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978-0-521-08937-1 - British Policy Towards Greece During the Second World War, 1941-1944

Procopis Papastratis

Excerpt

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1. CAIRO AND LONDON

The German advance into Greece in April 1941, after the Greeks had inflicted a severe attack on the Italians, led to the defeat of the Greek army and the withdrawal of its allied British expeditionary force. It led also to the downfall of the Greek government under A. Koryzis, the successor of the late I. Metaxas, in an atmosphere of increasing confusion and defeatism, with charges of treason being levelled against field commanders. Moreover, the regime Metaxas had imposed upon the Greek people collapsed with a rapidity that underlined its artificial character and limited appeal. The King and his hastily assembled government under E. Tsouderos left, first for Crete and then for Egypt. Meanwhile in Athens, the occupation authorities promptly installed a collaborationist government headed by G. Tsolakoglou, the general who had concluded the surrender to the Germans against the orders of his superiors.

British–Egyptian relations were governed by the 1936 Treaty which afforded Britain every facility to meet its wartime needs, while Egypt itself remained nominally neutral. However, these relations became strained due to the repeated, highly peremptory British interventions in the internal affairs of the country, where strong pro-German feelings were evident. Egypt was thus in no position to prevent the establishment on its soil of the Greek government and military forces. The defeat in Greece and the fall of the Metaxas regime confronted the British with a whole new set of problems in their policy towards Greece, in which British military and political objectives were repeatedly at odds with each other. An added complication was the emergence of a strong and massive left-wing resistance movement that could not possibly be trusted to promote British post-war interests. The period from 1941 to 1944 therefore was one in which the seeds of many subsequent conflicts were being sown.

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The British, as well as the King and Tsouderos, were obviously well aware that public opinion in Crete would certainly not be in favour of what was considered as, and indeed was, the continuation of the Metaxas regime. Consequently there is no doubt that one of the main reasons for Tsouderos' appointment as premier was that, as a Cretan himself, he would make the King and the government more acceptable on the island.

Two days after his arrival in Crete, Tsouderos went to Hanea to test public opinion and explore the possibilities of the King visiting the city. His diary says nothing about his impressions on either this or subsequent visits to the city, but the British Vice-Consul in Athens, T. Bowman, who was in Crete at the time, reported that there was a lot of bad feeling against C. Maniadakis and I. Diakos, the late dictator's *eminence grise*. The latter, broken and terrified he would be shot, went under an assumed name until he left for Egypt. Maniadakis, on the other hand, assisted by many of his secret policemen who had come from Athens, took a prominent part in public affairs. This created an explosive situation which could hardly be afforded in view of the impending German attack on the island. In consequence, Bowman and Consul G. Meade, asked by Tsouderos to intervene, went to the King and pointed out that Maniadakis should leave the island for his own safety. The King agreed, and Maniadakis departed two days later.¹ Public feeling still ran high, however; just a few days earlier, when the Commander of the Cretan Division, General Papastergiou, had barely arrived in Crete, he was shot dead by a sergeant of the gendarmerie when a demonstration accused him of having abandoned his division on the mainland.

The Greek government took a series of half-measures, clearly designed to appease public opinion – such as the appointment of retired Venizelist generals as heads of the Greek army. Nevertheless the Cretans insisted on the immediate and full restoration of all the clauses of the constitution put in abeyance by Metaxas; at the same time they agreed to the proposal that martial law should be proclaimed so as to permit the military authorities to deal with the situation. The King and Tsouderos disapproved, as it was obvious that the full restoration of the Constitution would inevitably affect their own position and especially the legitimacy of Tsouderos' appointment to the premiership. Not wishing to involve himself directly in so

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delicate a matter, Tsouderos again turned to Bowman and Meade and asked them to intervene. The two Britons succeeded in convincing the Cretan committee which had been formed to press these demands to take no further action in the matter, and to advise their fellow citizens accordingly, in order to give the government time to deal with the formidable problems lying ahead. Meade, however, felt obliged to comment at a later stage that, as far as he was able to judge, the King and the government lost much prestige during their stay in Crete; the King did little or nothing, and Government House was a 'scene of utter confusion'.²

