

James Ker-Lindsay

Britain and the Cyprus Crisis

1963 - 1964



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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	7
Introduction	8
1. The Origins of the Crisis	14
2. The Outbreak of Fighting	24
3. Initial Peacemaking Efforts	34
4. The London Conference	44
5. Attempts to Create a NATO Force	53
6. Cold War Tensions	66
7. The Recourse to the United Nations	79
8. An Agreement is Reached	100
Conclusion	119
<i>Appendix A: UN Resolution 186 (1964)</i>	131
<i>Appendix B: The Khrushchev Letter and Replies</i>	132
<i>Bibliography</i>	136
<i>Index</i>	141

For My Family and Biljana

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Introduction

*The breakdown of peace in Cyprus cannot be an isolated event. Turkey and Greece are inevitably involved, and with them the whole delicate strategic balance of the eastern Mediterranean and the southeast flank of NATO. Cyprus is wired like a detonator to other larger problems.*¹

Although a relatively small island, Cyprus has had a rich and diverse history. Just 3,572 square miles in size it sits at the historical crossroads between the East and West. Turkey, its nearest neighbour, lies just forty miles from its northern coast. To the east, Syria is only seventy-five miles away. Rhodes, the nearest large Greek island, and Egypt are roughly two hundred and fifty miles west and south respectively. Mainland Greece lies approximately five hundred miles west. As a result, the island has been regarded as vital territory by almost every empire that has wished to assert control over the wider Eastern Mediterranean region. Over the course of the past four thousand years Cyprus has been conquered, ruled or colonised by an impressive array of civilisations: Minoans, Assyrians, Persians, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Franks, Genoese, Venetians, Ottomans and, most recently, the British.

After a long history of being controlled by others, Cyprus finally became independent in August 1960. However, and perhaps uniquely in the modern era, that independence was curtailed by a series of agreements signed with and between outside parties. The complex constitutional arrangements put in place entrusted the ultimate protection of the new country's constitution, sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity to Greece, Turkey and Britain. Under the terms of the Treaty of Guarantee, these three countries, the 'Guarantor Powers', were given an exclusive right, collectively or independently, to intervene if events on the island so required. As Article IV of the Treaty states,

In the event of a breach of the provisions of the present Treaty, Greece, Turkey and the United Kingdom undertake to consult together with respect to the representations or measures necessary to ensure observance of those provisions.

In so far as common or concerted action may not prove possible, each of the three guaranteeing powers reserves the right to take action with the sole aim of re-establishing the state of affairs created by the present Treaty.

Although the Treaty clearly states that consultation is expected prior to any action by the Guarantor Powers, it is not difficult to see that this arrangement posed serious problems and dangers. Could Greece and Turkey really reach an agreement in the event that developments on the island threatened to destabilise the constitutional arrangements that had been put in place? Perhaps the more important question was whether Greece and Turkey would be ready and able to lean on their respective communities sufficiently to ensure that a problem was not created in the first place?

With the benefit of hindsight, this second question was indeed the more important of the two. While independence had certainly been welcomed as a means of preventing a prolongation of the direct bilateral Greek-Turkish stand-off that had developed over Cyprus in the second half of the 1950s, independence had instead created a new, potentially more dangerous, security problem insofar as the Cypriot communities were now expected to overlook the differences that had arisen over the course of the EOKA campaign and work together to build a state based on equality and mutual respect. With little experience of self-government and the monumental task of creating a nation from a state that commanded little respect from either community, the danger of conflict on the island was a constant threat. This threat was further amplified by the presence of Greek and Turkish troops on the island as a part of the Treaty of Alliance. These forces made it more likely that if fighting broke out Greece and Turkey would be dragged into direct confrontation. If fighting were to take place on the island it would not be difficult to envisage the conditions that could see hostilities rapidly extend beyond the shores of the island and lead to direct confrontation between the two countries in the Aegean Sea or on their shared land border in Thrace.

Although the prospect of a war between Greece and Turkey was serious in its own right, it became all the more worrying in view of the fact that both countries were members of NATO. Turkey, in particular, was regarded as a vital component of the NATO's security against the Soviet Union as it was West's only direct non-arctic route into the USSR. Obviously any strains between Greece and Turkey would limit Turkey's effectiveness as a frontline state. Moreover, a Greek-Turkish war was widely seen as offering just the type of distraction Moscow could use to good effect, either in the region or on the wider international stage. Just as the 1956 Suez Crisis had provided good cover for the Soviet suppression of a rebellion in Hungary, another conflict in Eastern Mediterranean could also be exploited. In this light, the small island of Cyprus truly was, as Sir Brian Urquhart noted, 'wired like a detonator to other larger problems'. For better or for worse, Britain had been given an explicit role to ensure that Cyprus did not ignite a larger problem.

