

The British Labour government's policy towards the Greek Colonels, 1967-68

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Introduction

The military dictatorship that plagued Greece for seven long years (1967-1974) left its distinct mark on the history of the country as one of the three most significant episodes of the twentieth century. It would not be an overstatement to say that the impact that this period had on the social, economic and political life of Greece can be compared only to monumental events such as the Asia Minor catastrophe and the Greek Civil War. As an historic event of such magnitude, the junta (as it is commonly referred to in Greece) still has important repercussions that are being felt today, not only insofar as the obvious implications on international relations are concerned (the Cyprus imbroglio being the predominant one) but also with respect to contemporary Greeks' view of politics and history. That is why a thorough examination of specific aspects of military rule, and especially relations with other countries is of considerable importance.

However, although it is now more than thirty years since the collapse of the military regime, unequivocal answers, in particular in relation to the role of the Great Powers at the time, have not been adequately produced. Clouds of confusion continue to obscure, to a certain extent, US but also general NATO involvement in the coup that brought the Colonels to power, and the role of the British government, whether instigative, compromising, or antagonistic (both in terms of bilateral relations with Greece and within the framework of collective action), in the events preceding and following the establishment of the junta in Greece has not been researched.

An investigation of Britain's attitude vis-à-vis the dictatorship is highly important as the British role in Greek history is significant. Britain's acquired status as a 'traditional ally' has enabled it to exert her influence on Greek events on various

occasions including creating precedents for intervention (the Metaxas dictatorship, 1936-41, and the years immediately after WWII, for instance).

This paper will undertake a general review of the foreign policy of the Wilson government towards the Greek Colonels covering practically the first two years of junta's tenure; i.e. 1967-1968. Its aim is to question British involvement and reaction to major events of the period, such as the April 1967 coup d'état, the abortive counter-coup organized by King Constantine in late 1967, the expulsion of Greece from the Council of Europe and the possible repercussions of this on NATO (not forgetting its impact on matters of trade and arms supply). The paper also seeks to examine the effect of international and domestic developments on the 'love-hate' relationship between the governments of Britain and Greece at the time. Special emphasis will be placed upon the proverbial ambiguity of the British in their attitude towards the Colonels.

The first traces

A new, caretaker, government (the fourth in two years' time) was formed in Athens, under Panayotis Kanellopoulos, the president of NRU (*National Radical Union*), that is the party of the Right, in early April 1967. Sir Ralph Murray's report that time concentrated on his conviction of CU's electoral triumph and the possible expulsion of the King, which 'would have as a concomitant the danger of an anticipatory coup to prevent it'.¹ The political forecast was twofold: a) NRU would influence the forthcoming elections in order to perpetuate its hold of power (as it had

¹ PRO: FCO 9/120 Telegram from Sir Ralph Murray to Foreign Office, 6.4.67.

done in the not so distant past²) and b) there were to be ‘devices to avoid the holding of elections for some considerable time’.³

The military coup d’état, however, even without the active contribution of Britain (and without the collusion of the US, the Palace or any significant political figure, for that matter), became a reality on 21 April 1967, as a ‘pre-emptive strike’ against an unfavourable to the Colonels’ election outcome.

1967: A coup, a war and a conference

The first dispatches from the embassy in Athens to the FO after that date are quite revealing of the extent that Britain was aware of a putsch conceived by lower rank officers. Although Sir R. Murray confessed that he knew (as mentioned above) that ‘a group of extremist officers decided in January to go underground and organise military measures to solve the political problem’, information was more than blurry and he held that ‘the plotters [were] unrepresentative and that their measures [were] inexpert and [might] *not be sustained for very long*’⁴ (emphasis added). It is more than certain, though, that he and, consequently, Whitehall, was not anticipating a military overthrow of government of that type.⁵ As becomes evident from the

² The most eminent instance was the 1961 election campaign, which led to Constantine Karamanlis’, then leader of NRU, being elected Prime Minister through what seemed to be methods of ballot rigging and illegal pressure. Interestingly, when, much later, it became known that the General Staff had actually established a ‘secret committee to organise the electoral fraud’, the name of a certain Major *Papadopoulos* emerged as the secretary and leading officer behind it (Athenian. *Inside the Colonels’ Greece*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1972, p. 42).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ PRO: FCO 9/124 Telegram from Sir R. Murray to FO, 21.4.67. A month later he conceded that he ‘became aware in January of a Colonel Papadopoulos plotting, having declared that the time for military action had come’ (PRO: FCO 9/126 Memorandum on Coup in Greece from Sir Ralph Murray to Mr. Brown, 23.5.67).

⁵ Neither was the CIA, if one believes what its officials told Commonwealth representatives in the eve of the coup. As Sir Patrick Dean, the British Ambassador to the US, informed the Foreign Office: ‘the nature of the coup which has occurred was quite different from that which the C.I.A. had been expecting...they had had no warning of the ‘Colonels’ rebellion. They knew very little about the individuals concerned or how they had managed to maintain some form of conspiratorial organisation’ (PRO: FCO 9/125 Telegram from Sir P. Dean to FO, 26.4.67).

following day's telegram to London, the perpetrators of the unconstitutional coup were, as far as British were concerned, an 'unknown group of colonels...of whom we know nothing'.⁶

Anew consultations with the US concluded in dilatoriness in resuming official relations with the Colonels. Nevertheless, the Labour government considered itself to be in a position where it needed to establish at least a working relationship with the men that held power in Athens, in order to safeguard Britain's interests, the fair treatment of British subjects being the first, valid concern.⁷ So, when the issue of recognition arose in 26 April, the British Ambassador opined that he should reply to Greece's Foreign Minister's letter (an act that meant official recognition) immediately, in order not to raise the suspicions of the junta⁸. As Sir R. Murray said:

'I think one must distinguish between the existence of relations, however chilly, and the way they are conducted once they exist. We don't want this dictatorship, *however much we dislike it*, to start its life with an anti-British bias.'⁹ (emphasis added)

Of course, humanitarian concerns were not the only ones, as a mixture of Realpolitik and finance appeared to be the most persistent catalyst for not upsetting the Colonels.¹⁰

Nevertheless, though initially Foreign Office officials found that there was 'no urgent practical reason for [them] to recognise and assume a normal working relationship

⁶ Ibid, 22.4.67. Quite apparent of the embassy's lack of familiarity with the members of the newly established dictatorship was the fact that, in the same telegram, junta's Prime Minister Kollias was referred to as 'Skollias'.

