of Cypriots but under British rule. The Radcliffe’s proposals offered to form a Legislative Assembly with six seats reserved for members elected by the Turkish Cypriot community, twenty-four for members elected by Greek Cypriots, and six for members appointed by the Governor.

⁷ PANTELI (1990): 170–173.

⁸ HOLLAND (2002): 146.

⁹ TOFALLIS (2002): 138–140.

However, their decisions could have been lawful just after the approval and signature of Governor. The self-governing power would have been held by a Cabinet, led by a Chief Minister, appointed by the Governor as well. In this Cabinet a Turkish Cypriot minister would have maintained the Turkish Cypriot affairs, while the whole self-government would have had executive, initiative, and proposal power. Taken as a whole, the Radcliffe Constitution could have given the widest possibility of autonomy, but with the reservation to the Governor of decision on defence, external affairs, and public security. However, the proposals were accepted by the Turkish Cypriots and Turkey, but were rejected by Greek Cypriots and Greece.¹⁰

The system of parallel policies began to disappear after the retirement of Governor Harding and the (2.2.) governance period of Sir Hugh Foot between 1957–1967 brought a more liberal and negotiable viewpoint. Even though Foot was a good diplomat, even he was not able to bring the EOKA and the TMT to the negotiation table, moreover the military situation became worse and worse on the island.

2.2.1. The Foot – Macmillan Plan was the first attempt of Foot to adopt a resolution on the Cyprus Question in 1958 after when the new Macmillan cabinet decided to release Makarios. Although the plan still dealt with the separation, and not the independence of Cyprus, but legal rights of Cypriots would have been more comprehensive than before. The plan offered a common administrative system under British, Greek, Turkish and Cypriot rule, where the island would have been led by a Council which would have consisted of the British Governor, the Greek and Turkish representatives, and six elected Cypriot ministers, four from the Greek Assembly, two from the Turkish Assembly. The international status of the island would have remained the same as it was before for the following seven years, while the British Governor would have been responsible for external, defence and security affairs in consultation with the Greek and Turkish representatives. The legislative power would have been given to the House of Representatives, which had two chambers. The elected Cypriot representatives would have got seats in the lower house with respect of their community rate. The upper house would have been reserved for the representatives of Britain, Greece and Turkey, while a tripartite Council would have controlled the cases of discrimination. After all, the plan was rejected by both sides, however, it signified an important stage in the process of independence.¹¹

2.2.2. The policy of independence became more and more popular after the failure of the Foot – Macmillan Plan. However, Makarios still favored the Enosis but he realized – as he did in 1974 as well – that the achievement of self-determination by independence would bring less risk than an annexation by Greece. On the other hand, Turkey was also ready to drop her claims for partition and accept independence as a solution, since they realized that the Turkish minority was suffering significant losses under Greek Cypriot attacks. Zorlu, the Turkish Foreign Minister communicated their view several times to Averoff Greek Foreign Minister and to Llyod British Foreign Secretary in 1958, however, the Turks did not accept minority position for the Turkish Cypriots and claimed to have an equal share in the administration and the army. After a long period of negotiations between Averoff, Zorlu, Lloyd, Makarios and Kütçük they finally agreed to hold a conference in 1959. The

¹⁰ TOFALLIS (2002): 146–147.

¹¹ HOLLAND (2002): 237–238.

conferences of Zurich and London officially agreed on independence and formed the basic structure of a new Cypriot State. The Republic of Cyprus became an independent country on 16 August, 1960 under the presidency of Makarios and vice-presidency of Küçük. However Grivas blamed Makarios for betraying the dream of Enosis but he left Cyprus for Greece where he was received as a hero, honored with many titles and promoted to General.

3. The period of 1960–1964

As we mentioned it before, at the beginning of this period Great Britain was still a significant regional power but by the end of the era London had to realize her loss of power. However, the colonial government was replaced by the new Makarios cabinet abruptly, but the British influence did not disappear overnight. First of all, Great Britain kept Sovereign Military Bases at Akrotiri and Dhekelia, where approximately 5000–7000 British were stationed accompanied by numerous fighter jets, helicopters and naval vessels.¹³ Since the Republic of Cyprus was part of the British Commonwealth and the Cypriot state administration was very similar to the British, the new Government of Cyprus and the British Cabinet remained in a close cooperation. Moreover, after the decolonization, quite a few British inhabitants or business companies stayed at the island, they all became part of the British influence in the new born country.

