

British Imperialism in Cyprus, 1878-1915: the Inconsequential Possession

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The first decades of British rule in Cyprus have so far received by far too little academic interest. Ever since the fourth volume of George Hill's epic *A History of Cyprus* was published in 1952, few books have added in depth analysis and new insights on this period. In 1979, George Georghallides, the leading expert on British rule until the failed uprising of 1931, was the first to challenge Hill's pro-British account from a moderate Greek Cypriot perspective. The first four chapters of his book *A Political and Administrative History of Cyprus 1918–1926* contain a fine outline of the first decades of British rule and served for many years as the best source available in the English language. In 1996, Rolandos Katsiaounis added his excellent book titled *Labour, Society and Politics in Cyprus during the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century* to the short list of essential reading. Keenly interested in social history, his book partially overlaps as far as politics are concerned with Andrekos Varnava's study but his focus on social transformation and labour relations i.e. the life of the common people, is very different from the political and cultural angle taken by Varnava. Rebecca Bryant's well written anthropological study *Imagining the Modern* (2004) and the comparative volume of Robert Holland and Diana Markides *The British and the Hellenes, Struggles for Mastery in the Eastern Mediterranean 1850-1960* (2006) together with some chapters in the book edited by Nicos Peristianis and Hubert Faustmann *Britain in Cyprus. Colonialism and Post-Colonialism 1878-2006* (2006) complete the short list of essential reading about the first decades of British colonial rule in English language. The latter was not evaluated by the author for this book though one of the five chapters covering his period was written by himself nor was the Holland/Markides book, which is unfortunate given its pertinence to some of the topics explored in Varnava's study. Soon, the first book of the English version of Heinz Richter's monumental four volume *History of Cyprus* from 1878 to 1977 will have to be added to the list. But, the first volume covering the years 1878–1949 has so far only been published in German while the Greek edition appeared too late (2007) to be included by the author.

British Imperialism in Cyprus, 1878–1915 is based on Varnava's PhD dissertation written for the Department of History at the University of Melbourne and now published within the Studies of Imperialism series of Manchester University Press. Within his short academic career, he has distinguished himself already as the author of numerous academic articles, two edited books ([1](#)) and now his first monograph. With so little research done there are plenty of new angles to take and Andrekos Varnava has succeeded in both providing the reader with plenty of new archival and other findings that add important new insights and

knowledge to the historiography of Cyprus as well as taking a new and different approach to all of his predecessors.

Methodologically, he relies heavily on his thorough evaluation of archival material from British and Cypriot archives which provide a solid base for the reconstruction of political decision making and strategic choices. One of the strengths of the study is the evaluation of previously overlooked and rare sources like unpublished and published correspondence, journals and diaries as well as literary sources by travellers or memoirs. Of special value is his evaluation of fictional references in particular by the man under whose conservative premiership Cyprus became part of the British Empire: Benjamin Disraeli (later Lord Beaconsfield). Contemporary images like caricatures, sketches and photographs analysing and visualising the new acquisition of the British empire aimed at educating (but also manipulating) the public about the new colonial possession. These pictorial sources provide important insights otherwise lost in accounts purely based on the evaluation of files and secondary sources.

His wider and different approach is also mirrored in the methodology and structure of the book. Following a brief introduction, the book is divided into eight chapters and a conclusion. A largely chronological account until the liberal Gladstone becomes prime minister in 1880 is followed by a thematic approach exploring various aspects of British rule in Cyprus: finance/economy, governance and identity, strategic value and international position in separate internally chronologically structured chapters. The year 1915, in which the government in Athens rejected the British offer to cede the island in exchange for a Greek entry into the First World War, ends the narrative of this book.

The book also raises issues not specific to Cyprus. The case of Cyprus is used to examine more general questions either relevant for researchers of imperialism or social scientists who look into wrong political choices and the inability of leaders to reverse them: 'It [the study] deals with British imperialism and the problem of the worthless territorial acquisition ... States do not always come to decisions logically or through evidence-based reasoning; decisions are often wrong; reasons for bad decisions can be twisted and turned to justify them differently; and there is a great reluctance to admit a wrong move, let alone to reverse it' (p. 3) .

The book title *British Imperialism in Cyprus, 1878-1915* describes the scope while the subtitle *The Inconsequential Possession* reflects the main thesis of the study. As far as the former is concerned the study is the most thorough attempt so far to place the acquisition of and policies in Cyprus within a wider British imperial context. This is also the first monograph which in its core focuses on the period from the British takeover 'on lease' from the Ottoman Empire in 1878 to the formal – and never repeated – proposal to hand it over to Greece. The year 1915 as a watershed in Cypriot history makes perfect sense as Britain ever since (with the notable exception of some internal deliberations during and shortly after the Second World War) was determined to keep the island (or failing that at least military bases on it) until today and one wonders why it took so long to dedicate a monograph to such an obvious story to tell.