⁷ Parliamentary questions in the House of Lords were particularly pressing in relation to that issue. See, for example, PRO: FCO 9/125 Parliamentary question by Lord Archibald, 27.4.67.

⁸ Inasmuch as the Easter holidays in Greece were about to start, any action taken after 27 April would reach Greek officials with much delay and would thus incite scepticism in regard to Britain's intentions.

⁹ Ibid, 26.4.67.

¹⁰ Although they overtly professed their interest in Cyprus, where British bases were operating, as the overarching one, issues of trade (that were to become more acute after the Arab-Israeli war and the devaluation of the pound) and, especially, security (support for a wounded NATO vs. Soviet expansionism in the eastern Mediterranean) loomed in Bevinite ministers' minds.

with the new regime'¹¹, again in close consultation with Americans both in Washington and Athens, the decision was taken to postpone the recognition for only a couple of days, following thus the US policy that determined to 'play it cool and burn no bridges.'¹² By 1 May, the British, as well as the Americans and the Turks, had resumed relations with Athens. A formal act of recognition was not needed since the Head of State, that is the King, to whom British officials were to show their credentials, was present when the military government was sworn in.

Furthermore, Brown told the Cabinet meeting of 27 April that, since all information entering London led to the conclusion that 'the new regime [was] firmly in control of the country and likely to remain so', the junta satisfied the criterion that Britain applied 'when deciding whether to recognise a new government or not'.¹³ It is true that this was the main British policy on the subject of recognition of governments assuming power unconstitutionally, but this was certainly without exceptions: the non-recognition for many years of states as North Vietnam, North Korea and the German Democratic Republic (all of a different ideological orientation, to put it mildly), leads to the conclusion that the 'effective control of the country' principle was merely a guideline, albeit significant, which more than once 'appeared to yield to political considerations.'¹⁴ This fact, furthermore, in conjunction with the assertion that 'there is no obligation to recognize a new government once it effectively rules the state'¹⁵ elucidated that this was a political decision, which 'as a matter of optional bilateral relations and readiness to undertake normal relations [...] depend[ed]

¹¹ PRO: FCO 9/125 Telegram from FO to Athens, 25.4.67.

¹² PRO: FCO 9/125 Telegram from Sir P. Dean to FO, 26.4.67.

¹³ PRO: FCO 9/125 Cabinet: 27 April, The New Greek Government, 27.4.67.

¹⁴ Shaw, Malcolm N. *International Law*, 4th edition, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 304.

¹⁵ Peterson, M.J. 'Political Use of Recognition: The Influence of the International System' in *World Politics*, Vol. 34, No. 3, (Apr. 1982), p. 325.

precisely on *intention*'¹⁶ (emphasis added), and as such it could be different, as, for instance, to imply a conditional recognition.¹⁷ This statement was corroborated by the change of policy by the British government to not formally recognising governments in 1980 because 'the practise ha[d] sometimes been misunderstood, and, despite explanations to the contrary, our 'recognition' interpreted as implying approval.'¹⁸ Still and all, FO officials discredited the value of pressurising the junta by setting conditions for recognition and insisted that relations should be recommenced immediately on the grounds that this way they would be able to influence the Colonels towards a return to constitutional rule.¹⁹

The next serious consideration of policy towards Greece following the coup came as an immediate response to a change of the political situation in a country considered for many (and hard) years a traditional ally. Only a week after the tanks had filled the roads of Athens, following the orders of what was to be the omnipotent triumvirate of the 'Revolution of 21 April' (as the Colonels preferred to call their criminal ascent to the long-coveted political 'throne'), George Brown, suggested to Prime Minister Wilson, that they should be thinking how to strengthen the opposition to the regime and to give support to the King, thus, securing, 'the return of a non-Communist constitutional government before resistance [became] an exclusively Communist prerogative.'²⁰ He also expressed his concern on having a second (the

¹⁶ Shaw, *International Law*, p. 96.

¹⁷ That is recognition 'subject to fulfilment of certain conditions', like the treatment of minorities or the respect for human rights (Brownlie, Ian. *Principles of Public International Law*, 4th edition, Oxford: Clarendon, 1990, p. 312).

¹⁸ Brownlie, *Principles*, p. 106.

¹⁹ Meynaud, *Political Forces*, p. 525. As Brown said: 'I don't think we can treat Greece (however lunatic its politics have been traditionally) on a par with Sierra Leone and Paraguay' (PRO: PREM 13/2140 Letter from Brown to Wilson, 28.4.67).

