

# CYPRUS AND THE PROJECTION OF BRITISH SEA POWER SINCE 1878<sup>1</sup>

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**Dr Klearchos A. Kyriakides**  
Solicitor and Lecturer in Law

**School of Law, University of Hertfordshire, 7 Hatfield Road, St Albans, United Kingdom**  
**Tel: 01707 286203; Fax: 01707 286205; Email: k.a.kyriakides@herts.ac.uk**

## INTRODUCTION

Under the Convention of Defensive Alliance made between Great Britain and Turkey and signed at Constantinople on 4<sup>th</sup> June 1878, Turkey agreed to ‘assign the Island of Cyprus to be occupied and administered by England’. The Convention may not have extinguished Turkish sovereignty over the Island, but nonetheless it laid the foundations for British rule. A few days later, Admiral Lord John Hay of the Royal Navy received secret orders to proceed with a fleet of ships from Suda Bay in Crete and ‘take over the Island in the name of the Queen’.<sup>2</sup> At the command of a fleet consisting of various ships headed by *HMS Minotaur*, Hay arrived at Larnaca Bay, on the south east coast of the Island, on 10<sup>th</sup> July 1878. Upon his arrival there, Hay ordered Captain Harry Rawson, the Flag Captain of *HMS Minotaur*, to make his way to Nicosia and ascertain whether force would have to be employed in order to occupy the Island. It was not necessary. Although the local inhabitants had no absolutely say in the matter – if they did, most would no doubt have preferred to have seen Greek sailors landing on their shores - they were only too pleased to see the British step into the shoes of the Turks.

On 12<sup>th</sup> July 1878, ‘the ceremonial of the surrender of Cyprus to Great Britain, was completed at Nicosia, the capital, by Admiral Lord John Hay’<sup>3</sup> with the hoisting of the Union Flag. Ten days later, on 22<sup>nd</sup> July, Lieutenant-General Sir Garnet Wolseley arrived in the port of Larnaca to take the oath of allegiance to Queen Victoria and assume the government as the first Administrator of the Island of Cyprus under the style of H.M.’s High Commissioner and Commander-in-Chief. By then, hundreds of

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<sup>1</sup> This Working Paper draws heavily upon declassified archival materials from the National Archives, Kew, Surrey, TW9 4DU (“PRO”). It also upon research conducted for the author’s doctoral dissertation ‘British Cold War Strategy and the Struggle to British Military Bases in Cyprus’ which was submitted to the Faculty of History of the University of Cambridge in October 1996. Crown Copyright materials from the National Archives and from other sources have been reproduced in this Working Paper by permission of the Controller of Her Majesty’s Stationery Office.

<sup>2</sup> Letter quoted by L.J. Lind, ‘Admiral Sir Harry Rawson GCB, GCMG, The Happy Warrior’, *Naval Historical Review*, March 1974.

<sup>3</sup> Captain A. R. Savile (18<sup>th</sup> Royal Irish Regiment), *Cyprus: Compiled in the Intelligence Branch, Quarter-Master General’s Deparment, Horse Guards* (Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, London, 1878), page 31.

British and Indian troops had already arrived on the Island to form the garrison there, after sailing from Malta.<sup>4</sup>

In a letter written on 21<sup>st</sup> July 1878, just a day before Wolseley's arrival, Captain Rawson recorded that 'Here I am, installed as the first English Commandant of Nicosia, and a fine lot of work I have done getting things in order and settled down. ...' He added: 'I do not suppose we shall remain much longer in Cyprus, as our work is nearly done.'<sup>5</sup> Rawson duly left after a three week stint on the Island but the British have stayed there ever since.<sup>6</sup> For the British military presence on the Island persists to this day – in two Sovereign Base Areas and a host of retained sites which are scattered across the Republic of Cyprus - in spite of the grant of independence to the Republic of Cyprus in August 1960 and the post-independence conflicts, culminating in the Turkish invasion of 1974, which have scarred that tragic place.

## 1878-1945

When the British signed the Convention of Defensive Alliance, 1878, they were motivated by a number of inter-related factors, including a determination to prop up Turkey, to enhance the capabilities of the Royal Navy in the Eastern Mediterranean and to improve the communications of Empire. As the British Prime Minister, Lord Beaconsfield (formerly known as Benjamin Disraeli), declared in the House of Lords on 18<sup>th</sup> July 1878:

In taking Cyprus, the movement is not Mediterranean; it is English. We have taken a step there which we think necessary for the maintenance of our Empire, and for its preservation in peace. If that is our first consideration, our next is the development of the country. ... I only hope that the House will not misunderstand – and I think the country will not misunderstand – our motives in occupying Cyprus, and in encouraging those intimate relations with the Government and population of Turkey. They are not motives of war: they are operations of peace and of civilisation.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, page 31.