It is within this wider context that Britain's role under the 1960 constitution should be seen and analysed. As the nominally impartial signatory of the Treaty of Guarantee, the United Kingdom was always expected to play the part of the neutral referee. Under normal conditions, Britain would be expected to be a source of balance, regulating the affairs of the island at the regular meetings held between the Guarantor Powers. However, in the event that any disturbance took place on the island that could threaten to lead to a confrontation between Greece and Turkey, it would be up to the United Kingdom to play the part of

¹ Urquhart, *A Life in Peace and War*, p.199

peacemaker. While this fact was well, if only tacitly, understood at the time of Cypriot independence, few in Britain expected that this role would be put to the test just three short years after the Union flag was lowered over the island in August 1960. However, in December 1963, just forty months after Cyprus became independent, an outbreak of fighting drew the United Kingdom back into the island's politics.

Britain and the Cyprus Crisis, 1963-64

This work is an attempt to cast light on the actions of the United Kingdom during the Cyprus Crisis of 1963-64. The work concentrates on a very specific period of events, charting the course of British actions from the start of fighting to the moment when UN Security Council Resolution 186 passed responsibility for peacekeeping and peacemaking over to the United Nations. In essence, Britain actually undertook several different, but interconnected roles during this period. On the one hand, Britain had a part to play as a crisis manager and peacekeeper. Its timely decision, along with Greece and Turkey, to establish a peacekeeping force, the Joint Truce Force, certainly helped to limit the extent of fighting on the island, and thus reduced the chance of direct Turkish intervention. However, as this work shows, it was not an easy role to play. Secondly, Britain tried to act as peacemaker. At first this was done informally on the island, but was later supplemented by a formal peace process in London. Unfortunately, the process failed in its objective and in doing so created a rift between Britain and the Greek Cypriots, which ended all hopes that Britain might be able to broker a compromise between the parties. It also affected Britain's efforts to find an alternative peacekeeping force to replace the Joint Truce Force.

The need for a replacement for the Joint Truce Force became very clear with the failure of the London Conference. Initial British attention focused on NATO and its potential pacification role on the island, either as a distinct organisation or indirectly through an operation staged by a number of its member states. This was eventually rejected by the Greek Cypriots. The Commonwealth was then considered as a possible option, but found little support in London. In the end, and following considerable debate, the UN took charge for maintaining peace and stability on the island. This was in many ways a controversial decision as the idea of UN peacekeeping had been strongly rejected by Britain at the start of the crisis. Indeed, even into February the idea of UN peacekeeping was resisted in London. Therefore, this work will examine the transformation of Britain's attitudes about UN involvement, from initial opposition to any form of United Nations involvement through to the decision to take the matter before the UN Security Council and its subsequent acceptance of UN Resolution 186.

Wider issues and questions

Quite apart from the way in which Britain led attempts to try to prevent a wider war between Greece and Turkey from erupting, the period from December 1963-March 1964 is

particularly notable for two other reasons, both of which were to prove profoundly important for the future of the island.

First of all, it was during these months that the Greek Cypriots were accorded international legitimacy as the Government of the Republic of Cyprus. As will be shown, this recognition came about partly as a requirement of international peacekeeping and peacemaking efforts. However, it also becomes clear that the actual confirmation of this recognition involved a certain amount of what the Turkish Cypriots see as betrayal – betrayal by Britain, by the United States, and, most surprisingly, by Turkey. This development was a major victory for the Greek Cypriots.

On the other hand, and secondly, this period saw the acceptance by the international community of the legality of the Treaty of Guarantee. During the period analysed in this work, the Greek Cypriots unsuccessfully tried to abrogate the Treaty. The result of this failure was not only that Turkey retained a constitutional right to intervene, but that this was clearly accepted by the international community. This right was put into effect in 1974 after a coup ordered by the then military government in Athens overthrew Archbishop Makarios, the first president of the independent state. As a result the island was divided and the more modern understanding of the 'Cyprus Problem' was created. Ankara's right to take such a step was effectively recognised during the period discussed in this book.

Earlier research on the 1963-64 Cyprus Crisis

Despite of the clear importance of the period, not just in terms of being the first major outbreak of inter-communal fighting on the island but also insofar as it set the parameters for certain key aspects of the Cyprus issue, there has, until relatively recently, very little by way of systematic and in-depth research has so far been conducted. With the notable exception of Alan James's work on the peacekeeping aspects of the 1963-64 Cyprus Crisis,² published in 2002, there has been little distinct academic attention paid to this era of Cypriot history. Instead the period has usually tended to be treated as a transitional phase within the large number of works that have been written on the domestic history of Cyprus or on the origins and evolution of the Cyprus Problem in a wider context. Even the works looking at the post-Resolution 186 operations of the United Nations in Cyprus devote little more than a few words to the period.³ Fortunately, there have been a number of accounts

² Alan James, *Keeping the Peace in the Cyprus Crisis, 1963-64*.