Why was Cyprus in the first 35 years of British rule an inconsequential possession, as the subtitle claims and the book impressively proves? Strategically it was inconsequential because Britain required the right to administer and occupy Cyprus 'to end the threats to British interests, both strategic and economic, in the Near East and India, arising from a weak Ottoman Empire and an expansionist Russia' (p. 1). But 'it soon became apparent that the island was going to deliver neither the commercial nor the geopolitical value expected of it' (p. x). Cyprus became an inconsequential possession in many ways, not living up to any of the strategic and economic expectations but also disappointing the cultural imperial imaginations of the conservative proponents of its acquisition in 1878. Britain failed to make the intended use of its 'European' possession in the decades that followed. As a strategic colonial backwater ever since the beginning of British control over it, Cyprus turned into a (rejected) pawn failing to be of any but some financial use within the British empire until the end of the Second World War.

In the first chapter, the author outlines the main theses of the book, presents the main arguments used and

places them within the context of theories of imperialism. Varnava rightly points out that Cyprus has always been more important for scholars of decolonisation than of imperial expansion. Those authors who deal with the role of Cyprus within wider British imperial strategies in the late 19th century do so within the received wisdom of its strategic importance. This strategic argument is rejected by Varnava even for the period predating the British occupation of Egypt in 1882, which so far had served in the literature as the main explanation why Cyprus was not developed into a base. He rightly points out that Cyprus was never fortified nor made a naval base unlike the other three British Mediterranean possessions Egypt, Malta and Gibraltar. One could counter argue that despite its non-development into a base, Cyprus always was of strategic value for Britain albeit in a negative sense: denying its possession to any other major power which could make use of it by doing what Britain failed to do: materialise its potential.

Chapter two, arguably the most original one, tries to locate Cyprus within the imagined space it occupied in the collective memory of the educated imperial upper class: 'To the British there was an unequalled sense of possession over the Holy Land which included much of the eastern Mediterranean and especially Cyprus' (p. 60). Impressively, he traces back the links of Cyprus with Europe and England from the times of Richard the Lionhearted, who was crowned King of Cyprus, its status as an outpost of western Christendom during the times of the Crusades, when the island became associated with the Holy Land until Ottoman rule ended the period where Cyprus belonged to the West. The decision makers in London in the late 19th century consequently associated Cyprus with the spiritual and strategic Holy Land/Crusader imagination as well as with the intellectual and cultural concept of Hellenism. The Ottoman and Oriental elements were suppressed in the imagination of Disraeli and others when they 'imagined' the acquisition of 'Greek' Cyprus. In one of the most interesting parts of the book, Varnava reconstructs the strong intellectual but also biographical links between Disraeli and Cyprus. His fiction according to the author served as a blueprint for the acquisition of Cyprus. He visited the island in 1830 and in one of his novels (*Tancred*, published in 1847) already elaborated his desire to bring the Near East and India into the British imperial structure unifying England with Asia culturally and spiritually. In the novel Britain acquired Cyprus to create an empire in the Levant and Queen Victoria was made Empress of India. Once prime minister, this is exactly what Disraeli did though the intended empire in the Levant never materialised.

The third chapter analyses the justifications used for the occupation of Cyprus. It contains nothing significantly new concerning the story of how Cyprus became part of the British Empire in 1878. But, the chapter is full of interesting new details proving how Disraeli and Lord Salisbury contemplated since 1876 the occupation of Cyprus to counter Russian expansion against the Ottoman Empire based on decades old reports on Cyprus' potential value instead of checking its actual state. The ensuing illusions of leading Conservatives about Cyprus as a Mediterranean 'El Dorado' are the focus of the fourth chapter. Within months, the realities on the ground where only diseases flourished and reports made clear that massive investments would be necessary to develop Cyprus into a base soon shelved the desired development and therefore use of the island. That the Liberals, whose leader Gladstone had opposed the occupation of Cyprus from the beginning, came to power in 1880 did not help the development of the new colonial possession either. Once in power the Liberals accepted the island as a colonial possession but were 'as confused as the Conservatives over what to do with Cyprus' (p. 127). Quickly Cyprus declined from a perceived gem to a useless millstone within imperial strategy, though the Conservatives at least publicly still presented Cyprus as an asset, most probably in order not to admit that they had made a mistake.

