

# *British Imperialism in Cyprus, 1878–1915*

*The inconsequential  
possession*

ANDREKOS VARNAVA



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# British Imperialism in Cyprus, 1878–1915

## **The Inconsequential Possession**

Andrekos Varnava

Lecturer in Modern History,  
Department of History,  
Flinders University,  
South Australia

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## GENERAL EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Imperialism often represented the temporary triumph of hope over reality. The Victorian belief in progress was so profound that progressive expectations of economic or strategic value were invariably wildly overdrawn. This was very much the case with Cyprus. Acquired in a mood of just such enthusiastic aspirations, it soon became apparent that the island was going to deliver neither the commercial nor the geopolitical value expected of it. Seldom has an imperial possession produced so quickly such a declining fall in its reputation for productivity, for its climatic and health properties, and its military advantages. Soon seen as a Tory folly by the Liberals, many politicians came to view it as an unnecessary blot on the imperial landscape. Abandoning it, as with the Ionian Islands earlier in the century, seemed like the best course of action, but the British discovered that they had become deeply implicated in, and had perhaps exacerbated, communal tensions. Cyprus had remained no more than a lease from the Ottoman Empire, but returning it to the Turks was inconceivable and handing it over the Greeks was fraught with difficulties. They were landed with the 'inconsequential possession' until later in the twentieth century, when a violent and messy decolonisation only served to stir up more hostilities and apparently ratchet up the scale of conflict.

Andrekos Varnava's book deals with these issues in illuminating ways. The author rightly demonstrates the manner in which Cyprus played a significant role in the imaginative culture of the British, through the fascination with the ancient world in the nineteenth century, the archaeological developments, which often constituted major news, the new invoking of the medieval crusades and the exaltation of heroes in that period, the philhellene passions of the time, and the various literary manifestations that had kept Cyprus at the forefront of their consciousness. The acquisition of Cyprus in 1878 was, therefore, rooted in romantic predilections, which may well have influenced Disraeli as much as hard-headed practical concerns. But Cyprus was soon overtaken by other events in the Mediterranean, notably the British move into Egypt in 1882 – again theoretically under the aegis of the Ottoman Empire creating the co-called 'veiled protectorate' – a development which seemed swiftly to render Cyprus redundant. It was certainly no longer important on the route to India and its significance in respect of the Aegean and Asia Minor was dubious in respect of the nature and scale of British interests there.

From the point of view of the British search for 'added value' from the island, it was unfortunate that Cyprus was locked into Ottoman debt, that medical and sanitary advances capable of overcoming its health problems had not yet occurred, and that neither the military nor naval establishments could find (despite much debate) anything to recommend it. The great irony is that Cyprus only seemed to offer advantages once air power had entered the equation and once the hostility of nationalist politicians had rendered the British position

## GENERAL EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

in Egypt untenable. By then, Cyprus was on the verge of becoming, despite its record of communal conflict, a highly significant tourist destination. Now its climatic and physical attractions would come to the forefront of the British consciousness in new ways. Only in modern times have the possibility of resolution and reconciliation become more real, perhaps in association with the European Union.

The author has shifted the historical centre of gravity on the island from the decolonisation years (which have received a great deal of attention) to the earlier era of British rule. He has done this through a remarkably detailed examination of official documents and other sources. He has also looked in detail at the British efforts to hand over Cyprus to the Greeks before and during the First World War, analysing the reasons for the failure of these early attempts at *enosis*. The book greatly increases our understanding of British dispensations and disappointments in respect of Cyprus, setting political and military arrangements into wider cultural and ethnic contexts.

In all of this we should never, of course, forget the people of Cyprus themselves who have been so often caught up in political and diplomatic events beyond their control.

John M. MacKenzie

## ABBREVIATIONS

AC	Army Council
AMH	American Historical Review
BLC	Biographical Lexicon of Cypriots (Koudounaris)
BMGS	Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies
BS	Balkan Studies
CAB	Cabinet Papers
CAOG	Crown Agents for Overseas Governments and Administrations
CDC	Colonial Defence Committee
CHBE	Cambridge History of the British Empire
CHJ	Cambridge Historical Journal
CIC	Commander-in-Chief
CICMS	Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean Squadron or Station
CID	Committee of Imperial Defence
CMO	Chief Medical Officer
CO	Colonial Office
CP	Comparative Politics
CR-1	Contemporary Review
CR-2	Cyprus Review
EHR	The English History Review
EIC	Editor-in-Chief
EKEE	Επετηρίδα Κέντρου Επιστημονικών Ερευνών (Annual Review of the Cyprus Research Centre)
ERS	Ethnic and Racial Studies
ESS	European Studies of Sociology
FO	Foreign Office
FR	Fortnightly Review
GED	General Engineer's Department (later PWD)
GOCE	General Officer Commanding Egypt
HJ	Historical Journal
HOC	House of Commons
HOL	House of Lords
HR	Historical Review
HSANZ	Historical Studies Australia and New Zealand
IA	International Affairs
ICCS-1	Proceedings of the First International Conference on Cypriot Studies
ICCS-2	Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Cypriot Studies
ICQ	Irish Church Quarterly
IGF	Inspector-General of Fortifications (WO)

