

## *British Imperialism in Cyprus 1878-1915: The Inconsequential Possession*

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Manchester University Press (Manchester, 2009), xiv + 321 pp.

ISBN: 978-0-7190-7903-0

Varnava's book is a wonderful addition to our knowledge and understanding of a crucial period in Cyprus' history, namely that of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The book analyses the British take-over of Cyprus in 1878 from the Ottoman Empire primarily "for strategic reasons" (p. 18), a myth that it debunks effectively. Spanning a period of over thirty-seven years, the book covers this event, up to 1915 when the island was offered to Greece: a decision taken following "the outcome of years of seeing Cyprus as strategically useless and a pawn" (p. 265). Varnava emphasises how Cyprus, given its geographic location "on the periphery of Europe, Asia and Africa" (p. 26) and population (its majority being Greek Orthodox Christians), was different than other "traditional imperial settings" (p. 26). He argues that for London, the island "belonged to the unitary ideal of the modern Greek world that Europeans had fashioned after creating a unitary ideal of ancient Greece during the Enlightenment" and that this prevented the British from implementing co-optation strategies with the locals. Alternatively, it led the way for the British introduction of "modern structures and approaches in Cyprus – as far as they did not impinge on their control of affairs – and in doing so assisted in importing the national identity being created in the Greek state" (p. 26). For Varnava, "British rule not only created the space for the introduction of Hellenism, it planted its seeds. This divided Cypriot society and made British rule difficult" (p. 33). The latter has been a contested issue in the literature for some time, but Varnava presents convincing arguments to support a much more nuanced approach to the 'divide and rule' processes analysed thus far. As to the question of whether Cyprus was useless and why it was not returned to the Ottoman Empire, Varnava highlights the 'Liberal view' that perceived Cyprus as belonging to the 'modern Greek World', which prevented "[r]eturning Cyprus to the Porte – an Empire with pre-modern systems – was contrary to political modernity" (p. 37).

Once Varnava establishes the contexts within which he sees his thesis developing (ch. 1), he goes on to devote seven well-written chapters based on his diligent archival work and excellent review of secondary literature. He traces how Cyprus, from the Crusades onwards, was visualised as a land of desire in line with that of the Holy Land for the British (ch. 2) and then moves to the British justifications for its occupation (ch. 3). He then proceeds to show how Cyprus was "crushed from a 'gem' to a 'millstone'" (p. 120) when the power of the initial British 'Eldorado' effect ran out within the first two years of British occupation (ch. 4). He then focuses on British rule in

Cyprus from 1880 to 1912 whereupon the British effort to turn the 'millstone' into a 'gem' yielded results neither for the British nor the islanders, who on the contrary suffered heavily (ch. 5).

With a twist in chapter 6, Varnava then delves into the details of local identity formation and politics under the influence of British rule, which he claims paved the way for the evolution of a 'multi-nationalist' society out of the former multicultural Ottoman culture. For Varnava, "the imposition of political modernity replaced the religious, civic and regional identity of Cypriots with the imagined ethnic identity, making British rule problematic" (p. 152). His analysis of the Greek Orthodox Church and its role in local politics and identity formation as an institution, which was co-opted by the Ottomans but left out of the ruling structures of the British, is illuminating and supports earlier findings (e.g. Katsiaounis) in the argument for the late arrival of nationalism (p. 157). In chapter 7, Varnava returns to the argument that – contrary to what is widely believed – Cyprus was not a 'strategic', but rather an 'inconsequential' possession of the British, occupying a space in the 'backwater' of 'the British imperial structure'. In his final chapter he analyses various settings within which this 'inconsequential' possession was used as a 'pawn' by the British to safeguard their wider imperialistic interests. The book ends with a short but succinct conclusion in which various formerly espoused myths about British colonialism in Cyprus are discredited.

Varnava's book is a well-written and well-documented account of the first four decades of British rule in Cyprus. It heightens our knowledge and exposes the problems surrounding some of the accepted 'truths' regarding this period. On one hand the book is brimming with historic data (primarily based upon work with British colonial archives) that the readers can utilise for future research. In addition, there are powerful analysis and conclusions that challenge historic norms that were created (invented) in an environment of contesting nationalist claims and antagonism that still prevail on the island. On the other hand, the readers may sometimes sense an absence of in-depth analysis of the local socio-economic and political conditions as perceived and lived by ordinary locals and linkages to regional analysis – particularly with respect to the late Ottoman Empire and early Turkish Republic. The work might have included a more in-depth analysis of its local influences on the lives of Cypriots in general, and Turkish Cypriots in particular. But this has been attempted by others (e.g. Nevzat) and poses questions for future research.

This book would be an excellent addition to student reading lists as well as providing new material for seasoned researchers in the history, colonial studies, sociology, and political science of Cyprus.

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