

## *Britain and the Greek Colonels: Accommodating the Junta in the Cold War*

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I.B. Tauris (London, 2013), 307 pp.

ISBN: 978-1-84885-952-4

Over the past few years, academics, journalists and other commentators have delved into the British and American National Archives in order to analyse recently declassified government documents and produce detailed studies of US and British foreign policy on Greece, Cyprus and the Eastern Mediterranean in general. Alexandros Nafpliotis has now extended and made a valuable contribution to this historiography by reviewing recently declassified documents in the US, British and Greek National Archives and has produced a detailed study of Britain's foreign policy towards the seven years of military rule in Greece from 1967–1974.

Throughout Nafpliotis sets out to examine the factors that influenced the policy decisions of both the Labour (1964–1970) and Conservative governments (1970–1974) with regards to Europe's first post-World War II military regime. He does so by virtue of a compelling analysis of primary sources from the archives of the US, Britain and Greece. As with some of the revisionist studies that have recently looked at British and American policy in the Eastern Mediterranean during the late 60s and early 70s, Nafpliotis convincingly highlights the pragmatic approach adopted by Britain during this period in prioritising political and commercial interests over a more ethical approach and therefore demonstrating and putting forward a case study of how the Western powers accommodated 'unpleasant' governments during the Cold War.

Britain's policy, and this is true of both the Labour and Conservative governments, towards the junta can be summarised as wanting to maintain a 'good working relationship'. In Chapter I, the author cites a 1966 memorandum from the Foreign Office to Prime Minister Harold Wilson which clearly outlined Britain's desire for a stable Greek government in order to maintain British interests. These are described as (a) Cyprus (retention of Britain's Sovereign Base Areas), (b) the Greek role in NATO, (c) British commercial interests and (d) the containment of the Communist threat. The memorandum adds that 'an extra-parliamentary solution of present Greek political problems would not necessarily conflict with these interests provided it was successful' (p. 15). When put into the context of the historiography that relates to nefarious British and American activity in both Greece and Cyprus during this period, this once again emphasises the reality of foreign policy namely that just because Western governments considered and made contingencies for events such as military coups, this does not necessarily equate to actively encouraging or even engineering the overthrow of democratically, yet perhaps unwanted, governments.

Throughout *Britain and the Greek Colonels*, the author highlights the internal disagreements and struggles within the British government over how to deal with the junta. Divisions within the Labour Cabinet, differences in approach between the Foreign Office's Southern European Department and the British Embassy in Athens and the demand for more pressure to be put on Athens to make moves towards constitutional reform from within parliament and the public all reveal the way in which British interests were constantly being constrained within the limits of both public and parliamentary approval.

Ultimately, Nafpliotis determines that Britain's weak position financially and internationally dictated its pragmatic policy. It is worth mentioning two examples which clearly highlight this. Firstly, whilst the issue of selling arms to a military government was naturally controversial, the reality was, Nafpliotis argues, that had Britain changed its policy on this issue, countries such as France, the US and Germany would simply have picked up the pieces. In order to maintain a 'good working relationship' and ensure continued arms sales, the British government intended on arranging a ministerial visit but was well aware of the hostile reaction this would receive within both the House of Commons and the press. The result was that in 1972 Lord Carrington, Defence Secretary, who happened to be planning his holiday in Greece, visited Athens. The Conservative government were able to justify this by claiming that as he had planned his holiday in Greece, this was merely a private visit. The importance of this kind of visit was made clear when similar ministerial visits from French and US officials subsequently saw trade with Greece increase. A second example which clearly underlines Whitehall's pragmatic political approach is the way in which the British Government attempted to appease the Colonels by adopting a neutral attitude towards King Constantine, who was at the time anathema to the military regime. Nonetheless, officials stressed the value of not severing relations completely, as the King could one day return as 'a political force' (p. 104).