## ABBREVIATIONS

IHR	International History Review
IJMES	International Journal of Middle East Studies
IJSL	International Journal of Society and Language
ILN	Illustrated London News
IO	India Office
IOR	India Office Records
JAH	Journal of African History
JCH	Journal of Contemporary History
JHS	Journal of Hellenic Studies
JICH	Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History
JMA	Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology
JMGS	Journal of Modern Greek Studies
JMH	The Journal of Modern History
JWH	Journal of World History
KL	Kypriakos Logos
KS	Kypriakai Spoudai
LC	Legislative Council
LK	Laografiki Kypros
LO	Law Officers
MAS	Modern Asian Studies
MES	Middle East Studies
MM	Macmillan's Magazine
MO	Medical Officer
MRC-I, MRC-II, MRC-III	Military Report and General Information Concerning the Island of Cyprus (1907), (1913) and (1936)
NC	The Nineteenth Century
NN	Nations and Nationalism
NR	National Review
ODNB	Oxford Dictionary of National Biography
OHBE	Oxford History of the British Empire
PSQ	Political Science Quarterly
QR	Quarterly Review
RE	Royal Engineers
RMA	Royal Military Academy
RN	Royal Navy
SA	Secretariat Archive
SEER	Slavonic and East European Review
UE	United Empire
USM	United Service Magazine
WD	War Department
WO	War Office





## Introduction

On 12 July 1878, the future admiral and governor of New South Wales (1902–09), Captain Harry Rawson, raised the British flag in Nicosia, the capital of Cyprus. The special artist of the *Illustrated London News* (ILN), Samuel Pasfield Oliver, depicted bemused, animated and scruffy natives, whom he contrasted with the solemn and pristinely lined British and Indian soldiers. Admiral Lord John Hay, who had taken possession of Cyprus in Queen Victoria's name, salutes the Union Jack.<sup>1</sup> A month later, Oliver drew 'Greek Priests Blessing the British Flag at Nicosia'. After Mass, they huddled under the hoisted flag outside the entrance in an act of benediction before a large crowd. Three cheers followed for Queen Victoria, Sir Garnet Wolseley, the High Commissioner, and the British nation. Wolseley stood before a throne especially placed for him, which he refused to use. The other British officers stood beside it, clearly indifferent.<sup>2</sup> Wolseley wrote in his journal that the ceremony was 'such a mockery of everything sacred', conducted by 'dirty greasy priests' and 'was like a penny peep show very badly done by very inferior showmen'.<sup>3</sup>

The scenes show the contradictions in the British rule of Cyprus between 1878 and 1915. The martial presence reflects the British aim in occupying Cyprus: strategy and power. The local reaction, especially of the clergy, reflected their support and even reverence of the British. The Cypriot Eastern Orthodox Christians welcomed the British with the hope that they would bring equality to Orthodox Christian and Muslim alike. The indifferent – even rude – British reaction contrasted with the British strategic aims behind the selection of a place with docile inhabitants. That the British ultimately failed was no surprise.

During the Anglo-Turkish Convention of June 1878, Lord Beaconsfield's Conservative government demanded and got from the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II the right to administer and occupy Cyprus. The island was to be a *place d'armes*, a term Beaconsfield used when he suggested seizing Cyprus in April 1878. A place of arms is an offensive base and thus needs a harbour capable of berthing warships for the disembarkation and embarkation of an army, especially in the case of an island. Such a base, the Conservatives hoped, would end the threats to British interests, both strategic and economic, in the Near East and India, arising from a weak Ottoman Empire and an expansionist Russia.

BRITISH IMPERIALISM IN CYPRUS, 1875-1915



**Figure 1** 'Raising the British flag in Nicosia, Cyprus'  
*Source: Illustrated London News, 10 August 1878.*

## INTRODUCTION

A generation later, in December 1912, the Liberals, Winston Churchill, the First Lord of the Admiralty, and David Lloyd George, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, with the consent of Sir Edward Grey, the Foreign Secretary, and the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, told the Prime Minister of Greece, Eleutherios Venizelos, that London wanted to cede Cyprus to Greece. Cyprus was of no value to the British except as a pawn. In 1915, a formal offer was made to Greece's government, but it was rejected.

This study examines Cyprus' progress from a perceived imperial asset to an expendable backwater, explaining how the Union Jack came to fly over the island and why after thirty-five years the British wanted to lower it. It deals with British imperialism and the problem of the worthless territorial acquisition. Ultimately, Cyprus' strategic, political and economic importance was always more imagined than real and was enmeshed within widely held cultural signifiers and myths.

The reader may ask: Why is it important to study the history of 'the inconsequential possession'? Most studies examine the importance of possessions to an imperial power. By showing their value to the imperial centre, imperialism and, in some cases, the reluctance to decolonise them in the face of rising nationalism, can be justified. Oddly, given this study, Cyprus also falls into this category in the traditional literature and received wisdom (see [Chapter 1](#)). This study shows that Cyprus was not always a valuable imperial asset. More broadly, examining the inconsequential possession reveals much about reasons of state, construction of policy and the contingencies of imperial governance. States do not always come to decisions logically or through evidence-based reasoning; decisions are often wrong; reasons for bad decisions can be twisted and turned to justify them differently; and there is a great reluctance to admit a wrong move, let alone to reverse it. Imperialism is especially difficult to reverse. Positive vibes and future value and prosperity usually accompany the occupation of new territory. It is not always easy to reconcile this with a sudden failure to realise this. Such failure hits at the pride of the imperial centre and the judgement of those politicians that decided on the move. But what is clear, and Cyprus is not the only case (for example, the Ionian Islands, Weihaiwei), is that a generation or two down the track, politicians are capable of critical reflection and reversing a policy that resulted in the acquisition of a failed possession. Personal identification with a policy, thus, plays a great part in 'reversing' a 'wrong move'. Whether succeeding in reversing a wrong policy or not, it is the intention that is important.

