

Review Essay

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The Cyprus Question and US Foreign Policy

Claude Nicolet, *United States Policy towards Cyprus, 1954-1974: Removing the Greek-Turkish Bone of Contention*, Mannheim und Möhnsee: Bibliopolis, 2001, pp. 483.

Sotiris Rizas, *Ένωση, διχοτόμηση, ανεξαρτησία: Οι Ηνωμένες Πολιτείες και η Βρετανία στην αναζήτηση λύσης για το Κυπριακό, 1963-1967* (Enosis, Partition, Independence: the United States and Britain in Search of a Solution to the Cyprus Question, 1963-1967), Athens: Vivliorama, 2000, pp. 247.

Sotiris Rizas, *Οι Ηνωμένες Πολιτείες, η δικτατορία των συνταγματαρχών και το Κυπριακό ζήτημα, 1967-1974* (The United States, the Colonels' Dictatorship and the Cyprus Question, 1967-1974), Athens: Patakis Publishers, 2002, pp. 261.

Chris P. Ioannides, *Realpolitik in the Eastern Mediterranean: From Kissinger and the Cyprus Crisis to Carter and the Lifting of the Turkish Arms Embargo*, New York: Pella, 2001, pp. 523.

Some fifty years after the inception of the problem and more than a quarter of a century since the *de facto* partition of the island, Cyprus remains a mine of topics for scholarly research and personal accounts. This is proven by an avalanche of publications which have seen the light during the last decade or so. Most are published in English, though there are certain important works, based on original research, which are only available in Greek or Turkish. Although the majority of these publications focus on the 1950s and 1960s, the period leading to the 1974 events increasingly comes under scrutiny on the basis of newly available material. Starting with President Glafkos Clerides' four-volume *Deposition*, available both in Greek and English since 1992, a series of important works now shed considerable light to the factors that combined—one is tempted to say “conspired”—to render the Cyprus question

one of the most vexing international problems of our time.

Within a few years of the outbreak of the Cyprus controversy, in 1954, an impressive variety of possible solutions was already in store at diplomatic quarters in London, Washington and elsewhere. Since then, the major phases of the dispute have evolved around three major themes: Enosis, partition and independence. The books under review follow the seemingly endless sequence of proposed schemes in considerable detail. Most of these schemes remained tentative and inconclusive and, according to standard bureaucratic practice, were often taken off the shelf to little practical avail. After twenty years of diplomatic efforts and intermittent violence, the *faits accomplis* of the Turkish invasion have rendered two of the previous options, i.e. Enosis and unfettered independence, a matter of historical reflection.

Claude Nicolet's work is the first to provide a comprehensive account of American policy towards the Cyprus question during the entire twenty year period between 1954 and 1974. It was submitted as a doctorate thesis to the University of Zürich, and that makes Nicolet's work all the more commendable: the author forged ahead undaunted by the scope of his subject which entailed time consuming research in sources scattered between London, Washington, and various sites in the United States housing presidential archives. This venture, which required considerable stamina as well as logistical support, resulted in what looks like an exhaustive inquiry into the subject on the basis of American and British sources declassified as of the year 2000. Inevitably, this left out the presidential materials of the Richard Nixon era, which became available in early 2001. Nicolet also delved into an extensive bibliography in English, French and German.

Sotiris Rizas' two books focus on American and British policy during the second phase and third phase of the Cyprus problem, following decolonisation and independence. Regarding this 1963-1974 period, and unknown to each other, the two authors have plodded at the same task, yet on the basis of surprisingly varied sources. While Nicolet's visibly more extensive research all but exhausts American sources, with the important exception of the Nixon materials, Rizas primarily draws on the files of the National Security Council, deposited at the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library and the National Archives. Unlike Nicolet, he could afford to wait for the Nixon materials to become available.

Rizas has utilized British records to a greater extent than Nicolet, particularly the FCO 9 series which contains revealing material on US policy up to 1970. Unhindered by the language barrier, he was also able to profit from sources in Greek. Incidentally, these sources included accounts by Turkish officials, such as former Foreign Ministers Nihat Erim and Ihsan Sabri Caglayangil. As a result, his work reflects a good deal more on Greek and, to some extent, Turkish policies than Nicolet's rather cursory references. On the other hand, Nicolet's bibliography is richer in English titles, including the important memoirs of George Ball and the *Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964*, edited by Michael Beschloss.