²⁰ PRO: PREM 13/2140 2140 Letter from Brown to Wilson, 28.4.67. This is all reminiscent of one of the most prominent instances of British intervention in Greek political life, namely during the Axis occupation and the first year following the WWII, when Britain bolstered the conservatives in their fight against the desire of the communists to gain full control of the country, in their endeavour to capitulate on their enhanced status after their successful campaign against the German occupiers.

first one being Salazar's Portugal) dictatorship in NATO and the effect that would have on the organisation itself and on feelings towards NATO in Britain. Wilson, in his reply, declared that developments in Greece were of major importance for two main reasons: first, because of Greece's 'key position in NATO and in the Mediterranean, and secondly because of Cyprus.'²¹ The Prime Minister, however, distinguished his views from Brown's saying that overt assistance to the King, and indeed, any political meddling would be inexpedient as it would lead the Colonels into further isolation and harden their stance. He, therefore, introduced what was to become the unofficial doctrine of the Foreign Office in relation to Greece for at least the next three years: that cautious and measured co-operation would modify the regime. As far as the King was concerned, the decision, taken after consultation with Dean Rusk, the US Secretary of State, was that he was to be supported fully but unobtrusively. The British government, however, remained perplexed in its effort to maintain a balanced attitude towards the fledgling military junta and its old friends in Greece (mainly the conservative politicians, who were opposed to the regime from the outset), as was demonstrated by the stress that Foreign Office ministers felt over the issue of invitations to Queen's Birthday Party that was to be held by the British Embassy in Athens.²²

In his attempt to draw a successful policy, the Foreign Secretary wished to gain access both to first hand information regarding the general attitude of the Colonels and the state of public opinion in Greece. He, therefore, regularly asked

Interestingly, Greek resistance in WWII was for many years wrongly considered 'an exclusively Communist prerogative' by both communist and their political adversaries, for, obviously, altogether different reasons.

²¹ PRO: PREM 13/2140 Minute by H. Wilson, 1.5.67.

²² The fortuitous imminent departure of Sir Ralph Murray, HMG's Ambassador, from Athens provided the government with an excuse for not holding an official party. The [Foreign Secretary](#) gave permission for only a personal farewell party to take place, and, so, managed to avoid the appearance of offending the Colonels and abandoning former friends. (PRO: FCO 9/224 Letter from Sir R. Murray, 17.5.67 & Telegram, 13.5.68)

Britain's Ambassador in Athens for an up-to-date evaluation of the political and social situation. The first major instance of such coordination of views occurred a few days after the coup d'état, and resulted in Sir Ralph Murray's advice of 'do[ing] business with the regime and try[ing] to push them into a suitable political evolution.'²³ According to him, Britain had three kinds of interests that 'pointed towards dealing with the new régime': a) commercial, b) NATO and c) humanitarian.²⁴ The Ambassador's recommendation to proceed with a *normal working relationship* on the spot was coupled with the possibility of using the strength of feeling in Britain about the coup as one way of pushing the Colonels in the right direction. Brown commented that 'that could be combined with a certain aloofness, for example in having no British Ministers visit Greece [...] until the regime had evolved into something more respectable.'²⁵ However, the repulsion that British officials felt for the military junta and its leaders, although initially muted, in official exchanges, was extremely apparent within governmental circles and the FO in particular.²⁶

This negative climate, however, did not last long (at least on the official level) and subsequent international and domestic incidents worked in favour of the Colonels. The Six Day War, whose outbreak came less than fifty days after the coup in Greece, played a significant role in allaying the fears of especially western, US and NATO, officials. The 'widespread concern' that the Defence Secretary, Denis Healey, on 31 May had admitted that all members of the NATO alliance felt, soon changed to predilection towards the junta, due to their upgraded status as the only tried-and-true

²³ PRO: PREM 13/2140 Record of a meeting between the Foreign Secretary and H.M. Ambassador, Athens, 3.5.67.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Sir R. Murray had described Colonel Papadopoulos, Brigadier Pattakos and Colonel Makarezos as 'thugs' or more precisely as "tough Greek patriots with a streak of thuggery", and had discerned that Colonel Papadopoulos especially was 'predominantly tough' and had some features in common with Nasser. (PRO: PREM 13/2140 Record of a meeting between the Foreign Secretary and H.M. Ambassador, Athens, 3.5.67)

western ally in the wider region apart from Israel.²⁷ As FO officials drafting notes for the Prime Minister's answer to Mr. Winnick's parliamentary question on NATO and Greece, wrote: 'the Greek Government were helpful during the recent Middle Eastern crisis in connection with some of our evacuation arrangements...it would be against our interests to cause trouble with them in NATO at this time, or to do anything which would disturb the uneasy situation over Cyprus.'²⁸

A look on a map of the wider region would be all it would take for a State Department official with a penchant for geopolitics to infer that Greece was the only country that could play the role of a 'buffer zone', a bastion against the expanding tendencies of communism in Europe and the rising of Middle Eastern nationalistic and independent thinking in foreign policy. Greece (and by extension Cyprus), being surrounded by isolationist and pro-Chinese Albania, Tito's Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria (Moscow's closest satellite) to the north, Turkey and Syria to the east (and Iraq even further east), Egypt (the latter three being susceptible to USSR's political and military influence) and Libya (which, after 1969, got rid of American and British facilities along with its monarchy) to the south, and always under the constant surveillance and possible threat of the Soviet naval presence in the eastern Mediterranean, was conspicuously in the eye of the vortex, or rather caught between two maelstroms

²⁷ PRO: FCO 9/148 Oral answer from Mr. Healey to Mr. Gardner, 31.5.67., Murtagh, *The Rape*, p. 155, Clogg, Richard. *A Concise History of Greece*, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 162 and Sakkas, John. 'The Greek dictatorship, the USA and the Arabs, 1967-1974', *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans* 2004 6(3), p.252. The other NATO ally in the region, Turkey, could not be considered sufficiently reliable as it was in a process of 'foreign policy reevaluation' (originating in the disillusionment in Ankara insofar as American intentions were concerned, as these were expressed in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis and the 1964 crisis in Cyprus), which resulted in a change in defence arrangements with the US, and in the improvement of relations with the Arabs, the EEC and the Soviet Union (which was substantiated by the economic agreement of March 1967, and corroborated by the Turkish Prime Minister's visit to Moscow later that year) (Zürcher, Erik. *Turkey: A Modern History*, London: I.B. Tauris, 1993, p. 288-90, CSIA European Security Working Group. 'Instability and Change on NATO's Southern Flank', *International Security*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Winter, 1978-1979), p. 166-167, 171).

