

Britain and the Revolt in Cyprus, 1954-1959

Robert Holland

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What Greek Cypriots call the armed national liberation struggle of 1955-59 was the culmination of a long campaign to put an end to British colonial rule in Cyprus and bring about *Enosis* or political union between the island and Greece. This struggle, seen from the perspective of the colonial power, was 'the revolt in Cyprus'. From the end of World War II, and more especially from 1954 when Archbishop Makarios persuaded the Greek government to appeal to the UN General Assembly for the application of the Cypriots' right to self-determination and George Grivas arrived in the island to set up EOKA, a considerable number of British politicians, officials of the British government in London and the colonial administration in Cyprus, and British soldiers and police officers serving in the island expended great efforts and committed appreciable resources to put down the Cyprus revolt, influence developments on the ground and in the diplomatic field, and maintain Crown sovereignty over the island for British strategic purposes. Much of this official British business involved producing - in writing - assessments of British interests and the security situation in Cyprus and the Middle East, analyses of current events and intelligence reports, instructions to and reports from colonial posts and diplomatic missions, submissions of advice and policy proposals, minutes of meetings of ministers or other officials, announcements of administrative and military measures and so on. Documents of all kinds were dispatched to or received by British officials, recording or reflecting the thought processes, judgments and decisions of British officialdom. These masses of documents have been kept, at least for the most part, in the Public Records Office in London. In the past decade or two historians of Cyprus have delved in the Public Records Office and examined documents released under the '30 Years' Rule' to produce their, in many respects, different historical accounts of the Cyprus revolt and the resulting diplomatic imbroglio.

Dr Robert Holland has carried out what must be the most comprehensive examination of British official documents on the Cyprus revolt ever undertaken, and has supplemented it with a study of collections of private papers and memoirs by officials who had direct or close involvement in various aspects of the subject, as well as par-

liamentary reports and contemporary newspapers. His command of such primary material and a sound historical judgment have enabled him to piece together with meticulous care complexly interconnected layers of events within and outside Cyprus - events that impinged on and challenged what British policy-makers regarded as Britain's interests and 'position' in the Middle East - and produce an authoritative and absorbingly interesting reconstruction of the British government's handling of the Cyprus revolt. Considered from this standpoint, *Britain and the Revolt in Cyprus, 1954-1959* is a remarkable historical work and students of Cyprus history, whatever their own standpoints, foci of interest and broader intellectual orientations are indebted to Holland.

The structure of the book is on the surface straightforward enough: it consists of twelve chapters, the first dealing with the background, the second with the immediate backdrop, and the rest with the Cyprus revolt, its impact on British official attitudes, policy and action, and its repercussions on relations between Greece and Britain and Greece and Turkey. The narrative, however, contains a rich complexity of topic and tone, and sudden changes of location and atmosphere, as the author pursues the several intertwined strands of events, driven by different personalities and groups. From the Archbishopric and the churches of Cyprus he moves to Government House and the Secretariat of the colonial administration, to the Colonial Office in London, to the Foreign Ministries of Greece and Turkey, and back to the town streets and country lanes of the island. From time to time Holland breaks his narrative of violent incidents, acts of repression, political and diplomatic discussions, the elaboration of constitutional ideas and so on, he stands back from the flow of events, and considers the character and temperament of the main personalities involved in the events, the dynamics and direction of the long-term social and political forces expressed in the events, or the significance and implications of what happened. Holland is an engaging writer, equally impressive in presenting dry constitutional and political ideas, the high drama of violence and riots, the tension of difficult government business and negotiations, and subtle character portraiture.

These qualities are evident from the opening pages of the book which contain a dramatic street-level account of the Greek Cypriot uprising of October 1931 culminating in the burning down of Government House by angry demonstrators. This account serves to introduce the main factors in the Cypriot tragedy. There were the Greek Cypriot people who, by and large, saw themselves as Greek and Orthodox, and whose traditional ways were slowly giving way to a more modern pattern of social organisation and values, including an attitude of opposition to colonial rule and an identification with the free Greek state, and this enabled a strong Church to maintain its leading position as it cultivated the inflexible aspiration of *Enosis*. There was, also, a self-consciously distinct Turkish Cypriot community whose own political culture and assertive nationalism of Turkishness was to gain in definition and

strength as a reaction to the *Enosis* agitation. And there was the colonial administration which had little empathy for the culture of the indigenous population and which, under instructions from London, sought to maintain British sovereignty at all costs, offering some measure of welfare to the population, but meeting Greek Cypriot disaffection with increasingly blunt, if ultimately ineffective coercion.

In the second chapter of his book Holland provides some interesting details about British machinations in the mid-1950s to help the Turkish Cypriot community to put forward their objections to the Greek Cypriot cause of *Enosis* in the UN, and to encourage the Turkish government to come in as an interested party in the future of Cyprus with a demand for the partitioning of the island, so as to counter-balance Greek support for *Enosis* in the diplomatic field. Once Greece and Turkey took up their roles in the tragedy of Cyprus, the Cyprus problem acquired the aspect of a Greek-Turkish dispute which was never to leave it.