<sup>5</sup> Letter quoted by Lind, 'Admiral Sir Harry Rawson'.

<sup>6</sup> The fact that *HMS Minotaur* sailed from the Island of Crete in order to secure British rule on the mythical birthplace of Aphrodite is rich in irony. In Ancient Greek mythology, the Minotaur was the offspring of a bull and Pasipha, the unfaithful wife of King Minos of Crete, the latter of whom was the first ruler of the Mediterranean. The Minotaur was a monster with the head and tail of a bull but the body of a man, who lived in Crete. The Minotaur had terrorised Crete to such an extent that he was incarcerated in a labyrinth, built by Daedalus, from which escape was impossible. He stayed in the labyrinth, devouring human tributes brought over annually from Athens, until Theseus arrived in Crete and, with the assistance of Ariadne, beat him to death. And who was Theseus? He was an Athenian hero who makes an appearance in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Indeed, at the start of the play, Theseus invokes an ancient law under which a daughter must marry the suitor chosen by her father or face devastating consequences!

<sup>7</sup> Savile, *Cyprus*, page 30.

Admiral Hay, who led the naval expedition to the Island in 1878, was a rising star in naval circles. Indeed, his accomplishments did no harm to his career for he went on reach the summit of the Royal Navy by becoming First Sea Lord in 1886 and Admiral of the Fleet in 1888. Yet, if anybody in the Royal Navy of the late nineteenth century was under the illusion that large amounts of money would be spent on improving the largest natural harbour on the Island at Famagusta and on constructing new military bases, they were to be bitterly disappointed. Even though the Island was in ‘a thoroughly exhausted and ruined condition’,<sup>8</sup> as Lord Kitchener noted in 1885, other priorities took precedence.

In 1882, British forces effectively took control of Egypt and, as a result, the Royal Navy was able to make use of the deep water port of Alexandria, in addition to Port Said and the Suez Canal. The acquisition of a British foothold in Egypt, the gradual build-up of a network of bases there, the absence of any deep water port on the Island and a shortage of available funds combined to ensure that the Island became a sleepy backwater of empire without a leading role in British strategy until the British exodus from Egypt during the early to mid 1950s.

This is not to say that the British did not make any improvements to Famagusta harbour or that the Island was without any strategic significance to them. As *Whitaker’s Almanac* recorded in 1912:

Important works at Famagusta have rendered the inner harbour accessible to steamers, and a narrow-gauge railway connecting the harbour with the capital [Nicosia] (36 miles) was opened in 1905, and has been extended westwards to Morphou, a total of 60 miles. There is a regular service of steamers from Egypt, leaving Port Said every Wednesday.<sup>9</sup>

These modest improvements facilitated the ‘vast development in the trade of Cyprus with Egypt, which followed the establishment of a weekly service of steamers between them’.<sup>10</sup> They also enabled the Island to play a part in the Great War, upon the outbreak of which the United Kingdom annexed the Island and thereby asserted British sovereignty there, Turkey having entered the War on the side of the Axis Powers. Even so, the deficiencies of Famagusta prevented the Island from being used as a major base in the way that Gibraltar, Malta, Egypt and other parts of the Mediterranean had been used.

In retrospect, however, the Great War was still important in relation to the military history of the Island. It appears that it was during the latter part of the War that the British armed services first recognised the

<sup>8</sup> As Lord Kitchener noted in 1885, ‘Cyprus was handed over the Great Britain by Turkey in a thoroughly exhausted and ruined condition. They system for centuries had been to take as much as possible out of the Island giving nothing in return. All public works and every institution in the Island were in the last state of decay.’ Note attached to a letter from Lord Kitchener, dated 6.4.[18]85, Kitchener Papers, National Archives, PRO PRO 30/57/1.

<sup>9</sup> Extract from *Whitaker’s Almanac 1912* which appears in PRO 30/57/1, National Archives, Kew Gardens, Surrey.

