

*Britain and the Greek Civil War, 1944–1949*  
*British Imperialism, Public Opinion*  
*and the Coming of the Cold War*

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The Greek civil war holds a significant place in the history of twentieth-century Europe for many reasons. Firstly, it was Europe's bloodiest conflict in the second half of the 1940s; secondly, it marked a turning point in the Cold War; and lastly, it showed how Greece had become an 'apple of discord' for both American and Soviet involvement in Greek affairs which led to even more complexity in the country's post-war politics. Yet despite its significance, only a limited number of studies have been carried out on the subject of this era. After the troubled period of the 1950s and 1960s, a time dominated by extreme conservatism, anti-communism and nationalist paroxysms, it was difficult to access material sources and this made it nearly impossible to conduct scholarly research, so that older politically-charged interpretations and accounts went mostly unchallenged. However, in the past two decades a new historiographical current has developed as regards the civil war in Greece and new evaluations and debates have emerged that shed fresh light on conventional supposition.

*Britain and the Greek Civil War, 1944–1949* draws upon the author's doctoral dissertation and provides a welcome addition to studies on that period in Greek history. John Sakkas takes up a novel approach that does not focus solely on Greek politics, whether they are national or local, nor does it centre simply on British policy in Greece. 'On the contrary', the author states that 'it deals with the profound impact the Greek question had upon the British public and the labour movement, in particular, from Churchill's military intervention in December 1944 to the end of the civil war in 1949. The chief aim of this study is to analyse the response of the British people to the official policy in Greece, to relate it to contemporary attitudes and concerns, and to assess the various ways in which the coming of the Cold War affected critics of British foreign policy both in the Labour Party and the trade union movement' (p. 10).

Sakkas begins by outlining the main goal of his study and the factors that induced him to choose this specific period. After offering a discussion on public opinion and following the specific course of action for 'measuring' opinion on 'political issues' as suggested by American historian Lee Benson, he adopts it in his own account of British public opinion from December 1944 to October 1949. Sakkas identifies three main types of events, broadly defined as: a) sequences of

relevant governmental decisions, b) actions taken by agents to shape opinion, and c) events contributing to significant changes in the historical situation. These three points underpin the narrative framework, and Sakkas selects five distinct types of opinion indicators for the study: a) editorials, reports and articles published by influential newspapers and journals that represented different political perspectives, b) debates in Parliament and the Labour Party and TUC conferences, c) resolutions issued by political organisations, trade unions, party constituencies and pressure groups, d) the expression of opinions by well-known figures (writers, artists, intellectuals), and e) public opinion polling and correspondence in the press. All of these are useful means for understanding what the British public thought regarding its country's policies on Greece and its political leaders who played an influential role in Greek affairs (Churchill, Bevin) (p. 15).

In chapter 1 the author attempts to establish patterns and trends by explaining the ways in which the British government impacted Greek affairs and the latter's traditional dependency on the UK. Through a brief overview of Greek–British relations starting in the nineteenth century and leading up to World War II, Sakkas focuses on how Greece played a part in British imperial strategies largely through anti-communist activities. A paper dated 11 August 1945, which circulated in the Cabinet, is indicative of this state of affairs: '... we must maintain our position in Greece as a part of our Middle East policy, and that unless it is asserted and settled it may have a bad effect on the whole of our Middle East position' (p. 24). The situation in Greece generated, or rather led to the deterioration of, Attlee–Bevin relations to an even greater extent than ever before.

