

Cyprus Under British Colonial Rule: Culture, Politics, and the Movement toward Union with Greece, 1878–1954

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Christos P. Ioannides' *Cyprus Under British Colonial Rule* offers a thought-provoking and original contribution to Cypriot historiography by examining the interplay between culture, religion, and politics during a critical era of the island's modern history. The book spans from the outset of British colonial rule, in 1878, to 1954, the year preceding the EOKA revolt, a pivotal moment marking the intensification of the Enosis (union with Greece) movement. Through a nuanced reading of folk poetry, Ioannides innovatively foregrounds subaltern voices in colonial Cyprus, revealing how cultural expression served as a powerful conduit for political sentiment and resistance.

From the outset, the author states his central aim: 'to examine the role of culture and its religious dimension in politics, using Cyprus's experience under British rule as a case study' (p. xii). In doing so, he diverges from conventional political or diplomatic histories by prioritising popular expression -especially folk poetry- as a legitimate and rich historical source. This methodological approach is of particular significance, given the general lack of access to formal outlets of political discourse among the largely uneducated peasant population of Cyprus during this period. By viewing 'songs as a form of resistance', Ioannides convincingly argues that folk poetry functioned as a medium through which the oppressed articulated grievances, aspirations, and collective identity.

Historiographical Contribution

One of the major strengths of this work is its unique contribution to Cypriot historiography. While the field has traditionally focused on high politics, colonial governance, or international diplomacy, Ioannides brings to the fore a sociocultural perspective that highlights the lived experience of ordinary Cypriots. As primary sources of his study, the author uses the folk poems that were created between 1878 and the

first part of the 1950s and, specifically, he largely uses the works of Dr Constantinos Yiangoullis -whom he identifies as the ‘father of the systematic study of Cypriot folk poetry’- and Menelaos Christodoulou.¹ Alongside the poems, the book offers a rich contextualisation of the British period and the Enosis movement, not merely as a political project championed by elites, but as a grassroots phenomenon deeply rooted in the social fabric of Cypriot rural life. The work is firmly grounded in a solid corpus of historiography. Ioannides engages with key historical accounts, such as Robert Holland’s *The Cyprus Revolt*, George Georgallides’ seminal works, or the works of Stanley Kyriakides, William Mallinson, Francois Crouzet, Heinz Richter, etc. However, there is limited engagement with more recent scholarship, as the author neglects the newer wave of Cypriot historians such as Andrekos Varnava, Alexis Rappas, Anastasia Yiangou, Yiannos Katsourides,² etc, whose political and social histories offer complementary and, at times, corrective perspectives to older political narratives. Greater dialogue with this recent literature would have enhanced the book’s analytical depth and historiographical currency.

Structure and Content

The book is structured chronologically across 11 chapters, each of which addresses a specific thematic and temporal aspect of the British colonial rule. The organisation is clear and coherent, allowing the reader to follow the political and social evolution of Cyprus over three-quarters of a century. Chapter 1 lays the groundwork by outlining the institutional and symbolic authority of the Orthodox Church in Cyprus from the Byzantine times to the Ottoman Rule. The Church’s power, which was consolidated during the Ottoman period, is shown to have played a critical role in shaping the cultural and political aspirations of the Cypriot people. Ioannides identifies the continuity of the ‘Megali Idea’ -the irredentist vision of uniting all Greek-speaking peoples- as a powerful intellectual force that persisted well into the 20th century until the Asia Minor debacle in 1922.

¹ Konstantinos G. Yiangoullis (ed.), *Pavlou Liasidi Complete Works (Παύλου Λιασίδη, Άπαντα)*, vols. I and II, (Nicosia: Centre for Scientific Research, 2003) (in Greek) Konstantinos G. Yiangoullis (ed.), *Palesi, Chr. Th. Complete Works (Παλαίσση, Χρ. Θ. Άπαντα)* First Volume (Nicosia: Cyprus Research Centre, 2000) (in Greek); Menelaos Christodoulou (ed.), *Cypriot Demotic Songs (Κυπριακά Δημώδη Ασματα)*, vol.10, (Nicosia: Cyprus Research Centre, 1987) (in Greek).

² Alexis Rappas, *Cyprus in the 1930s: British Colonial Rule and the Roots of the Cyprus Conflict* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014); Anastasia Yiangou, *Cyprus in World War II: Politics and Conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010); Yiannos Katsourides, *The History of the Communist Party in Cyprus* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014); Andrekos Varnava, *British Imperialism in Cyprus, 1878-1915: The Inconsequential Possession* (Manchester: University Press, 2009).