Britain's policy throughout these seven years proved to be a balancing act. Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson judged the decision to support Greece's removal from the Council of Europe to be politically more acceptable than any equivalent move in NATO, thereby, at least temporarily, relieving the Labour government of some degree of parliamentary and public pressure. The value of Greece to NATO's south-eastern flank also had a counter-effect, namely that whilst the junta provided some stability in the Eastern Mediterranean, this was used by the Colonels, leaders of a relatively small country, to exploit its geo-strategic position to essentially force the Western powers to adopt a pragmatic approach towards them. Colonel Papadopoulos makes this abundantly clear when informing Sir Robin Hooper, Britain's Ambassador to Greece, in 1973 that Greece's economic policy was governed by the political attitudes adopted by its trading partners.

It is impossible to produce a study of the Greek Colonels without acknowledging the relevance of *Britain and the Greek Colonels* to the historiography on Cyprus. Nowhere is this better encapsulated than in Nafpliotis' claim that the island was the junta's 'most predominant foreign policy preoccupation' which would ultimately, somewhat ironically, bring about the junta's

demise (p. 59). By removing this irritant (i.e. the 'Cyprus Problem'), the Colonels believed, it would not only increase prestige at home but also end the regime's international isolation. Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath's government believed that Papadopoulos was well aware a clash with Turkey over Cyprus would mean the end of the junta (p. 101). This corroborates the findings of some of the recent revisionist studies on US/British policy on Cyprus that have made the same argument in explaining Papadopoulos' *rapprochement* with Ankara in stark contrast to his successor's, Brigadier Dimitrios Ioannides, reckless decision to overthrow Cypriot President Makarios on 15 July 1974 thereby precipitating the Turkish invasion of Cyprus. In fact, Nafpliotis describes the importance of the moment when Papadopoulos in late 1973 lifted martial law, announced the formation of a civilian government and parliamentary elections, denounced General George Grivas, leader of EOKA-B who was openly advocating *enosis* (union with Greece), and aligned himself with Makarios. By doing so, Papadopoulos alienated himself from some of his nationalist colleagues within the military and paved the way for the November 1973 coup which overthrew him and brought the obscurantist Ioannides to power.

One of the biggest ongoing debates within the historiography of US/British policy in the Eastern Mediterranean during this period remains the extent to which both Whitehall and Washington actively supported the overthrow of democratic governments in order to secure their own national interests. Nafpliotis quotes Sir Robin Hooper who in his annual review of 1974 wrote that the theories *vis-à-vis* the CIA's involvement in the 1967 and 1973 military coups were 'absurd' and that 'even intelligent and otherwise quite reasonable Greeks believe that the US is responsible for everything that happens here' (p. 208).

Nafpliotis convincingly exposes the harsh reality of *Realpolitik* which underpinned Britain's arguably unethical yet pragmatic approach and allowed a relatively small country in the Eastern Mediterranean to exploit its geo-strategic importance within the context of the Cold War. This is in line with the findings contained within those more recently published revisionist studies which have sought to challenge the previous predominance of the more conspiracy-based theories within this historiography. In a telegram sent to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in March 1974, Sir Robin Hooper referred to the 'US preponderance in the junta's foreign relations':

'Only the US government disposes of sufficient means – strategic, military aid and financial and political involvement – to make pressure effective. If we act on our own or even in conjunction with the like-minded Western Europeans, we run the risk not only of failing to achieve our objective but of seeing what we are bound to lose commercially and in other ways picked up by other (e.g. the French and Japanese) who are less scrupulous politically. In my view, therefore, the process should begin in Washington' (p. 215).

This is identical to the assertion made by British Foreign Secretary, James Callaghan during the Cyprus crisis that Washington had far more influence in Athens and Ankara than Whitehall leaving Britain in a position of 'responsibility without power' (Constandinos, A., *Cyprus Crisis*, University of Plymouth Press, 2011, p. 104).

Nafpliotis' detailed and scrupulous analysis of the available primary sources material has enabled *Britain and the Greek Colonels* to make a valuable contribution to our understanding of British policy towards Greece from 1967–1974, enhanced our understanding of the junta's attitude towards Cyprus and provided us with a detailed case study in the way in which smaller countries were able to manipulate their geo-political significance within the context of the Cold War.

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