²⁸ PRO: FCO 9/165 Speaking notes on Greece and NATO: Parliamentary question by Mr. Winnick, n.d.

deemed extremely dangerous to the West.²⁹ Since the people on the helm of Britain's external policy at the time, namely Wilson, Healey and, especially, Brown, were ardent followers of Bevin³⁰, and they had begun to see Britain as 'a medium-sized power'³¹ (or 'a major power of the second rank', as they preferred to say)³², there was not much space for a different point of view, and consequently, policy towards Greece to be formulated.³³ As a consequence, the issue of the Cyprus dispute also became a matter of priority for the Western Alliance, which made efforts, especially through the British, to persuade the two parties (i.e. Greece and Turkey at the time) to take bolder steps towards a peaceful settlement.³⁴

Nevertheless, a few months later, a considerable blow to the Colonels' already tarnished façade came from the core of one of their closest allies. On 4 October the Labour Party Conference at Scarborough (that is the conference of the party in power

²⁹ Xydis, Stephen G. 'Coups and Countercoups in Greece, 1967-1973 (with a postscript)', *Political Science Quarterly* 89 (1974), p. 524. It was, after all, only three days after the coup d'état in Athens that Leonid Brezhnev 'demanded the withdrawal of the American Sixth Fleet from the Mediterranean'. Walter Laqueur has argued that Moscow 'had little to lose from a war fought [in the region] by proxy' (Laqueur, Walter. *The road to war, 1967: the origins of the Arab-Israeli conflict* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, [1968], p.53).

³⁰ Ernest Bevin (Foreign Secretary from 1945 to 1951) was a pragmatist and a staunch anti-communist who played a significant part in the formulation of the Atlantic Alliance, by stimulating the Truman Doctrine, the first sign of commitment on the United States' part after WWII, and participating actively in the Marshall Plan (Bartlett, C.J. *British Foreign Policy in the Twentieth Century*, Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1989, p. 77-8). George Brown had idolised him and even changed the arrangement of submissions in the FO to that preferred by him. As Denis Healey admitted in his memoirs, Ernest Bevin was 'a [...] powerful political influence in the Labour movement as a whole' (Healey, Dennis. *The Time of My Life*, London: Michael Joseph, 1989, p.78). Michael Stewart whenever in trouble was reminded by his advisers of Bevin's apt comments (Stewart, Michael. *Life and Labour*, London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1980, p. 215), and Sir Paul Gore-Booth, the Permanent Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, before he assumed his post felt that he had to 'underline the immense admiration of all [his] generation in the service for Ernest Bevin' (Gore-Booth, Sir Paul. *With great truth and respect*, London: Constable, 1974, p. 323).

³¹ Coker, Christopher. 'Foreign and Defence Policy' in Hollowell, Jonathan ed. *Britain Since 1945*, Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2003, p.3.

³² As the 1969 Duncan Report asserted (Stewart, Michael. *Life and Labour*, p. 142).

³³ As the Permanent Under-Secretary of the FO revealed, British economy 'was far too vulnerable to short-term pressures on the balance of payments for a steady external policy to be planned and adhered to' (Gore-Booth, *Truth*, p. 330), and, as many scholars have argued, 'London wanted to show solidarity with the Americans, demonstrate its usefulness in the Cold War and so reinforce its own world role' (Young, John W. 'Britain and 'LBJ's War', 1964-68', *Cold War History* 2002 2(3), p. 65. See also Abadi, Jacob. 'Great Britain and the Maghreb in the Epoch of Pan Arabism and Cold War', *Cold War History*, 2002 2(2), p. 136-7, Ponting, *Breach*, p. 215 and W .N. Medlicott in Bartlett, *British Foreign Policy*, p. 122-3).

³⁴ Murtagh, *The Rape*, p. 155-6.

in Britain) voted, notwithstanding Brown's plea not to³⁵, for the expulsion of Greece from NATO.³⁶ The Greek government responded through the newspaper that was expressing its views, 'Eleftheros Kosmos' (which is Greek for 'Free World', and, consequently, a highly ironic appellation), which claimed that some members of the Labour Party were influenced by communist propaganda, and had, wittingly or unwittingly, assisted the Soviet State in the past and were now doing so again. The article concluded by suggesting that 'the British people were sensitive about democracy, but they should confine their sensitiveness to their own country.'³⁷ As a result, and under subsequent pressure from Athens, the British (Labour) government, which by then appeared to have no 'coherent, long term policy or goals', and had become extremely unpopular with the electorate³⁸, decided to ignore the resolution of the conference.³⁹ This was perfectly in line with Wilson Cabinet's disregard of conference resolutions on a variety of foreign policy issues (such as Vietnam, the Nigerian civil war and Rhodesia)⁴⁰, and the general ambience for, as Woodhouse has argued, 'throughout the dictatorship it was the various vehicles of public opinion rather than the executive authorities that sustained the resistance' to military rule.⁴¹

A matter of real interest and high importance to the British, inherited by their imperial past, was Cyprus. So, when tension reappeared once again in November 1967, due to skirmishes on the island between the Greek-Cypriot National Guard (commanded by Grivas) and inhabitants of two Turkish-Cypriot villages, London was

³⁵ PRO: FCO 9/165 Mr. Brown's speech to the Labour Party Annual Conference, 4.10.67.