Chapter five, as the first thematic chapter, analyses the British financial policy and its relationship with the development in Cyprus from 1880–1912. British policy cynically rendered Cyprus economically unviable. London was unwilling to spend imperial funds for the development of the island and in particular the transformation of Famagusta harbour into a deep water naval base. This would have made Cyprus strategically significant and might in the long run have brought economic benefits but London rather exploited the island to pay for the so called 'tribute' to the Ottoman Sultan for 'leasing' it. The perceived ability of the 'island of plenty' to pay a tribute was a major motive for the occupation of Cyprus though the island actually was never able to pay for it without extensive British grants-in-aid. The Tribute, which until 1905 used up nearly 43% of the island's revenue, dramatically hindered its development but remained the

only positive contribution of Cyprus from an imperial perspective. The money went straight into the British and French treasury to pay for a defaulted Ottoman loan thereby relieving the British tax payers of their obligation. Exceeding the already harsh criticism of Varnava, the Tribute constitutes one of the major (and largely forgotten) crimes against the Cypriots by the British who continued to collect it devoid of any legal basis long after the annexation of the island until 1927. This is not to say that British colonial rule until 1915 did not bring improvements like an efficient and non-corrupt administration as well as a fine road network, but the first major projects were only initiated after 1895 (railway, irrigation) and largely failed (irrigation) or proved economically unviable (railway). Only the limited and long overdue improvement of Famagusta's harbour in 1906 would lead to a moderate increase in trade by 1914.

Chapter six, titled 'From multiculturalism to multi-nationalism: the 'European' possession', elaborates on the most controversial but also most interesting hypothesis of the book: 'British rule not only created the space for the introduction of Hellenism, it planted its seeds' (p. 33). For Varnava 'by the nineteenth century the orthodox and Muslim Cypriots shared a language, folklore, economic and social hardships and intermarried' (p. 155). But British rule, through its perception and treatment of orthodox Cypriots as European Greeks, the tolerance and encouragement of Greek nationalism on the island and its administrative structures, which introduced a secular system and divided Christian and Muslim inhabitants along ethnic lines, brought political modernity to the island to the detriment of the development of a common Cypriot identity which predominated in 1878: 'The imposition of political modernity replaced the religious, civic and regional identity of the Cypriots with an imagined ethnic identity, making British rule problematic' (p. 152). In short, orthodox and Muslim Cypriots ceased to be Cypriots and became Greeks (and at a later stage in case of the Muslims Turks), the former because of British rule: 'The Cypriot Orthodox may not have become 'Greeks' if the British and the Hellenist leaders, which replaced, marginalised and absorbed the leaders that preached good relations with the British and Muslims, had not imposed it on them' (p. 279). Since the public discourse of the Greek Cypriot community is based on a primordial approach to their identity though most social scientists agree – and there is plenty of evidence for 19th century Cyprus – on a modernist approach to identity formation or at least a perennial one, Varnava's thesis is bound not to go down well in Cyprus should the book get the attention it deserves. He is not the first to challenge the official view of a predominance of a Greek identity in Cyprus prior to 1878, but he is the first to claim that it was mainly the British who were responsible for the adaptation of a Greek identity of the orthodox Cypriots through their perception and treatment as Greek and their tolerance and even support for the Hellenists. If 'Cypriotism' as a common national identity for all islanders was a realistic alternative to the adaptation of a Greek ethnic identity by the majority of the population had Ottoman rule continued, British rule had been different or if the island had been granted independence in the 19th century (which was never contemplated) is one of the debates this book should trigger. The opponents of this thesis will point at the existence of a Greek state with an irredentist agenda that included Cyprus (Megali Idea) thereby offering an alternative identity. They will also point at the lack of assimilation of the Muslim minority and their identification with the Ottoman Empire (and therefore possibly later Turkey). Furthermore, the orthodox religion, Greek language, Byzantine past and at least perceived descend from Minoan settlers of the majority of its inhabitants made arguably the development of a Greek identity in the age of nationalism still a serious contender if not a likely choice after 1878.

There is a series of impressive contemporary quotes brought forward in the study to support the argument of the almost complete absence of a Greek identity amongst the orthodox Cypriots in 1878 despite the existence of a Greek state since 1832. But, the author provides also evidence that Cypriots, considering themselves as Greeks as well as mainland Greeks living on the island, were already promoting a Greek identity prior to the British takeover which begs the question: how many orthodox Cypriots felt Greek in an ethnic sense in 1878? We will never know given the absence of empirical data, though the evidence available seems to support Varnava's thesis that there were only very few. But we also know that local newspapers in Cyprus spread Hellenism and promoted the demand to unify the island with Greece ever since 1878/9 and that the educational system was allowed to disseminate a Greek identity soon after the British take over and did so very successfully.