<sup>10</sup> *Cyprus*, Formerly ‘Confidential’ and now declassified handbook prepared under the direction of the Historical Section of the Foreign Office, December 1918, page 70.

potential role of the Island as a base in support of air power.<sup>11</sup> For example, on 29<sup>th</sup> October 1918, just a few days before the end of the Great War, the Major-General who was commanding the Royal Air Force, Middle East, informed the General Staff of the General Headquarters of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force that plans were in place to deploy air power from to the Island in order to confront the sea-based air power of Turkey:

... the following arrangements have been made for the proposed flight of 2 Bristol Fighters escorted by an F3 Flying Boat to Cyprus with a view to the destruction of enemy aircraft which has been reported as flying over Cyprus at regular intervals, and also with a view to carrying out a bomb raid or raids on the enemy Seaplane Base reported to be located East of Selefke. A cablegram was despatched to the Officer Commanding Troops, Famagusta, on 26-10-1918 requesting him to proceed at once with the construction of a temporary aeroplane landing ground on a site selected by Lieut-Colonel Grant Dalton in his recent visit to Cyprus. This officer left written instructions with the Officer Commanding Troops, Famagusta as to what action should be taken by him in the event of machines being sent from SYRIA. The Officer Commanding Troops was requested to notify these Headquarters, by cablegram, of the date on which the landing ground would be available for use. ... it is proposed that the F.3 Boat should be flown from Alexandria to the selected port in Syria on the day prior to that on which the 2 Bristol fighters will be flown to Famagusta. The latter is dependent upon the following factors: (a) The date on which the landing ground at Famagusta will be ready for use. (b) The date on which certain stores such as Petrol, bombs, etc which it is necessary to send by sea to Famagusta will arrive at that place. ... It is understood that the enemy seaplane usually flies over Famagusta on a Thursday, and it is therefore proposed, in order to effect a surprise, and to avoid, if possible, the transmission of information concerning the proposed operation by hostile agents in Cyprus, to the enemy, that the machines should fly to Cyprus on the Wednesday. ... If the enemy seaplane does not appear within three days of the arrival of our machines at Famagusta, it is proposed that the bomb raid on the enemy seaplane Base should then be carried out. ...<sup>12</sup>

Steps were taken to prepare for the implementation of the plan. Nevertheless, on 1<sup>st</sup> November 1918, an official in the Headquarters, Royal Air Force, Middle East, spoke over the telephone and wrote to the Officer Commanding 64<sup>th</sup> (Naval) Wing, Royal Air, to confirm that 'the operations at CYPRUS have now been cancelled.'<sup>13</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of the Great War, as the tectonic plates of international relations began to shift, the hierarchy of the British armed services took the opportunity to assess the strategic value of the Island just as the politicians were considering its future status. Various assessments were made,

<sup>11</sup> On the genesis of the aerial age, see *inter alia* Richard P. Hallion, *Taking Flight: Inventing the Aerial Age from Antiquity to the First World War* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Formerly 'Secret' (now declassified) memo entitled 'Cyprus' from the Major-General Commanding the Royal Afir Force, Middle East, HQ Cairo, to the General Staff, General Headquarters, Egyptian Expeditionary Force, 29<sup>th</sup> October 1918, PRO, AIR 1/1712/204, 129/95.

<sup>13</sup> Formerly 'Secret' (now declassified) memo from HQ, RAF, Middle East, HQ Cairo, to the Officer Commanding 64<sup>th</sup> (Naval) Wing, RAF, 1<sup>st</sup> November 1918, PRO AIR 1/1712/204, 129/95.

particularly in 1919 and it is interesting to note that Royal Navy officers, as well as Royal Air Force officers, seized upon the potential of the Island in relation to air power.

Take Vice-Admiral J.M. de Robeck, Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Navy in the Mediterranean. In a letter, written on the battleship *HMS Iron Duke* on 18<sup>th</sup> September 1919 and addressed to the Secretary of the Admiralty, Vice-Admiral de Robeck summarised the ‘result of enquiries made of persons with experience of the Island, and who have studied the question’. In doing so, he proceeded to classify his findings under three headings: ‘naval’, ‘air’ and ‘political’:

Naval advantages derived from our possession of Cyprus

The naval advantages are:

- (a) Cyprus is ideally placed for the concentration of troops, subject to efficient escort, for operations on the Coasts of Syria or Asia Minor.
- (b) Is a suitable base for light craft such as Coastal Motor Boats inside – and in fine weather Destroyers outside such a port as Famagusta, protected by a bank.
- (c) Can be used as an advanced fuelling and supply base, with possible adequate protection and as a Base for Auxiliary patrol

Air Advantages derived from our possession of Cyprus

Plenty of good aerodromes can be found on a large plain running East and West across the island, between the mountain ranges, North and South of it, and an aerodrome can be found close to Famagusta Port, easily accessible for stores, or, if it is considered that the aerodrome should be inland, to avoid bombardment, a suitable site can be found close to the Capital town of Nicosia. Should it be thought that the [salt] lake at Limassol may some day have to be converted to a seaplane station, it might be preferred to place the aerodrome there also, a site could easily be found, but this locality is somewhat inaccessible and seaplanes proceeding North would have to cross a mountain range 6,000 feet in height. On the whole I would recommend that the aerodrome be placed at Famagusta.

I beg to bring to your notice the important strategic position occupied by the British island of Cyprus, particularly as regards the employment of aircraft.