³⁶ The representatives of the party seemed to be divided, however, considering that the votes were 3,167,000 for and 2,898,000 against (Vournas, Tassos. *History of Contemporary Greece: Junta – Cyprus Dossier (1967-1974)*, Athens: Ekdoseis Patakis, 2003 (in Greek), p.87-8).

³⁷ *Ibid*, Telegram from Sir Michael Stewart, 17.10.67.

³⁸ Ponting, *Breach*, p. 183.

³⁹ Governmental officials, after a meeting with Labour MPs, ruled that their hitherto policy was 'basically correct but that [they] should seek to project it more clearly' (PRO: FCO 9/165 Record of Mr. Rodger's meeting with M.P.s by R.C. Samuel, 22.11.67).

⁴⁰ Ponting, *Breach*, p. 321 and Young, *LBJ's War*, p. 82-3.

⁴¹ Woodhouse, C. M. *The rise and fall of the Greek Colonels*, London: Granada, 1985, p. 40.

watching closely.⁴² Turkey threatened to invade but the crisis was resolved with the aid of Cyrus Vance, United States' special representative, and the upshot was the withdrawal of all unauthorised Greek and Turkish troops.⁴³ The British claimed a little later that it 'was very probably Sir Michael Stewart's personal intervention with the leaders of the military junta on the night of 15 November which resulted in instructions being sent to the Greek forces in Cyprus quickly enough to restore the situation there before the Turkish air strikes which would almost certainly have taken place at dawn on 16 November.'⁴⁴ This event, which marked another instance of brinkmanship in relations between the two NATO partners, was seen by Whitehall as a vindication of its policy of maintaining a working relationship with the Greek régime, for thus it had been able to make a positive contribution to the defusing of the crisis.⁴⁵ FO officials concluded that the Cyprus question was 'not only a British interest... [but] an interest of all who wish to keep the peace in the Eastern Mediterranean which the [November] crisis so nearly shattered', and, as a consequence, British influence in Athens was imperative.⁴⁶

Royal blues

The first serious event which called for a radical reappraisal of Britain's relationship with the regime was the abortive counter-coup instigated by Constantine

⁴² Brown had questioned Grivas' being under control and had even personally warned the Greek Foreign Minister about the 'gravest consequences' any attempt to impose a solution by force would incur (PRO: FCO 9/165 Speaking notes for Meeting between the Secretary of State and the Greek Foreign Minister, n.d.).

⁴³ Only 950 Greek and 650 Turkish soldiers were allowed on the island, according to the Zurich-London agreements of 1959-60. The fact that those covertly infiltrated during George Papandreou's premiership (9-12,000, a large number in relation to the 1,500 'illegal' Turks) were asked to leave was a diplomatic defeat for Greece and the beginning of the end for a united Cyprus.

⁴⁴ PRO: FCO 9/139 Memorandum on Greece by A.E. Davidson, 20.12.67.

⁴⁵ PRO: FCO 9/139 Letter from John Beith to the Central Department, 14.12.67.

⁴⁶ PRO: FCO 9/165 Speaking notes for Socialist International Party Leaders' Conference, n.d. As A.E. Davidson, a FO official, declared: 'to break off diplomatic relations in these circumstances would be a dramatic gesture. But it would be an empty one' (PRO: FCO 9/165 Notes for Parliamentary Labour Party Meeting, 7.11.67).

on 13 December 1967, the upshot of which was that the King fled to Rome and the Colonels tightened their grip on the country. London seemed to be completely unaware of the countercoup and had difficulty even identifying what had triggered off the King's action.⁴⁷ It managed to assert, though, that, despite Constantine's 'very brave attempt'⁴⁸ and although the matter of recognition was still pending, Britain 'in practise [would] have to go on dealing with the Junta.'⁴⁹

The government, after an initial numbness, reacted through a statement by the Prime Minister in the House of Commons, saying that King Constantine enjoyed the moral support of the British people and of H. Wilson personally, in his efforts to re-establish freedom in his country. However, only one week after the Prime Minister acknowledged the King's letter of gratitude for the genuine expression of the Wilson government in his favour, the Foreign Office informed the State Department that Britain was prepared to resume doing business with the Greek (military) government.⁵⁰

This time (unlike when the Colonels seized power) the question of recognition did arise. Whitehall, following its well-established 'doctrine of effective control'⁵¹ decided to continue diplomatic relations with Athens, without further delay. A formal act was once again unnecessary as a call by the British Ambassador to Colonel (now Prime Minister) Papadopoulos would have been sufficient.⁵² Information, however, that efforts were being made to reconcile the King and the Colonels and persuade him to return to Greece, were the cause for a delay of according recognition, justified by

⁴⁷ PRO: FCO 9/139 Speaking notes on Cabinet meeting on Greece, 14.12.67.

⁴⁸ PRO: FCO 9/139 Telegram from Sir M. Stewart to FO, 14.12.67.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ PRO: PREM 13/2140 Telegram, 18.1.68.

⁵¹ The criteria for recognition of governments were set out in an office circular by Ernest Bevin in 1950.

⁵² PRO: FCO Telegram from Mr. Rodgers to Secretary of State, 14.12.67.

London's desire not to weaken the King's position.⁵³ Consultations with other NATO allies, the French, the Germans, and most importantly the Americans, in the light, however, of the anxiety lest the junta began to feel that [it] could exist without [Britain]' and, consequently, become 'less inclined in the future to pay heed to what [London said]'⁵⁴, led to the postponement of recognition until after New Year.