One of the immediate problems the British and Greek authorities had to solve was the timing of the departure of the King and Tsouderos from Crete and their final destination. Cairo had informed Sir M. Palairot, British Minister to Greece, at the end of April that the Egyptian Prime Minister did not like the idea of the Greek Royal Family taking up residence in Alexandria; they could come to Egypt in an emergency, but only on the understanding that they would leave again as soon as possible. The Foreign Office favoured Palestine, but the King strongly objected to staying in Jerusalem where he would inevitably be involved in the contentions surrounding the Greek Church there. Kenya was also discussed as a possible destination. Then Tsouderos came forward with the suggestion that, as an encouragement to the Greeks in their present disaster, the King should be made 'a personal present' of Cyprus so that he could transfer his residence there if he should have to leave Crete. Palairot was quick to point out, and the King himself agreed, that this was not a practical proposal, and that it had already been decided that Cyprus would not be any safer than Crete. The Foreign Office approved this reply. In London, Buckingham Palace informed the Foreign Office that His Majesty did not particularly want any member of the Greek royal family, with the exception of the King, to go to Britain; the others had much better go to stay in South Africa. The Crown Prince's children and their mother, the German Princess Frederika, were especially mentioned in this respect.³

Early in May, Major-General Sir B. Freyberg, in command of the Allied forces in Crete, and Palairot had a very frank discussion about the situation on the island with the King and Tsouderos, both of whom stated that they were determined to remain until the last possible moment. When the time came, they wanted Freyberg to issue a statement that he himself had requested them to leave for military

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reasons. It soon became evident that for the King and Tsouderos the last possible moment was just before the German attack. Aware of the impression their departure would create on the island, they believed that if it were made before the attack, it would arouse less criticism than if it came afterwards, when it would look like flight. The King and Tsouderos also insisted that in order to justify their departure it was essential that the British should proclaim, but not necessarily apply, martial law in Crete. Freyberg was in favour of their leaving soon, as he could not guarantee their safety after the middle of May. The Chiefs of Staff (COS) were of the same opinion, but not so Churchill, who believed that the presence of the King and Tsouderos would underline British resolution to fight in Crete. General A. Wavell, C-in-C Middle East, on his part informed Freyberg in no uncertain terms that the King and Tsouderos should not leave Crete for the time being. The War Cabinet reached the same decision a few days later. This decision swept aside all the arguments the King and Tsouderos kept putting forward for their departure prior to the German attack.⁴ Their insistence on this issue was so strong, however, that one cannot help thinking that considerations of their personal safety were also involved.

The German attack on Crete started in the early morning of 20 May. The King, his suite, Tsouderos, and their New Zealand guard were obliged immediately to withdraw to the hills and then to the mountains beyond, as German parachutists dropped near their house and almost surrounded it. At this point it was decided that the King should leave the island. Colonel J. S. Blunt, the British military attaché responsible for the safety of the party, succeeded in contacting the naval base at Souda on a village telephone. He was informed that arrangements had been made to pick the royal party up at the rendezvous originally fixed, Aghia Roumeli on the south coast, during the night of 22/23 May. After a very difficult march, they joined up with Palairot and the Legation party at their point of embarkation. Sailing on H.M.S. *Decoy*, they reached Alexandria the following night, where at the request of the British military authorities news of their arrival was kept secret so as not to damage morale in Crete.

An examination of the Battle of Crete lies beyond the scope of this book. Suffice it to say that, notwithstanding the gallant resistance put up by Allied and Greek units alike, the defence of the island had not been adequately prepared. Tsouderos had repeatedly drawn Palairot's attention to this issue. When General Wilson had arrived from Greece, he submitted an assessment of the defence of the island, and concluded

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that unless the three services were really prepared to face the situation and provide adequate forces, trying to hold the island was a dangerous commitment. Serious reservations had also been voiced by Major-General Freyberg. Reacting to a warning from the Middle East that a very strong airborne attack on Crete was imminent, Freyberg had underlined the insufficient protection available to Crete in the air, on the ground and at sea. He had requested that the decision to hold Crete should be reconsidered, unless the additional fighter planes he had asked for were made available. Neither of these two requests was ever met.