Examining the inconsequential possession also reveals a great deal about the ambiguities and unintended consequences that often remain

unaccounted for in deterministic and monolithic accounts of the past. What does an imperial centre do when it occupies a place, once marketed as a pearl, that turns into a millstone? Does it fumble around to create a value for it? After all, it must justify its continued occupation. Conceptual and organisational confusion best characterise British perceptions of Cyprus' value and its administration between 1878 and 1915. Put simply, British governments whether Conservative or Liberal, did not know how to put Cyprus to any use within the wider imperial structures. Thus the 'inconsequential possession' can be seen as a deconstructive tool for demythifying policy and geopolitics.

In this respect, 'strategy' is also as an ambiguous discourse. At different periods or in different governmental quarters Cyprus was officially viewed as both important and inconsequential. Party politics and ideology, especially with respect to imperialism, influenced these differing views. But there came a point when even those that had been involved in the Conservative government that had occupied Cyprus did not know what to do with it. Thus it was possible for the arguments of those that considered Cyprus inconsequential from the beginning (the Liberals) to gain ground and result in the island becoming an expendable pawn.

Understanding how and why the British found themselves in such a position, that is, saddled with an 'inconsequential possession', and their response, which culminated in efforts to lower the Union Jack that had been first raised in 1878, is the main preoccupation of this book.

### *Sources and methodology*

This book has an unconventional structure, combining a chronological with a thematic approach. It is structured chronologically until William Gladstone comes to power in 1880, when the structure takes a thematic approach, so that the focus is on the fundamental issues, leading to the final chapter, which examines Cyprus' eventual place as a pawn. [Chapter 1](#) provides the necessary historiographical, thematic and historical context from which the chapters to follow can be situated and also draws upon other similar cases within these contexts. [Chapter 2](#) explores the English/British imperial imagination relating to Cyprus from the time of Richard *Coeur de Lion* to Benjamin Disraeli (Lord Beaconsfield), with a focus on the strategic perceptions and cultural aspects of imperialism. [Chapter 3](#) examines the occupation of Cyprus from a more conventional approach – the aims, interests and decision-making processes of Lord Beaconsfield's government. It attempts to draw links between the decision-making processes and

## INTRODUCTION

the imperial imagination. Chapter 4 investigates the policy in practice from its reception to the realities in Cyprus. It reveals the difficulties encountered and London's reaction. Beaconsfield's loss in the April 1880 elections, when the Liberals came to power under Gladstone, forms a break because the opposition of the new government to the Cyprus venture resulted in a different approach to the island. It would no longer be treated as a potential strategic asset, but as an ordinary colony, in so far as who would run it (transferred from the Foreign Office to the Colonial Office), but also it would be more overtly considered part of the Greek world. It was during this time, with Gladstone as prime minister, that policy in Cyprus was set, until after 1915 when changes were forced on the imperial centre because of Greece's rejection of Cyprus, French imperial interests in the region and the rise of nationalism within the Greek Cypriot elite. The subsequent chapters are thematic. The themes explored are finance/economy, governance and identity, strategic value and international position. An important or at least a successful possession must be financially/economically viable, relatively easily governable, and developed through public works and its resources, hence the choice of these themes. If economically viable, easily governable and developed, the place would have an important position within imperial structures and internationally it would project the power of the imperial centre. This international aspect is explored in the final chapter. But far from projecting power, Cyprus was considered useless as a British possession not only by the British but also by key European powers. That it became a pawn was not sudden and not a surprise.

Few historians have covered Cyprus between 1878 and the First World War, let alone its strategic place within the British imperial imagination, politics and structure. Volume IV of Hill's *A History of Cyprus* covers Ottoman and much of British rule, but it was written from an imperialist perspective (remembering also that Sir Harry Luke, an old Cyprus hand, edited the volume) and focuses on the friction between the British and the Cypriots.<sup>4</sup> In *A Political and Administrative History of Cyprus, 1918–26* George Georghallides outlines the period 1878–1918, but does not explore the issue of Cyprus' strategic role and place within the British imperial structure as thoroughly as he does for 1915–26.<sup>5</sup> More recently two excellent studies on the period after 1878 look at the Cypriots rather than the imperial power. Rolandos Katsiaounis' *Labour, Society and Politics in Cyprus during the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century*<sup>6</sup> and Rebecca Bryant's *Imagining the Modern*<sup>7</sup> were both timely accounts of the development of national and political consciousness. There are few other secondary works worth mentioning. The lack of secondary sources means that

archival sources must be used to tell the general history of the island as well as to address the questions this study seeks to shed light on.

This study, being about British perceptions and policy, relies on British records. Most of the archival material was accessed at the National Archives in Kew, London. The Foreign Office ran Cyprus until 1880 when the Colonial Office took over, and most of the material in the section on the Ottoman Empire (FO881) was transferred to the Colonial Office (CO67). Scholars have not examined the files in the Colonial Office relating to Cyprus' strategic disposition or its political and economic viability within the Empire from its occupation until its annexation in November 1914. Much data were also found in the Foreign Office classmarks for Greece (FO371) and the Ottoman Empire (FO881), the War Office, Admiralty and Cabinet Papers.