When January came, nevertheless, the King's position did not appear to some British to be 'so important [...] as to outweigh the considerations in favour of resuming normal dealings with the Government in Athens.'⁵⁵ London recognized the new junta government on 25 January 1968, two days after the official recognition by the United States. This decision, again taken after prior consultation within the framework of the prevailing Anglo-American 'special relationship', was justified by arguing that British ministers had reached the conclusion that 'it was no longer possible or profitable to try to hold the common line regarding recognition.'⁵⁶ [...] The policy of holding back [adopted in the context of the immediate post-21 April period], which had no doubt produced good results during the first weeks, was now in danger of being counter-productive and might lead to a serious reduction of Western influence over the regime and to the encouragement of Extremist elements.'⁵⁷

London wished to help the Colonels in power to consolidate their position, fearing that less moderate elements would prevail and convert the entire political scene of Greece into a drama staged and starred in by a group of intransigent, trigger happy, and bloodthirsty villains with chevrons. This postulation sounds like a perfect

⁵³ PRO: FCO 9/139 Telegram from FO to Athens, 16.12.67.

⁵⁴ PRO: FCO 9/139 Telegram from Sir M. Stewart to FO, 20.12.67. This is another instance of Anglo-American coordination of actions; see PRO: FCO 9/139 Telegram from Washington to FO, 20.12.67 and PRO: FCO 9/139 Telegram from Athens to FO, 21.12.67.

⁵⁵ PRO: FCO 9/132 Minute of Lord Lambton's approach to the Secretary of State, 18.1.68.

⁵⁶ Some other governments, notably the German and Turkish governments, had already taken some steps towards recognition.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, Telegram from Sir E. Shuckburgh, 19.1.68.

example of irony, as some would argue that Britain, by pursuing that policy, contributed to the further establishment and deeper entrenchment of a regime of exactly the type that it wanted to prevent from getting the control of the country. Nonetheless, what could have been the consequences of overt assistance to the still weak and dispersed forces of opposition to the regime will remain forever unknown.

Furthermore, criticism that the British government was condoning military rule⁵⁸ by dealing with the new government grew and grew, only to be countered with the expression of the familiar point that ‘dealing with a government is not the same thing as approving it.’⁵⁹ This declaration marked the beginning of a series of demarcations that distinguished between adopting a tough stance towards the junta and cooperating fully with them.

1968: ‘Business as usual’

1968 opened with the Colonels signing a contract with *Maurice Fraser Associates*, a British firm of public relations consultants, in order to quench their thirst for international recognition. The firm, however, was not really dexterous in the handling of its responsibilities, leading to the worsening of the regime’s image abroad by the time the contract was cancelled in September.

Although the second year of the Colonels seemed to have started as they had wished (they had consolidated their power domestically after King Constantine ‘delivered his people into [their] hands’⁶⁰), and they had resumed normal diplomatic

⁵⁸ Attributed by the British Ambassador to ‘the pathological Greek belief that [British] are somehow responsible for every development that takes place in this country [i.e. Greece]’ (PRO: FCO 9/132 Letter from Sir M. Stewart to the Viscount Hood, 29.2.68.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, Telegram, 30.1.68.

⁶⁰ PRO: FCO 9/838 Annual review by Sir M. Stewart, 10.1.69.

relations with all their neighbours and the major powers), it also had in store some of the most severe blows to be inflicted on them during their seven year rule. The first, minor, instance, occurred on 11 April when William Rodgers, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, said in the House of Commons that there was ‘strong *prima facie* evidence of people having been subjected to what one would regard as inhuman treatment under police interrogation.’⁶¹ Decisive, insofar as the estrangement that followed between the British and Greek governments was concerned, was Harold Wilson’s reference, in his reply to a supplementary question in the House of Commons on 25 June, to ‘bestialities’ that had been perpetrated in Greece.⁶² Both instances received a complaint from the Greek Ambassador in London, Mr. Verykios, but the latter incident in particular provoked a strong response from the Greek government including threatened action against British commercial interests.

A week later the most seminal and oft-quoted document within the Foreign Office was produced. In his Memorandum of 2 July to the Defence and Overseas [sic] Committee, the Foreign Secretary, Michael Stewart (who succeeded George Brown and who happened to have the same first and last name as the then British Ambassador in Athens, *Sir* Michael Stewart), laid down the four main objectives of Britain in Greece. Those were:

- i) ‘to promote a return to constitutional rule and democratic liberties and conditions of stability;
- ii) to preserve, so far as possible, the military effectiveness of Greece as a NATO ally;
- iii) to protect British subjects and interests generally, and in particular to pursue our commercial interests;

⁶¹ PRO: FCO 9/835 House of Commons speech, 11.4.68.

⁶² PRO: FCO 55/80 Oral answer from the Prime Minister, Mr. H. Wilson, to Mr. John Fraser, 25.6.68.

iv) to maintain our ability to influence the Greek Government in matters of foreign policy, for example, Cyprus.’⁶³

These interests were in general terms pursued by the Labour government with success. The second and the fourth points especially, regarding issues pertaining to pragmatic politics were constantly in the mind of every British official who dealt with the Colonels’ regime. The first and the third interests, nonetheless, which did not belong to the sphere of *Realpolitik*, were arguably sometimes neglected and on other times considered conflicting. Steps aimed at methodically pressuring the Greek government to hold democratic and, by international standards, acceptable elections not only fell in to a void but Whitehall’s anxiety over the future state of the ‘plaster-covered’ country⁶⁴ was also often considered as intervention in the internal affairs of Greece, and was, therefore, dispelled.

Events, however, were to take a slightly different turn and international developments again played a significant role. The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in late August to counter the impending reforms of ‘the Prague Spring’, and the increased fear of a continuing communist threat, emphasized in Greece by Soviet naval activity in the Mediterranean, which this engendered, led to a further reconsideration of Britain’s policy towards the Colonels.⁶⁵ Relations between the two countries were already at low ebb.