This island lies almost on the direct line between Taranto and Karachi, and it may very likely be found desirable to use it as a refuelling station on the England to India and Mesopotamia air route

...

Again Cyprus lies close to country where unsettled conditions may be expected to exist for a considerable time. The distance from Famagusta to Beirut is only 110 miles, to Alexandretta 138 miles, to Mersina 100 miles, to the railway junction at Aleppo only 175 miles ... These facts point to Cyprus holding a most important strategic position in the Levant.

Political advantages derived from our possession of Cyprus

The political reasons which render the retention of Cyprus as an integral portion of the British Empire desirable, may be divided into two categories, namely:-

- (a) Direct advantages of Cyprus to Great Britain
- (b) Disadvantages to Great Britain were Cyprus in the hands of a potentially hostile power or of a weak country which might be brought under the influence of a hostile power.

Further, Cyprus lying as it does over against Mersina and Alexandretta, which may be regarded as western termini of the Baghdad Railway, might well, in the hands of a hostile power, be used as a place whence to strike a blow at British power in Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf...<sup>14</sup>

In reaching these conclusions, Vice-Admiral de Robeck, a veteran of the Dardanelles Campaign whose naval career culminated in the command of the Atlantic Fleet (from August 1922 to August 1924) and promotion to the rank of Admiral of the Fleet (in November 1925),<sup>15</sup> was merely reflecting a view which has been held by many senior British military officers since 1918: the primary strategic function of the Island of Cyprus in relation to British strategy is to enable the United Kingdom to project air power rather than sea power.

Notwithstanding the rosy picture which had been painted by Vice-Admiral de Robeck and others, the post-1918 economic and political realities precluded the exploitation of the Island by the British for strategic purposes during the inter-war years. At the same time, however, those realities reinforced the resolve of the British military hierarchy to keep the Island up its sleeve in order to deny anybody else the opportunity to exploit it. This calculated ambivalence was reflected in a memo, dated 15<sup>th</sup> October 1919, which was submitted by Air Commodore S.M. Steele to the Chief of the Air Staff:

Paragraph 8 of [the] Admiralty Memorandum to [the] War Cabinet of 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1919, really sums up our point of view. We cannot afford to run the risk of Cyprus being used by another Power established in Asia Minor or Palestine, as an advance Base for air attacks on Egypt or the Suez Canal ... Our main base at this end of the Mediterranean will be at Alexandria and if we can prevent any other Power from using Cyprus, there should be no difficulty in patrolling the approaches to the [Suez] Canal. ... To sum up from an Air Staff point of view, (1) we do not propose to use Cyprus as a base in peace time unless it is developed into a fortress with the necessary guns and garrison. (2) It is of vital importance that no other Power should be allowed to do so and therefore we must retain control of the island.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Formerly 'Confidential' (now declassified) letter from Vice-Admiral J.M. de Robeck, Mediterranean Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Navy to the Secretary of the Admiralty, 18<sup>th</sup> September 1919, PRO Air 2/1465.

<sup>15</sup> Paul. G. Halpern, 'Sir John Michael de Robeck', H.G.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (eds.), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Volume 47 (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003), pages 78-80.

<sup>16</sup> Memo from Air Commodore S.M. Steel, DOI, to the Chief of the Air Staff, 'Proposal to cede Cyprus to Greece', 15<sup>th</sup> October 1919, PRO AIR 2/1465.

Thus, the Island remained in the shadow of Egypt throughout the next three decades including throughout the Second World War during which the Island did not have the infrastructure to do anything more than offer occasional support to the Royal Navy.

The intelligence assessment prepared by the Mediterranean Main Naval Intelligence Centre in Alexandria and dated 20<sup>th</sup> October 1941 laid bare the paucity of what was on offer to the Royal Navy in terms of port facilities:

PORTS:

(a) Main:

East Coast:

FAMAGUSTA. The only port in the island dredged to a depth of 24 feet. 1 quay 1,800 feet long. Unloading capacity 1,000 tons per day. The port is closed only in N.E. gales. See Appendix A [not reproduced in this paper].

South Coast:

LARNACA. Affords open anchorage in all weathers except N.E. gales, when vessels can anchor at DHEKELIA, 8 miles N.E. Unloading capacity 240 tons per day from schooners and caiques. See Appendix C [not reproduced in this paper].

LIMASSOL. Similar to Larnaca, shelter from N.E. in EPISKOPI BAY, 8 miles west. Unloading capacity 700 tons per day, can take 2 ships of 600 tons alongside. See Appendix D [not reproduced in this paper].