The delay in organising the island's defences was a persistent problem confronting each of the five commanders appointed between November 1940, when the British landed in Crete and the German invasion in May 1941. An Inter-Service Committee appointed by GHQ Middle East in June 1941 reported that 'with notable exceptions, six months of comparative peace was marked by inertia for which ambiguity as to the role of the garrison was in large measure responsible'.⁵

The strong criticisms of the Committee, ranging from lack of ability to organise the defence of Crete to the slack discipline that had permeated many units, prompted Wavell to reject the report in a letter to the Under-Secretary of State for War. Wavell argued, and with good reason, that during the period in question it had been quite impossible to undertake an extended programme of defence in Crete. Men, material, transport and labour were 'utterly insufficient' to the British needs in the entire Middle East theatre of operations. Aside from Crete, Wavell had to meet far more pressing and important commitments in Greece and the northern frontiers of Palestine and the Western Desert, where the most serious threat was developing at the time.⁶

A long journey to London

After the Battle of Crete was over, the Middle East and particularly Egypt soon became the centre of Greek affairs. There were several important reasons for this. To start with, Greece fell within the operational control area of the C-in-C Middle East, and with the country occupied by the enemy, this was the territory under Allied control nearest to Greece where the Greek armed forces could take refuge and get reorganised.

Furthermore there were large wealthy and influential Greek

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communities in the Middle East, and in Egypt especially. Ever since the nineteenth century Greeks had been emigrating to Egypt in large numbers, encouraged initially by the policies of Mehemet Ali, who favoured the settlement of foreigners. Organised in 'communities', that of Alexandria founded in 1843 being the oldest, the Greeks of Egypt soon flourished in commerce, particularly in cotton, but also engaged in other sectors of the Egyptian economy. By the outbreak of the Second World War, there were more than 100,000 Greeks in Egypt.⁷ With the arrival in 1941 of the King, the government, and the Greek armed forces, the already active involvement in politics by Egyptian Greeks gained further momentum and considerably aggravated the highly explosive situation which was soon to permeate Greek affairs.

When the King left Crete he was most anxious that the news should not be released. When he arrived in Cairo he found that, strict censorship notwithstanding, his departure from Crete was already common knowledge. In order to forestall enemy propaganda, the King insisted on immediately issuing a statement to the Greek people, explaining that he had left Crete so as not to hinder military operations by his presence. To add a touch of heroism, the proclamation was backdated to make it appear that it had been issued from the mountains of Crete, and was circulated with the concurrence of General Wavell, then in command of the Middle East forces.

At the same time, the King and Tsouderos announced that on Britain's invitation they would proceed to London. Since no such invitation had ever been issued, the Foreign Office was taken by surprise. As it would have been highly embarrassing for all concerned to deny the invitation outright, Whitehall suggested that the King and Tsouderos stay in Egypt until the issue of the Battle of Crete were known. Meanwhile Palairot informed the King of a number of different routes for reaching England. When the time came George II and the government decided they would travel all the way by ship from Suez and via South Africa, partly because they were tired, partly because they did not wish to be separated from their families; and besides they were in no particular hurry.⁸

In the meantime C. Maniadakis, Metaxas' Public Order Minister, assisted by over fifty men of the Greek secret police, had created a confused and uncomfortable situation among the Greek community in Egypt. It became obvious that if the unity of the Greeks abroad were to be preserved, the services of Maniadakis should be terminated as soon

