

Fighting EOKA: The British Counter-Insurgency Campaign on Cyprus, 1955-1959

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David French's *Fighting EOKA: The British Counter-Insurgency Campaign on Cyprus, 1955-1959* offers a comprehensive and insightful analysis of the conflict between the British security forces and the EOKA insurgency in Cyprus, with the latter fighting for the union of the island with Greece (Enosis). His central research question is: 'How did the security forces on the island attempt to defeat and dismantle EOKA?' (p.3). As an experienced researcher and academic, with a robust track record in military strategy and British counter-insurgency research, French brings a wealth of comparative knowledge to this work in order to answer the question. One of the book's strengths is his ability to compare British counter-insurgency measures against EOKA with British strategies used elsewhere.

French's strength lies in his meticulous use of both primary and secondary sources, some of the former only recently having become available, while others were traced by the author and are evaluated for the first time. Armed with this new information, French offers a unique perspective on the conflict. Moreover, the narrative maintains a fair and balanced tone, avoiding bias towards either side, while being outspoken and critical of both sides simultaneously.

After a historical introduction, the second chapter excellently explores the pre-history of the EOKA struggle, covering the period from Makarios III's election to the initiation of the insurgency. French delves into little-known details, such as the ease with which EOKA intelligence penetrated the police force due to politically motivated exclusion of left-wing Cypriots, highlighting the conflict's complexity and showcasing the depth of his research. French skillfully presents the EOKA insurgency through the eyes of the British administration, particularly the military and intelligence branches on the island, revealing their comprehensive understanding of EOKA tactics and procedures. The chapter also sheds light on EOKA's cost-effective campaign ('EOKA

waged an insurgency on the cheap' p.60) and its intelligence capabilities, including the systematic interception of postal communications.

Chapter three provides a valuable overview of EOKA's tactics, finances, weapons, and logistics, as part of a chronological account of the insurgency, which he covers in the remaining chapters of the book. French recognises the internationalisation aspect of EOKA's struggle, i.e., the insurrection as a tool to gain international attention and ideally acknowledgment of the right of self-determination (and therefore the union of the island with Greece) by the United Nations, though he sees it as less central than some, including myself, suggest.¹ The book critically examines the British response during the initial stages of the conflict, emphasising the surprise caused by EOKA's tactics. French raises pertinent questions and offers interesting explanations about the completely wrong British assessment of Greek Cypriot unwillingness to engage in armed insurrection despite the capture of the 'Agios Georgios' ship filled with explosives in January 1955.

Chapter four explores EOKA's dual terrorist campaigns. One was a '*campaign of agitational terror*' defined as '*attacks against security forces and symbols of government in order to undermine the prestige of the British administration, to demonstrate that it was no longer capable of ruling the island and persuade the British government that the price of blocking Enosis was more than it could afford*' (p.106). The other was a '*campaign of enforcement terror: efforts to intimidate and, if this failed, assassinate those Greek Cypriots not supporting the EOKA campaign or who worked against it*' (p.106). The latter proved far more successful than the former. The chapter also analyses the internal reorganisation of British administration to counteract them. French highlights the shortcomings of the Special Branch and the challenges in gathering intelligence. The creation of the highly successful counter-gang "*X-platoon*" comprised of about 20 turned former EOKA members who continued to pretend to be terrorists, though its members were unofficially known as "*The Toads*" (p.148.) proves an interesting development, shedding light on a previously largely unknown aspect of the British efforts to combat EOKA.

Chapter five, titled 'Losing Hearts and Minds', examines the unintended consequences of British collective punishments, ultimately alienating the Greek Cypriot population. French acknowledges the failure of British attempts to sway public opin-

¹ Hubert Faustmann; 'The United Nations and the Internationalisation of the Cyprus Conflict 1949 – 1958', in: James Ker-Lindsay / Oliver Richmond (ed.): *The Work of the UN in Cyprus. Promoting Peace and Development in Cyprus over Four Decades*. (Houndmills / New York: Palgrave 2001), pp. 3-49.

ion, mainly due to a lack of investment in the improvement of living conditions on the island and the absence of a political vision as attractive and emotionally appealing to the mass of Greek Cypriots as Enosis. He also underscores EOKA's success in intimidating those Greek Cypriots who worked for the British authorities, cooperated with them, or were opposed to the struggle.

In Chapter six, French explores EOKA's counter-narrative and Britain's response to accusations of brutality. The chapter addresses EOKA's efforts to portray British rule as barbaric, examining allegations of mistreatment and torture. While French acknowledges instances of misbehaviour by British forces, he contends convincingly that EOKA's propaganda machine massively exaggerated the scale of abuses.