S.W. Coast:

PAPHOS. A small enclosed harbour suited for sailing vessels and light craft only. Unloading capacity 120 tons per day. See Appendix E [not reproduced in this paper].

North Coast:

KYRENIA. A harbour for light craft. See Appendix B and Part II Coast Reconnaissance, Point F.1 [not reproduced in this paper].

(b) Minor Ports:

There is a large number of minor ports and trading stations for coastal trade, which, since the road system was improved, have decreased in importance. Each normally consists of a Customs House, a small jetty and several store sheds for collecting the local carob bean crops. These are summarised in Appendix F [not reproduced in this paper]. There are several jetties marked on the maps which do not exist and vice versa.<sup>17</sup>

For these and other reasons, the contribution of the Island to the allied war effort from 1939 to 1945 was, though noteworthy, less dramatic than it might otherwise have been. As the Ministry of Information reflected in a paper dated 14<sup>th</sup> September 1945:

<sup>17</sup> Formerly 'Secret' now declassified 'Cyprus Intelligence Report', prepared by the Mediterranean Main Naval Intelligence Centre, Ras-el-Tin, Alexandria, 20<sup>th</sup> October 1941, PRO HS 3/120.

The island of Cyprus has played an important part in the strategy of the Eastern Mediterranean. For the first nine months of the war it was left undisturbed, but after Italy entered the war on Germany's side in June 1940 the position changed. The island was especially threatened from the Italian naval base in the Dodecanese, about 200 miles away. Serious attacks did not however develop until 1941, when the evacuation of Greece and then of Crete, 350 miles to the west, brought Cyprus into the main Middle East defence line. For a time it seemed that Cyprus might be the next point of Axis attack. Hostilities in Russia, and the British occupation of Syria stabilised the situation in the Mediterranean and the immediate threat to Cyprus became less. In 1942 the Middle East was again threatened, and Cyprus again became important as a forward base against the enemy forces in Greece, Crete and Rhodes. The Prime Minister of the U.K., Mr Winston Churchill, then named it as part of the line through the Middle East which safeguarded communications with Turkey, Iraq, and Russia through the Caucasus. The reinforcement of the small pre-war garrison of British troops, new fortifications, building of air-fields and the improvements to Famagusta harbour increased Cyprus' strength considerably, and its defences were augmented by the fact that R.A.F fighters stationed in Syria, about 150 miles away, could operate over the island. The defeat of the Axis armies at El Alemein in October 1942 removed the immediate danger, and on the defeat of the Axis armies in Greece and Italy the threat to Cyprus evaporated; but the improved communications established during the danger period have brought Cyprus in closer touch than before with all the Middle East countries. Cyprus has not been an important naval base, nor an important port of call: but in the hands of a hostile power it could have threatened the vital route to the East through the Suez Canal. Its harbours have been used during the war for the re-fuelling of Allied ships: and the mere fact that it was denied to the Axis powers was of very great importance in the strategy of naval warfare in the Mediterranean. ....<sup>18</sup>

The above report went on to record, with reference to communications, that:

During the war considerable improvements have been made in the internal communications of the island, the troops stationed in Cyprus having made a new and important net-work of roads. The new airfields, built for wartime purposes, and the improvements to Famagusta harbour, for which a grant was made under the Colonial Development and Welfare Act, should be of great assistance in improving Cyprus' external communications, especially with the countries of the Middle East.<sup>19</sup>

These improvements were almost literally built upon during the mid-to-late 1950s when in direct response to the gradual withdrawal from Egypt and the intensification of the Cold War the British were effectively compelled to transform the Island into a vast military base, to the chagrin of most of the local population.

## 1945-1960

To quote Robin Neillands, who served on the Island during the late 1950s with 45 Commando RM: 'Timing is a factor in human affairs and Cyprus became important to Britain just at the moment the

<sup>18</sup> 'Cyprus and the War,' Reference Division, Ministry of Information, Based on a note received from the Cyprus Information Office, 14<sup>th</sup> September 1945, pages 2 and 3.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, page 10.

Greek Cypriots began their bid for independence and ‘enosis’ – union with Greece.<sup>20</sup> Even so, during a decade characterised by construction and conflict, the emphasis by the United Kingdom was on the development on the Island of land, air and intelligence bases - particularly the latter two, bearing in mind the critical role of the Royal Air Force in support of the nuclear deterrent; the enlargement of the Island’s ports for military purposes was a second-order priority. Hence, Episkopi became the site of the Headquarters of British Forces in the Middle East, RAF Akrotiri emerged as the largest RAF base in the world and Ayios Nikolaos evolved into a modern intelligence gathering base. By contrast, little was done to renovate the Island’s ports to a standard which would have benefited the Royal Navy. As J.N. Browne, an MP who had visited the Island, warned the Colonial Office in a letter dated 28<sup>th</sup> January 1952:

Even the Mediterranean traders are now approaching the maximum length allowed in Famagusta (425 ft). Troop movements and supplies would really need larger vessels than this. Complacency at this time may be unwise. ... It must not be overlooked, however, that the existing [fresh water] pumps are unable to cope with the height of larger vessels. ... Harbour Lights: According to my information from more than one source, it is impossible for coasters to enter or leave in the hours of darkness, this causes hold-ups or delays. ... If Cyprus is to be given its proper importance and proper degree of safety, extra cranes are essential for handling modern tonnage. ... Conclusion: I think I am right in saying that the Famagusta Harbour, the only [large] harbour in the whole island, was constructed some 600 years ago. The vessels at that time were of the size of modern ships lifeboats. The harbour has deteriorated, the breakwater dwindling and the harbour shoaling. The importance of Middle East defence, the difficulties in Egypt, the increasing trade to Cyprus, its telephone communication with the mainland, and the growing population since [the] stamping out of malaria; - all these points make it desirable for Cyprus to be an island which Britain can hold and make prosperous and use as a base. Let us for goodness sake make a proper job of this, it will pay dividends for generations to come.<sup>21</sup>

Such pleas fell on deaf ears. Two years later, the assessment of the ‘Strategic Importance of Cyprus, which was carried out by the United Kingdom Chiefs of Staff and approved at their meeting on 8<sup>th</sup> September 1954, confirmed that the Island’s ports were still deficient:

#### Strategic importance of Cyprus

Peace and Cold War. Cyprus lies in the Eastern basin of the Mediterranean and is regarded by the countries of the Middle East as part of it. It is the only British Territory in the Middle East where our combined headquarters and centre of intelligence can be located, and where we can keep troops in peace to exert British influence and to meet sudden emergencies of any kind. It is geographically convenient for this purpose and also has airfield facilities which could receive reinforcements from the U.K. strategic reserve and operate reinforcing aircraft in case of need. It

<sup>20</sup> Robin Neillands, ‘Cyprus, 1955-1959: EOKA’, in Major General Julian Thompson, ‘The World in 1945: The View from May 2001,’ Introduction to Major General Julian Thompson (ed.), *The Imperial War Museum Book of Modern Warfare: British and Commonwealth Forces at War, 1945-2000*, (London, Sigwick & Jackson, 2002) at page169.

<sup>21</sup> Letter from J.N. Browne, CBE, MP, to Alan Lennox-Boyd, MP, Colonial Office, 28<sup>th</sup> January 1952, PRO CO926/104, folios 200 to 203. Browne’s interest in maritime matters no doubt flowed from the fact that he was the Conservative MP for Govan, in Scotland, home to one of the largest shipyards in the United Kingdom. Browne had served in the armed forces during World War II, attaining the rank of acting RAF Group Captain.

is becoming an increasingly important link in our imperial air routes. Its chief defect is lack of port facilities.

War. In war, if the forward strategy now being prepared is a practical operation, the use of the Cyprus airfields will prove an important adjunct to those in Turkey, Jordan and Iraq. In addition they will give added flexibility to the strategic bomber force. Furthermore Cyprus lies athwart our sea route through the Eastern Mediterranean and is capable of supporting to a limited extent small numbers of light naval forces.<sup>22</sup>

The ongoing failure to transform the Island's ports to a standard comparable with the ports of, say, Malta, came to haunt the Royal Navy during the Suez Campaign of 1956. The Royal Air Force was able to make extensive use of RAF Akrotiri, even though it was under construction and other airfields on the Island. However, the inadequacies of the Island's ports hampered Anglo-French naval planning and necessitated the increased use of Malta, which was much further away. In the words of Field Marshal The Lord Carver, who in 1956 was Army Chief of Staff in East Africa and who went to serve as Chief of the Defence Staff from 1973 to 1976:

One of the principal difficulties they [the Chiefs of Staff] faced was that any seaborne expedition had to start from Malta, six days' sailing for slow landing-craft to Alexandria or Port Said, as Cyprus had no port capable of acting as a mounting base. A second was the very limited unloading facilities at Port Said.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of the cessation of hostilities, the United Kingdom Minister of Transport and Civil Aviation, Harold Watkinson, informed the Minister of Defence that:

The recent military operations have disclosed that the ports of Cyprus have serious limitations. At a time when the future of the island is being considered it seems opportune that facts which restrict its strategic value should also be considered. The chief limitation is that at only one port in the island, namely Famagusta, can ships of even modest draught come alongside a quay. Even there deep-draughted ships of the kind needed to transport tanks and M.T. cannot berth alongside for lack of water. As a result, the M.T. ships which I had to requisition for these operations were very severely held up in Cyprus. They had to be held at anchor for long periods in exposed roadsteads where, as storms are liable to arise suddenly at this time of year, they had to maintain steam in order to be able to put to sea quickly. Whenever the weather was at all bad they could not load or discharge.<sup>24</sup>

These factors, in addition to bad weather, choppy seas and diplomatic bungling, contributed to an episode which is invariably described as a 'débâcle' or a 'fiasco'.