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as possible. Tsouderos proposed to the King that this should be done by a royal decree which, together with accepting the government's resignation, would also reduce the number of its members. The British, however, intervened in favour of Maniadakis, and Palairret requested the King to allow the Minister of Public Order to stay. Tsouderos, who suspected that the British secret services were working against him, confronted the King with an ultimatum: he would have to choose between Maniadakis and himself. The upshot was that the decree he had proposed was duly issued, and Maniadakis was packed off to South America on a deliberately vague diplomatic mission. 'The whole manoeuvre was tiresome but interesting', Tsouderos noted in his diary.⁹

In late June the Foreign Office made a thorough reappraisal of the position of the King and his government. Until then the Foreign Office had held the view that the King and the government would have to come to Britain, because if the Middle East were to turn into a theatre of war, as seemed likely, the Greek government could not possibly remain and function there. In any case, the Egyptian government had refused to allow them to stay on. An added minor consideration was the convenience of having the Greek King and the government in London.

At the reappraisal, however, a contrary view was put forward from within the Foreign Office, attempting a long-term approach. This argued convincingly that the King in particular should remain in the Middle East, seeing that he had for a long time been regarded in Greece as a very unpopular foreign monarch, who kept an unpopular regime in power. What little popularity he enjoyed was mostly confined to army circles, and it was therefore imperative that 'he should be very closely identified' with the reorganisation of the army, thus enhancing his image and gaining in prestige.

Compared to the importance the Foreign Office attached to the person and position of the King, that of the Tsouderos government was clearly secondary. One argument, however, was that it should become more representative and concern itself with overseas Greeks too. Since the government had been constituted for the sole objective of its going to Crete, its hold on the Greeks in general was considered precarious. Moreover, it was felt in London that the long journey around the Cape, and the one-month stay in South Africa which the government and the King were about to embark on, were bound to make 'a deplorable impression of inactivity' on the Greek people. The presence

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of the Greek forces in the Middle East, on the other hand, was a strong reason why the greater part of the Greek government should remain in the area, perhaps in Palestine if the Egyptians could not be 'bullied' into allowing them to stay in Egypt.

In the end, the Foreign Office could come to no definite decision regarding the place of residence for the King and the government. In the course of the lengthy discussion on this issue, the Foreign Office acknowledged that the position of both the King and Tsouderos, the two main figures representing Greece at the time, left much to be desired. 'It must not be forgotten that the King of Greece has not a drop of Greek blood in his veins and that he is of mixed Danish, German and British origin. His position therefore is a peculiar one', noted one of the officials of the Southern Department.¹⁰ Fresh information made available to the Foreign Office described Tsouderos as a financier with little general political experience, and little or no personal influence outside financial circles. In terms of character, he was said to have something of an inferiority complex, to be in turn very obstinate and subject to bouts of depression, at the same time as being a terrible intriguer. This information was not contradicted and gradually proved to be quite true. In any case, it appears that the Foreign Office was resigned to accepting that Tsouderos should remain as Prime Minister, despite his many shortcomings, for the simple reason that there was nobody else to take his place.

The King, Tsouderos and part of the government sailed from Cairo for South Africa on 27 June, leaving the Services Ministers and the Vice-President of the Council of Ministers, Rear-Admiral Sakellariou, in Egypt. Sir Miles Lampson, British Ambassador to Egypt, had a long discussion with the King on the 26th, and reported to London that George II was leaving Egypt most reluctantly, anxious about the Greek community there holding together and about possible intrigues against the throne. Lampson had reassured him that he would keep a very close watch on the situation, and had offered the King his assistance with any matter he might think required a special attention. The King took the opportunity to hand him a list of 'local Greek suspects' whom he would like to see moved on. Lampson undertook to see to it.¹¹

On the way to South Africa, Tsouderos submitted to the King a memorandum on issues he considered of primary importance. These were Greece's foreign policy, her national revendications and how to promote these aspirations, the organisation of the Greek armed forces

