

British reactions to the ‘rape of Greek democracy’¹

As was remarked in the *Greek Observer*, a monthly anti-regime propaganda newspaper edited and published in London, ‘historic ties with the States and with Greece made Britain’s position pivotal’² during the 1967 events in Greece. In view of the well-documented British connection stemming from British interests and involvement in Greek affairs over the past two centuries, there was nothing surprising or unjustifiable in the strong manifestation of British concerns over the events that shook Greece in April in 1967. Rather, this was nothing other than the continuation of a pattern resulting from a complexity of factors associated with Greece’s long-standing significance for British interests.

The origins of British involvement in Greek affairs predate the founding of the Greek nation with the formation of the group of the Philhellenes. Their interference got established with the signing of the Treaty of London in 1830, when the newly founded Greek nation was assigned as a *protégé* under the jurisdiction of a joint triadic protectorate of which Britain, in particular, played the most notable part. British agile influence in Greek affairs continued unabated during the first part of the 20th century too. Although the close Anglo-Greek cooperation was fully manifested during the first and second world wars, the interwar years were equally significant for the strengthening of their bond. Besides, it needs to be borne in mind that the extent of British preponderance in Greek affairs was linked to the degree of British penetration

¹ Telegram, Athens 4797, Philips Talbot, American Embassy in Athens, to Department of State, Secret, Priority, 21 April 1967, Department of State, Central Files, POL 23-9 Greece, National Administration of Records and Archives, MD (NARA thereafter)

² *Greek Observer*, March 1969, p. 24

of the Greek economy; it is undoubtedly striking that in 1935 ‘half of the Greek public debt of 89,000,000 [pounds sterling] was held by private British investors’³.

British involvement in Greek affairs up until the Second World War was far from being negligible. However, its apogee was reached during the years immediately following the termination of the war. The milestone was provided with the signing in October 1944 of the infamous ‘percentages agreement’ between Churchill and Stalin, with which Greece was unequivocally assigned within the British sphere of influence. Only two weeks after its signing, this agreement gave self-invited Britain the justification necessary for pulling the strings with unencumbered ease during the Greek civil war, in the form of energetic support for the Greek Nationalists’ attempt to countenance the threat staged by the Greek Communists.

Despite the fact that by 1947, Britain, unable to afford the massive injections of foreign financial assistance had relinquished most of its responsibilities in Greece to the US, thus bringing its direct involvement in Greek affairs to a halt, its sizeable interest in those affairs was never eliminated. In short, it could be argued that at the turn of the century and beforehand Greece’s cooperation was highly valued by the British for safeguarding their route to India; in the 1930s and 1940s, it was important against Italy and Germany; and in the 1960s, although the British gradually withdrew from East of Suez following the decimation of their Empire, Greece assumed significance in view of the Russian threat in the Mediterranean and their special interest in keeping Cyprus out of the Communist sphere of influence. It becomes comprehensible why Britain’s role in Greece’s internal affairs has been widely and rightly interpreted to be one of exceptional power and influence, although there is

³ John V. Kofas, *Intervention and Underdevelopment: Greece during the Cold War*, p. 7

disagreement about the nature of the effect on the outcome of post-war developments in Greece.

The fact that the Anglo-Greek special bond had persisted unchallenged was manifested in a number of statements. For instance, the King of the Hellenes, Paul, was quoted saying during his official state visit in London in 1963: ‘the gallant British people have always come to our side in times of peril. We have experienced their bravery at close quarters. We are proud to give hospitality to their dead who fell on Greek soil in common struggles with ourselves’⁴. It could be argued that this succinct retrospective clearly demonstrated that the two countries have enjoyed ‘a special, historical and emotional relationship’⁵. Indeed, such was the intensity of their special relationship and the traditional affection felt by the British people for Greece, that there existed a widely shared belief among ordinary Greek citizens that their country’s destinies got shaped in London. It came therefore as no surprise that allegations about Britain’s tentative involvement in the Colonels’ *coup* spread rapidly and eventually became common currency.

In the light of this highly speculative climate, before proceeding with the examination of British policy towards Greece in the wake of the Colonels’ coming to power, it is crucial to investigate the validity of floating hypotheses regarding British anticipation of, or even complicity in, the April *coup*, in an attempt to piece together some of the mosaic of the political demonology surrounding it. Despite the seemingly insuperable impediment of Britain’s extreme reservation with the release of sensitive material involving intelligence information, through the implementation of a variety of different research methods, the examination of all potentially related material,

⁴ Telegram, Athens 1313, Henry Labouisse (US Embassy in Athens) to Secretary of State, Priority, 12 June 1963, Department of State, Central Files, POL 15 Greece, NARA

⁵ Memorandum by Sir Michael Stewart, UK Policy towards Greece, Confidential, 17 February 1969, FCO, The National Archives of England, Kew, Richmond, Surrey (NA thereafter)

including American sources, and the thorough assessment of a vast array of arguments, the resultant conclusions allude to the fact that the allegations regarding British involvement in the planning and/or execution of the *coup* were nothing more than mythoplastic.

However, through a rigorous process of investigation and analysis, it was also established that the British government or at least some of its intelligence officials must have received information prior to the *coup* about its planning. In 1966, for instance, in a letter addressed to Sir Ralph Murray, the British Ambassador in Athens, due consideration was given to ‘the strong likelihood of a right-wing coup’⁶. In fact, this was not considered to be a secret, as even the Greek people suspected that it might happen. It is indicative that the same report later referred to ‘the surprising equanimity with which the Greeks regarded the possibility of some extra-parliamentary solution’⁷. In another instance, a month later, Sir Ralph Murray reported to the Foreign Office that ‘such equilibrium as has been reached here is essentially unstable and sooner or later it is bound to be upset’⁸.