Examining only one archive, however, limits any study. In this case, it would present only the bare bones of policy-making without the meat behind it. Men on the spot and locals informed policy. This is evident in the collection of the Secretariat Archive (SA1), in the State Archives, Nicosia, which contain the papers of the chief secretaries during British rule. The SA1 series present the circumstances in Cyprus and include correspondence between London and the Cyprus government; the latter and its local officers; and local officials and the population. But military and personal files of officers are empty or missing.

Scholars often view unpublished unofficial correspondence, such as journals, diaries and letters, as complementing official correspondence, but this underestimates their value. The views and emotions of men on the spot and decision-makers alike are more freely expressed in private than official correspondence. History is not only about the official; it is also about the individuals and the importance of their perceptions, ideologies, prejudices and emotions, which are often suppressed from official correspondence and reports. They provide a private avenue to understanding Cyprus' place within the Empire and are useful in pursuing the secret diplomatic discourses and departmental debates.

Public sources, such as memoirs, newspapers, parliamentary debates and travellers' accounts, are equally vital in understanding contemporary perceptions. Such literary sources provide the public with those views that authors wish and agree to make public. Thus they must be contextualised. They also often help to understand shifts in government policy, the importance of issues and the views of the wider public beyond the politicians. Fictional references also have an important role to play, hiding messages that the author might otherwise not wish to overtly disclose – or more overtly disclosing messages, thus giving



## INTRODUCTION

importance to them. Although many of these sources are readily available, most have not been used before in a study covering this period of British rule of Cyprus.

Images, no less than words, are vital. John MacKenzie correctly observed that 'a full understanding of orientalism requires some comprehension of the extensive range of artistic vehicles through which representations of the orient were projected'.<sup>8</sup> Despite this, images have seldom been taken seriously. From the caricatures of *Punch*, the sketches in the *Illustrated London News*, to photographs, such as those of John Thomson, the image has an important story to tell, politically, culturally and of course aesthetically.

The British were masters at analysing and visualising their Empire and educating those at home about it. Historians have significant records from which to understand the place of Cyprus in British imperial imagination, politics and strategy.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *ILN*, 10 August 1878.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 18 August 1878.

<sup>3</sup> Wolseley Journal, 18 August 1878 (ed.) Anne Cavendish, *Cyprus 1878: The Journal of Sir Garnet Wolseley*, Nicosia, 1991. Hereafter Wolseley Journal, with entry date.

<sup>4</sup> Sir George Francis Hill, *A History of Cyprus*, IV (ed.) Sir Harry Luke, London, 1952.

<sup>5</sup> G.S. Georgiades, *A Political and Administrative History of Cyprus 1918–1926*, Nicosia, 1979.

<sup>6</sup> Rolandos Katsiaounis, *Labour, Society and Politics in Cyprus in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century*, Nicosia, 1996.

<sup>7</sup> Rebecca Bryant, *Imagining the Modern: The Cultures of Nationalism in Cyprus*, London, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> John MacKenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts*, Manchester, 1995, 14.



## CHAPTER 1

### Historicising the British possession of Cyprus: the contexts

There was once a little lady, who had lodgings in a shoe,  
She had so many babies that she didn't know what to do,  
Queen Victoria's the lady, Old England is the shoe,  
And the latest baby's little Master Cyprus.

(The chorus of an 1879 comical and topical song, written by  
E.V. Page, composed by Vincent Davies and sung by Arthur  
Roberts, J.W. Rowley and H.P. Matthews)

Queen Victoria, so this song goes (see Appendix IV for full song), has added another baby (possession) to her collection – an extensive collection she does not really know what to do with. The new possession is Cyprus, thus implying, about a year after its occupation, that it too will be as useless as the others. No doubt, some of the others were not so useless, but then again some of those of value were not babies, such as Australia, Canada and India. Nevertheless, the song is clear enough: it argues that once occupied overseas possessions become ornaments that have no real value and it is not known what should be done with them. This song extract challenges the received wisdom of Cyprus' strategic importance and throws down the challenge to situate the occupation and subsequent retention of the island within the various theoretical contexts. So the main aim of this chapter is to examine the historiographical and theoretical contexts, ending with a section that provides a narrative of British imperial and foreign policies from which to better understand the chapters that follow.

#### *Historiographical context*

Historians have not included Cyprus in explanations of imperialism. This is understandable, as colonial expansion saw vast amounts of territory occupied in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and Cyprus was only a small part. Yet the politicians (namely Beaconsfield and