Most interesting is how Varnava reconstructs the process of Greek identity adaptation within the first three decades of British rule with impressive evidence and quotes like the one of a British Commissioner in Cyprus in 1900. He saw trouble coming which Britain was unwilling to stop since it considered the Greek identity adaptation and the demand for union with Greece to be legitimate: 'Having watched the march of the Hellenic movement for ... some thirteen years, I must respectfully submit the opinion that unless Her Majesty's Government intend to favour the annexation of Cyprus to Greece serious trouble will sooner or later [result] if something is not speedily done to check what is going on.' (p. 179). In 1910, the orthodox Cypriotists (who, according to Varnava, also adopted rather reluctantly Hellenist positions albeit in more moderate form in acknowledgment of the progress made by the Greek nationalists) were finally defeated by more hardline Hellenists with British help in the archiepiscopal dispute. The candidate of the Hellenists prevailed after a ten year dispute and irredentist Greek nationalism finally won the identity battle: 'Nationalism, which has plagued the stability of Cyprus, started manifesting itself in the 1890s in the Cypriot Orthodox community and was not instituted as a 'national policy' until 1910.' (p. 279) But, British tolerance and support for the Hellenists backfired. By April 1912, British rule was openly challenged by the Greek nationalists, who demanded a Greek majority in parliament in exchange for postponing their demands for union with Greece. Moreover, within a month, the first Cypriots were killed in bloody inter-communal clashes between Greeks and Muslims, a first sign of by far worse things to come.

Chapter seven describes Cyprus' strategic place within the British imperial structure. Acquired for strategic reasons, Cyprus turned within months into a backwater of the British empire. The chapter reconstructs the repeated but always unsuccessful attempts to develop Cyprus into the base it never became until 1915. As a detailed story of failed plans and proposals, the chapter is in some parts tedious. The main thesis is well put in the conclusion: 'Party affiliation determined, to a large degree, how Cyprus was viewed within British imperial strategy. Most Conservatives viewed Cyprus as valuable or potentially valuable, while most Liberals viewed it as inconsequential. Imperial strategy played a large part in Cyprus becoming an inconsequential possession. The British failed to forge a role for Cyprus after Beaconsfield's government postponed making it a military and naval base...' (p. 235).

The title of Chapter eight "'Cyprus is of no use to anybody": the pawn' epitomizes the theme of chapter 7. Gradually and reluctantly, more and more decision makers in Britain came to the conclusion that Cyprus was useless and could (or in the eyes of some should) be given to Greece resulting in an informal proposal to cede Cyprus in 1912 in return for the use of a harbour in the Ionian sea and a formal one in 1915 to lure Greece into the first world war. Clearly, 'the offer of 1915 was not an isolated event, but the outcome of years of seeing Cyprus as strategically useless and a pawn' (p. 265). After 1916, a new chapter of British rule began where 'exaggerated advantages were once again invented to justify the maintenance of British rule, while the new phase saw little sympathy to Hellenism and few attempts to try to justify ceding Cyprus to Greece' (p. 265).

It is not without irony that this 'useless colony', 'millstone', 'strategic backwater' or failed 'pawn', as it is so convincingly described in this study, is one of the few contemporary remains of the British empire. Hanging on to the island paid off for Great Britain eventually since the island acquired real strategic importance as an

'unsinkable aircraft carrier' in the final phase of British colonial rule and never lost it since. The two sovereign military bases as well as the intelligence gathering stations kept as colonial possessions after granting independence form one most important strategic assets the UK controls today. If only Disraeli had known...

This thoroughly researched and very well written study will remain essential for any modern historian of Cyprus. Intellectually stimulating, in a well substantiated way provocative and full of new insights, one can only wish that its main theses enter the public discourse of Cyprus, which is so ignorant of many of the findings of this book.

Notes

1. *The Minorities of Cyprus: Development Patterns and the Identity of External-Internal Exclusion*, ed. Andrekos Varnava, Nicholas Coureas, Marina Elia (Cambridge, 2008); *Reunifying Cyprus: The Annan Plan and Beyond*, ed. Andrekos Varnava, Hubert Faustmann (London/New York, 2009). [Back to \(1\)](#)

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