The citation of the above comments from the immediate pre-coup years is usefully complemented by the recent testimony of the British Counsellor at the Embassy in Athens, the late Sir Derek Dodson, who commended on the possibility of a *coup* in the following way:

...there was a period before the coup when everybody thought that there was going to be a coup... If you go back to the exchange of letters between the King and the Papandreu, ... there was a great rift between the Papandreu and the King, there were endless changes of government, ... so people thought there was going to be a coup, and this did not come as a great surprise.⁹

⁶ Letter, H. A. F. Hohler to Sir R. Murray, Confidential, 27 June 1966, FO 371/185677, NA

⁷ *Ibid*

⁸ Letter, Sir Ralph Murray to Michael Stewart, Dispatch no. 31, Confidential, 25 July 1966, FO 371/185666, NA

⁹ Interview with Sir Derek Dodson

It is undisputed that political processes in Greece were experiencing a gradual degeneration, which was especially marked in the 21-month period prior to the *coup*. In fact, a closer examination of Greece's socio-political situation before the *coup* suggests that conditions were opportune for a deviation from democracy, as the tempestuous stalemate gradually led the country to an impasse, due to a number of accentuated political rifts, exacerbated by increasing social unrest, a rash of street demonstrations, sporadic strikes and marches. Between July 1965 and April 1967, Greece was governed by a kaleidoscope of political combinations, as the position of the Premier was filled by five different politicians¹⁰, all of whom failed to secure a vote of confidence, therefore had to resign within months or even days of the inception of their premiership. The British Council in Greece, in a retrospective assessment, concluded that 'the social and industrial unrest, administrative chaos and moral confusion... has held the country to ransom'¹¹ in the years before the *coup*.

It becomes therefore crystal clear that the British, and indeed those knowledgeable about Greek affairs, must have been alarmed at the apparent signs of political decay, hence suspected that an unconstitutional act was in the offing. Interestingly enough nonetheless, they were 'caught napping' at the time of the putsch. Baron Bridges, the Head of Chancery of the British Embassy in Greece, recalls the way he experienced the very first moments of the Colonels' *coup* in the night of 21st April, as follows:

My wife... heard some funny noises going on, and she came to me and said there were noises of armoured vehicles, and one passed by an alley, close to our garden and stopped and said: "Have you heard? There has been a *πραξικόπημα (coup d' état)*". So she woke me up at half past six, and a telephone call arrived from the Embassy saying "could you please come in at

¹⁰ Led by namely, George Novas (15 July – 4 August 1965), Ilias Tsirimokos (20 August – 28 August 1965), Stefanos Stefanopoulos (17 September 1965 – 21 December 1966), Ioannis Paraskevopoulos (21 December 1966 – 30 March 1967), Panayiotis Kanellopoulos (2 April – 14 April 1967)

¹¹ Representatives' Annual Report, 1967-68, the British Council, Greece, Restricted, FCO 13/92, NA

once?” So I went to the Embassy which at that time was at Loukianou, where I found most of the rest of the staff trying to find out about Greek torture going on, and particularly our military attaché was phoning up his friends and other attachés, and we were pulling what we knew together into telegrams to send off to London...¹²

This oxymoron can be attributed to the fact that most of the intelligence reports sent from the embassy in Athens to the Foreign Office paid attention exclusively to the likelihood of a *coup* planned to be carried out by Generals or Senior Officers. In fact, during the months before the *coup* there had been in Greece a good deal of idle talk about a *coup* that was being commissioned under the name *Ierax* (Hawk) by the Greek King to be executed by the Chief of the National Defence General Staff, General Spandidakis¹³. Such was the degree of anticipation of the King’s orchestrated *coup* that *The Economist’s* special correspondent in Greece argued one week after the Colonels’ *coup* had taken place that ‘what happened in Greece in the early hours of April 21st turns out to have been the wrong *coup d’état*’¹⁴.

However, while it is undoubted that most intelligence reports compiled before the *coup* pointed out the serious possibility, almost certainty, of such an act being organised by the Greek Generals following orders from King Constantine, as an attempt to pre-empt the Papandreous’ anticipated victory in the forthcoming elections, according to the convincing evidence, information was also gathered and communicated regarding the underground activities of the actual protagonists of the *coup* years before they finally took action. Hence, the officials’ professed ignorance of the executors’ identity can be questioned, as there are reports that highlighted the underground activities of the triumvirate years before the *coup*. These had been mainly composed by American intelligence, but it would be safe to conclude that,

¹² Interview with Baron Bridges

¹³ Laurence Stern, *The Wrong Horse*, p. 41

¹⁴ International Report, *The Economist*, 29 April 1967, p. 445

given the close cooperation between the two countries, particularly at the intelligence level, they were shared with their British counterparts.

More specifically, according to a memorandum drafted by Charilaos Lagoudakis, a Greek American and veteran analyst of the State Department's Office of Intelligence and Research and submitted in February 1967, intelligence officials had been warned that Papadopoulos and his entourage were conspiring for a *coup*:

Since June 19, 1965, RNA [Near East Desk] has seen some 15 CIA reports from various sources on the so-called "Rightist Greek Military Conspiratorial Group"... [which] is ready to stage a military coup, when, in its view, a dictatorship would become necessary as the only alternative to Centre Union control of Parliament¹⁵.

What is also very interesting is that in one cable drafted in March 1967, General Spandidakis is reported as having stated that

within the past ten days various key officers have been on unofficial alert status, the first step in implementing "Ierax (Hawk) Number Two" (*Field comment*: According to Spandidakis, "Ierax Number Two" is a plan for the military takeover of Greece contingent upon the occurrence of another political crisis. In the event such a crisis occurs, the plan outlines the role of key military units which would be involved in the take-over. See [*document number not declassified*] (TDCSDB-315/03301-66) – [not found] for additional details on this contingency plan)... Key officers on unofficial alert status are ... GAGS G-3 Chief Lieutenant Colonel Georgios Papadopoulos.¹⁶

Nonetheless, for unknown reasons, the gathering of further information about the Colonels' underground activities came to a halt just months before their long-term plans were finally put into practice in April 1967. The intelligence personnel clearly failed to adequately observe or report that the Colonels' long-monitored intentions of executing a *coup* were imminent, before the Greek King could give the green light for his own *coup*. Moreover, even more inexplicably, the recipients of still earlier

¹⁵ Laurence Stern, *The Wrong Horse*, p. 43

¹⁶ Intelligence Information Cable, Country Greece, Subject: Increased Activity of Group Advocating Dictatorship, Central Intelligence Agency, DDI Files, Intelligence Information Cables, Secret; No Foreign Dissem/Controlled Dissem/No Dissem Abroad, 9 March 1967, LBJ Library

warnings about such covert activities chose to disregard them, a fact which clearly accounts for the surprise manifested by the British government upon receiving the news. It is indicative that the Foreign Office department responsible for Greece stated in the summer of 1966 that ‘We told the Secretary of State that we had no recent indication that any right-wing coup was imminent’ and assessed that ‘EDA [Greek Democratic Left] had been fostering such ideas in order to gain support for their own policy, but as long as the King was resolutely opposed to such a coup, it seemed unlikely that the army leaders could organize one with success’¹⁷.