Nicolet tackles his task with no preconceived notions. His manifest aversion to conspiracy theories is adequately borne out by ample material and convincing interpretation. He adopts a "let the documents speak for themselves" approach. At times, however, the principal arguments seem to get lost in the maze of the diplomatic seesaw, which Nicolet has meticulously sought to trace and put together. Yet his main findings are usefully recapitulated at the end of each part and, again, at the end of the book. There is also a methodological caveat: the author tends to revisit primary sources already used in earlier works, for instance Hatzivassiliou¹, Holland², Slengesol³ and Stefanidis⁴. Had he quoted these works, except in those few parts in which his views differ, redundant references might have been avoided at no cost to the originality of the book.

Both authors take a straightforward chronological path. In addition to his broader time span, Nicolet provides a useful outline of US policy at the beginning of each part of his book. The local context, however, the importance of which he often acknowledges, is missing. Nationalism in Cyprus, both in its Greek and Turkish versions, is essential in any

1. Evanthis Hatzivassiliou, *Britain and the International Status of Cyprus, 1955-1959*, Minnesota Mediterranean and East European Monographs, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

2. Robert Holland, *Britain and the Revolt in Cyprus, 1954-1959*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.

3. Ivar-André Slengesol, "A Bad Show? The United States and the 1974 Cyprus Crisis", *Mediterranean Quarterly* 22.2 (2000) 96-129.

4. Ioannis D. Stefanidis, *Isle of Discord: Nationalism, Imperialism and the Making of the Cyprus Problem*, London and New York: Hurst & Co. - New York University Press, 1999.

attempt to interpret the conflict. Sotiris Rizas takes it for granted. Nicolet devotes a few pages primarily based on somewhat dated approaches⁵. In this connection, he appears to ignore major contributions to the study of the problem, notably Paschalis Kitromilides' seminal work.

In the first part Nicolet deals with the last years of British rule, when the United States faced a novel situation with Cyprus fast becoming a bone of contention between three of their allies. The major aim of US policy was to prevent the dispute from coming out into the open and wrecking western unity to the benefit of the Soviet bloc. In their attempts to expedite a solution, the Americans adopted a pragmatic approach, largely disengaged from Wilsonian idealism —on which, incidentally, the Greeks had initially pinned their hopes for support. At the height of the Cold War, Washington felt that it could not afford to alienate Britain and Turkey, its most important allies in the region. This, however, did not mean that the Americans ever committed themselves to a particular solution. Throughout this “twenty year crisis”, they were prepared to accept any settlement their three allies, and, after 1963, Greece and Turkey felt able to agree upon. Thus, with the exception of the mid-1960s, they chose to remain behind the scenes and tried to encourage whatever formula promised to heal the rift in NATO's southeastern flank, even if that might seal the fate of Cyprus as an independent republic.

In parts II and III, which extend over half his work, Nicolet provides convincing answers as to what compelled the Johnson administration to become actively involved in the settlement of the crisis which erupted in late 1963. As the two ethnic communities drifted apart armed clashed, their “mother countries” engaged in sabrerattling. The British, whom the Americans would have been only too happy to let handle the crisis, soon made it clear that they wished to be absolved of their responsibilities as a guarantor power. American mediators stepped in, persevered against a recalcitrant Greek Cypriot leadership —whom they chose to ignore—and the diverging Greek and Turkish objectives, but, ultimately, failed to effect a settlement. Following a respite, by late 1967, the Americans were back on the scene, not so much to produce a final settlement as to

5. Primarily Robert Henry Stephens' *Cyprus: A Place of Arms*, published in 1966.

avert a Greek-Turkish war —this time successfully. Despite differences in detail, both authors paint broadly the same picture: an American administration obsessed with the spectre of Soviet inroads in the region and the prospect of Cyprus turning into a “Mediterranean Cuba”; an elusive Greek Cypriot leadership under Makarios, bent on beating the break-away Turkish Cypriots into submission and striving for unfettered independence while paying lip-service to Enosis; a succession of Greek governments unable to decide on a clear-cut policy and sell it to both Makarios and their domestic public; a succession of Turkish governments ever resentful of the famous “Johnson letter” of June 1964, seeking to redress the balance in their favour; and the British, to whose muttering from the sidelines Rizas dedicates a considerable part of his book.

Apart from establishing the sequence of events, a major contribution of both authors is that they dispel a number of distortions and misinterpretations regarding the American role and the positions of the other parties involved in the dispute. It is now known that at the time of Acheson’s mediation, during the summer of 1964, the United States had come to regard Enosis as the solution best serving western interests in the region. It was also prepared to put pressure on Turkey to accept minimum compensation in the form of a military base on Cyprus. At this crucial point, it was Makarios’ opposition, whom, incidentally, the Americans did not wish to involve in the talks, that managed to reverse the initial Greek acceptance of the plan. This helped extricate the Turks from their predicament, as they greatly resented the turn of American diplomacy. Nicolet correctly observes that the tendency of certain, primarily Greek and Greek Cypriot⁶, authors to equate Acheson’s plans with partition —or “double Enosis”— on account of the proposed cession of a base to Turkey is hardly warranted in view of the similar arrangement that Britain had secured in the case of its two Sovereign Base Areas (Nicolet, p. 229, note 34).