Chapter seven covers the period of Sir Hugh Foot's governorship and the descent into large-scale intercommunal violence. French effectively intertwines the political context of the Foot and Macmillan Plan with the escalating violence between Greek and Turkish Cypriots. What French misses here is what the British colonial official Reddaway called 'choice of evils' in dealing with the militants of both sides. The British clearly favored the Turkish Cypriot community and militants in the summer of 1958, after suddenly facing Turkish Cypriot resistance to their rule in the context of the Foot plan. The massive one-sidedness during Operation Matchbox, with mass arrests of suspected EOKA fighters and suspects and only a token number of their Turkish Cypriot counterparts, is the most significant manifestation of the British attempt not to further alienate the Turkish Cypriots, on whose loyal support the British rule on the island during the emergence rested. French fails to see the political dimension here, which is one of the few and rare flaws of the book.

The final chapters delve into the political landscape, detailing the Macmillan Plan and the London and Zurich agreements. French adeptly analyses the last major offensives by EOKA and TMT, showcasing the effectiveness of British security forces in combating EOKA once again.

In the conclusion, French emphasises that Enosis did not occur due to effective British counter-measures and diplomatic victories. However, he also recognises British failures, especially in providing security for the civilian population. The inability to separate insurgents from civilians and the lack of a compelling vision for the future contributed to the British failure to win over the hearts and minds. In his own words:

'Enosis did not happen because, in every arena where the insurgency was conducted, the British were able to take effective counter-measures. On the island, the security forces twice, in the spring of 1957 and again in the autumn

of 1958, succeeded in containing EOKA's campaign of agitational terrorism. On the diplomatic plain, the British repeatedly came out on top. Greece could never muster sufficient support at the UN to persuade the General Assembly to put pressure on the British to concede. In the wider international arena, EOKA's propaganda campaign and Greek efforts to embarrass the British at the European Court of Human Rights had only a marginal impact. They caused the British to change some of the ways in which they conducted their counter-insurgency campaign, but they did not persuade them that the political cost of continuing to fight Enosis was too high. The British public never demanded that their government surrender the island. The Greek Cypriot belief that they would achieve Enosis because it was their manifest destiny proved to be a naïve illusion' p. 302. [...]

'The British, likewise, could not achieve what they most wanted. The government had failed to achieve what must always be the first task of any government faced by an insurgency, to provide security for the civil population' p.303.

Therefore, they did not manage to 'root out the terrorists,' nor were they able to stop the EOKA enforcement terrorism to intimidate the Greek Cypriot population. The result was that *'those Greek Cypriot civilians who did not support the insurgents willingly had perforce to do so unwillingly'* p. 303. For him, the main reason for the British failure to defeat EOKA was that British policies *'failed to divide the insurgents from the civilian population because its strategy fell between two stools. In terms of brutality, the British campaign was a "pale shadow" of what they did in Kenya. But British measures, curfews, cordon and search operations, collective fines, arrests without warrants, detention without trial, were fundamentally coercive'* p. 303. He also points out another reason for the inability of Britain to defeat EOKA, a reason which is too often still a taboo in Greek Cypriot public discourse about the struggle: *'EOKA's ruthless brutality towards alleged and real traitors instilled far more fear from EOKA into those Greek Cypriots not supporting the cause than the British could in order to get them to cooperate given their relatively mild treatment of civilians'* p.303. Despite all the British successes during the counter-insurgency, French acknowledges the ultimate weakness of the British position as colonial rulers; they never stood a chance in the struggle for the hearts and minds. *'Once the insurgency had begun, the British could never craft a vision of the future that had a more powerful emotional appeal for Greek Cypriots than Enosis.'* p.303.

Despite its many strengths, the book has one notable weakness. French oddly did not conduct oral history research. He missed the opportunity to gather firsthand accounts from EOKA and TMT veterans still alive at the time of writing the book, which would have been particularly helpful to counter his source bias of evaluating mainly British documents to answer the question of British (mis)conduct and torture. Additionally, the absence of references to a significant body of secondary literature that he evaluated limits the book's engagement with alternative perspectives and interpretations in the research-based chapters of his book.

In summary, *Fighting EOKA* by David French is a well-written, a well-researched must-read for those interested in the detailed dynamics of the EOKA struggle on the island. It provides sufficient and balanced information to understand the high-level politics that shape the developments on a political level, forming the background to the insurgency and counter-insurgency on the island. French's expertise in insurgency studies, combined with a meticulous examination of primary sources, makes this book an essential contribution to the understanding of this crucial period of modern Cypriot history.

Hubert Faustmann