In fact, the undeniable surprise felt by British officials, not at the actual *coup* but rather at the *coup*’s timing and perpetrators, clears the British government of any suspicions of wrongdoing. Besides, the chances of British involvement were seriously curtailed as the British Labour government of that time, a fervent advocate of ethical foreign policy, placed emphasis on minimising interventionist policies, as its adamant refusal to join the Vietnam War proved, as well as on limiting defence expenditure and overseas commitments, while prioritising home spending instead. Finally, and in spite of the above, it should be mentioned that the one fact that could invalidate all allegations about British complicity would have been the communication by the relevant British officials of their, albeit limited, foreknowledge of the Colonels’ underground activities to the relevant Greek authorities, who could have taken the necessary measures to avert the *coup*.

Despite the lack of solid grounds to substantiate claims of British perplexity in the coming to power of the Greek Colonels, the vast majority of the data consulted confirms the view that the British government did nothing to influence the regime’s downfall, after it had assumed power. It can certainly be argued that it was not the

¹⁷ H. A. F. Hohler (Foreign Office) to Sir Ralph Murray (British Embassy in Athens), Confidential, 27 June 1966, FO 371/185677, NA

responsibility of the British government to undertake actions that could influence the evolution of another country's domestic developments – not that the policy of direct intervention in Greek affairs was unfamiliar practice to British politicians, as the recent past, especially at the onset of the Greek civil war, had unquestionably proven. However, there were apparent differences between the mid-1940s and the late 1960s, namely that Britain's world power status had considerably shrunk consequently its role in world affairs was taken over by the U.S. Furthermore, and perhaps even more significantly, the Colonels' regime was fiercely opposed to Communism, which had constituted the *raison d' être* for British interference in Greek affairs in the 1940s.

This is perhaps the most catalytic reason for which Britain chose to follow a policy of tolerance towards the dramatic Greek events of 21st April 1967. The British government's first reactions to the *coup* at policy level, are best summarised in one word, 'consultations'. In fact, one of the immediate actions of the British government was to call Ralph Murray to return to England for consultations. Meanwhile, a series of consultations took place not only among British officials, but also with their foreign counterparts with whom the British opened direct channels of communication. For instance, there is reference in the files to the British ambassador's lengthy call, the day after the *coup*, to his American counterpart. Furthermore, as was cited at a Cabinet Meeting, 'we [the British] were in close touch with the United States and the Federal German governments, whose views were in accordance with our own'¹⁸.

The underlying reason behind those lengthy deliberations was the need to acquire a better grasp of the events. For many hours after the *coup*, most officials were trying to gather information regarding the identity of the *coup* perpetrators. This

¹⁸ Cabinet Conclusions (67) 28th meeting, 4 May 1967, CAB 128/42, NA

is not surprising because, as has already been discussed, the widespread belief prior to the *coup* held the King to be the only possible executor of such an act.

Meanwhile, the British government made every effort to keep in close and constant contact with King Constantine and concentrated its efforts on restoring his influence. According to American sources, during the fateful fourteen hours that followed the communication of the news of the putsch, the United States and the British envoys met the King, to whom Sir Ralph Murray strongly recommended to refuse to accept the *fait accompli*. Another unassailable proof of the British government's dissatisfaction was its emphasis on making public knowledge the fact that the King had gone along unwillingly with the new government, a line that they encouraged the BBC and the British press to take, and emphasised in Parliament by clarifying that the 'King Constantine had not been a party to the revolt'¹⁹. As Sir Patrick Dean, British ambassador in Washington, told Secretary of State Rusk, 'in background briefings to British press and to BBC, Brit Govt sources had discreetly supported King'²⁰. This was done in the belief that 'this will protect [the] image of [the] monarch and at the same time assist him retain political leverage vis-à-vis new government'²¹.

In addition, it was also repeatedly mentioned, when the opportunity arose during the heated debates in both Houses, that Her Majesty's Government had made clear to the new rulers in Greece that 'recent events have placed a strain on Anglo-Greek relations' and that they hoped that 'advances towards the restoration of

¹⁹ Cabinet Conclusions (67) 23d meeting, 27 April 1967, CAB 128/42, NA

²⁰ Telegram, State 187449, Rusk, Department of State to American Embassy in Athens, Secret, 3 May 1967, Department of State, Central Files, POL 15 Greece, NARA

²¹ Telegram, State 180756, Katzenbach (Dept of State) to American Embassy in Athens, Secret, Limited Distribution, 23 April 1967, Department of State, Central Files, POL 15-1 Greece, POL Greece-UK, NARA

democratic procedures and civil liberties will make our relations easier'²². According to another report,

[British] Ambassador in Athens had told both the Greek Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister that the Foreign Secretary, George Brown, had impressed upon him, while he was recently in London for consultations, the strength of public opinion here [in Britain] in regard to recent events in Greece, which must have their effect on our future relations with that country.²³

In the meantime, they refrained from contacting Greece's new rulers right away²⁴. In fact, immediately after the *coup*, they maintained only working-level consular contacts with the new regime and thoroughly froze all other direct dealings with *coup* officials and new ministers. For instance, the embassy deliberately abstained from its customary joining of the Greek authorities for the celebration of Easter, three days after the new regime's coming to power.

