

Britain in Cyprus
Colonialism and Post-Colonialism
1878-2006

Hubert Faustmann & Nicos Peristianis
(eds.)

PELEUS

Studien zur Archäologie und Geschichte Griechenlands und Zyperns

Herausgegeben von Reinhard Stupperich und Heinz A. Richter

Band 19

Umschlagvignetten:

Umschlagbild: Briefmarke zum 50jährigen Jubiläum der britischen Herrschaft

Gegenüber Titelblatt: Innenbild einer Schale des Peithinosmalers, Berlin, Pergamonmuseum (CVA Berlin 2, Taf. 61).

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Gesamtherstellung: Druck Partner Rübelmann GmbH, Carl-Benz-Str. 11, 69 502 Hemsbach

BIBLIOPOLIS

D - 59519 Möhnesee-Wamel, Schulpatt 13

Tel. 02924/2781, Fax 02924/2757, e-mail: bibliopolis@web.de

ISBN 3-933925-36-3

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Introduction

There has been no satisfactory comprehensive study to date, in English, of the British Colonial period in Cyprus (1878-1960). Nor has there been any systematic assessment of the relations between Cyprus and its former ruler since independence. This collection attempts to close this gap. With more than thirty contributions by leading experts, it provides the reader with a comprehensive analysis of British-Cypriot relations during various sub-periods of modern Cypriot history.

The historical overview is enriched by a number of articles analysing political, economic and social developments in Cyprus during British rule. The collection also contains case studies of the British perception of Cypriots in the arts, photography and literature. Two documents, a pamphlet written by a Greek Cypriot intellectual and agrarian leader on the status of the peasant class in Cyprus published in the 1940s, and a report on the British role during the EU accession of Cyprus by the former President of the Republic of Cyprus, George Vassiliou, are also included.

The book is therefore both a systematic political-historical analysis of the British role during the modern history of Cyprus and a "treasure chest": An interdisciplinary examination of the main aspects of Cypriot-British relations.

Given the number and background of the various authors, this book does not provide a consistent narrative but rather a large variety of views and perspectives, which often complement and sometimes contradict each other. It mirrors the complexity of modern Cypriot history and illustrates a number of scholarly academic scientific and political controversies which make the history and culture of this island extremely fascinating, yet also difficult to understand.

Looking back at British-Cypriot relations since 1878, there can be no doubt that Britain played an important role in Cypriot history, society and culture. As a number of chapters clearly demonstrate, many of the features of modern Cypriot society emerged during the British Colonial Period. In the early period of its rule, Britain introduced basic political freedoms to the island as well as an effective Western European administration that contributed decisively to its modernisation. At the same time, Britain exploited the island economically and played a very ambivalent role during the emergence of modern Cypriot politics. It allowed the emergence of modern political parties but there would be no democratically legitimised participation of Cypriots in the central administration of the island between 1931 and 1959. In particular, its handling of the national aspirations of the two main communities, the Greek and Turkish Cypriots, and therefore in a wider sense the emergence of the "Cyprus Problem" in its various forms is heavily criticised in a number of contributions. Between 1955 and 1959, EOKA, a Greek Cypriot underground organisation, fought an armed struggle for union of the island with Greece. This conflict also resulted in civil strife between the two communities and led to the more active involvement of Greece and Turkey, which came to the brink

of war over the island. In the end, a compromise was found that nobody had wished for: Independence.

Britain continued to play an important role in the history of Cyprus after it gained independent status. It shared together with Greece and Turkey the responsibility for the preservation of the constitutional order and the territorial integrity of the island. Moreover, Cyprus remained vital for British strategic interests. Britain retained two sovereign military bases and various military installations as colonial relics and makes extensive use of them until today.

The articles dealing with the post-independence period provide an overview of the main developments since 1960 by systematically assessing the British role at crucial moments of the history of the Republic of Cyprus before and after its division.

In 1963, the constitutional order of the Republic broke down resulting in renewed armed conflict between the two communities and the withdrawal of the Turkish Cypriots into small enclaves. Britain as a guarantor power, the only "neutral" party to the conflict, and with a military presence on the island, was very reluctant to be drawn back into assuming an active role towards the problem. Since December 1963, British soldiers have been involved in peace keeping on the island, and have served as part of a UN-force from 1964 onwards. But the conflict between the Greek and Turkish Cypriots as well as their "mother countries" still remained. It culminated in a coup d'état staged by the Greek military junta against the Greek Cypriot President Makarios, followed by the landing of Turkish troops on the island in 1974, which led to the current division of the island.

Various attempts to overcome the division under UN auspices, with the active British participation in the mediation process, have so far failed. In 2004, the first comprehensive plan for a settlement, the so called Annan Plan, was submitted to a referendum. Britain once again had played an important role in the negotiations which led up to its fifth and final version. In the referendum, the Plan was overwhelmingly endorsed by the Turkish Cypriots, but decisively rejected by the Greek Cypriots. Again heavy criticism was raised against Britain. Leading Greek Cypriot politicians accused the guarantor power of being biased towards the Turkish side, endorsing a plan which for the majority of the Greek Cypriots was unjust and unacceptable. The Turkish Cypriots charged Britain for continuing to officially recognise only the Cyprus Republic (effectively controlled by the Greek Cypriots since 1963) but not their own regime in the north, despite their positive stand as regards the Annan Plan – and thereby not offering them substantial help post EU-accession, of which the Turkish Cypriot community saw little benefit.

These accusations are only the most recent manifestations of a long standing grudge that the Greek, and to a lesser extent the Turkish, Cypriots hold against their former colonial ruler. Britain is still accused of carrying the main blame for the emergence and escalation of the Cyprus conflict through a consistent policy of divide-and-rule during the colonial period, and for having failed to live up to its responsibility as a guarantor power after independence. Are all these accusations justified?

This collection does not provide the reader with a simple, straightforward answer to these questions and criticism. What it does provide are substantial analyses of British policy towards Cyprus, highlighting both its achievements and failures, as well as its impact on the course of Cypriot history as seen by the authors. The controversy about Britain's role and legacy will continue – and this collection aims to shed light on the various aspects of Britain's continuous but changing relationship with the island. We hope that this volume will become an essential source for anyone interested in British-Cypriot relations, Colonialism and Post-Colonialism, as well as in modern Cypriot history of the covered period, more generally.

The editors would like to thank Christina McRoy for the tireless work she put into the copy-editing and proof reading of the book. We would also like to thank the British Council in Nicosia for their financial contribution toward the printing expenses of this book.

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