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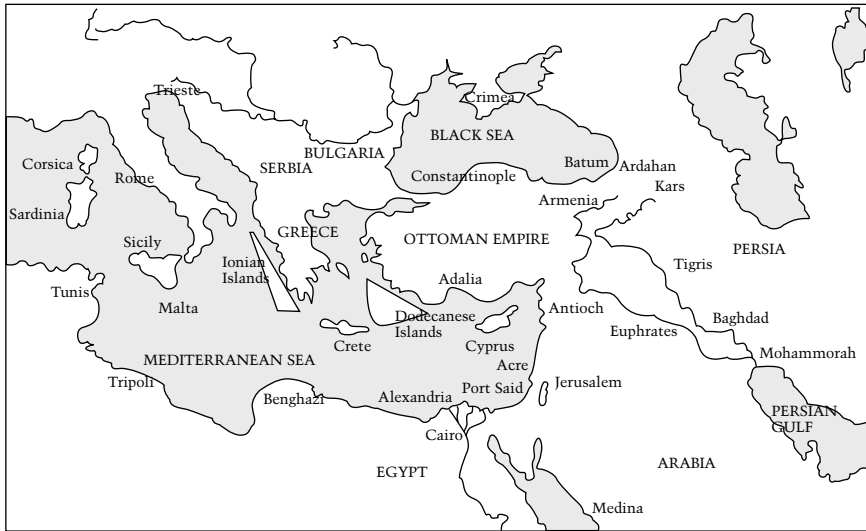
Lord Salisbury) who selected Cyprus placed great value on it. So it is odd that Cyprus is mentioned only eight times in the relevant volume of the sweeping *Cambridge History of the British Empire*.<sup>1</sup> The volume, published in 1959, coincided with agreements granting Cyprus independence after the violent EOKA (Εθνική Οργάνωση Κυπρίων Αγωνιστών/ National Organisation of Cypriot Fighters) revolt since April 1955. It had been front-page news for four years, so the omission is surprising, but Cyprus has always been more important for scholars of decolonisation than of imperial expansion.<sup>2</sup> Forty years after the *Cambridge History* appeared the *Oxford History of the British Empire* was published as 'a major new assessment of Empire'.<sup>3</sup> William Roger Louis, its editor-in-chief, claimed that it was broader in scope than prior studies.<sup>4</sup> Even so, in its 800-page *The Nineteenth Century*, Cyprus was mentioned a mere three times, in contrast to the *End of Empire* book and television series, which had a chapter and a documentary on the messy decolonisation.<sup>5</sup>

Cyprus did not become a stronghold after its occupation, consequently, it is not mentioned in most imperial defence studies, such as in W.C.B. Tunstall's two chapters in the *Cambridge History of the British Empire* (CHBE) and Peter Burroughs's chapter in the *Oxford History*.<sup>6</sup> Donald Schurman mentions Cyprus only three times in his study<sup>7</sup> and although Quentin Hughes mentions Cyprus more often in his study of British Mediterranean naval stations, his view reflects the received wisdom of the so-called importance of Cyprus.<sup>8</sup>

Because Cyprus is centrally located in the north-eastern Mediterranean Sea, where Europe, Asia and Africa converge (Figure 2), it seems extraordinary that it was never really a stronghold. It is 45 miles from Anatolia, 60 miles from Syria, 240 miles from Port Said and 350 miles from Crete. Most European and Near Eastern civilisations had occupied it partially or wholly: Greek, Phoenician, Assyrian, Egyptian, Persian, Ptolemaic, Roman, Byzantine, Arab, Genoese, Frankish, Venetian and Ottoman. For many historians this suggests that it was coveted as a strategic island vital to obtaining hegemony in the Near East.<sup>9</sup> Clearly it was coveted – because it changed hands so many times – but few commentators have perceived that it seldom served as a military bastion or offensive base.<sup>10</sup> It also suggests that having acquired it, no power exerted itself much to retain it.

Historians of Cyprus have taken for granted the island's strategic role to Britain because of its central location and subsequent role in Middle East defence policy after the Second World War.<sup>11</sup> Sir George Hill, the director of the British Museum (1931–36), spent thirty years on his monumental *A History of Cyprus*. Sir Harry Luke, a Cyprus Colonial Government officer (1911–20), edited the last volume. They

## BRITISH IMPERIALISM IN CYPRUS, 1875–1915



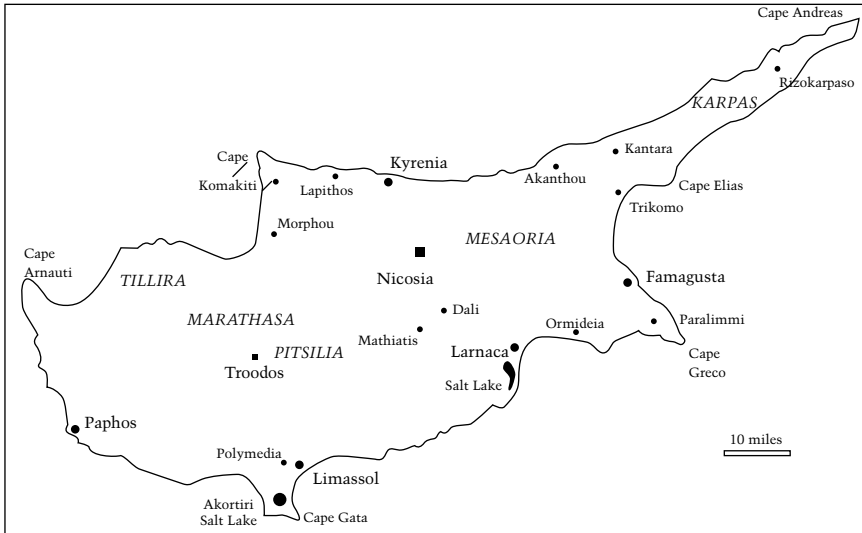
**Figure 2** The Location of Cyprus  
 Source: © Dr Andrekos Varnava, 2007.