A month after Warsaw Pact tanks entered Prague and while the European Commission of Human Rights was in the process of examining allegations of violations of human rights on the part of Greece, some FO officials thought that it

⁶³ PRO: FCO 9/870 Memorandum by M. Stewart, 2.7.68.

⁶⁴ The head of the triumvirate, Colonel Georgios Papadopoulos, in his desperate endeavour to justify the military’s interference in the political affairs of Greece, distinctively used medical references in his rhetoric; he used to call Greece as ‘the patient’ that he and his colleagues were determined to ‘heal’ by putting it in a plaster cast.

⁶⁵ PRO: FCO 9/870 Memorandum for the Secretary of State’s meeting with Sir Michael Stewart, 7.11.68.

would be helpful if Signor Brosio, the General Secretary of NATO, *spoke* to the Greek Foreign Minister about the situation in the country.⁶⁶ Lord Hood, however, the following day said that there were certain reasons that made FCO hesitant. These were a) the fact that there was to be a referendum in Greece by the end of the month and London would like to see its result before it took action, b) the American attitude, which was then favourable to the Colonels, and c) the attitude of other NATO powers.⁶⁷ Events in Eastern Europe played a significant part, as the war in the Middle East had one year before, in Western perceptions of the Greek dictatorship. The junta was increasingly being seen in a much more favourable light, as it appeared to be a geostrategically important NATO stronghold. The affirmations of the Colonels about their uncompromising allegiance to the Western Alliance were greeted in the West as a much sought after reassurance in the face of ‘communist danger’. Britain, in particular, wanting to assert its proximity to American views, could not assume the role of the leader in a motion unpleasant to the regime in Athens. Therefore, even the idea of having Brosio merely discussing with members of the junta human rights issues was not painstakingly followed. As a result of that and in conjunction with the result of the referendum on the Greek Constitution, the Colonels, bolstered by the greater emphasis being put on NATO military preparedness in the wake of the Czechoslovakian crisis, toughened their stance and, especially, their resistance to pressure from their allies on Greek internal matters.

Britain, at the time, was suspected of maintaining an uncompromisingly hostile attitude. This feeling was sustained by the reports of Amnesty International, comments in the BBC Greek Service, and to some extent by the British press.⁶⁸ Greek

⁶⁶ PRO: FCO 9/166 Memorandum on Greece and NATO by A.E. Davidson, 17.9.68.

⁶⁷ PRO: FCO 9/166 Letter from Hood to Sir Bernard Burrows, 18.12.68.

⁶⁸ The fact that the BBC, Amnesty International, and a large number of Greeks opposed to the junta were all operating from London contributed to the feeling in Athens that the British capital was ‘an

ministers gave the appearance of being unwilling to do business with London and the Greek government in general was no longer receptive to representations from H. M. Ambassador.

Against this background, which was enhanced by the domestic successes of the regime⁶⁹, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (the Foreign and Commonwealth Offices merged in October 1968) ruled that it had to make use of ‘different tactics’ if British interests were to be successfully pursued. This decision marked the beginning of a new phase in Anglo-Greek relations, for, as a report by the Southern European Department of the FCO claimed, whereas in the first phase of relations between the two countries after the coup d’état the British government was well placed to affect the thinking of Greek leaders, British officials appeared by then to have ‘shot their bolt’.⁷⁰

The policy of making private representations to the Greek government had contributed to certain improvements in the Greek regime (for instance, the closing of the Yioura prisoners’ camp), but representations to persuade them to hasten the return to democratic rule were no longer likely to be receptive, and could even prove counter-productive. The FCO, therefore, insinuated the notion of condoning the nature and the deeds of the junta, arguing that Britain’s policy should be ‘to give pride of place to strictly British interests, bearing in mind that, however illiberal they may be, the Greek government (unlike Spain or Rhodesia) are not doing H.M.G. any

island of opposition in an otherwise decreasingly hostile world.’ (PRO: FCO 9/870 Letter from D.S.L. Dodson, 1.11.68)

⁶⁹ The Colonels had managed to capture the perpetrator of an assassination attempt on their leader’s life, to achieve an overwhelming vote for their constitution, to be in an economically strong position (chiefly through deals with Greek magnates like Aristotle Onassis, the second husband of Jackie Kennedy), and to strengthen their bargaining powers with the US, as the American decision to release certain categories of heavy military equipment for supply to Greece demonstrated, all in three months time.

⁷⁰ PRO: FCO 9/870 Memorandum for the Secretary of State’s meeting with Sir Michael Stewart, 7.11.68.

harm.⁷¹ The above proclamation is quite revealing of the disquietude that Whitehall was feeling as a result of pressures exerted on it within the general, international context of the Cold War, and by the domestic problems (predominantly economic, caused by the 1966-7 financial crises, but also political and identity problems due to the relinquishment of its East of Suez policy and role) that tantalised it.⁷² Concepts of self-preservation and self-interest seemed to be its guides in relation to the Greek issue. The so far oscillating behaviour of the British government appeared to change instantly into an open declaration in favour of the military regime, which was regarded as the sole safeguard in Greece of Old Albion's self-seeking commercial interests.

The situation, still, was, in reality, not that bleak; the British government had the national interest as its first priority, although it did not cease, throughout its term, despite some occasional and mostly superficial fluctuations, to be interested in the conditions of life of the amiable people of Greece. Although the British concentrated their efforts on 'normalising relations with the junta and recreating [their] stock of influence with the Greek government with all means open [to them]', they wished to attain that aim not merely to pursue their national interest but also in order to be in a position that would enable them to function as a lever of pressure on the Colonels re domestic matters (like the holding of general elections, the treatment of political prisoners and detainees, and human rights issues in general). Furthermore, in spite of the British government's decision to 'do everything in [its] power to improve [Britain's] export performance (including inviting the competent Greek Ministers to

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Pickering, Jeffrey. *Britain's Withdrawal from East of Suez: the politics of retrenchment*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998, p. 150.

visit the United Kingdom)', the supply of war material that could help the Colonels to repress the opposition was excluded.