This 'distinctively chilly diplomatic situation'²⁵ crystallized, despite the regime's constant assurances about its genuinely democratic intentions. Everett, the British Embassy official responsible for NEA described the British stance towards the new regime 'as one of "extreme reserve"' and mentioned that 'British Amb Athens is under instructions... not to approach new govt although Embassy officers have had "informal" contact with officials new government'²⁶. Furthermore, it was promptly decided to 'freeze all, if any, exports of arms to Greece for the time being'²⁷.

The British government consistently expressed in Parliament concern for the Greek people. The first statement of sympathy in Parliament on behalf of the British

²² Parliamentary Records, House of Commons, Vol. 750, 20 July 1967

²³ *Ibid*

²⁴ Telegram, London 8690, Bruce, American Embassy in London to Secretary of State, Unclassified, Priority, 22 April 1967, Department of State, Central Files, POL 23-9 Greece, NARA

²⁵ *The Times*, 25 April 1967, p. 5

²⁶ Telegram, State 180756, Katzenbach (Department of State) to American Embassy in Athens, Secret, 23 April 1967, Department of State, Central Files, POL 15-1 Greece, POL Greece-UK, NARA

²⁷ Cabinet Conclusions (67), 28th meeting, 4 May 1967, CAB 128/42, NA

government came three days after the *coup*, and mentioned *inter alia* that ‘to see a friend and an ally go through this kind of problem, it is as much of concern to us as it is to them’²⁸. Two weeks later, another Cabinet Minister, namely Richard Crossman, speaking on behalf of his government, remarked: ‘I personally am deeply shocked by and profoundly alarmed at what is happening there, as are all members of the Government... It is a shock for us that Greek democracy should be treated in this way’²⁹. It should be born in mind that this was a Labour government, so not only did it feel natural distaste for the unlawful imposition of a military regime in Greece, but, most importantly, it had to publicly manifest it. Hence, British officials by issuing statements of sympathy wished to eradicate any suspicions regarding their feelings about the events in Greece.

Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that, despite its given displeasure with the developments in Greece, the British government made no statement outside Parliament, even of the most delicate nature, regarding its stance towards the Colonels’ regime; this was true not only during the first hours after the *coup*, when the situation was still in flux, but even several days or indeed months after the *coup*. Instead, it confined itself to defending its policies among strictly political circles in a vague and notably laconic fashion. As they argued during a debate at the House of Lords, ‘there is time to speak and there is time to be silent. I think it is possible to argue that this is time to be silent, or at least to be discreet, and to let the fruits of our private diplomacy make their appearance’³⁰.

Besides, there was always the danger, they estimated, that factions within the Greek army might feel encouraged to initiate resistance, thus sparking off a civil war. In fact, such action was considered by a few as potentially hazardous, especially

²⁸ Parliamentary Records, House of Commons, Vol. 745, 24 April 1967, c. 1160

²⁹ Parliamentary Records, House of Commons, Vol. 746, 11 May 1967

³⁰ Parliamentary Records, House of Lords, Vol. 283, c. 515, 8 June 1967

immediately after the *coup*, on the grounds that it could indirectly incite serious violence against the new government, a possibility which was decried. The fear of contributing, even unintentionally, to the potential outbreak of civilian clashes was taken very seriously into consideration by the British Government. This concern was reflected in one of the comments made by George Brown, which read as follows:

It is easy to talk about supporting the working classes of Greece in overthrowing the regime. It is easy to talk about expelling Greece from here and there. The fact of the matter is that if that ended in murder and bloodshed which we were in no position to help or to avert, we would have a hell of responsibility on our heads for those who would then have to suffer and pay the price for it.³¹

Nonetheless, their passive policy constitutes by itself an initial indication of the British government's reluctance to create rupture with the regime for reasons that shall be explained in due course. It is indisputable that the forcible imposition of a military regime in Greece was not a welcome development for the British Government. This is a point embodied in the British government's hesitation to openly liaise with the regime in the immediate aftermath of the *coup*. Even the idea of breaking off its diplomatic relations with Greece was one that was put on the table of negotiations.

However, the verdict that was unanimously reached in the Cabinet did not favour the adoption of this course of action. This was seen as counter-productive, as it would alienate a country whose close cooperation was deemed ultra-significant within NATO and would, in response, lead to unwelcome retaliations. In fact, it was not long before British officials started to yield to pressures for sustaining a working relationship with the regime and accede to the idea that, despite the fact that the nature and practices of the newly emerged military regime in Greece were fundamentally contradictory to the ideological stance of the British Labour tradition, as long as it

³¹ Ms.Eng.c.5019, Bodleian Library, Modern Political Papers

satisfactorily served, from a pragmatic point of view, British national interests, there existed no crying need to disrupt their traditionally close dealings with Greece; in fact quite the contrary, since hard core political considerations clearly favoured the continuation and indeed furtherance of their military cooperation and commercial exchanges with the new regime.

In other words, in spite of its serious doubts about the potential of the Colonels, whom the British Ambassador described as ‘political eunuchs’³², showing thus his low appreciation, and its distaste for their repressive methods, as a result of which it had decided to remain aloof from the new regime in the first days following the *coup*, the British government informed its American colleagues that it intended to resume working relations on April 27. At the Cabinet Meeting on 4 May 1967, the belief was expressed that Britain could achieve ‘the most favourable results possible in the circumstances, if we continue to do business with the regime’³³. In view of this decision, ‘the British Ambassador ... congratulated him [Mr. Kollias] on his accession to power and... expressed his understanding of the change which had occurred’³⁴, according to a report published in *The New York Herald Tribune* on 9 May 1967.

In Parliament, the British government presented its decision to resume normal relations with the Greek regime in the following way:

we have assumed official relations with the new regime. Had we not done so, we would not have been able to make the strong representations...A further reason for the assumption of official relations was to enable us effectively to protect British subjects and interests in Greece which are the Government’s first concern. But this action in no way implies approval of the regime’s policies³⁵.