argued that the desire to make ‘a *place d’armes* and not merely a coal-ing station . . . completely justified’ Cyprus’ selection.<sup>12</sup> This became the received view. The British journalist Nancy Crawshaw, who had covered the EOKA revolt, later wrote: ‘Britain’s interest in the Cyprus question has always been strategic.’<sup>13</sup> John Reddaway, the chief secretary of the Cyprus government in the 1950s, more recently wrote that this was ‘indisputable’.<sup>14</sup> In 1964 T.W. Adams and A.J. Cotrell, American political scientists, claimed that Cyprus was a ‘valuable . . . link in British imperial defence policy after the turn of the [nineteenth] century’.<sup>15</sup> In 1988 the historian George Kelling wrote that the island’s ‘value to the Empire always related to defence’.<sup>16</sup>

Historians of the British Empire and the Near East also accept this view. David Cannadine included Cyprus in his list of naval stations that the British had founded to encircle the world.<sup>17</sup> In 1999 Afaf Lutfi Al-Sayyid-Marsot, a historian of Egypt, claimed that the naval base of Alexandria, added to Malta and Cyprus in 1882, boosted British power in the eastern Mediterranean, implying that Cyprus was a stronghold.<sup>18</sup> Andrew Porter, Professor of Imperial History at King’s College and former editor of the *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, backed this view.<sup>19</sup>

Two Greek Cypriot historians also adopted this view in discussing why Cyprus had changed hands so often. P.N. Vanezis argued that

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**Figure 3 Map of Cyprus**

Source: © Dr Andrekos Varnava, 2007.

Cyprus became a military base in 1878, while Stavros Panteli claimed that it was Britain's turn to exploit its strategic advantage.<sup>20</sup>

But these claims exposed a paradox: if Cyprus was such a strategic prize, why did the British not realise its value? In 1931, Harold Temperley observed that it was 'not easy to see that the occupation of Cyprus, which has never been fortified or made a naval base, was a real advantage to England'.<sup>21</sup> Christopher Woodhouse, who served in Greece during the Second World War, also thought 'Cyprus played virtually no strategic role at all, despite the circumstances of its . . . occupation' from 1878 to 1954.<sup>22</sup> Also, the aide-de-camp to King Constantine, General Victor Dousmanis, observed that Cyprus had not been strategically valuable to Britain as Egypt, Malta and Gibraltar had been.<sup>23</sup>

Most commentators refer to William Gladstone's return to power in 1880 and Egypt's occupation in 1882 to explain why Cyprus did not become a strategic base. These ideas have a long history, starting with the men who served in Cyprus. In 1885 Major Benjamin Donne, a commandant of the Cyprus *zaptieh* (military police), wrote in the first English book published in Cyprus that 'had Lord Beaconsfield's Government remained in power there is no doubt that Cyprus would have been made a coaling-station for the Navy and a suitable harbour and defences would have been made at Famagusta'.<sup>24</sup> In that year, Horatio Kitchener, who surveyed Cyprus, claimed that Gladstone stopped public works, which stalled development.<sup>25</sup> Colonel Hugh

Sinclair, the private secretary (1881–86) to Lieutenant-General Robert Biddulph, the second high commissioner (1879–86), agreed, believing for the rest of his life that Beaconsfield ‘would have made it into a really important place of arms and developed its resources and harbour’.<sup>26</sup> In 1908 Basil Stewart, who helped build the Cyprus railway in 1906, argued that since Egypt’s occupation, Cyprus had been ‘practically neglected’.<sup>27</sup> A decade later, Sir Charles Orr, the Chief Secretary to the Cyprus government (1911–17), elaborated.

By the garrisoning of Egypt with British forces the safety of the Canal was far more effectively secured, and Cyprus, at the same time, lost most of its value as a strategical point of vantage.<sup>28</sup>

In this view, the superior naval facilities at Alexandria rendered superfluous the development of Famagusta harbour (the only place for a naval or coaling station). In April 1927 William Bevan, the Colonial Commissioner to the Cyprus government, agreed with Orr in a speech at the Royal Colonial Institute, presided over by Sir Charles King-Harman, Cyprus’s High Commissioner from 1904 to 1911.<sup>29</sup>

Hill and Luke included the Gladstone and Egypt explanations in their three reasons for the failure to establish Cyprus as a base (the third reason was that Britain’s uncertain tenure stunted private enterprise, so necessary for economic development).<sup>30</sup> These reasons became the consensus view of historians, with one or both claimed as the reasons why Cyprus did not become a base by: D.E. Lee in 1934; W.L. Burn in 1936; Philip Newman in 1940; Doros Alastos (Evdoros Joannides) in 1955; Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher in 1961; T.W. Adams in 1962; Daniel Wosgian in 1963; Susan Rosenbaum in 1964; Robert Stephens in 1966; Quentin Hughes in 1981; Woodhouse in 1984; James McHenry in 1987; Klearchos Kyriakides in 1996; Rolandos Katsiaouinis in 2000; and in 2003 Anna Marangou.<sup>31</sup> In 1976, Richard Patrick asserted that, after occupying Egypt, London ‘re-evaluated Cyprus’ value to Britain’s imperial interests [and] downgraded the island’s former strategic importance in relation to Suez’.<sup>32</sup> This study shows that Cyprus had no strategic value before Egypt was occupied.