<sup>22</sup> Formerly 'Top Secret' now declassified Annex to a Note by H. Lovegrave, the Secretary of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, 'Strategic Importance of Cyprus,' 13<sup>th</sup> September 1954, COS (54) 303, PRO CAB 134/801.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Carver, *Tightrope Walking: British Defence Policy Since 1945* (Hutchinson, London, 1992), page 45.

<sup>24</sup> Memo from Harold Watkinson, Minister of Transport and Civil Aviation to the Minister of Defence, December 1956 (the exact date of the memo is obscure), PRO DEFE 7/1008.

Less than four years after the end of the Suez Campaign, the United Kingdom surrendered sovereignty over all but two parts of the Island of Cyprus and granted independence to the newly-established Republic of Cyprus. However, the British government refused to countenance a complete withdrawal from the United Kingdom's last remaining outpost in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Accordingly, under the terms of the Treaty of Establishment, 1960, to which the Republic, the United Kingdom, Greece and Turkey are parties, the United Kingdom retained and continues to retain to this day a formidable array of strategic interests on the Island; for this reason, the present tense is used hereafter in this paragraph. Firstly, the United Kingdom retains sovereignty over two portions of territory and adjacent territorial sea: at the Akrotiri Sovereign Base Area, on the south-west coast and at the Dhekelia Sovereign Base Area on the south east coast, neither of which has a deep water port. Secondly, the United Kingdom reserves the right to use thirteen or so sites and installations in the Republic of Cyprus, including the Foreign Office Wireless Station at Zygi and three sites at Famagusta even though, as the UK Ministry of Defence explains, these three are “Not currently used as in Turkish Occupied Area”;<sup>25</sup> these are the remnants of forty such sites and installations which were originally retained in 1960. Thirdly, the United Kingdom reserves the right to use a number of training areas on the territory of the Republic of Cyprus. Fourthly, the United Kingdom reserves the right to use the ports and other parts of the infrastructure of the Republic of Cyprus; these rights include the following which are set out in Part B of the Treaty of Establishment:

4 (1) (a): The United Kingdom authorities shall have the right to use roads, ports and other facilities [in the Republic of Cyprus] freely for the movement of formed bodies of troops, and convoys of vehicles, of the land, sea and air armed services of the United Kingdom, to and from and between the Akrotiri SBA, the Dhekelia SBA, the Sites, and other premises and installations referred to in paragraph 6 of Section 8 of this Part of this Annex, Range Areas, Training Areas, localities in which training is carried out, ports and airfields, and, with the consent of the authorities of the Republic of Cyprus, elsewhere ...

5 (1) The rights accorded by the Republic of Cyprus by Section 4 of this Part of the Annex shall include the unobstructed use of the port, docks, harbours, piers and related installations and equipment of the Republic of Cyprus ...

5 (3) In exercise of the rights of the United Kingdom authorities under this Section, United Kingdom vessels shall have the right to visit ports in the Republic of Cyprus and to obtain there

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<sup>25</sup> Written Answer by Ivor Caplin MP, Minister of State, Ministry of Defence, Hansard, *House of Commons Debates*, 19<sup>th</sup> January 2005, Column 950W.

provisions, fresh water and other supplies. Visits by Her Majesty's Ships shall be subject to the customary international procedures.

The rights in favour of the United Kingdom under the Treaty of Establishment, which it does not enjoy in any other former colony, enable the British to assert sovereignty over two areas of Eastern Mediterranean territory and over two areas of the Eastern Mediterranean Sea.

## **1960-2006**

During the first thirty years after the independence of the Republic of Cyprus, the United Kingdom was largely in retreat from its overseas Empire and other interests. Although the Sovereign Base Areas and the ports of the Republic came in handy during a number of operations involving the Royal Navy, such as the reinforcement of Kuwait in 1961 and the deployment to Lebanon from 1983 to 1984, the Royal Navy made no more than sporadic use of the Island in connection with major operations. Indeed, when Turkey invaded the Republic of Cyprus in 1974, the Royal Navy was not ordered to do anything much more than operate in a humanitarian and civilian rescue capacity.

