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GREECE, ENOSIS AND BRITAIN'S COMPLETE EVACUATION FROM GREECE IN MARCH 1947

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Abstract

Greece, a country which borders the Ionian and Mediterranean Sea, was important to Britain. This was due to Greece's location, which is close to Britain's sea communications and oil supplies. Therefore, Greece's safety was of utmost priority to Britain so the latter could secure its predominance in the Mediterranean region. When the Greek Civil War (1946-1949) broke out in March 1946, Britain, and specifically Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, determined in helping the Greek Royalist government, fought against Greek communists by providing economic and military support. Should Greece fall under communist influence, Britain would lose its dominance in Greece and the Mediterranean region. However a year later, Britain decided to withdraw its troops even though the Civil War in Greece was not yet over. This article will discuss in detail, from Bevin's perspective, the decision to withdraw from Greece as he was the one who initially refused to cut military spending in Greece as proposed by the Treasury, and it was he who eventually accepted the proposal. Previous studies have unanimously argued that Britain's poor economic and military circumstances were Bevin's greatest worries, which led to Bevin's decision to discontinue Britain's aid to Greece. This article, however, will identify Bevin's other reasons that are absent from the literature. Through the methodology of British primary records, this article found that Greece's support for the *enosis* (union) movement, and that Cyprus wanted to be returned to Greece, were also factors that influenced Bevin's decision to accept the termination of British aid to Greece.

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1. Introduction

World War II in Europe ended after the Allied Powers accepted Germany's surrender on 8 May 1945. Despite this victory, the Allied Powers, especially Britain, suffered significant monetary losses during this war. According to Callaghan, about a quarter of Britain's national wealth had been used during World War II, and therefore Britain was burdened with an enormous imbalance of trade and a massive overseas debt (Callaghan, 2007). The enormous expenditure on World War II exhausted Britain's resources and affected its economy. Thus, at the beginning of post-World War II Britain was overwhelmed by social problems such as poverty, unemployment and malnutrition. These domestic crises brought a painful dilemma for the government when handling Britain's foreign affairs: finding a way to fix its economic problem while at the same time maintaining its overseas defence responsibilities (Baylis, 1993).

This dilemma remained a legacy of conflict within the Cabinet for the next few years. It was a difficult task for the British defence planners to develop a coherent defence policy during a period when Britain was suffering from economic and military weakness. This allowed the Soviet Union to push its frontiers forward and threaten Britain's sphere of influence in Greece. The Soviet Union was eager to broaden its domination in Greece after World War II ended because it needed new warm-water ports and extra bases in the Eastern Mediterranean and Aegean regions, hence making Greece a satisfactory option (Kuniholm, 1980; Leffler, 1985). The Soviets' expansionist policy apparently brought conflict with Britain as the latter needed to safeguard British communication networks from the Mediterranean region to the British Eastern Empire by its strong presence in Greece (Kuniholm, 1980).

During a meeting with Allied members in December 1945 at the Moscow Conference, the Soviets demanded that Britain stopped its interference in Greek internal affairs, but the latter refused (Roberts, 2011). Subsequently in March 1946, the Greek Civil War broke out and the communist insurgents in Greece received military supplies from Greece's neighbours, namely Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and Romania (CAB, 1948).¹ It is worth noting here that these three neighbours of Greece were satellite countries of the Soviet Union. Thus, Britain was sure that the Kremlin in Moscow had orchestrated the civil war given that the Soviets were reluctant to have anti-communist governments on its doorstep (Boyle, 1990).

Both British Chiefs of Staff (hereafter COS) and British Secretary of State Ernest Bevin believed that British communication lines, as well as its oil supplies, could be seriously affected if Greece fell under Soviet domination (CAB, 1946; CAB, 1946).² To prevent this unfavourable outcome, it was necessary for Britain to help Greece given that the army of the Greek Royalist government was ill-equipped and ill-trained to combat communist aggressions independently. The British government therefore agreed to continue supporting Greece through economic and military aid, even though Britain itself suffered from economic crisis (*Hansard*, 1945; DEFE, 1947).³ Bevin asserted that: '[Britain accepts] responsibility for giving guidance for the training and development of the Greek Army in order that they might be able to defend themselves against any attack from their neighbours' (CAB, 1947).⁴

¹ CAB 129/23, CP (48) 7, Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 'Review of Soviet Policy', 5 January 1948.

