

History of the Communist Party of Cyprus (1923-1944)

[Ιστορία του Κομμουνιστικού Κόμματος της Κύπρου (1923-1944)]

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No other political party or political movement in Cyprus has been the subject of such extensive historical research and book writing, as the Communist Party of Cyprus. Many historians, academicians, political analysts, journalists, university students and lovers of history, have at times occupied themselves with studying the history of the Communist Party of Cyprus, but have also proceeded in producing written material thereon. Tens of books, newspaper and periodical articles and proceedings of ad hoc seminars and congresses have been produced through time. Yet, it appears, as it has been proven by the authors of this book, that there is still room for more research and writing on the subject.

The reasons are obvious. The Communist Party of Cyprus has been the first political party ever to be established on the island, at a time when society was characterised by backwardness, poverty, unemployment, low wages and long hours of work, heavy taxation and exploitation by a ruthless colonial rule. The appearance of the Communist Party of Cyprus at that specific period of time –the decade of 1920-1930– when no hope appeared to emerge from any side gave that hope to the people. The workers and farmers, who made up the bulk of the social structure, placed their hopes and expectations on the new political party, which declared, as one of its basic scopes, the upgrading of the social and economic level of the masses of people. The authors present, from the early chapters of the book, the miserable social and economic conditions in which the local population lived and the lack of prospects for a better life. They proceed then to present the social and economic objectives of the new party, which were in line with the doctrines of Marxism-Leninism.

A handful of people, despite heavy colonial police persecution, organised themselves secretly in small communist nuclei, which in time led to the establishment

of an island-wide political movement, the Communist Party of Cyprus. Such people as Panos Fasouliotis, Charalambos Solomonides, Leonidas Stringos, Costas Christodoulides-Skeleas, Demetris Anastasiou-Chrysostomides, Emilios Hourmouzios, Yiannis Papangelou-Lefkis, Charalambos Vatyliotis-Vatis, Nikos Yiavopoulos and a few others, were the pioneers in this new movement. On many occasions, they paid a high price for their involvement by being imprisoned by the British or by paying heavy fines for their activities. The authors really succeed in presenting how, at the beginning at least, small communist nuclei of two to three persons were formed and worked in secrecy towards the establishing of the party.

Early communist activity was initiated in Limassol, which was at that time the centre of economic, commercial, social and cultural activity in Cyprus. Limassol, thanks to its busy port, acted as a window of Cyprus to the outside world. The arrival of hundreds of visitors and sailors from abroad, mainly from Greece, helped promote a kind of informal political education to the local people. The contact of local people with these visitors and sailors, some of whom had really some level of education and knew what had happened in other parts of the world, such as in Europe and Russia, helped motivate local people. Periodicals, newspapers and other printed material, which visitors happened to bring with them when arriving on the island, was a valuable source of information for local leaders.

The authors present in their book how local people, labourers and farmers alike, organised themselves in small professional organisations, most important among them being the Ergatikon Kentro Lemesou (Limassol Labour Centre), which acted as a Labour Union. This institution gradually spread its influence to other activities in Limassol, but also to other parts of Cyprus, as in Nicosia, Larnaca, Famagusta and elsewhere. The new movement introduced as the Communist Party spread all over the island and left its mark on local elections, being municipal or local elections organised for the purposes of the Legislative Council. The authors have indeed succeeded, in a challenging way, to present through the pages of this book how the Communist Party of Cyprus soon became a leading institution on the island.

However, the functions of a political party are not limited to social and economic issues alone, but also, and mainly so, to political issues: how the country is governed, liberation from colonial rule, democracy, promotion of human rights and other relevant issues. The dominant political issue of the Cyprus society at that time was its liberation from colonial rule and its Enosis with Greece, which by all reasons was the motherland: with the same language, same religion and same national feelings and aspirations. In this respect, the newly established Communist Party in my opinion

failed to prove itself. But the authors also failed to present to the best possible degree, the role of the new party on what we call Cyprus politics. They have made the same mistake as other writers before them, who produced publications on the Communist Party, but failed to record the actual role of the party on such issues as the liberation of the island from colonial rule and the struggle of the people for Enosis etc.

The Communist Party, at least during the period covered in the book (1923-1944) was strongly against Enosis, which it considered as a curse for the Cypriots, contrary to the wishes of the majority of Cypriots who considered it as a blessing. For a political party established in the core of the struggle for Enosis, the superficial mention to Enosis in the book indicates that the Communist Party has not much to say. Or that the authors chose to refer to it in brief, as if they were protecting the party. It is relevant to mention that in the constitution of the Communist Party published in the Party's newspaper *Neos Anthropos* on 24 December 1926, Article 1, which was titled to mention the purposes of the new Party on the Cyprus issue, is blank. But in the original hand-written copy of the Constitution (Cyprus National Archive, SAI 1678/26, items 8-16), the newly established Communist Party pursued right from the start the establishing of a Balkan Federation of Soviet Socialist Republics, which, after uniting with other similar federations in other parts of the world, would make-up the Global Proletariat Federation. That which Ploutis Servas, ex-Secretary General of the Party characterised as nonsense. (Ploutis Servas, *Κοινή Πατρίδα*, Nicosia 1997, p. 82).