Both works are useful in demonstrating the limits of the American ability to intervene effectively and promote a settlement in Cyprus. Not only American commitments elsewhere but also the ability of the

6. The same view is shared by certain Western authors, including scholar Lawrence Wittner and journalists Brendan O’Malley and Ian Craig.

other actors to upset elaborate diplomatic approaches constantly undermined the role of the leading western power. More than once, Makarios' commitment to a unitary, independent and non-aligned state proved a hard nut to crack and invited contingency planning for his removal. Such plans, which were floated in summer 1964, were based on active Greek co-operation and, at least, Turkish and British acquiescence. They were only partly related to the conspiracy theories which were rife at the time and continued to be reproduced long after such plans were finally dropped in September 1964.

It is also well established that the Greek governments of that period, from George Papandreou down to the Colonels, contemplated Makarios' removal, by force, if necessary, in order to expedite a solution based on Enosis and some concession to Turkey. Yet they always got cold feet in the end. As Rizas puts it, the Athens government lacked both the analytical and the political capacity to implement its decisions (p. 141). One might add that the Greek governments only too often became as much hostage to their own maximalist public rhetoric as to Makarios' shrewd manoeuvring.

Despairing of the Greeks and Turks ever reaching an understanding on the future of the island, the Americans abandoned the option of Enosis for good. Their last active involvement came in November 1967, when the ineptitude of the Colonels' regime and General Grivas' bellicosity brought Greece and Turkey to the brink of war. "The stakes are such", Secretary of State Dean Rusk reasoned, "that the future of our bilateral relations is secondary to the prevention of hostilities between Greece and Turkey". (Nicolet, p. 359). Henceforth, improved relations with Turkey would take precedence over the effort to avert the —rather unfounded— prospect of a Soviet-dominated Cyprus. While there was no love lost between Makarios and the American administrations, the latter finally became reconciled with the survival of an independent Cyprus.

The two books also help to place the mediation efforts undertaken by the United Nations in a proper perspective. The subject has been studied elsewhere, more recently by Oliver Richmond⁷. During 1964-

7. Oliver P. Richmond, *Mediating in Cyprus: The Cypriot Communities and the United Nations*, Frank Cass: London - Portland, Or, 1998.

1967, the activity of the Secretary General's mediators was little more than a side show as the main thrust in crisis management came from Britain, initially, and then the United States. The role of the United Nations became more substantive after the United States decided to support the intercommunal talks which began in June 1968. American documents tend to confirm Clerides' view that agreement with the Turkish Cypriots was at hand in summer 1971, but it was Makarios' refusal to reciprocate concessions that forestalled it. This was the result of the Cypriot President's fundamental miscalculation that time was on his side. The period leading to the Greek coup against President Makarios and the Turkish invasion is covered in the last part of Nicolet's work and in Rizas' second book under review. Nicolet relies considerably on the accounts of Clerides and Ambassador Parker T. Hart, who served as Ambassador to Turkey in 1965-1968 and then, briefly took charge of the Office for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs. It is here that Rizas' book enjoys a comparative advantage owing to his access to the National Security Files of the Nixon era. He also casts an insightful eye on the bilateral relationship between the Washington and the Colonels' regime and the latter's Cyprus policy. He correctly points out that this policy became entangled in the internal rivalries of the *Junta*.

Unlike the preceding period, US involvement in Cyprus was decisively limited after 1967. Against the backdrop of the grand scale *Realpolitik* practised by Nixon and Henry Kissinger, Cyprus appeared as a mere distraction⁸. Both authors provide enough evidence to dispel the widely assumed position that American Policy favoured or even encouraged schemes of partition. While sceptical about the real prospects of stability, the State Department supported the intercommunal talks and refused to become directly involved in a short-lived initiative towards a Greek-Turkish understanding at the expense of Cypriot independence, in 1971. Further, they find no evidence of American collusion with the efforts of ultra-nationalist element in Greece and Cyprus to eliminate Makarios. Washington had learned to live with the Cypriot

8. As Kissinger himself put it in his memoirs, he "considered Makarios more of a nuisance than a menace". See Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, Phoenix Press: London, 2000, p. 199. Kissinger devotes an entire chapter to the events in Cyprus: *Ibid.*, pp. 192-239.