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in the Middle East, and policies for post-war Greece. Tsouderos elaborated at length on the revendications and the policy Greece should follow in order to achieve them. He believed that Greece should claim Northern Epirus, the Dodecanese, Cyprus, an adjustment of the frontier with Bulgaria, the reinforcement of the Greek frontiers in the region of Gevgeli (the point on the border with Yugoslavia where the Germans had thrust into Greece), and the right of massive Greek emigration to and settlement in the Italian colonies of Northern Africa. Such an emigration would help considerably towards solving the demographic problem which he felt was threatening Greece, unable to export her population surplus because of existing immigration laws (especially in the United States). In addition, if from now until the end of the war Turkey were to follow an erratic or hostile policy towards Britain, Greece should make a twofold demand: the accession of Eastern Thrace, and for Istanbul to be recognised as a Free State with Greece participating in its administration.

To support this unrealistic list of claims, the Allied countries' governments and public opinion should be prepared by propaganda in the press, and by books especially written to underline the identity of the British and Greek interests in the Eastern Mediterranean. Skilful mobilisation of the Greek colonies abroad would also help enormously.

Tsouderos declared himself against the Greek armed forces participating in the war effort, with the exception of the navy. Greece, he said, had done her duty and was justified in contributing nothing further to the war effort. He believed that the main objective of the Greek forces should be the liberation of their country and the occupation of the new territories that would be given to Greece. Their reorganisation, therefore, although necessary, would not require any haste and there was ample time for the officers to be selected most carefully. He was opposed to the beliefs expressed by a number of officers who 'think quite differently and are in a hurry to go into action'.¹² Tsouderos also asserted that there was a tendency among those aspiring to govern Greece after the war to make use of the Greek forces in the realisation of their plans, and emphasised that such ambitions should be crushed in good time. The Greek armed forces 'assigned to cooperate with the King in the political reorganisation of the country' should stay away from politics and have no political initiatives. He urged the King not to let Greece become a police state, or to let her be governed by the 'neurotic organisations' of one social class or another. He suggested that by following a middle course instead, and planning

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well ahead for the post-war era, public opinion could be manipulated and the country saved from post-war social and political dangers. Tsouderos ended his memorandum stating: 'Your Majesty, only one thought is guiding me: to serve Your Majesty and, through you, Greece. I have no further ambitions, politically or otherwise. In any case, I am wholly at Your Majesty's disposal.'¹³

At about the same time, a memorandum prepared at the Foreign Office in anticipation of the arrival of the Greek government in London noted the following problems in respect to Greece: discipline in the Greek merchant marine; requisitioned Greek cargoes; the finances of the Greek government; the merchant marine; the Greek armed forces; the food situation in Greece; how to obtain better intelligence reports on conditions in Greece; Greek political unity; Cyprus; matters of protocol in Britain's welcome of the Greek government and honours to its members and the King. The food situation was singled out as probably the most difficult of all. Greece produced little food and was almost entirely dependent on imported grain. A member of the Greek Legation had privately expressed the view that if the British were to enforce a rigid embargo on food imports to Greece, and if as a result the people starved and the children suffered, the Greeks would turn against Britain. The Foreign Office memorandum proposed that this point should be given special consideration:

The question is: what is Greek goodwill worth to us? Is their shipping, the effectiveness of their passive resistance and the armed resistance of their free forces worth more to us than the amount we might help the enemy by facilitating the supply of cereals to Greece? Is it important to have a healthy population of $7\frac{1}{2}$ million Anglophile Greeks to reinforce our position in the Eastern Mediterranean after the war? Or can we view with equanimity the reduction of the Greek population by famine, its health, particularly in the case of children, ruined and outlook violently anti-British? The pros and the cons must be very carefully weighed before we commit ourselves to starving Greece, and it must be borne in mind that the Greeks will not starve silently. The effects on opinion in the United States of America will also have to be considered.¹⁴

The question of intelligence reports about conditions in Greece was another matter which required attention, because until that time information had been very sparse. It was desirable that an Anglo-Greek organisation should be set up in the Middle East for the purpose of obtaining information from and keeping in touch with occupied Greece. Contacts with members of the puppet government who,