However, the authors have also failed to present how the Communist Party of Cyprus stood during the events of the spontaneous uprising of Cypriots in October 1931 – *Τα Οκτωβριανά*. Chapters 6 and 7 of the book, which cover this event, present the Communist Party as delaying in joining forces with the *Unionists* against the British. The authors present the view that the Communist Party joined voluntarily on the second day. The historical truth, however, based on undisputable sources is different. The uprising took place on Wednesday evening, 21 October 1931. The next day, Thursday 22 October 1931, the Central Committee of the Party, in a meeting, condemned the uprising characterising it as ‘a nationalistic chauvinistic provocation of the Cyprus capitalistic class’. (Fifis Ioannou, *Έτσι Αρχισε το Κυπριακό: Στα Αχνάρια μιας Δεκαετίας 1940-1950*, Athens 2005, p. 15). However the day after, i.e. on Friday 23 October, having seen that the uprising spread all over the island, the Party's Central Committee took a new stand after a new meeting, cancelling its previous decision and calling the uprising as a ‘*national liberation and antimperialistic movement*’. (Fifis Ioannou, p. 15). And also took the decision to take part in the uprising. To this end Tefkros Anthias was sent to see the Archbishop, asking him to

form a '*United National Liberation Antimperialistic Front*'. Indeed on Saturday 24 October 1931 a meeting was convened under the chairmanship of the Archbishop, in which Charalambos Vatyliotis-Vatis, representing the Communist Party, took part as the head of a three-member delegation, which included Tefkros Anthias and Costas Kononas. And it is at this meeting that the Communist Party agreed to participate in the uprising and encouraged its people to do so. But of course this did not materialize, since the day after, Sunday 25 October 1931, the uprising was totally crushed by the security forces, and political leaders involved, including Charalambos Vatyliotis-Vatis and Costas Crhistodoulides-Skeleas, were arrested and exiled.

The authors of the book do not cover all aspects of the history of the party as far as this major event is concerned. For example, they do not mention what exactly happened after their arrival in the USSR. I feel I am entitled to recall what exactly happened there. They indeed mention that after the exile of Vatis and Skeleas to Britain, they both managed to go to the USSR. On their arrival, they were summoned to appear before the Balkan Office of the Third International and explain what had happened in Cyprus in October 1931 and what had been the role of the Communist Party. As Ploutis Servas recalls (ex Secretary General of the Party (1936-1944), who was then studying in Moscow and was present in the hall where the hearings were held), the two Cypriot leaders appeared before Bela Kun, Secretary of the Balkan Office. Ploutis Servas writes that it was a normal court trial, which judged their stand during the uprising and found them guilty of violating the decision of the Third International, taken during its Sixth Congress in 1928. In accordance with this decision, communists all over the world should join forces with nationalists in the case of revolution or uprising against colonial rules. The two Cypriot leaders were found guilty of failing to act in accordance with the said decision of the Third International. Vatis was sentenced to serve in a kolkhoz in Siberia teaching farmers on agricultural matters. Skeleas was sent to Marioupolis to work in the printing office of the Greek newspaper which was published there. Strangely enough, both died mysteriously soon after: Vatis in 1933 at the age of 36 and Skeleas in 1940 at the age of 42. (Fifis Ioannou, *Έτσι Αρχισε το Κυπριακό/Στα Αχνάρια μιας Δεκαετίας 1940-1950*, Athens 2005, pp. 19-20). I feel it is an omission on behalf of the authors not to mention anything in their book on this issue.

Another major issue, which the authors do not cover adequately in their book, refers to the stand of the Cyprus Communist Party on the Second World War. The authors present the view that the War was an imperialistic conflict among capitalistic countries in which the communists had no reason to get involved. And that is why

the Communist Party refused to encourage its people to sign up as volunteers even when Greece was attacked by Italy in 1940. It is worth noting that the USSR and Germany had signed, in August 1939, an agreement not to attack each other. And the Third International issued a Directive, in October 1939, calling communists all over the world to stay out of the war. The Communist Party of Cyprus, as a member of the Third International since 1931, could not, of course, do otherwise but honour the said decision. That is why the Communist Party did not proceed to call Cypriots to join the allied forces against the Nazis as volunteers. But, even when Hitler broke the non-offensive Agreement and attacked USSR, on 22 June 1941, the Communist Party of Cyprus did not call people to register as volunteers. Nothing is said about this by the authors. The Party waited for another two years, until 16 June 1943, when the Party's Central Committee took the decision to call its people to join the allied forces against the Nazis. The war was, of course, still going on, but its end was already visible in the horizon. The Germans were retreating from the eastern front with USSR and they were also pushed out from North Africa. And on 10 July 1943 the allied forces landed in Sicily in their pursuit against the Germans. It was a matter of time for the war to come to an end, with the total defeat of the Germans.

These are major historical facts, which should have been presented in a book recording the history of the Communist Party of Cyprus.

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