The British and the Hellenes: Struggles for Mastery in the Eastern Mediterranean 1850-1960

Robert Holland and Diana Markides
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Students of the Cyprus Problem as it developed in the 1950s must have had the feeling that it had all happened before, what with the Ionian Problem, the Cretan Problem, the Dodecanese Problem. When in 1829 the independence of Greece had been grudgingly acknowledged and the Powers of the so-called Concert of Europe subsequently fixed the niggardly Volos-Arta line as the full extent of the new Kingdom, they had in truth inserted a cause of permanent instability into the Mediterranean world. Admittedly Volos-Arta was an advance on the initial attempt to confine the new state to the Peloponnese, with the insufferable consequence of a Greece which excluded Athens, but to the Greeks it represented a starting point from which to gather in the wide fragments of land where the Greek language was spoken and Greek culture was to be found.

On this notion of enosis (union with Greece) being explained to him by Field-Marshal Papagos in relation to Cyprus in 1953, Sir Anthony Eden rather fatuously observed that “there was a considerable Greek population in New York but he did not suppose that the Greek Government was demanding enosis for them”. This was an interview that was to have unfortunate consequences for the British in Cyprus.

From the outset of independence, therefore, the Greeks were committed revisionists, wanting a substantial mainland advance in the north and an expansion into the Mediterranean to gather up the substantial number of islands, some with names made magic by the genius of Homer, which had a Greek-speaking majority though with often a Muslim minority. Most of these were part of the Ottoman Empire but an important group, including Corfu and Ithaca, had been placed by the Congress of Vienna under the protection of Britain. For many present-day Greeks their country is not a mainland with an add-on of islands; for them the islands are the mainstream. It is about them and their rickety relationship with the British that this crisp, lucid, enjoyable book has been written.

It must be said that the content of the book is considerably less than the main title would suggest. It is concerned primarily with the islands and only marginally with Anglo-Hellenic relations as a whole. Even the subtitle is odd since the authors choose to start not with 1850 but with the arrival of the Great Philhellene, Mr Gladstone, fresh from publishing three volumes on Homer, in Cephalonia at the end of 1858. The most memorable event in 1850, the bombardment of the Piraeus by the Royal Navy on behalf of the claims of a British subject, Don Pacifico, is relegated to a footnote on page 48.

The authors' description of Gladstone's few months as Lord High Commissioner in the Ionian Islands is, however, a joy to read. His main purpose was to convince the islanders that, however much they might agitate for union with Greece, they were in no circumstances going to get it, so they might as well pay attention to his proposals for reform. The Ionians wanted enosis and were not very interested in reform. The final outcome was that in 1864 the British Government – no thanks apparently to Gladstone who was serving as Chancellor of the Exchequer at the time – recognised the accession of the Ionians to Greece as part of the dowry of a new King of the Hellenes, a seventeen-year-old prince from Denmark, the previous Bavarian monarch having been despatched into exile. Between the two monarchs there had been a considerable hiatus, during which time the vacant throne had been traded humiliatingly around the dynasties of Europe.

The book devotes an hilarious passage to the Greeks' sudden but emphatic infatuation for Prince Arthur, the second son of Queen Victoria, as their King, from which prospect Queen and advisers ran a mile. The episode was typical of the ambivalence of the British-Hellenic relationship. Officially the British were pro-Hellenic, largely on account of the sentiment arising from the classical education enjoyed by the British governing class. Those who believed in the clash of civilisations would back Christians against Muslims. Weak Greece, needing to lock in a strong supporter, turned naturally first to Britain. But British foreign policy was for the most part committed to preventing Russia getting through to the Mediterranean and for this purpose the integrity of the Ottoman Empire was to be supported. Greek islanders relying on British sympathy had therefore plenty of occasions to feel let down. On the other hand the petty-mindedness of politicians in Athens caused patience to be lost with what Lord Salisbury described as "the blackmailer of Europe".

Crete remained on the agenda of Europe between 1866 when a Greek (or, as it was usually expressed at the time, a Christian) uprising against the Turks (Muslims) was brutally suppressed, and 1913 when enosis with Greece was finally confirmed. In between Crete was a running irritation for European diplomacy. The sequence in 1866 was described by a French observer, quoted by Holland and

Markides, as “successive phases of agitation and quiescence, a Muslim retreat into the towns, destruction of crops and homes, cordons separating the sides, and a European proclivity to become involved without effecting any resolution of fundamental conflicts”. The British attitude in 1866-1867 was that there were enough Turks and Egyptians on the island to make the suppression of the revolt a mere question of time. Therefore humanitarian intervention on behalf of the Cretan Greek majority was ruled out on the ground that it would only prolong the agony. Greece itself was summed up by a diary entry by the Foreign Secretary, Lord Stanley, as “Brigandage undiminished, finances hopeless, anarchy everywhere: great excitement on the subject of the war, stimulated by the politicians who use the national feeling as a means of displacing one another”.

Both Greece and Cretan Greeks were inclined to act as if Turkey’s difficulties were their opportunity. They more than once miscalculated, an invasion of Thessaly in 1854 while the Turks were preoccupied with the Crimean War confrontation with Russia brought a British and French occupation of the Piraeus for three years and no extra territory. But after 1866 Crete remained fairly quiet until 1878, though the Powers had been attempting to sponsor constitutional reforms. In 1878 there was a Greek uprising and the usual mutual barbarities followed. The British reaction to this was different from what it had been in 1866; it was the year of the Congress of Berlin and the Sultan was more open to international pressure. The British consul played a key role in brokering the Halepa Pact, under which, as the authors put it, “An authentic legislature brought with it the ‘real’ politics that the wider availability of public spoils implied”. The British consul was two years later able to report “the unusual spectacle … of a mixed mob of Christians and Mussulmans cheering a successful Christian candidate and hooting his Christian opponent”.