² CAB 131/12, DO (46) 40, 13 March 1946; CAB 133/86, PMM (46) 1, Chiefs of Staff to the Defence Committee, 20 April 1946.

³ *Hansard*, 20 August 1945, Vol. 413 (London: H.M.S.O., 1945), p. 289; DEFE 5/3, COS (47) 9 (0) Final, *Aide Memoir* by the Chiefs of Staff, 23 January 1947.

⁴ CAB 129/16, CP (47) 34, Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 'Policy towards Greece and Turkey', 25 January 1947.

However, all parties that championed this aid policy to Greece, such as Bevin and his Foreign Office, the COS and also the Minister of Defence, Albert V. Alexander, were pressured by the Treasury to cut these expensive aids to Greece. This was apparently because there was no improvement in Britain's own economic difficulties, and it saw further dramatic deterioration by the end of February 1947 (Morgan, 1985). Subsequently, the decision to withdraw from Greece was officially taken by the British government in March 1947.

2. Problem Statement

Britain's economic crisis worsened in early 1947 when severe winter storms hit Britain throughout January and February 1947. This economic difficulty was seen as a huge disaster by the Foreign Office (FO 371, 1946).⁵ Hugh Dalton, Chancellor of the Exchequer, questioned the relevance of aid for Greece and whether it should be continued (CAB, 1947).⁶ The Treasury urgently required manpower to operate industries in Britain so that its plan for economic recovery could be successfully accomplished (CAB, 1946).⁷ Dalton therefore strongly proposed the cessation of aid given to Greece due to Britain's domestic problems. Clement Attlee, Britain's Prime Minister, concurred with Dalton on this matter. While Bevin continued to emphasise his beliefs that the Greek Royalist government's army would be unable to independently resist communist insurgents, he eventually acquiesced to the Cabinet's preference that Britain ended its commitment to Greece.

Don Cook and other scholars agreed that the reason Bevin accepted the decision to evacuate was due to pressure put by Dalton and Attlee because of their concerns for Britain's economic situation (Cook, 1989). Other historians that have also studied this withdrawal issue from the perspective of domestic affairs in Britain were Higgins (1984), Young (1996), McCauley (2016), Dockrill and Hopkins (2006). McCauley (2016), Higgins (1984), Dockrill and Hopkins (2006) argued that due to Britain's worsening economic difficulties at the beginning of 1947, the British government proclaimed in mid-February 1947 that Britain was unable to continue supporting the Greek Royalist army, and therefore had to cease British aid to Greece at the end of March 1947. Young (1996) also agreed, writing that 'the US must either take on Britain's role as protector of Near Eastern states from Russia or witness a major advance for communism'.

These historians have paid substantial attention to the issue of Britain's economic weakness in being the reason for Britain's decision to cease its economic and military aid to Greece in March 1947. This scenario showed that other circumstances (such as those argued by this article, which included Greece's support for the *enosis* movement), that might have also had a vital impact on Bevin's endorsement for the withdrawal of British troops from Greece, were given less consideration.

It is useful to highlight here that this *enosis* issue, and its relation to Bevin's new attitude towards the complete removal of the British army from Greece, is new to the literature. Thus, this article complements a gap in the existing literature, and presents an in-depth review and discussion on Britain's evacuation from Greece by exploring beyond Britain's domestic affairs.

⁵ FO 371/66546/U5471/5471/G, Foreign Office Minute, 'Mr C.F.A. Warner Views on Preparation of New "Stock-taking Memorandum"', 24 December 1946.

⁶ CAB 131/5, DO (47) 6th Meeting, Defence Committee, 'Greece: Previous Reference: DO (46) 9th Meeting, Minute 5', 3 March 1947.