The ten chapters which form the main body of the book provide a detailed account of the successive phases of the course of the Cyprus revolt, or more accurately of the revolt as it was perceived by British officials and its impact on British government policy and action, from 1 April 1955 when EOKA inaugurated its campaign of violence against the colonial power, up to the conclusion of the Zurich and London agreements in February 1959 which led to the end of British rule over Cyprus - except for the Sovereign Base Areas! Readers of Holland's book, especially Cypriot readers of a certain age who lived in Cyprus through the EOKA years and later read about them, may well look with particular interest to find how he describes events about which they have some knowledge or special interest. I myself was interested to read about a number of ambushes and battles involving EOKA fighters and British soldiers which have passed into legend. Holland's sources are for the most part official British reports, and these tend to be written in a language and style that express the characteristic anti-EOKA attitudes of the officials who wrote them. However, Holland does not necessarily endorse such attitudes, nor is he particularly interested to evaluate the motives or moral qualities of the young Cypriots or Britons involved. He mentions these acts of violence as part of developing his account of the security and political situation in Cyprus, the predicament and dilemmas faced by the administration and the policy decisions made by London. It is in the same spirit that the book describes the administration's tough response to the revolt which included stiff sentences for EOKA fighters, detention without trial for many hundreds of civilian suspects, collective fines, curfews and exhausting searches, and occasional acts of brutality by British interrogators and soldiers. The book mentions the suppression of AKEL by the colonial administration and the detention of many of its members. According to Holland, the banning of AKEL was a measure of the contradictions emerging from the mixing up of the older colonial belief that the liquidation of the communist party was a pre-requisite for any safe experiment in Cypriot self-govern-

ment in Emergency policy (p. 105). The book also contains some references to the EOKA side interest in attacking members of AKEL and PEO because they were thought to be *anti-Enosists* and traitorous.

The book also has something to say about the inter-communal conflict. The origin of the conflict is located in Turkish Cypriot resistance to *Enosis* and the recruitment of Turkish Cypriots in the colonial administration's Mobile Reserve and the Auxiliary Police Force, which eventually made them targets of EOKA guns. Inter-communal violence fuelled the Turkish argument that Greeks and Turks could not live together, and so Greek and Turkish sectors of the main towns had to come under separate municipalities. Holland writes that in 1958 "TMT, encouraged from Ankara, started a series of assassinations of Turkish Cypriot leftists with any known assassinations with Greeks through political or trade unions organisations" (p. 242).

The Greek government of the day was pressured by its own people to support the Greek Cypriots in their struggle and it could not act otherwise, even though it must have realised that once Turkey got into the act and claimed not only the right to protect the Turkish Cypriots, but also a security interest in the island, *Enosis* was no longer a realistic prospect. The British government began to brandish the spectre of partition, and although initially it may only have hoped to frighten Greek Cypriots, it offered the Turks an idea which they eagerly seized. A kind of British - Turkish collusion was evidenced by the Macmillan Plan for a British - Greek - Turkish condominium announced in June 1958, when Cyprus was already drifting into open intercommunal conflict. It is difficult to see how the Plan could work, given Greek refusal to co-operate in its implementation. At the time Makarios was confident ultimately of victory, but by September 1958, Holland says, "Makarios grasped that if the Greeks might destroy others, they could also destroy themselves. In this regard, the British Plan was no paper tiger" (p. 283). But what did Makarios think the alternative to *Enosis* was? In September 1958 he told British Labour M.P. Barbara Castle that he would welcome an independent Cyprus. But what made Turkey come around to the same idea? Holland indicates that the worsening of East-West relations in November 1958 led Turkey to re-assess its foreign policy priorities. Once the governments of Greece and Turkey found common ground in the idea of an independent Cyprus, a new avenue opened up which, after a period of intensive but quiet negotiation, resulted in the Zurich agreement. The way Holland presents the facts suggests that the British government, the Greek Cypriots supported by Greece, and Turkey standing behind the Turkish Cypriots were locked in a terrible battle from which no one could emerge as the winner and all ran the risk of strangulation. Each side demanded things which were incompatible with the things demanded by the other sides, and no side was strong enough to impose its will on the others. The only alternative to further intensification of civil strife and increasing bloodshed in Cyprus was a compromise settlement of the kind elaborated by the Greek and Turkish governments,

signed in Zurich. The settlement forced on the two communities a partnership, one they had never sought; but it also gave them at last a reasonable prospect for reconciliation and peace; and peace suited the British too, once they obtained the consent of the other parties for their two sovereign base areas. Maybe there are still some positive lessons to be learned from Zurich.

Zenon Stavrinides