Even though, British potential was still important on the island, the difference between the former colonial power and the weak regional influence was very significant. Before Cypriot independence Great Britain had owned the whole island, however, only 3% of Cyprus remained under British sovereignty after 1960, and not some 30,000 British soldiers were stationed there, just maximum 7000. This size of power was not enough to play a leading role in region of the Eastern Mediterranean, but it was still enough to keep the British influence in Cyprus. The importance of this influence became obvious when the temporarily settled ethnic conflict revived in 1963–1964. When Makarios' proposals to change the unsuitable constitution failed to be accepted by both sides, intercommunal fights began again and brought Cyprus close to a Civil War situation. The British prestige and their Cyprus-based forces – for the last time – played a very important and active role in this situation since Makarios asked London to divide the militant groups by the only significant army of the island: the British Forces of Akrotiri and Dhekelia. Mayor General Peter Young immediately acted to solve the crisis and commanded 7,000 British soldiers to Nicosia and drew up the Green Line, which started to divide not just the fighting sides, but the communities of the island as well.¹⁴

Although the strength of British peacemaking forces was not significant they acted fast and seemed to solve the crisis. Even though the action was internationally recognized – as the situation in Cyprus was serious and only the British could act immediately –, but after the first attempts of the peacemaking process the UN tried to internationalize the peace

¹² TOFALLIS (2002): 159–162.

¹³ KAZAMIAS (2010): 24.

¹⁴ BRISCOE (2003): 157.

operation and adopt a resolution to establish a peacekeeping force under UN authorization. The UN banned Greece and Turkey from the participation of UNFICYP since they were deeply involved in the Cyprus Question. The UN Security Council also decided to hold back its countries from UNFICYP except for Great Britain, who was one of the guarantor powers of Cypriot independence. This fact was internationally recognized but the USSR questioned it several times during the formation process of UNFICYP why London could take part – moreover get a leading position – of UNFICYP, but at the same time Moscow was forbidden to send peacekeepers to Cyprus.¹⁵ Nevertheless Moscow had to realize that Cyprus was under the sphere of influence of the Western Alliance, which was a very important unofficial and invisible “agreement” between the USA and USSR after the conclusion of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and Suez Canal Crisis. Even so, it was the first attempt by Moscow to send Soviet peacekeepers to Cyprus, which policy has appeared several times during the different stages of the Cyprus Question since 1964.

After all, on 4 March, 1964 the United Nations Security Council Resolution 186¹⁶ adopted unanimously the creation of UNFICYP with the participation of Canada, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Sweden, Austria, Australia, New Zealand and Great Britain. Even though most of these countries were neutral in the Cold War, it is obvious that the participants were more the supporters of the Western Alliance than the Communist Bloc. Moreover, Great Britain played a leading role in the creation and command of UNFICYP, wherein London was asked to provide all vehicles, petrol, ammunition, and medical equipment. At the beginning of UNFICYP mandate, Great Britain had offered the most significant number of peacekeepers, the British Intelligence service provided the needed information for operations, which were led by 170 British officers, based at the Ledra Palace Headquarters of UNFICYP, Nicosia.¹⁷ The outcome of this great demonstration of power was that Great Britain spent over a million dollars just in the first month of UNFICYP mandate. The British Cabinet had to realize very soon that they did not have the potential anymore to finance bigger military operations, and hold back the growing Turkish demands. Douglas Home British prime minister notified the US officials already in January, 1964 that London was not able to maintain a balanced NATO policy at the region and mediate between British, Cypriot, Greek and Turkish interests, what is more, she would appreciate if Washington would replace her in the same way as she did in Greece in 1947.¹⁸

On the other hand, most of the Cypriot population also did not seem to appreciate the British peacekeepers, they saw them as a renewal of British colonial policy. This fact provided numerous incidents, what is more, the Finish and Canadian soldiers rather used bicycles than using British ensigned vehicles.¹⁹

¹⁵ PANTELI (1990): 204.

¹⁶ RoC PIO (1994): 5.

¹⁷ BRISCOE (2003): 170.

¹⁸ NICOLET (2001): 433.

¹⁹ BRISCOE (2003): 172.

4. The period of 1964–1974

After the first two months of peacekeeping, Great Britain did not need her Intelligence to discover that the British peacekeepers were not welcome in Cyprus. The policy-makers in London seemed to realize that if they played an important role in the slippery issues of the Cyprus Question then they would possibly find their Sovereign Military Bases under attack soon. The negative aspects of peacekeeping and its huge financial expenses changed the policy of United Kingdom towards Cyprus, the British were deliberately reducing their influence on Cyprus to keep their positions and obtain a neutral standing on the Cyprus Question. At the beginning of this process London reduced her number of peacekeepers from 6,000 to 2,700, and later from 2,700 to 1000.²⁰ In September 1964 mostly officers remained at the UNFICYP, led the coordination of UNFICYP, meanwhile the peacekeepers did not operate within the British Sovereign Bases, and British non-UNFICYP troops did not operate outside them. The practical cooperation between UNFICYP and Britain – at least seemingly – ended, and London acted as a neutral neighbor of a troubled island.

This policy continued during the 1960s when London decided to keep herself out of Cypriot internal affairs. Even though Cyprus remained a non-aligned country, practically Washington replaced the former British influence. This was the reason why Britain did not get involved in the preparation of the Acheson Plan in the summer of 1964, and then in the Galo Plaza Plan in 1965. What is more, President Johnson's letters were the most important braking factors of the crisis of 1967, and just the prestige of US foreign policy was able to avoid the Turkish intervention of Cyprus. After the events of 1967 London was not pleased to see the growing influence of the Greek Junta in Cyprus, but she was more concerned about Turkish demands since Ankara did not have military access to the island at that time, while Britain or Greece did. After all, Great Britain was following the USA leadership during the period, and year by year she successfully created a neutral position in Cyprus.