Chapter 2 begins with the arrival of the British in Nicosia and provides a solid description of the first months of the British rule. In this chapter, the author addresses the theme of ambivalence -a phenomenon that arguably remains relevant even today. Ioannides aptly states that the British colonial policy in Cyprus was marked by ambivalence -admiration for the Greek classical heritage coexisted with the imperatives of imperial control. The author accepts in principle that the *doctrine of divide and rule* had shaped British policy in Cyprus. However, the British ambivalence he accurately describes, suggests that this doctrine shouldn't be taken as a given, as this risks an oversimplification in the understanding and interpretation of British politics in Cyprus. The opposite of divide and rule, i.e. British efforts towards de-nationalisation of the communities, was highly resisted by the local population, and especially the Church, and therefore left little margin for alternative approaches.³ Additionally, the author aptly identifies Greek ambivalence which characterised the local population: love for Greece on the one hand and respect for the British on the other. This dynamic is vividly illustrated in a conversation between Lawrence Durrell and a taxi driver (p.59) or the dubbing of Britain, not as a foe or as a dictator, but as an 'aunt' who treated Cyprus as a slave (p.149) by Pavlos Liasides, or as a 'stepmother' in contrast to the 'true mother', Greece, by Kyriacos Karneras, (p.152). It could be argued that this duality persists today, given the continuing affection within the Greek Cypriot community for the English language, British education and institutions, despite long-standing political grievances (guarantor powers, sovereign British bases, etc).

Chapter 3 turns to the rural peasantry, examining the socio-economic realities that shaped their political consciousness. Ioannides presents a detailed demographic and geographic portrait of urban and rural Cyprus, revealing sharp contrasts in development and opportunity. He demonstrates how poverty, clientelism, and lack of services entrenched the Church's role as both a spiritual and a socio-economic anchor for the majority of Cypriots. In subsequent chapters, Ioannides deepens his exploration of the Church's centrality to Cypriot life. The Church is shown not only as a religious institution but also as a vehicle of cultural preservation and political mobilisation. Folk poetry is once again employed to reflect this symbiotic relationship between faith and political identity.

The following chapters, 6 and 7, arguably constitute the book's core and make its most valuable contribution to Cypriot colonial historiography. Chapter 6 is especially

³ Antigone Heraclidou, *Imperial Control in Cyprus: Education and Political Manipulation in the British Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017) 259.

compelling for its portrayal of the *poietarides*, or folk poets, as key agents in articulating the popular mood. Ioannides draws a compelling sociological profile of these poets, emphasising their economic precarity and embeddedness within the peasant class. As he aptly puts it, ‘no one expressed the plight of the poor as the folks did, because they themselves were flesh from the flesh of the poor’ (p.127). This grounded perspective adds credibility to the use of their poetry as historical evidence and vocalises neglected voices and stories of the period. Chapter 7 addresses the emotional and symbolic resonance of the Enosis ideal. Drawing upon Durrell’s description of the ‘mystery of Enosis’, Ioannides interprets the concept as a deeply internalised national longing, often articulated through familial metaphors such as mother-child bond. What is particularly significant here is that this aspiration cut across ideological lines. Even leftist poets like Liasides and Karneras, whose political leanings might have suggested alternative visions, expressed support for union with Greece, indicating wide appeal of Enosis among the local population. Indeed, the demographic analysis the author makes of the October 1931 uprising, in Chapter 8, shows ‘that the peasants’ resistance against British colonialism was unmistakable’ (p.182), overturning the British belief that the uprising was an urban one of limited extent, as well as the British artificial construct about ‘the subservient’ Cypriot peasant (p.182).

Lastly, chapters 8 through 11 provide a thorough political chronology, detailing major events such as the 1931 uprising, Cypriot contributions to the World Wars, the 1950 plebiscite, and the ascent of Archbishop Makarios III. The analysis ends with Makarios’ appeal to the United Nations in 1954, against the wider context of self-determination of people, and the withering British influence in the Middle East.

Critical Reflections

While Ioannides’ interdisciplinary approach is commendable, there are areas where the analysis could be strengthened. Most notably, the final chapters -while detailed in their political narrative- lose some of the distinctive cultural analysis that makes the earlier chapters so compelling. The decreasing use of folk poetry in the final chapters is unfortunate, as it dilutes the book’s unique methodological contribution. While this may be partly due to a lack of available sources, the absence nonetheless weakens the overall cohesion of the work. Additionally, while the book excels in foregrounding Greek Cypriot voices since its focus is on the *Enosis movement*, it could have incorporated some references to the perspectives of Turkish Cypriots and other minority groups, as a more inclusive treatment would have enriched his analysis. However, it

is very understandable that this was very difficult to achieve due to language restrictions or absence of relevant sources.

Despite these minor limitations, *Cyprus Under British Colonial Rule* stands as a valuable and original contribution to the study of colonial Cyprus. Its central innovation -reading political and social history through the lens of folk poetry- provides an essential corrective to state-centered narratives and opens new avenues for research. Ioannides's work offers a rare insight into the thoughts and lives of a population often left voiceless in the archival record. For scholars of colonialism, nationalism, and modern Greek and Cypriot history, this book serves as both a resource and an inspiration.

In sum, Ioannides succeeds in his attempt to illuminate the cultural foundations of political resistance in colonial Cyprus. His work not only fills a notable gap in Cypriot historiography but also exemplifies the potential of interdisciplinary historical methods. Future scholarship would do well to build upon his example, further exploring the intersections of culture, religion, and resistance in societies shaped by colonial rule.

Antigone Heraclidou