⁷ CAB 131/1, DO (46) 27th Meeting, Views by Secretary of State, 'Questions of Defence', 16 November 1946.

3. Research Questions

The primary aim of this article is to identify Bevin's point of view on the decision to cease Britain's aid to Greece at the time of Britain's many problems. At a domestic level, Britain suffered from economic difficulties. In regards to Britain's foreign affairs, there were many problems that appeared during this period. But this article will only focus on the issue involving Greece, specifically Greece's support for *enosis* (union) with Cyprus. It should be noted here that Cyprus belonged to Britain as part of its Crown Colony.

Previous studies on Britain's decision to withdraw from Greece have concentrated on Britain's domestic affairs. Because Britain was struggling with its own economic problems, Britain therefore had no choice but to cut-off Britain's financial and military assistance to Greece. This article however, seeks to relate this evacuation decision to the question of *enosis* involving Cyprus and Greece to further understand Bevin's change of stance in leaving the Greek Royalist government to overcome the communist insurgents by itself.

In order to clearly explain the argument that there was a link between Bevin's new stance on the withdrawal issue and Greece's support for the *enosis* movement, this withdrawal matter must be analysed thoroughly through the eyes of Bevin, the person who was responsible in handling all matters of foreign affairs.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this article is to identify other reasons for Bevin's new attitude towards the Treasury's proposal to cut-off British aid to Greece, which commenced in April 1947. It is worth noting here that the suggestion for cuts in military overseas spending had been issued by the Treasury since the beginning of the post-World War II period in mid-1945. This was due to Britain's economic difficulties. But Bevin refused the proposal as he thought it would be a mistake given the expansionist policies of the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe that could threaten Britain's predominance in the Mediterranean region.

This article recognizes the validity in the argument posed by previous studies in regards to Britain's economic weakness forcing Bevin to change his long-standing objection to stop aid to Greece. This article, however, seeks to present a comprehensive account of the evacuation decision by studying this issue from an angle that has yet to be explored by historians – Bevin's anger at Greece due to the latter's support for the *enosis* movement. This article illustrates that the question of *enosis* troubling Britain at the time was also a factor that led to Bevin's decision to cease British aid to Greece, even though the Greek Civil War was far from over.

Enosis was a movement initiated by Cyprus islanders of Greek descent, namely the Greek Cypriots, whose aim was for the political union of Greece and Cyprus. Their desire for *enosis* found its beginnings in the era of the Ottoman rule and was manifested later at the time of British occupation of Cyprus (Kelling, 1990). This *enosis* movement intensified at the end of World War II due to Britain's readiness to discuss the issue (Hatzivassiliou, 1997). However, given that Britain's predominance in the Middle East depended on its strong presence in Cyprus, it would be unwise to surrender to the demands for *enosis* when Greece was on the brink of falling into Soviet domination. An unusual situation later arose and annoyed Bevin

when Greece, which was currently being supported financially and militarily by Britain in combating Greek communist insurgents, demanded Britain to return Cyprus to Greece.

This article therefore demonstrates new perspectives in regard to Bevin's new attitude towards the complete removal of British troops from Greece by focusing on his frustration towards Greece, a country that received economic and military aid from Britain, but at the same time desired an *enosis* movement that directly challenged British sovereignty in Cyprus.

5. Research Methods

This article revolves around Foreign Secretary Bevin's decision to evacuate British forces from Greece although the latter was still fighting a civil war. A qualitative method was adopted by this article, which involved extensive scrutiny of British primary records that relate to Britain's diplomatic history and policymaking during the period that concerns this article. The National Archives in London and the Brotherton Library at the University of Leeds held the primary records used in this article. The secondary sources were retrieved from three different libraries: the British Library in London, the Brotherton Library and the Edward Boyle Library at the University of Leeds.