The few historians who have noted the paradox that Britain occupied Cyprus for strategic reasons but did not turn it into a base, offer mis-directed explanations. In 1935 L.E. Lawrence, in a neglected thesis, thought it was clear by 1880 that ‘Cyprus could not play the part in British policy anticipated in 1878’. Lawrence claimed that Cyprus was too far from the theatre of war in Ottoman Asia, but in fact, Cyprus was only forty miles from Anatolia. He asserted that the harbours in Cyprus were too poor to permit development; yet British harbour engineers found that it was not too expensive to redevelop Famagusta

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harbour. Lawrence also suggested that the failure to redevelop Cyprus was due to the Porte refusing to implement the reforms it promised in the Anglo-Turkish Convention for Asia Minor, but this was not it; indeed the Conservatives reinvestigated redeveloping Famagusta harbour after Constantinople's intransigence.<sup>33</sup>

A year earlier than Lawrence, D.E. Lee suggested that the decision not to make Cyprus a stronghold resulted from the failure to build the Euphrates Valley Railway, connecting the Mediterranean and India, and the British failure to establish an informal empire in Ottoman Asia.<sup>34</sup> In 1963 Daniel Wosgian outlined the implications of this:

Cyprus has not substantially contributed to the development of an 'alternative route' to India, nor has it proved . . . the first step in the establishment of a great Near Eastern Empire. As to its use as a '*place d'armes*', it can be pointed out that by an irony of fate, the first time after the Convention, that it served as a '*place d'armes*' was in 1915, during the Dardanelles campaign, when it was used as a British base in support of Russia and against Turkey.<sup>35</sup>

Cyprus did not have a role as a stopover on route to India and the failure to develop a place for it in British imperial structure contributed to the failure to seek an informal empire in Ottoman Asia. But the question of informal control did not hinge on Cyprus' development. As for the 'irony of fate', Cyprus had served as a base in the 1882 Egyptian war, but Lemnos filled that role in the Dardanelles campaign.

Wosgian also asserted that Cyprus had 'some positive value as a secondary strategic base at all times, during . . . British domination, whenever conditions in the Near East were unsettled'. He added that 'strategically Cyprus was of some use to the British' because it was denied to an enemy.<sup>36</sup> Thus, Cyprus had 'only a sort of residual importance', as Susan Rosenbaum claimed a year after Wosgian.<sup>37</sup> George Georghallides, formerly the director of the Cyprus Research Centre, shared these views. In 1979 he argued that Cyprus had a 'negative strategic significance' and was held as a 'reserve *place d'armes*, lying on the periphery of an area of vital concern to Britain'. He thought that the 'principal strategic consideration militating against' the satisfaction of the Greek Cypriot leaderships demands for *énosis* (union of Cyprus with Greece)<sup>38</sup> was the fear that it would fall to a power that could challenge British interests in the eastern Mediterranean. Georghallides claimed that when Winston Churchill, the under-secretary at the Colonial Office, visited Cyprus in 1907 and declared that the British government could not grant *énosis* because Cyprus did not belong to Britain, he was obscuring the real reason: 'the political and strategic usefulness of Cyprus to the British Empire'.<sup>39</sup> But

this conclusion was wrong: Churchill's push to cede Cyprus to Greece five years after his visit and the 1915 offer, contradict it.

Cyprus' place in British imperial strategy and defence is not simply explained. A grand imperial strategy did not govern policy towards Cyprus before 1912; policy oscillated between ad hoc perceptions of advantage, non-advantage and disadvantage. Cyprus raises the question of the ability of historians to test the overall theories of imperialism.

### *Theoretical contexts*

#### *Mainstream justifications for imperial expansion*

G.N. Sanderson asserted that it was the historian's task to explain imperial expansion.<sup>40</sup> Until now, there has been no effort to do this with Cyprus. This study presents a different – although not new – approach to the understanding of British imperial expansion, revising the understanding of economic and strategic theories by distinguishing between actual and imagined benefits. This brings into focus the 'Eldorado' or 'Promised Land' motif in accounting for expansion in the case of the inconsequential possession, and presents a cultural explanation to account for imperial expansion and failure in Cyprus' case.

Imperialism is a frame of mind or policy that dominates the politics, society, economy and culture of foreign entities by informally or formally controlling them without significant settlement from the metropolitan centre. R.J. Horvath believed that the last point was the difference between imperialism and colonialism: the latter occurred when significant numbers of colonisers settled in the dominated place.<sup>41</sup>

There must be a historical context for this mindset: European imperialism was not new to the nineteenth century – Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, French, Russian and British expansion had transpired over four centuries. The label 'new imperialism' was given to a period starting in the 1870s when European powers dramatically began occupying territory, culminating in the 'scramble for Africa'. Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher distinguished 'informal' empire (in the mid-Victorian era) and 'formal' (in the late-Victorian era)<sup>42</sup> and claimed that the later period was no more imperialist, thus questioning the concept of 'new imperialism'.<sup>43</sup> Why then did Europe expand so suddenly starting in the 1870s?