But this could not last. By 1885 the Ottomans were clawing back some of their power and from 1889-1890 there was once more fighting between the races. In 1896, partly provoked by a Greek revolutionary committee, the Ottomans with some 30,000 troops made a last ruthless effort to stamp their rule on the island, producing reports of a Christian massacre which the revolutionaries intended would result in international intervention. While the Christians were very visibly suffering in the main towns, hundreds of isolated Muslim villagers were being killed. Europeans were reluctant to intervene and it was not until February 1897 that marines representing Britain, Russia, France and Italy were put ashore at Canea, the capital. Subsequently Crete was divided up between the Powers under a temporary occupation run by European admirals without, according to the authors, any clear political direction or idea of an outcome. On the mainland, the Greek army, prodded by the action of irregulars hoping to gain territory in Thessaly was again defeated. The European Powers showed themselves out of sympathy with what they regarded as unsuccessful opportunists and only the most strenuous efforts of

Russia were able to prevent a Turkish march on Athens. Holland and Markides show that the belief of the Greeks that Britain would give them any more protection than the offer of a destroyer to take off the Greek royal family had proved untrue.

Hitherto in this crisis the Greeks had strained the patience of almost all the European Governments; yet by 1898 the Turks, by trying yet again to assert themselves in Crete and thereby coming into conflict with the British peace-keeping unit stationed in Candia, had at last produced the situation the Cretan Greeks had long sought, namely the patronage of Britain. The outcome was the appointment by the Sultan as High Commissioner of the Greek Prince George. Turkish sovereignty remained but Turkish power had gone and the apparatus of Turkish administration was dismantled.

The Turkish flag had, however, to be flown and the authors explain how, with the Turks having departed, this was raised by British and French troops.

If the British supposed that this arrangement would keep Greek Cretans quiet for long they were in for a disappointment. For one thing Greek Cretan politics were at work, Prince George had stirred up substantial opposition and the impressive opposition leader, Elevtherios Venizelos was proclaiming an insurrection with the rumoured approval of the British consul. “In the great tradition of Cretan insurrections”, say the authors, “the goal was not to win a military victory but to seduce, and if necessary extract by blackmail, the sympathy and political action of Europe – and especially of Great Britain”. The book discusses in intriguing detail the manoeuvres of the consuls on the spot but also the higher strategic consideration that prompted Sir Edward Grey to send a personal assurance to the Sultan that union between Crete and Greece remained impossible. “One cannot spend one’s day making jam for Cretans”, he observed to an official.

The internal tensions in the island had reached such a pitch during 1906 that the body of consuls, led by the British consul Esmé Hamilton, ordered European troops commanded by the British to occupy the Assembly building and evict the members of the legislature. Also evicted (with the collusion of the King of the Hellenes) was Prince George, who had by now made himself a cause of bitter division among Greek Cretans. Holland and Markides devote a further chapter to the means by which the Greeks were finally able to make use of the Balkan wars of 1912-1913 to bring about the aim along, although at times it was unstated, of enosis, union with Greece.

The story of the Dodecanese islands was much less dramatic in that their inhabitants played a much smaller part in determining their future. With 80 per cent of the population Greek, 8 per cent Italian and 8 per cent Turkish, after the First

World War, in which Turkey was defeated, they would have seemed to have been well qualified for transfer from Turkey to Greece. But unfortunately their ownership was Italian and victorious allies were not in the mood to give territory to each other. Count Sforza, the Italian Foreign Minister at the time, once told the present reviewer that Italy might well have agreed to surrender Rhodes (the largest of the Dodecanese) if Britain would lead the way by presenting Cyprus to Greece. One hesitates to think of the amount of trouble this would have avoided, bearing in mind that the Turkish Cypriots (then known as Muslims) would presumably have been included in the population exchange arranged by Venizelos and Ataturk.

Given that Italy was on the other side for the Second World War, it was comparatively simple to bring about enosis. But even so it took two years until 1947, during which the islands remained under British military government. Reading the authors' account one is left with an impression of meanness on the part of the occupiers which must have seriously diminished any legacy of goodwill.

There remained Cyprus. The build-up to the EOKA uprising and the subsequent grant of what Sir Hugh Foot called "agreement rule" rather than standard independence has been often described, but the efficient account contained in this book is well worth reading precisely because it is written in the context of what has gone before.

At the end of the story one is left with the fact that the Hellenic will finally prevailed, except of course most disastrously in Anatolia, where military defeat was this time not to be reversed over time. Despite other military defeats, the failure, documented in this excellent book, of the hoped-for British champion to appear promptly on the field at the first hint of Christian massacre and the petty politics forever interfering with loftier matters, the Greeks, with the above-noted terrible exception, have always in the end prevailed. Time and again islanders such as those of Corfu, Crete and Cyprus were asked by outsiders whether they really wanted to yoke themselves to impoverished and disorderly Athens. With certain exceptions this is what they wanted. It might seem a little odd after all this that, handed down what they were told was independence in 1960, Greek Cypriots accustomed themselves with some but not too much difficulty to a state different from though (normally) very friendly to Greece. Cyprus has paradoxically become the great enosis exception.

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