The archival records used in this article comprised of Papers of the Foreign Office (FO371), Papers of the Cabinet Office (CAB), Papers of the Chiefs of Staff Committee (DEFCE), Bevin's Private Papers (FO800), Papers of the Prime Minister's Office (PREM) and Papers of the Colonial Office (CO). These materials contain minutes of meetings, officials' reports, letters and recommendations regarding Britain's economic and military weaknesses in the early post-World War II era, the situation in Greece, the importance of Britain's sphere of influence in Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean area, and the Soviet Union's expansionist policies in post-World War II Eastern Europe. The reliability of these materials are indisputable given that they were documented at the time of the aforementioned situations or events. Other archival materials, namely the *Hansard* (House of Commons Parliamentary Debate), were retrieved through internet access. This article also used published primary materials such as memoirs and secondary sources such as books and journal articles to complement its interpretation of issues.

In showing that Greece's support for the *enosis* movement was also a decisive factor in Bevin's decision to end Britain's financial and military assistance to Greece, the information from FO 371, CAB and DEFCE – which mentioned Britain's economic depression and British aid to Greece – will be extracted and scrutinized thoroughly, then compared with materials from FO 800 and FO 371, which contains records surrounding Greece and its approval for the *enosis* movement.

6. Findings

The question of Britain's defence and military commitments in overseas theatres could never be treated or handled separately from its own economic or political matters because there were always budgetary and bipartisan political aspects to be considered (Abadi, 1982). Given that Britain's economy was gravely weakened after World War II, there was a dilemma within the Cabinet on which of Britain's responsibilities should be made the utmost urgent or given priority over others. Secretary of State Bevin and Defence Minister Alexander held the same point of view: that the occupation of British forces in

Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East should continue to exist (FO 800, 1946).⁸ The decision to sustain British forces overseas was taken in response to the Soviet Union's military and ideological expansion throughout Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union's interest in Greece, Turkey and Iran. These three countries were important in securing British national interests, primarily in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean region (CAB, 1946; DEFE, 1947).⁹ Therefore, the call for cuts in military spending was seen as a great mistake (CAB, 1946).¹⁰

However, the decision to continue armed services abroad worsened domestic affairs in Britain. The shortage of manpower in Britain's industries became one of the major contributions to Britain's economic problems. As noted by Dalton to the Defence Committee, Britain was nearly one million men short of the required minimum to achieve the revival of export trade in Britain (Baylis, 1993). Because Britain's finances worsened in early 1947, the Chancellor of the Exchequer Dalton pressured the government to cut back on its defence expenditures and manpower services. Dalton also alerted the Cabinet that Britain would face economic catastrophe if there was a delay in cutting off military and defence expenditures (Dalton, 1962; CAB, 1947).¹¹

Dalton demanded Bevin to reconsider Britain's financial assistance to Greece. Bevin however, contended that Greece was incompetent in combating communist insurgents without crucial military and financial support from Britain. Bevin thereupon begged the Treasury to defer any arrangements to halve Britain's aid to Greece (CAB, 1947).¹² But strangely, not long after Bevin pleaded for postponement of the reduction plan, he changed his mind and yielded to the Treasury's plan to axe significant military and defence expenditures. Attlee and Dalton, however, proposed for a complete withdrawal from Greece as they were concerned that halved cuts in military spending on Greece would be insufficient to rescue Britain's resources, and thus the plan for economic reconstruction would fail miserably. Bevin, surprisingly, agreed with this proposal. It is worth pointing here that, Bevin had successfully held back cuts in military spending for almost two years (CAB, 1946).¹³ Thus, apart from the issue of Britain's economic weakness, there must be another factor – the question of *enosis* – that influenced Bevin in changing his decision on this matter.

The issue of Cyprus and the *enosis* movement coincided with a series of difficulties involving British foreign matters that occurred because of the economic depression at the beginning of post-World War II Britain. These difficulties included the declining status of Britain as a Great Power, the problem in maintaining Britain's military commitment to its overseas theatres, specifically Greece, and the struggle to maintain Britain's privilege in the Middle East.