³² Memorandum of Conversation, Subject: Greek Situation, Secret, 24 April 1967, Department of State, Central Files, POL 23-9, NARA

³³ Cabinet Conclusions (67) 28th meeting, 4 May 1967, CAB 128/42, NA

³⁴ Parliamentary Records, House of Lords, Vol. 283, c.498, 7 June 1967

³⁵ Ms. Wilson. c.889, 8 May 1967, Bodleian Library, Modern Political Papers

However, in view of the likely obloquy that such a decision could have caused, not only in the public sphere but also within the Labour Party itself, the Foreign Secretary considered it wise to try to justify their resumption of business with the Greek regime. The first argument that they employed was that ‘the question of formal recognition does not arise in the case of Greece since there has been no change in the Head of State’³⁶. Similarly, George Brown suggested to the Cabinet that, ‘we [the British government] could avoid any question of recognition of the new regime or approval of it, if we took the line that we were merely continuing relations with a government whose Head of State was unchanged’³⁷. It can be argued with the certainty that the future course of events confirms, that this argument was used as a *façade*, as the British government continued to recognise the regime, even when the King fled into exile, following his failed attempted abortive *coup*.

Moreover, the Foreign Secretary claimed during a Cabinet Meeting that ‘it was our normal practice to have diplomatic relations with Governments which were effectively in power whether or not we approved of them’³⁸. In other words, it was argued that it was customary for the British government to be on good terms with fellow governments, regardless of their nature, on the grounds that they were in firm control of the country. As Sir Patrick Dean epitomized it, ‘British believe that coup govt is firmly entrenched for immediate future and nothing would be served by repeated condemnation of coup’³⁹.

It is actually true that the British Crown had for centuries adhered to the conservative doctrine of the *de facto* recognition of foreign regimes. Obviously the fact that overall control of a country could be achieved by a government in a number

³⁶ *Ibid*

³⁷ Cabinet Conclusions (67), 23d meeting, 27April 1967, CAB 128/42, NA

³⁸ *Ibid*

³⁹ Telegram, State 187449, Rusk (Department of State) to American Embassy in Athens, Secret, 3 May 1967, Department of State, Central Files, POL 15 Greece, POL Greece-US, NARA

of undemocratic ways did not seem to worry them. Hence, it is ironic how this can constitute a fundamental condition which the British Labour government devised in order to choose with which governments it would do business.

It is noteworthy, nonetheless, that in a previous exchange of views between David Bruce at the American embassy in London and Alan Davidson, Head of the Central Department of the Foreign Office, which took place only three days before the British government decided to resume normal working relations with Greece on the grounds that it had justified the criteria for recognition, Davidson was recorded as having expressed the opinion that ‘neither condition yet met in Greece’⁴⁰. Another interesting point is the reaction of the State Department, upon notification of the British government’s decision, which was recorded as follows: ‘at this end we do not see the need for this haste’⁴¹.

In a further attempt to justify their chosen policy, the British government’s representative reaffirmed during a debate in the Commons his government’s belief ‘that it is more effective to make our views known in this way than by making public pronouncements and protests which would be likely to drive the regime to extremes and thus frustrate the very purposes which we all have in common’⁴². As the Foreign Secretary said on another occasion, ‘certainly my view at the moment, and my colleagues’ view at the moment, is that we stand the best chance of influencing events by maintaining relations and by maintaining the contacts in the various ways in which they exist, both direct and through other associations and groups’⁴³. Otherwise, it was feared that the British Government would forfeit its influence. It was also reiterated

⁴⁰ Telegram, London 8713, Bruce, American Embassy in London to Secretary of State, Subject: Greek coup, Secret, Priority, 24 April 1967, Department of State, Central Files, POL 23-9 Greece, NARA

⁴¹ Telegram, State 183175, Department of State to American Embassy in Athens, Secret, Flash, 27 April 1967, Department of State, Central Files, POL Greece-UK, POL Greece-US, NARA

⁴² Ms. Wilson.c.889, 8 May 1967, Bodleian Library, Modern Political Papers

⁴³ Aigram A-1183, Unclassified Re: London 2638, Bruce (American Embassy in London) to Secretary of State, 7 October 1967, Department of State, Central Files, POL 12-UK, NARA

that ‘the fact that we have diplomatic relations does not in any way imply approval either of the political complexion of the Greek Government or of its position’⁴⁴.

In other words, although British officials were under no illusions regarding the real intentions of the Greek rulers, they proclaimed that it would be better if they were on good terms with it, so that they could influence its rapid return to democratic rule. This argument, nevertheless, served more as a pretext for continuing to do business with the regime for the sake of avoiding imperilling the associated vital stakes. Although the Cabinet did try to privately influence the regime, with some notable successes, they definitely failed to make Greece’s democratisation their uncompromising priority.

Instead, it can be certainly claimed that it was considerations of *Realpolitik* that made it imperative for the British to resume normal relations with the Greek regime. This may well be a legitimate calculation for the prophylaxis of British national interests, but it leaves no room for doubt that the government’s pompous declarations of its high-priority intention to contribute to the regime’s rapid democratisation were nothing more than a mere attempt to pay lipservice to it for public consumption. The British government chose a pragmatic foreign policy, substantially influenced by the stringent dictates of the devaluation and Cold War eras, and determined largely by American strategic interests. Buttressed by the American government, they opted for the continuation of full diplomatic relations and dealings with the Greek regime, in perfect awareness that such action would be used by the Greek rulers as a way of strengthening their claim to legitimate power.

The genuinely catalytic factors determining the British government’s decision to resume ‘business as usual’ with Greece varied and were variably prioritized by

⁴⁴ *Ibid*

different individuals. Overall, they included British concerns, for both moral and strategic reasons, over the fate of Cyprus and the importance of preserving Greece's cooperation with NATO. In addition, given Britain's anaemic financial state, officials were preoccupied with safeguarding British commercial interests in Greece.

One of the most frequently quoted considerations behind avoiding upsetting the Greek regime, regardless of its nature, was its utmost strategic importance to NATO, of which Britain was an integral member. British officials were emphatically conscious of Greece's pivotal importance for the prosperity of NATO's 'underbelly' and the consequent crucial necessity of being on good terms with it. The military facilities agreement signed in 1953 'authorised the construction, development, use and operation of military and supporting facilities in Greece necessary for the implementation of, or in furtherance of, approved NATO plans'⁴⁵. The established and expanded facilities following this agreement 'strengthened the NATO forces in the area, provided important communication links, a staging area and supply depots for US and NATO air and naval forces and permitted surveillance and monitoring of the activities of Soviet forces in the Eastern Mediterranean'⁴⁶. They also served the purpose of safeguarding NATO interests not only *vis-à-vis* the Soviet threat, but also those raised by Middle Eastern and North African countries; for instance, from 'the base at Hellinikon in Athens, surveillance planes had carried out flights over Libya, whereas the base at Iraklion monitored communications from Libya and the Middle East'⁴⁷.