The most characteristic event of British non-involvement policy was the crisis of 1974, when Great Britain had the ability to reduce the damage but she did use her lawful power and decided to remain seemingly neutral. There are numerous questions which still have to be asked, most importantly: Why the British – as guarantor country – did not take part in the intervention, even though Turkey asked them to do so, and with her participation London could have had the power to decrease the Turkish demands, and restore the 1960 constitution and state structure of the Republic of Cyprus. London's official answer was that at the time she did not have enough military force at the Sovereign Bases to carry out an intervention.²¹ If we are observing just the facts, then we should notice that at the beginning of Makarios' overthrow only 5553 British soldiers were stationed in Cyprus accompanied by the *HMS Hermes*, *HMS Andromeda*, *HMS Devonshire* naval vessels and 12 Phantom jets of Akrotiri Airbase.²² British Prime Minister Harold Wilson and Foreign Minister James Callaghan was right that with this military strength the British would not have been able to solve the crisis. But we should not forget that the question of intervention by only Great Britain had never been mentioned by any side, the British participation was

²⁰ BRISCOE (2003): 179-183.

²¹ BIRAND (1985): 8., PANTELI (1984): 382.

²² ASMUSSEN (2008): 3., 40.; KAZAMIAS (2010): 24–25.

asked if accompanied by the approximately 40,000 Turkish troops, which would have been more than enough to settle the crisis of Cyprus and restore the lawful constitution. Even so, the British Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister decided to keep back from the crisis and offered only diplomatic, mediating assistance. The author of this article believes that it is important to ask why Britain remained in the policy of non-involvement, and why she accepted the de facto Turkish occupation of North Cyprus? The question could be answered with several facts:

4.a. Wilson and Callaghan did not wish to lose their neutral status in the island with supporting either side. The British did not forget the period of the 1950s when they were permanently under attack in Cyprus, and on the other hand the example of Ireland and IRA²³ also warned them not to act with the favor of only one side.

4.b. Another important reason was that London did not wish to risk her leading position in the UNFYCIP, from where the UN Security Council already banned Greece and Turkey. Great Britain would have lost her neutral status with a participation in the intervention, and she could have been blamed that why she was playing important role at the UNFICYP.

4.c. If London had assumed the joint intervention with Turkey then she would have risked the good bilateral relationship with Greece, and would have created another hostile axis in the NATO, which could have affected the whole geopolitical balance of the region.

4.d. Great Britain – as well as Turkey – surmised that the CIA was behind the overthrow of Makarios as the USA was behind the overthrow of Allende. At the beginning of the crisis Kissinger seemed to confirm this supposition as he did not accept either Makarios or Sampson as a legal president of Cyprus. London – after the fiasco of Suez – did not have the power to act alone without the support or at least the permission of the US Government.²⁴

4.e. To reflect on a very interesting article,²⁵ we can possibly suppose that Great Britain – with fear of losing her military bases – would have agreed to give access to Turkey to Cyprus, as the rest of the guarantor powers – London and Athens – did. With the occupation of North Cyprus Britain pushed back the issues of Sovereign Bases and stabilized her positions on the island.

5. Conclusion

It is obvious that the British regional influence was significantly decreasing during the period of 1955 and 1974 and followed the international trends of reducing colonial powers. At beginning of the 1950s Great Britain assumed that she could still keep Cyprus with a tripartite or with a self-governmental system, but did not have the power against the two new regional powers – Greece and Turkey – to achieve her aim and intention. On the other hand, London was struggling with the fact that she was not able to handle the military situation of Cyprus financially, while the two other growing powers of the region started to sponsor their favored ethnic group more and more. When the three regional powers with the

²³ BYRNE (2006): 149–172.

²⁴ ASMUSSEN (2008): 9.

²⁵ KAZAMIAS (2010)

invisible permission of the Great Powers decided to give freedom for Cyprus, they created a state system based on a compromise, which practically was not workable. After the proclamation of troubled independence, Great Britain still played an important role in the Cypriot domestic politics, and still wished to keep Cyprus under her sphere of influence. Nevertheless, the crisis of 1963–1964 showed that Britain was still a significant power in Cyprus but she was not that anymore in the region. During the crisis London realized that she was not able to continue her former active foreign policy in Cyprus, and she decided to pass on the leading role to the USA. Between 1964–1974 the British policy makers were deliberately reducing their influence in Cyprus, and tried to keep their status quo and obtain a neutral status. Although the crisis of 1974 offered numerous opportunities to London to get involved and determine the future of the island, Wilson and Callaghan chose to stay away from the slippery issues of Cyprus and offered just their assistance as mediators. The voluntary but calculated policy of non-involvement continued after the crisis and definitely helped to keep the status of the Sovereign Military Bases and the British leading role at the UNFICYP.

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