Since the 1990/91 US-led operation to oust Iraqi forces from Kuwait and, more particularly, since the evolution of a British expeditionary strategy under the Prime Ministership of Tony Blair (which began in May 1997), the Royal Navy's presence on the Island has been augmented. As the Royal Navy discloses on its official website:

The Royal Navy Cyprus Squadron was formed in February 2003 in support of Operation TELIC, the US led invasion of Iraq. Two P2000 class patrol ships HMS Pursuer (P273) and Dasher (P280) were transported to Cyprus on a large merchant ship vessel the CEC Mayflower. The Squadron's role is to provide 'force protection' for entitled Ships in Sovereign Waters.<sup>26</sup>

It should not go without saying that Island has been instrumental in connection with post-2003 naval deployments to the Gulf thanks in no small measure to the availability of a deep water port at Limassol, which the Republic of Cyprus has transformed into its major port on account of the fact that Famagusta port has been under Turkish military occupation since 1974. As the *Cyprus Mail* reported on 28<sup>th</sup> January 2003, less than two months before the UK-led invasion of Iraq:

In the largest British naval mobilisation since the Falklands war, 15 vessels headed by the Navy's flagship *HMS Ark Royal*, arrived off Cyprus yesterday. British Bases Spokesman Rob Need told the Cyprus News Agency the arrival of the fleet had been hindered by the bad weather that struck Larnaca and Limassol early yesterday, allowing only the arrival of two landing ships at Akrotiri. The flotilla remained in international waters last night. Need told journalists that no decisions had yet been taken by the British

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<sup>26</sup> 'Cyprus Squadron', <http://www.royal-navy.mod.uk/server/show/nav.2206>

government on military action against Iraq and that the armada was arriving on the island for training. The bases will provide facilities for the training of Royal Marines. Major Hugh Milner of the Royal Marines said Cyprus was an ideal environment for the Marines. "The bases on Cyprus offer a unique blend of logistic support, as well as Eastern Mediterranean coastal environment to work up an Amphibious Task Force its associated Landing Craft and boats, Commando personnel and Helicopter Squadrons," Milner said.

Lieutenant Commander John Bower of the Royal Navy said Cyprus offered an ideal location for ships to collect stores, spare parts, mail and fresh provisions, while they operate in the Eastern Mediterranean. "Already waiting for the fleet at the Bases is over 10,000kg of stores ranging from important helicopter spares and engineering items to domestic items such as cleaning gear for the ablutions and galleys," Bower said. "Cyprus will be supplying the 5,000 men and women with over 80,000kg of fresh provisions. Cyprus is also the first opportunity the fleet has had to collect mail since leaving the UK. "Letters from home are a tremendous morale booster, so collecting the 200 bags of mail which have already arrived at the Bases will be a top priority." ...<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusions

In the words of Admiral Sir Jock Slater, the First Sea Lord from 1995 to 1998, the heritage of the Royal Navy has been formed 'in equal measure' from two traditions: 'on the one hand, a sterling and straightforward inheritance from the Nelsonic tradition of seeking battle on the sea, and on the other hand, the application of sea-based force as part of an integrated approach to operations.'<sup>28</sup> Both traditions have manifested themselves in the Eastern Mediterranean, which has figured prominently in British military calculations over a number of centuries. If the first tradition was reflected at the Battle of Navarino in 1827, then the second was embodied during nineteenth century era of imperial power projection (such as during the Syrian Campaign of 1840), the two world wars of the twentieth century (for instance in the Dardanelles campaign of 1915 and the Battle for Crete in 1941) and a number of post-1945 limited operations (including the ill-fated Suez campaign of 1956). Even so, for reasons set out in this paper, the Royal Navy has made scant use of the Island for the purposes of projecting sea power since 1878. On the other hand, if the events of the past three years or so are anything to go by, things may be changing.

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<sup>27</sup> Alex Mita, 'British flotilla arrives off Cyprus,' *Cyprus Mail*, 28<sup>th</sup> January 2003. As the official website of the Royal Navy further explains: 'The Unit [i.e. 40 Commando Royal Marines] deployed in its entirety in January 2003, initially part of the Naval Task Group (NTG) 03 in HMS Ocean, Ark Royal and RFAs Sir Galahad and Tristram. The group sailed through the Mediterranean after a brief stop at Cyprus, continuing through the Suez Canal bound for the Arabian Gulf. ... The Command Group's role in the success of the coalition operation in Iraq was pivotal and profound.' 'History of 40 Commando Royal Marines', <http://www.royal-navy.mod.uk/server/show/nav.2594>

<sup>28</sup> Admiral Sir Jock Slater, 'Foreword', in Captain Peter Hore (ed.), *Seapower Ashore: 200 years of Royal Navy Operations on Land* (Chatham Publishing in association with the National Maritime Museum, London, 2001), page 9.