It does therefore become quite self-explanatory that Greece was contributing both armed forces and a brilliant infrastructural base both of which were

⁴⁵ Yiannis Valinakis, *The US Bases in Greece: The Political Context*, in Thanos Veremis, *US Bases in the Mediterranean*

⁴⁶ *Ibid*

⁴⁷ *Ibid*

indispensable to the West's common defence of the area, because it hosted combat and logistic forces capable of accomplishing assigned tasks in accordance with strategic objectives, and granted overflight access, staging and base rights. This necessity was something that the American government, in the light of its even greater strategic interests in Greece, made sure did not escape Britain's attention. Hence the British government, desperate to sustain a common front with the Americans due to the associated benefits, allowed for the determination of its own interests in accordance with American needs. In short, the vital significance of preserving stability within NATO's southern flank, especially in view of the various developments that threatened the overrunning of the Mediterranean countries by the Soviet Union (most seriously the build-up of the Soviet fleet), dictated only one possible British policy, namely cooperation with Greece.

Besides, it should be always borne in mind that the year of 1967, when the Colonels came to power, witnessed many Cold War peaks in areas geographically related to Greece's position. In fact, it can be argued with certainty that the repercussions of Cold War incidents both in the European continent, such as the Prague Spring and in the Mediterranean, such as the Six Day War, had steadily boosted the strategic importance of Greece for the alliance. In other words, Greece's above-cited excellent ports and repair and communications facilities assumed paramount significance for NATO in view of the Cold War rivalries in the Mediterranean and the Near and Middle East, where Greece's position was pivotal.

Britain's interest in maintaining friendly relations with Greece was the result of another parameter too, namely the financial benefits that could be potentially derived by a close cooperation with Greece. As one Treasury official categorically claimed, according to the Ministry's financial perspective during a Cabinet discussion

a few weeks after the *coup*, it was imperative for Britain to ‘maintain working relations with the new regime so that British interests be protected’⁴⁸. In other words, it was considered important, in view of Britain’s mounting financial problems, not to risk losing its exports to Greece, and, in the light of the urgent ‘export or die’ principle, for its government to exploit the possibility of entering into new commercial deals with Greece. The British government was encouraged by the fact that the Greek Embassy in London had approached the Foreign Office in order “to emphasise their desire that commercial and financial relations should be maintained undisturbed”⁴⁹.

In addition, the concerns of the Treasury regarding Britain’s relations with Greece were also associated with the abeyances stemming from previous Anglo-Greek dealings that included the settlement of inter-governmental and administration of the bonded debt, as well as the issues of British Aid to Greece within the NATO framework and of the OECD Consortium aid. Hence in view of the potential benefits Britain’s liaison with Greece could afford the former, it was suggested by the Treasury that

in matters of trade, finance and investment our [the Treasury’s] wish was for completely normal relations with Greece and that... the criteria by which Greek investment or other projects to be financed by long term credit were judged in London were purely those of economic and financial viability.⁵⁰

In short, the Treasury, for the sake of the protection of its interests in Greece, chose to disregard the political complexion of the new Greek government, and favoured the continuation of its normal interactions with it. In view of these preoccupations, it was decided that ‘we [the British] must keep ourselves in a position

⁴⁸ Brief for the Financial Secretary, The Situation in Greece, R. S. Symons to Hay, 5 June 1967, T 312/1867, NA

⁴⁹ Restricted Saving Telegram, FO to UK Director IMF/IBRD, Washington, UK/Greek Intergovernmental debt, 3 November 1967, T 312/1866, NA

⁵⁰ *Ibid*

to take as full advantage as possible of development opportunities in Greece⁵¹. In fact, officials were aspiring to take advantage of their friendly relations with the military regime to enter into negotiations for new commercial deals.

Moreover, what was seen as a far more crucial factor was the need to safeguard the continuation of sustained negotiations regarding the possible supply by the UK Atomic Energy Authority of a nuclear power station to Greece, a deal that was estimated to be worth £20 million⁵². It was for the purpose of discussing this possibility that the Greek ministers of industry and foreign affairs had visited Britain in the previous May. There was noted anxiety among British officials, who in the archives present themselves as ‘interested in seeing this expensive project go ahead’⁵³, and anxious about succeeding in winning ‘this very valuable order’⁵⁴. In view of the above-mentioned substantial interests at stake, the Treasury concluded its argument by claiming the following:

on the basis of the existing issues pending settlement and the hope that commercial agreements could be enforced, and in conjunction with Britain’s poor financial state, the British government had to try to be on good terms with its Greek counterpart⁵⁵.

Thus, the British were fully aware that if they opposed the regime, they would not be able to derive any financial gains. This belief sprung from the fact that the Scandinavian countries were, in retaliation for their hostile attitude towards the Colonels, threatened by them that Greece would ‘break off all commercial relations with them, unless they revise their hostile behaviour towards the new regime’⁵⁶.

Furthermore, the debate about whether Britain should refrain, on ideological grounds, from selling arms to Greece was concluded by recognizing that, in view of

⁵¹ C.C. Lucas to Owen, 6 October 1967, T 334/144, NA

⁵² Interview with Alan Davidson

⁵³ C.C. Lucas to Owen, 6 October 1967, T 334/144, NA

⁵⁴ R. W. James (FO) to W. I. Luscombe (Office of the Minister without portfolio), 4 August 1966, FCO 371/185666, CE 105215, NA

⁵⁵ FO to UK Director IMF/IBRD, Washington, 3 November 1967, T 312/1866, NA

⁵⁶ *The Times*, 4 September 1967, p. 3

the need for ameliorating the balance of exports and avoiding jeopardising British labour in the armaments industry, Britain could not impose a ban on the overall sale of arms to Greece. Instead, British officials decided to closely monitor them so that they could forbid the sale of those which could be used against the civilian population, an argument that, as has already been proven, could be easily rendered spurious.