Britain encountered problems with the Greek Cypriots and their demand for *enosis* ever since they became an official sovereign power in Cyprus in 1878. As Cyprus was a valuable asset to Britain due to its strategic geographical location, where it could help Britain maintain its predominance in the Eastern

⁸ Retrieved from Brotherton Library, FO 800/474/PM/46/4/Man/46/3, Bevin to Attlee, 14 January 1946.

⁹ CAB 80/99, COS (46) 45 (0), 13 February 1946; DEFE 5/3, COS (47) 9th Meeting (0) Final, *Aide Memoir* by the Chiefs of Staff, 23 January 1947.

¹⁰ CAB 131/1, DO (46) 22nd Meeting, 19 July 1946.

¹¹ CAB 131/1, DO (46) 1st Meeting, Reports by Chancellor of the Exchequer, 11 January 1947.

¹² CAB 129/16, CP (47) 34, Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 'Policy towards Greece and Turkey', 25 January 1947.

¹³ CAB 131/1, DO (46) 27th Meeting, Views by Secretary of State, 'Questions of Defence', 16 November 1946.

Mediterranean area, Cyprus therefore needed to remain British (PREM, 1941; FO 371, 1941; CAB, 1941; FO 371, 1941; CO, 1941).¹⁴

Greece, the country that Cyprus wanted to unite with, was often inconsistent with its reaction to the *enosis* movement. At the early stages of the *enosis* movement, Greece welcomed Cyprus. However, Greece's positive attitude towards *enosis* changed when it began pursuing a good relationship with Britain after 1923. This matter was made evident when Greece became reluctant in backing the Greek Cypriots during their 1931 revolt. Greece firmly reminded the Greek Cypriots that the Greeks had nothing to do with the Greek Cypriots' dispute with the British administration in Cyprus (Hatzivassiliou, 1997). Nevertheless, Greece pursued *enosis* again at the end of World War II, stating that Cyprus belonged to Greece.

With strong support from Greece, the Greek Cypriots' demand for *enosis* grew stronger and more organised. Thus, from December 1946 onwards, the *enosis* campaign intensified. This matter placed great pressure on Bevin, who was already dealing with multiple crises at the same time. It is worth reminding here that Bevin, at the time, was struggling to defend his stance to continue Britain's commitments to Greece because of the escalation of the Greek Civil War into a full-scale rebellion in December 1946, which was fiercely fought through all of 1947. Amidst increasing difficulties in Greece because of the Civil War, and even though the Greek Royalist government's battle against the Greek communist insurgents seemed unpromising, the Greek Royalist government warmly supported the *enosis* movement that would obviously harm British rule in Cyprus.

Based on minutes from the Foreign Office, Bevin was outraged at Greece's support of *enosis*. During a meeting with Greek diplomat M. Aghnidis in December 1946 in London, Bevin said that it was 'senseless to hand Cyprus to Greece if that country was on the point of going communist' (FO 371, 1946).¹⁵ Bevin reckoned that should the Greek communist insurgents win the war, both Greece and Cyprus would definitely become satellite countries of the Soviet Union. Should this happen, it would be only a matter of time before the Soviet Union would replace Britain as the new dominant power in the Mediterranean. What is more, Britain was contributing to the Greek Civil War by providing the Greek Royalist government with financial and military supplies even though Britain itself was struggling economically. Therefore, Bevin despised Greece for selfishly asking Britain to return Cyprus to Greece at this critical and inappropriate moment (FO 371, 1946).¹⁶

In the months following Bevin's heated conversation with Greek Ambassador Aghnidis, the Cabinet ordered Bevin to seek a solution to this *enosis* matter with the Greek government that favoured Britain. The Foreign Office's record shows that the Cabinet opted for Greece to not raise the issue of *enosis* for several years to come (FO 371, 1947).¹⁷

At the time Bevin was carrying out the Cabinet's task regarding the *enosis* issue, Bevin was also being pressured by the Chancellor of Exchequer Dalton in ceasing financial and military aid to Greece (FO 371, 1947; *Hansard*, 1947).¹⁸ Regarding the latter issue – a complete withdrawal of British troops from

¹⁴ PREM 3/113, Churchill to Foreign Secretary, 6 June 1941; FO 371/23726, Churchill to Foreign Secretary, 6 June 1941; CAB 66/16, Churchill to Foreign Secretary, 6 June 1941; FO 371/29846, Churchill to Foreign Secretary, 6 June 1941; CO 67/316/13, Churchill to Foreign Secretary, 6 June 1941.