President and, at crucial points, US representatives even tried to protect him against subversion.

In summer 1974, the dramatic climax of events in Cyprus coincided with President Nixon's downfall as a result of his involvement in the Watergate affair. Still, both Nicolet and Rizas claim that Kissinger bears a good deal of responsibility for events in Cyprus. Both authors maintain that the US Secretary of State had enough information about both the Greek coup against Makarios and the impending Turkish invasion, yet he *chose* not to intervene and avert either. On the basis of largely secondary sources, Nicolet debits Kissinger with opting for inaction and, as events started to flow, a non-committal attitude. The undisputed master of US diplomacy at the time is revealed ready to accept the *faits accomplis* in Cyprus, provided the southeastern flank of NATO somehow remained intact. Later on, he was instrumental in preventing the British from actively intervening against the second wave of Turkish conquest⁹. Using the newly available sources, Rizas makes a stronger case for the part played by the Secretary of State, as a contribution to the course of events until the predictable outcome: partition. The same sources reveal the attitude of the leader of the Greek regime, Brigadier Dimitrios Ioannidis, vis-à-vis the Americans as an incredible mixture of naiveté, duplicity and deception.

In sum, we now know that US policy was not intrinsically slanted in favour of any particular solution to the Cyprus problem. Enosis, double Enosis, independence or partition were equally acceptable in so far as any of these promised to remove Cyprus as a bone of contention between America's allies in the region. As Nicolet rightly points out, in formulating their policy during those twenty years, the Americans scarcely took the —admittedly conflicting— aspirations and needs of the Cypriots themselves into account. Perceptions of the American national interest and superpower antagonism constituted the “larger issues at stake” to which a local dispute about an island ought to be subordinated. Criticism of its role, particularly during the crucial weeks of summer 1974, should focus on the fact that the United States failed to

9. This interpretation largely echoes the important study by Slengesol, “A Bad Show? The United States and the 1974 Cyprus Crisis”, *Mediterranean Quarterly* 22.2 (2000) 96-129.

intervene in a protracted struggle of which their policy-makers had had enough.

Since 1974, it has often been argued that the Greek Cypriot community suffered as a result of the *Realpolitik* practised by American decision-makers. Professor Van Coufoudakis is, perhaps, the most authoritative critic of the American role in Cypriot affairs between 1963 and 1974, joined more recently by several publishing journalists, including Christopher Hitchens, Brendan O'Malley and Ian Craig. Many of their assumptions are directly challenged by Nicolet and Rizas on the basis of documentary evidence. Yet the same assumptions inform the long introductory part of Chris Ioannides' book (pp. 29-103), whose title focuses on the aftermath of the Turkish invasion and the partition of Cyprus.

Ioannides' more original contribution comes in the part of his book that discusses the lifting of the Turkish arms embargo, in summer 1978. As the author rightly points out, the imposition of the embargo in October 1974 owed much more to the determination of the American Congress to reassert its influence on foreign policy than to the mobilization of the Greek American community in the aftermath of the Cyprus tragedy. The initiative of the Congress, in turn, resulted from the severe crisis of confidence in the relations between the executive and the legislative branch fuelled by the Vietnam debacle and the Watergate affair. Two years later, the Democrat presidential nominee, Jimmy Carter, promised to restore ethical standards and public confidence. What was more, in the field of foreign policy, Carter's presidency was supposed to herald a departure from the *Realpolitik* of the Nixon-Kissinger era. Ethical values and the rule of law were to balance the realist perception of the American "national interest". Promises to the effect that the new course would apply to Cyprus particularly helped to swing the vote of the Greek American community during a closely contested election.

Yet, after an abortive effort to expedite a solution in Cyprus, the Carter administration reversed course and engaged in an all out effort to have the Turkish arms embargo lifted in Congress. It was, perhaps, the final test for the "ethical policy" proposition which figured so prominently in the Carter electoral campaign. On the basis of congressional records and a few —but crucial— documents from the Carter presi-

dential papers, Ioannides meticulously reconstructs the tactics employed by the administration and its supporters in Congress in order to win votes for the lifting of the embargo. The author raises a number of interesting questions (pp. 26-27) which help to put the Turkish embargo affair in the wider context of US foreign policy. He also casts an incisive look into the dynamics of the American Congress, particularly cross party coalitions and loyalties. His analysis dispels lingering exaggerations about the role of the Greek American community as ethnic pressure group in the aftermath of the embargo. The book serves as a useful reminder that, more often than not, a moralizing approach to the world of international relations proves self-defeating.