In tandem with the already mentioned factors, British officials did not desire to see the deterioration of their working relations with the Greek military government because they had an interest in keeping the channels open for cooperation over the Cyprus issue. Cyprus was undoubtedly an extremely critical and contentious issue for Britain, because, although it had granted the island its independence following the signing of the Zurich agreement in 1959, it had become along with Greece and Turkey, as a result of the Treaty of London in 1960, the guarantor of the island's security.

In view of this, the much aspired and long awaited solution to the problem of Cyprus was considered attainable only through the productive collaboration of all parties involved. As one Foreign Office official put it even before the *coup*, thus signaling the necessity of being on good terms with Greece, 'we have always taken the view that progress towards a solution of Cyprus dispute can only be achieved by negotiations between the parties concerned'⁵⁷. This concern was particularly relevant in 1967, as by that time a number of crises during recent years had unmistakably proven that irredentism, shared by both Turkey and Greece claiming legitimacy over Cyprus, was a contaminating issue with potentially explosive dimensions.

⁵⁷ R. W. James (Foreign Office) to W. J. Luscombe (Office of the Minister without Portfolio), Anglo-Greek relations, 4 August 1966, FCO 371/185666, CE 1052/5, NA

Moreover, Britain's feeling of responsibility over the maintenance of peace in Cyprus was not the only reason for which its government was placing such an enormous emphasis on being in close cooperation with the Greek government. There existed additional stakes linked to the fact that Britain, in spite of having withdrawn long ago its political presence from Cyprus, had a very strong military presence principally in the form of their Sovereign Base Areas and the Retained Bases, whose core it maintained even after the island had become independent. Consequently, Cyprus, with its essential offensive bases, had emerged as the only remaining safe British asset for the defence of the region, which was utterly significant for Britain.

A memorandum drafted in 1967 by the Joint Intelligence Committee defined British interest in the region along the following lines:

- (a) the maintenance of conditions in which peaceful and orderly development can proceed
- (b) the prevention of Soviet expansion and communist penetration
- (c) the protection of our material interests (predominately our oil interests and supplies)
- (d) the preservation of our transit facilities, both civil and military, by sea and air⁵⁸

The factors determining the great significance of Cyprus in the eyes of British officials were succinctly summarized in a joint memorandum drafted in July 1965.

According to this,

Cyprus is important to the UK for three reasons. She is a member of the Commonwealth. The Cyprus dispute affects our relation with Turkey and Greece. Our Sovereign Base Areas in the island play a large part in our CENTO and other commitments and provide the jumping-off point for the CENTO air route through Turkey and Iran to the Persian Gulf and the Far East.⁵⁹

Unsurprisingly, therefore, Britain had showed unwillingness to demonstrate its displeasure with the Athens regime as it was determined not to risk the degree of basic *rapport* required by its responsibilities *vis-à-vis* the Cyprus problem and

⁵⁸ 1967 Reports, Memos, Cabinet JIC series, Soviet policies in the Middle East and North Africa and their likely development, CAB 158/66, NA

⁵⁹ Joint Memorandum by the Secretary for Foreign Affairs and the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs, Subject: British interest in Cyprus, OPD (67) 65, 26 July 1967, FCO 28/67, NA

jeopardize its valuable assets, facilities and sites in Cyprus, in view of their assessment that they 'could not be effectively provided elsewhere'⁶⁰. This undoubtedly strengthened further Britain's belief in the great benefits from a friendly relation with Greece.

Extensive evidence has, nonetheless, suggested that British officials were not just reluctantly cooperating on the Cyprus issue with the Greek government. On the contrary, they seemed quite confident and rather pleased with the Greek regime's handling of it. This became more apparent towards the end of 1967 when the regime appointed as its Foreign Secretary Panayiotis Pipinelis, a well-respected Greek politician who, according to various hints, was considered as a great Anglophile. As Xanthopoulos-Palamas related 'Pipinelis was ideologically attached to the Western monarchical tradition and politically followed the lines of close cooperation with the Anglo-Saxon powers and above all London'⁶¹ An additional bonus of the Greek government for Britain was that it was fiercely anti-communist, and would therefore minimise the possibility of Cyprus becoming the 'Cuba of the Eastern Mediterranean'⁶².

In short, in the light of the afore-mentioned considerations, the British government decided, albeit reluctantly due to ideological reservations, to continue 'doing business as usual' with the Greek regime. Furthermore, as the maintenance of good working relations with the Greek Colonels constituted an ideological discrepancy on the part of the British Labour Government, it infuriated the vast

⁶⁰ Amendments to C.O.S. 1591/9/3/64, DEFE 11/445, undated in Alan James, *Keeping the peace in the Cyprus crisis of 1963-1974*, p. 58

⁶¹ Christos Xanthopoulos-Palamas, *Diplomatiko Triptycho: Exoterike Politike, Hellenike Exoterike Politike, ta Prosopa kai ta Pragmata, semeioseis apo ta perasmena, stoicheia apo ten sychrone historia (Diplomatic Triptych: foreign policy, Greek foreign policy, the persons and the things, notes from the past, elements of contemporary history)*, p. 220

⁶² DO 161/5, dispatch no. 8 from Sir A. Clark (High Commissioner) to CRO, para 31, 23 November 1962 in Alan James, p. 44

majority of the government's own backbenchers. It is also noteworthy that not all members of the government were at ease with the implemented governmental policy. Some Cabinet members, like George Brown, who 'was under the control of the Americans'⁶³, were keener to do 'business as usual'. Perhaps the most discontented individuals among Cabinet members were the Prime Minister himself and also Richard Crossman, both of whom were reported as encouraging the Labour backbenchers to continue criticising the government⁶⁴.