³ For example: Karl Birgisson, 'United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus', pp.221-223. United Nations Department of Public Information *The Blue Helmets*, pp.283-286. Fabian, *Soldiers Without Enemies*, p.265. Harbottle, *The Impartial Soldier*, pp.7-18. James, *Peacekeeping in International Politics*, pp.224-226. Luard, *A History of the United Nations, Volume 2*, pp.407-413. Papadopoulos, *Peace-Making and Peacekeeping by the United Nations. Cyprus. A Case Study*, pp.22-23. Parsons, *From Cold War to Hot Peace*, pp.172-173. Rikhye et al. *The Thin Blue Line*, pp.99-100. Urquhart, *Ralph Bunche*, pp.368-369. Verrier, *International Peacekeeping*, pp.81-83. Wainhouse, *International Peace Observation*, pp. 437-446. White, *Keeping the Peace*, p.241.

written by those directly involved with the events of that time.⁴ However, as is usually the case, while these narratives add a great deal to the overall picture of that time, they are in many cases incomplete reference sources. Some deliberately present the situation from one particular standpoint. In other cases no attempt is made to construct a wider picture.

It would be wrong, however, to suggest that the period has been left wholly unexamined. Apart from the James book, there have been some other excellent accounts of those months.⁵ However, these still do not provide the thorough account that the period deserves or needs. It is with this in mind that this work attempts to try to redress this situation, even if only partially, by providing some insights into the British response to events taking place at that time. Importantly, the analysis is not solely confined to Britain's efforts to engage in crisis management and peacemaking through diplomacy, both on the island and at the international level. The work also examines Britain's vital and commendable peacekeeping efforts from the start of the crisis, on 23 December 1963, until the very moment responsibility for keeping the peace was handed over to the United Nations, with the passing on UN Security Council Resolution 186 on 4 March 1964.

The structure of the work

The book is structured around three distinct phases of the crisis. Following an introduction to the history of Anglo-Cypriot relations and the process of constitutional collapse, contained in Chapter 1, the second and third chapters examine the initial reactions to the outbreak of violence on the island. Chapter 2 explains how fighting erupted in Nicosia on 23 December and how this quickly proliferated to other towns. The concern of the Guarantor Powers led to the creation of the Joint Truce Force, which, although nominally tripartite in nature, was in reality a solely British undertaking. Chapter 3 looks at how the Truce Force consolidated its position and examines the first attempt at peacemaking. In particular, the section covers the visit of Duncan Sandys, the British Commonwealth Secretary, and his efforts to convene a peace conference in London in mid-January.

The second phase of the crisis is covered in chapters four, five and six. Chapter 4 examines the London Conference and explains how and why the peacemaking effort failed. It will also show how events at that time directly helped the Greek Cypriots to be recognised as having lawful control over the Cyprus Government and how the failure of the London Conference led to a growth in anti-British sentiment amongst Greek Cypriots, which in turn led Britain to approach the United States for assistance in putting together a peacekeeping force based on NATO. The chapter also looks at the evolution of ideas about peacekeeping based on NATO or the Commonwealth. Chapter 5 traces the efforts to put

⁴ Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, pp.337-346. Bitsios, *Cyprus. The Vulnerable Republic*, pp.126-157. Clerides, *Cyprus. My Deposition*, (Volumes 1 & 2, *passim*). Urquhart, *A Life in Peace and War*, pp.197-198.
⁵ In particular: Joseph, *Cyprus. Ethnic Conflict and International Concern*. Nicolet, *United States Policy Towards Cyprus, 1954-1974*, pp.188-224. Smith, "At Arm's Length: NATO and the United Nations in the Cold War Era", pp.68-71. Sonyel, *Cyprus: the Destruction of a Republic*. Verrier, "Cyprus: Britain's Security Role". Windsor, *NATO and the Cyprus Crisis*.

together a NATO peacekeeping force and shows how this failed as a direct result of the resistance put up by Archbishop Makarios. Chapter 6 starts with an account of how the Soviet Union became involved in efforts to prevent the reformulation of previous ideas for the creation of a NATO-based peacekeeping force and how this eventually led Britain to pass responsibility for handling the search for a peacekeeping force to the United States. The chapter concludes with Britain's letter to the President of the UN Security Council asking for an urgent meeting to discuss the Cyprus issue.

The last two chapters cover the final phase of the crisis, when the issue of Cyprus was discussed at the United Nations. Chapter 7 examines how the various parties prepared for the debate and charts the course of the first crucial days of discussion on the floor of the Security Council and how the efforts of the Secretary-General to reach a compromise on a resolution failed, only to be taken up by five of the non-permanent members of the Council. The final chapter, Chapter 8, covers the final days of the debate and the eventual vote to pass UN Security Council Resolution 186, on 4 March 1964, which finally extricated Britain from its role as peacekeeper and crisis manager.

After summarising the events, the Conclusion evaluates Britain's actions over the course of the crisis and identifies the main reasons why the United Kingdom became involved. Additionally, the chapter also looks at the crisis in wider international terms. An analysis of the actions of Greece and Turkey, the other two Guarantor Powers, is also provided, as is an assessment of the parts played by the United States and the Soviet Union. A further section is devoted to an analysis of why the Non-Aligned Movement ended playing almost no role in the crisis, even though Cyprus was a member. Finally, the chapter ends with an analysis of the Joint Truce Force and explains why the Force could never have successfully overseen a long term conflict management role on the island, despite the fact that it was clearly a peacekeeping operation in both name and nature.