¹⁵ FO 371/58891/R18129, Minutes of conference between Bevin and Aghnidis by Frederick Warner to FO, 7 December 1946.

¹⁶ FO 371/58891/R18129, Minutes of conference between Bevin and Aghnidis by Frederick Warner to FO, 7 December 1946.

¹⁷ FO 371/68082/R13855, CM (47), Conclusions, 18 March 1947.

¹⁸ FO 371/67032/R1900, Minutes by Michael S. Williams (Head of the Southern Department) and Edward Warner (Official of the Southern Department), 18 February 1947; *Hansard*, 17 March 1947, Vol. 435 (London: H.M.S.O., 1947), p. 16.

Greece – Bevin strangely changed his stance when he agreed without arguing this matter further with Dalton (Dalton, 1962). It could be true to argue here that, besides Bevin's consideration of Britain's economic situation, his new stance to stop British aid to Greece was also influenced by his annoyance at the Greek government's support for *enosis*. This was due to the fact that, when the Cabinet asked Bevin to find a solution with the Greek government on the *enosis* issue, Bevin told the Cabinet that he had taken no initiative to discuss it with the Greek government because he believed the effort would be pointless and would provoke further agitation for *enosis* (FO 371, 1947).¹⁹

It is worth noting here that Britain's withdrawal from Greece would not weaken the Greek Royalist government's army because American assistance in Greece was forthcoming. The United States agreed to take over Britain's burden in assisting Greece against communist insurgents through its economic aid, namely the Truman Doctrine. Therefore, Britain could still protect its sphere of influence in Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean region from the Soviet Union through American assistance, even after Britain's withdrawal from Greece.

7. Conclusion

Greece was significant to Britain in regards to its national and strategic interests in the Mediterranean area. Thus, it was of utmost importance for Britain to halt communist encroachment in Greece. This matter explains the reason for Britain's, and specifically Bevin's, continued financial and military support in Greece during its Civil War, even though Britain was facing bankruptcy. The same consideration can be applied to Cyprus, where Bevin was determined to refuse the issue of *enosis* so that Cyprus remained under British sovereignty.

The enosis movement emerged with the renewal of valuable support from the Greek government after World War II ended. As a result, the campaign for *enosis* grew stronger and more organised. With massive support from Greece, the Greek Cypriots expected that *enosis* would be easier to attain. But Britain did not acquiesce to this demand. Later, since Bevin agreed to the evacuation plan in March 1947, Greece too retracted its support for *enosis*. Considering that these two circumstances followed immediately after the other, surely Greece was aware that Britain, and specifically Bevin, was adamant in keeping Cyprus under British rule, and that the cessation of Britain's aid to Greece was apparently an act of retribution for Greece's earlier welcoming attitude for *enosis*.

This article focused on Britain's perspective regarding the withdrawal issue in Greece. While understanding that there were domestic issues in Britain that affected the withdrawal of British forces in Greece, this article specifically studied Secretary of State Bevin's perspectives to explain Britain's decision to evacuate Greece while the Greek Civil War was being fiercely fought between the communist insurgents and the Greek Royalist government. This article admits that it has yet to present a full account on this issue as there are many other angles to be looked at; for instance, the perspective of Greece itself, which still needs more studies for a complete understanding of this issue. Therefore, analysing this issue from the perspective of Greece is recommended for future studies so that it could present a comprehensive review regarding this withdrawal issue.

¹⁹ FO 371/68082/R13855, CM (47), Conclusions, 18 March 1947.

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