As London perceived that it could not hasten Greece's return to democracy until it had been able to rebuild its influence in Athens and that admonishing the military regime in public might well do harm, Sir Michael Stewart was asked to convey to the Greek Prime Minister the British government's acceptance of the fact that 'the timing of Greece's return to a democratic system [was] a matter for the Greek government', and its synchronous anxiety 'to establish a good working relationship with the Greek government, whose importance in the Western Alliance [it] fully recognise[d].'⁷³

Another major event of 1968 was the attempted assassination of the Greek Prime Minister, Georgios Papadopoulos by Alexandros Panagoulis on 13 August. A thorough examination of the events led to the conclusion that the Cypriot Minister of the Interior and Defence, Polycarpos Yorkadjis had assisted Panagoulis, providing him with a passport, refuge, and explosive material. A few weeks after the attempt, however, a rather peculiar rumour surfaced; Colonel Rufoghallis, a Greek Secret Service man himself, was reported by the King to have claimed that 'the British Secret Service was behind the plot and had engineered it in order to make bad blood between the Cypriot and Greek governments.'⁷⁴ British officials were caught by surprise by this, to them, outrageous, allegation, and were concerned because there seemed to be 'some risk that both parties [Greece and Cyprus] will try to make "the British Secret Service" the scapegoat.'⁷⁵ The allegations were soon dispelled and the matter was completely disregarded. There has been no indication whatsoever of the British government having previous knowledge of the attempt, let alone having taken any part in it.

⁷³ PRO: FCO 9/870 Record of a meeting by D.J.D. Maitland, 22.11.68.

⁷⁴ PRO: FCO 9/830 Telegram by Sir E. Shuckburgh, 1.10.68.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

A plea to Mr. Wilson to urge the Greek regime to spare Panagoulis, made by the League for Democracy in Greece⁷⁶ and by some Labour MPs, seemed to have had some result as, according to an article in the following day's *Guardian*, 'the British government, while disclaiming any intention of intervening in Greek affairs or directly appealing for clemency, has pointed out to the Greek embassy in London that a reprieve would favourably affect public opinion [in Britain].'⁷⁷

While the trial of those alleged to have taken part in the attempt was in progress, and on the same day that the Supreme Court ratified the results of the referendum on the Greek constitution (91.87 per cent in favour), another crisis, of minor proportions, however, in Anglo-Greek relations, broke out. Mr. Papadopoulos (who had relinquished his title of Colonel when he became Prime Minister) telephoned a member of the British embassy to say that 'Greece would regard implementation of the International Transport Workers' Federation decision to expel the Greek Trade Unions affiliated to the Federation and to boycott all Greek shipping as an inimical act.'⁷⁸ The British reaction was immediate; the Chargé d'Affaires delivered a message from the Foreign Secretary saying that Whitehall had no control over the federation (which was an international organization based in London and whose General Secretary was British) whatever and had no foreknowledge of this resolution, thus, assuring the Greek government that the resolution passed by the I.T.F. in no way represented the policy of Whitehall.

The dispute over the I.T.F. resolution, though, provided evidence of Papadopoulos' personal suspicion of the British government's attitude towards Greece. As a result, British officials were worried lest the Colonels hold London responsible for the boycott of Greek ships, for the additional reason that, by an

⁷⁶ 'U.S. Plea to Save Panagoulis', *Daily Telegraph*, November 21, 1968.

⁷⁷ PRO: FCO 9/870 Telegram by Sir M. Stewart, 22.11.68.

⁷⁸ PRO: FCO 9/838 Annual review by Sir M. Stewart, 10.1.69.

unfortunate coincidence, the boycott fell in the shipping field where British interests were in direct competition with Greek interests.⁷⁹ The most important consequence of that rift would be instructions by the junta not to award government contracts to any British firms and possibly to adopt restrictions towards British exports generally.

Conclusion

The ‘diplomatic’ (to say the least) handling of the issue of the Greek dictatorship, however, was, in general terms, considered successful even by the Conservatives who chose to continue it (with some conspicuous gestures of support to the Colonels, though). British officials, clearly influenced by overriding concerns deriving from the implications of the Cold War era, ventured, during the first two years of military rule in Greece, to keep a balanced stance towards the junta, going out of their way to maintain a ‘good working relationship’ with it, but also criticizing its methods and urging it towards a ‘return to constitutional rule’ in informal, personal exchanges with Greek ministers.⁸⁰ Britain managed to condone and even to support the Colonels (within the NATO context), but was also successful in ignoring their threats and blackmail and standing up to them when considered expedient, even though it was suffering from a bad setback due to its economic and political crises. Finally, the Wilson government achieved something really important: to make Britain appear, at almost the same time, as a close and faithful ally of Greece (not of the junta), by buttressing its defence capabilities in the face of external threats, and as the principal supporter of the effort to bring democratic liberties and stability back to Greece, ‘this lively and unpredictable little country whose affairs, out of all proportion

⁷⁹ PRO: FCO 9/874 Brief by J.E.C. Macrae, 14.11.68.

⁸⁰ The doctrine of ‘disconnected responsibilities’, distinguishing between dealing with a government and approving it and between moral and pragmatic considerations, was quite indicative of the British position.

to its size, seem[ed] likely to impose themselves on the international scene for years to come.⁸¹

⁸¹ PRO: FCO 26/267 Information policy report by Sir M. Stewart, 26.6.68.

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