Chapters 2 and 3 discuss public reactions in Britain to the *Dekemvriana*; the December events of 1944, in which bloody conflicts broke out in the centre of Athens between the Greek leftist forces, comprised of the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) and the EAM/ELAS forces, and the British Army, which was supported by the Greek Government, the city police and Georgios Grivas' far-right Organisation X. Churchill's policy on Greece is pertinent because it marked the first direct military intervention against a resistance movement and it took place six months before the war in Europe ended. The purpose was multifarious: to contain and if possible eliminate the left-wing mass resistance movement, to restore the Greek monarchy backed by a right-wing government and hence safeguard what was still considered to be a major strategic lifeline to the oilfields of the Middle East and to India. By closely examining the statements made in the British press, Sakkas is able to present a vivid account of the coverage of those bloody incidents. Of great importance is the fact that during the fighting, strict military censorship was imposed on all correspondence, a reflection of the determined attempts to protect British policy in Greece. On many occasions, the military would even substitute one descriptive word for another with the sole aim of vindicating British policies. Regardless, the fighting sparked notable opposition and brought about a range of opinions in Britain as it dominated politics and the press. Sakkas presents an impressive analytical account of each of the newspapers he examines and closely analyses their editorials, thus revealing the differences of opinion in British society that in the end led to harsh criticism of Churchill by both political parties and trade unions.

Chapter 4 deals with the way the Greek question was perceived in Britain in 1945–1947 by journalists, politicians and the public. The chapter vividly demonstrates the attitudes and debates that were generated by the British press in response to Greek affairs, as well as their impact upon people's political attitudes. One of the key points of contention between the Labour Party and some British newspapers was the former's decision to support the proclamation of Greek elections in 1946. The situation was already tense, because in July of 1945, when the Labour Party came to power, there were high hopes for radical change and proposals were made for the adoption of a socialist agenda. Nonetheless, many Labour supporters felt betrayed because Bevin, the Foreign Secretary, made a statement in the House of Commons on 20 August 1945 assuring the continuation of British imperial policy on Greece. Conservatives and Liberals were so relieved that even Eden congratulated Bevin on his decision. In fact, until 1951 Bevin was in complete agreement with his senior officials as regards anti-Soviet policies and the defence of Britain's imperial and global roles, and this raises a series of questions, perhaps the most noteworthy of which concerns the factors that shaped the Labour Party's decision to adopt a policy that was in direct conflict with the leftist agenda and socialist principles. Instrumental in this policy was Bevin himself, as he ignored the position of the Labour Party and the communist left in terms of British policy.

Chapters 5 and 6 concentrate on the strong opposition to Bevin's policies among members of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP), which according to general sentiment lacked socialist beliefs. Sakkas carefully constructs a Cold War analytical framework and draws parallels with policies adopted by Britain in other regions, such as in Spain, where Britain maintained diplomatic relations with the Franco regime, or in Indo-China and Indonesia, where it defended imperial interests (both French and Dutch). Following the Truman Doctrine, in 1947 British policy began shifting closer to that of the American administration and became increasingly hostile to the Soviet Union. This policy, as voiced by the British government and Bevin in particular, created vigorous opposition within the PLP and eventually gave rise to a splintering of the party. By mid-1948, the majority of critics had accepted the main lines of 'Bevinism' which supported the Anglo-American alliance and a common struggle against communism and the Soviet Union.

The last chapter of the book is devoted to the League for Democracy in Greece (LDG), which was founded in 1945 as a platform for campaigning for change in British policy as regards Greece and for justice for the Greek left-wing resistance. Its work was supported by left-wing MPs, trade unionists and other figures. Conversely, after the proclamation of the Truman Doctrine, which radically altered the political environment, the LDG adapted to the new reality since it had been characterised as anti-leftist because of its decisions. As Greece began to fall from the British agenda, the priorities of the LDG also shifted. Although it never refrained from calling on the British to withdraw from Greece, its policy was limited to explaining its causes, trying to mitigate the persecution being carried out and provide relief to the victims of those policies, and pleading for a negotiated peace; none of their efforts, however, produced momentous results.

This short book by John Sakkas is an important addition to the literature on the Greek civil war, British politics and the politics of the Labour Party in particular, and it also raises a series of crucial questions in relation to the interactions between communism/socialism and imperialism. The author makes extensive use of both primary and secondary sources, making the book an indispensable source and reference study for those interested in British and Greek political history.

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