

A Concise History of Modern Cyprus, 1878-2009

HEINZ RICHTER

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In his book *A Concise History of Modern Cyprus, 1878-2009*, Professor Heinz Richter has created a summarised version of his four volume, over 2,500 word opus *Geschichte der Insel Zypern* which begins with Britain leasing Cyprus from the Ottoman Empire in 1878 and culminates in 1977 with the death of President Makarios. Richter himself asserts within the preface of his book that:

'The aim was an easy to read fascinating text satisfying all scholarly standards with one exception: I waived an extensive scholarly reference apparatus of footnotes and bibliographies.'

In addition to condensing his four volumes into one very accessible book, Richter has also added a short overview of developments since 1977 up until 2009 which he subdivides into the Kyprianou, Vassiliou and Clerides presidencies. By his own admission, the facts in this shortened book have inevitably been reduced to a minimum, but the evaluation of what the author sees as the most crucial events in the history of modern Cyprus have been preserved. The result of this is a very professional book, littered with lots of interesting images, which whilst not quite being an academic textbook is so much more than just a guidebook. Although Richter's book does not fill a lacunae within the current literature it nicely compliments, as pointed out by the author himself, the work done by Sir George Hill (*A History of Cyprus*, Cambridge University Press, 1952) and more recently William Mallinson (*Cyprus: A Modern History*, I.B. Tauris, 2005) and therefore can be considered as making a valuable contribution to its field.

Much has already been written about how Britain came to acquire Cyprus, the British colonial period, the EOKA campaign and the way in which the constitution of the Republic of Cyprus broke down. Consequently, the strength of Richter's book is not in the way in which these definitive events in Cypriot history are portrayed but in the book as a collective resource in which the reader can refer to every major event from 1878 to 2009. Having said that, *A Concise History of Modern Cyprus, 1878-2009* does look at some often overlooked and frequently misconstrued events, which are certainly worth mentioning.

The book begins by acknowledging that Britain's decision to lease Cyprus from the Ottoman Empire was the result of 'highly complex developments far away from the island' (p. 10), a notion which has accompanied, rightly and wrongly, our understanding of much of contemporary Cypriot history. In the chapter entitled 'The Struggle for *Enosis*', Richter, in considerable detail, discusses the complex and often neglected way in which the nationalist and romantic dream of union with

Greece divided the Cypriot Left and Right. Had Cyprus become 'just' another Greek island, where following the Greek Civil War the KKE (the Greek Communist party), had been outlawed, AKEL would almost certainly have been proscribed, which meant that Cyprus' Communist party found itself in a catch-22 situation. Denouncing *Enosis* would have left them open to accusations of treachery whilst supporting *Enosis* would have spelt the end of the party's very existence.

In terms of Britain's role in the process of decolonisation, Richter confirms Britain's non-involvement in this development. Additionally, it is suggested that three years later, there existed no urgent need for Makarios to propose his 13 points, and that the Archbishop's miscalculation as well as poor communication from Britain's High Commissioner Sir Arthur Clark presented Denktash with the opportunity of declaring that the Greek Cypriots had unilaterally dissolved the Republic, an argument that continues to be as prevalent today as it was in the 1960s.

However, by far the most important part of the book is Richter's excellent discussion of the events of 1974. This chapter is based on volume IV of the *Geschichte der Insel Zypern* series and is based upon an extensive analysis of the secondary literature as well as original government documents recently released from the British and American national archives. Quite unequivocally, Richter dispels the widely-held idea of a conspiracy and rejects the notion that Henry Kissinger was the 'architect' of the Cyprus Problem.

The author puts forward the argument that the conspiracy theory is based on prejudice rather than historical truths and that Washington, and in particular Secretary of State Dr. Kissinger, acted in a calculated manner based on ignorance, arrogance and lack of information. From a *Realpolitik* perspective of the world, Turkey was simply more important to US interests than Greece and especially the fate of the island of Cyprus.

Crucially, Richter makes the distinction between the foreign and defence policies of the Johnson and then the Nixon administration in supporting his argument. Kissinger ignored the warnings he received from the State Department's Cyprus desk officer Thomas Boyatt because he was too busy focusing on the balance of power within the world in which the tiny island of Cyprus, with a population of less than a million played a relatively insignificant role. Consequently, Kissinger's failure to intervene in the developments of early 1974 allowed the junta and Ioannides in particular, to make the assumption that this gave Athens a green light to launch its ill-fated coup against President Makarios. In explaining why the idea of a conspiracy was so attractive to both the Greeks and Greek Cypriots, Richter cites the conviction that has permeated Greek politics since the mid-nineteenth century namely that any negative development within its world was the result of foreign, and often the American, factor.

In my view, *A Concise History of Modern Cyprus, 1878-2009* makes an important contribution to our understanding of 1974 chiefly through supporting the conclusions other historians and academics have recently come too – a conclusion that I have also reached in my own work through researching the very same sources (Jan Asmussen, *Cyprus at War: Diplomacy and Conflict during the 1974 Crisis*, 2008 and Andreas Constandinos, *Cyprus Crisis*, 2011).

Nevertheless, I do have two main criticisms of Richter's work. The first revolves around the fact that scattered throughout the book are spelling mistakes, inconsistencies and factual

inaccuracies. For example, at times the United Nations is referred to as the 'UN' and at other times by the German acronym the 'UNO' (p. 41). The Suez Crisis is said to have taken place in 1967 (p. 66) instead of 1956 and Grivas' order of an EOKA attack on the British in 1968 (p. 84) instead of 1958. Additionally, the text is littered with careless spelling. Whilst this criticism, the responsibility for which also rests with the editor, in the context of such an excellent piece of research might seem pedantic, it detracts somewhat from the otherwise very professional appearance of Richter's book.

The second criticism is more fundamental and centres around the certainty with which Richter makes some of his assertions, in particular with reference to the events of 1974. Based on the information currently within the public domain, Richter has indisputably come to the correct conclusions in terms of the role played by Washington in the Greek coup and subsequent Turkish invasion. However, I would like to cite one of the great *Lebensphilosophen* Friedrich Nietzsche's dictum of 'There is no truth, there is only interpretation', when suggesting that the truth is an ideal that is essentially unattainable. In doing so, i.e. asserting that a particular piece of work pertains to be revealing a given truth, historians, academics and commentators on Cypriot history in general, run the risk of making the same mistake that those who continue to cling to the idea of a conspiracy have made ever since 1974. Here, two important points need to be made.

First of all, a lot of information remains classified and may not be accessible within the public domain for a long time to come. Until that day comes, if that is even possible, we should err on the side of caution and acknowledge that these conclusions and evaluations, whilst based on good methodical research, only constitute the 'truth' based on what information we currently have access too. In other words, we simply do not know whether one day a document currently classified, however unlikely, might reveal the 'smoking gun' proving all those who believe in a conspiracy to have been right all along. Secondly, for the purpose of Richter's research, as well as that of Jan Asmussen and me, the conspiracy has been rigidly defined as a government actively being involved in a plan to (a) overthrow Makarios and (b) collude with Turkey in its subsequent invasion of Cyprus. Such a definition ignores the possibility of an alternative definition, namely that by acquiescing to the actions of both the Greek and Turkish government, both the United States and to a lesser extent the United Kingdom were involved in a conspiracy in 1974.

Nonetheless, *A Concise History of Modern Cyprus, 1878-2009* achieves, without doubt, exactly what it was supposed to, namely 'an easy to read fascinating text satisfying all scholarly standards'.

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References

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