The main problem of the British government was not whether they should continue to have normal contacts with the Greek regime, but rather how to publicly justify their doing business with such an ideologically incompatible regime, especially given the British people's perception, albeit erroneous, of Greece as the bastion of democracy. In pursuit of the protection of their national interest that could be defined in strategic, commercial, and domestic terms, as well as in view of the need to sustain a common front with the US, they implemented a broad policy of maintaining a good working relationship with the Greek Government, while avoiding being seen as provocatively embracing it. They were therefore faced with the almost insuperable task of striking a balance between safeguarding those stakes and easing the public's pressure for a tougher line of policy towards the regime.

The following extract from a report drafted by Foreign Office officials provides a good overview of British foreign policy towards the Colonels' regime, from roughly a week after it assumed power and through most of the remaining part of 1967:

...our own policy, following our assumption of an official relationship with the new government on 27 April, is to deal with the new regime, but to avoid taking actions (e.g. visits by British Ministers to Greece) which might be interpreted as signs that we approve of it. We

⁶³ Interview with Brigadier Baxter

⁶⁴ Interview with John Fraser

share the misgivings so widely expressed in this and other countries about Greece's reversion to military rule and suspension of many essential elements of democratic life. But an overdose of official condemnation might well have the wrong effect on the government which is still in a formative stage. We do not want to drive it into greater extremism... In answering any criticisms that we are condoning the military rule in Greece by dealing with the new government, [we] should make a familiar point: that dealing with a government is not the same as approving it. We are dealing with the Greek Government both because this is necessary for the protection of interests (e.g. British subjects who have been under detention) and because by doing so we have a better prospect of influencing it⁶⁵.

To sum up, this study has proven that the Labour government's policy towards the Greek Colonels was a synthesis derived from the consideration of a number of multifaceted issues and challenges. This is why, although the motives behind British policy can be easily spelled out, the policy itself, during the period under examination, could be summarised as ambiguous. In the light of the hugely adverse political climate, the British government's biggest challenge was to avoid giving any appearance of condoning the regime's internal policies.

In other words, it was not a question of what policy to follow, but instead the problem was to maintain their cooperation with the regime without appearing to condone it. It is self-explanatory that it was extremely uncomfortable for a Labour government to be seen as liaising with dictators whose illiberal practices were totally unrelated to the ideological credentials of the British government. There is no doubt that it seemed ironic and even, as often suggested, hypocritical that a social democratic government was conducting business with a military regime. In an attempt to harmonise the cacophony of this paradox, they employed a number of justifications in order to account for their 'unheroic stance'⁶⁶ towards Greece. However, these were not always sincere and hence not convincing either.

⁶⁵ Guidance No 96, Foreign and Commonwealth Office to Certain Missions, Confidential, Priority, 9 May 1967, FCO 9/227, NA

⁶⁶ Conclusions of a Meeting held at the FCO, 17 February 1969, FCO 9/871, NA

The extent of this incongruity can be easily proven by pointing out that, had Labour been in opposition, it would have bitterly criticised and adamantly resisted a British policy of cooperation with the Greek military regime. It could be undisputedly argued that, given the general displeasure of the overall British political spectrum with the dictatorial features of the Greek regime, British policy towards the regime could have been much more hostile, had it not been for the protection of their vital interests. However, it needs no further elaboration that once in power there are a variety of factors and considerations that a government needs to take into account. This is exactly what happened with the Labour government at that time.

In conclusion, the policy chosen by the Labour government was founded on a fair degree of pragmatism and even conservatism. This conclusion is reinforced by the fact that there was no rancor or disharmony in the policies consecutively adopted by the Labour or the Conservative governments towards the Greek Colonels, but instead a remarkable continuity. Thus it could with safety be argued that the Greek episode, like all analogous cases, fully illustrates the problems a Labour Party has always faced when coming to power, namely a constant clash between the preservation of its values and the safeguarding of the interests of the country, an unrelenting struggle between idealism and pragmatism. But in the case of Greece, as in most analogous cases, the classic dilemma between the expedient course of action and the morally correct one, ended up in the former prevailing yet again.

Sources and Bibliographical References

A) Manuscripts

British National Archives, Kew Gardens, Richmond, Surrey (NA)
National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, M.D. (NARA)
Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Austin, Texas (LBJ)
Harold Wilson, Modern Papers Collection, Bodleian Library, Oxford (Ms.Wilson)
Lord George-Brown, Modern Papers Collection, Bodleian Library, Oxford (Ms.Eng.)

B) Printed Primary Sources

Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons & House of Lords, Fifth Series, (HMSO: London)

C) Printed Works

I. Books

James, Alan, *Keeping the Peace in the Cyprus Crisis of 1963-1964*, (London: Palgrave, 2002)
Kofas, John, *Intervention and Underdevelopment: Greece during the Cold War*, (University Park and London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989)
Stern, Laurence, *The Wrong Horse: the Politics of Intervention and the Failure of American Diplomacy*, (New York: Times Books, 1977)
Yiannis Valinakis, *The US Bases in Greece: The Political Context*, in Thanos Veremis, *US Bases in the Mediterranean*, (Athens: ELIAMEP)
Xanthopoulos-Palamas, Christos, *Diplomatiko Triptycho: Exoterike Politike, Hellenike Exoterike Politike, ta Prosopa kai ta Pragmata, semeioseis apo ta perasmena, stoicheia apo ten sychrone historia (Diplomatic Triptych: foreign policy, Greek foreign policy, the persons and the things, notes from the past, elements of contemporary history)*, (Athens: Ekdoseis ton Philon, 1979, 2d edition)

II. Newspapers & Periodical Publications

The Economist, London (1967)
The Greek Observer, London, ed. by George Yannopoulos, (monthly, 1969-1970).
The Times, London (1967)

D) Interviews

Baxter, Brigadier Harry, (Military Attaché, British Embassy in Athens, 1969-71), London, 9 May 2001
Bridges, Baron Thomas, (Head of Chancery, British Embassy in Athens, 1966-68), London, 28 November 2000
Davidson, Alan, (Head of Central Department, F.C.O., 1966-68, UK Delegation to NATO, 1969-1971), London, 7 February 2001
Dodson, Sir Derek, (Counsellor, British Embassy in Athens, 1966-69), London, 4 December 2000
Fraser, John (Labour MP for Norwood, 1966-1997), London, 9 May 2001