In September 1877 the journalist Edward Dicey wrote that

our Empire is the result not so much of any military spirit as of a certain instinct of development inherent in our race . . . 'To be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth,' seems to be the mission entrusted to us, as it was to survivors of the deluge. The Wandering Jew of nations, it is forbidden to us to rest.<sup>44</sup>



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Dicey implied that the British were the modern Chosen People – chosen to create an Empire. In a lecture five years later Sir John Seeley, a noted historian, claimed that the British seemed to have ‘conquered and peopled half the world’ in a ‘fit of absence of mind’.<sup>45</sup> Seeley implied that the British had awoken to find themselves controlling an empire on which the sun always shone. His aim was to draw attention to the empire and not to account for how it came to be. Through time, many contemporary commentators and historians have invested much time in explaining imperial expansion.

The economic impulse theory was the earliest offered. The British economist, John Hobson, writing when the Empire was a hot issue during the Boer War, argued that after the 1870s, industrialised Europe needed new markets.<sup>46</sup> Capitalist greed, for cheap raw materials, profitable investments and exploitable places, underpinned imperialism. He influenced Lenin’s thesis that imperialism was the logical growth of capitalism, but Lenin emphasised finance capital.<sup>47</sup> Nearly a century after the ‘new imperialism’, Eric Hobsbawm agreed that the ‘convincing’ motive for expansion was the search for markets.<sup>48</sup>

Non-Marxist historians destroyed these models by showing that investors and financiers did not influence policy to the extent claimed and that many territories, especially in Africa, were not economically important.<sup>49</sup> But in the 1990s, P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins linked material forces to socio-political developments to account for imperialism. They argued that it was the capitalist interests of elite gentlemen, which convinced the British nation of the necessity of imperial expansion.<sup>50</sup>

Cyprus does not fit so easily into the economic theories. The island was occupied for economic reasons, but the justifications for its occupation were couched more in terms of the economic advantages of the Levant. Cyprus was to open the trade of the Levant to British investors. At first, and then periodically, British investors were interested, but the British did not develop the once famous Famagusta harbour and few British firms made their way to Cyprus, let alone establish shop there. Those that thought that Cyprus offered economic advantages based their assessments on a past that preceded Ottoman rule and on the British ability to renew the glory days of a once economically thriving island, which had fed the Crusaders and was one of the main Western emporiums in the Near East before the Ottoman rise. But the British made little effort to revive the island. They did not concern themselves with exploiting Cyprus’ resources or location. Yet the island was exploited. The Cypriots paid a tribute of nearly £100,000 per annum, nominally to the Porte, but actually to the British Exchequer, which retained it to pay the bondholders of the 1856

Crimean War Loan, which the Porte was in default, and to which London and Paris were liable. This was not achieved through developing Cyprus' economy, but through high taxation.

J.A. Schumpeter proposed a different theory: that sociological and psychological forces were at work. An overtly jingoistic nationalism propelled imperialism. The 'new imperialism', he claimed, was a 'temporary reaction of political sentiment and of threatened individual interests'. Industrialisation and liberalism at home threatened the traditional aristocracy.<sup>51</sup> They focused imperialism into active propagandist associations and pressure groups in order to publicise and promote territorial expansion and interest in colonies. In 1883 British Conservatives founded the Primrose League and in 1884 the Liberals founded the Imperial Federation League. In 1882 a German Colonial Society was formed and, in 1883, the Society for German Colonisation.

Commentators have argued that Schumpeter's theory is difficult to sustain because it implies that imperialism was popular, when it seems otherwise. David Cannadine showed that the British aristocracy played only a subordinate role in the building of the Empire.<sup>52</sup> In the 1930s, W.L. Langer argued that imperialism was not so popular in France and Italy as to allow the elite to get away with such a sudden expansion of territory.<sup>53</sup> More recently, Jonathon Rose claimed that throughout the nineteenth century most Britons were unaware of 'their' empire.<sup>54</sup> Bernard Porter agreed, showing that at least into the 1880s the working classes – about 80 per cent of Victorians – knew little if anything about it.<sup>55</sup>

Schumpeter's theory does not present the cause(s) of imperial expansion, but rather it offers a contextual basis from which to understand it. His explanation does not answer the question why specific territories were selected; it merely explains the circumstances and climate within which expansion was possible. No doubt there existed an extraordinary climate of jingoism before and after Cyprus' occupation, making it easy to justify, but this does not explain why territory, or indeed why Cyprus, was chosen.

J.S. Galbraith and D.K. Fieldhouse argued that the periphery, and not merely the metropolis, was central to imperial expansion. They believed that the activities of explorers, missionaries, merchants and government representatives created a 'turbulent frontier'.<sup>56</sup> Sir Stamford Raffles, a clerk for the powerful British East India Company and the lieutenant governor of Java, founded the British colony of Singapore in 1819. There were the Frenchmen Du Chaillu and De Brazza and the Englishman Sir Samuel White Baker in equatorial Africa; the Welshman Henry Stanley in the Congo; and the German Karl Peters

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in east Africa. The London Missionary Society and later the government sent David Livingstone, a Scottish missionary, to Africa to open a way for commerce and Christianity. When he vanished while seeking the source of the Nile, Stanley went after him and they met on the shores of Lake Tanganyika. Livingstone's funeral was a celebrated event and his discovery of Nyasaland (1858–63) resulted in it becoming a British Protectorate in 1889. France was the most active in organising 'mission civilisatrice'.<sup>57</sup> The idea that modern civilisation would improve humanity was imbued with racial beliefs of inferiority (the native) and superiority (the white European). The influence of 'men on the spot' was perhaps most evident in the Liberal government's decision to intervene in Egypt in 1882.<sup>58</sup>

The 'pericentric' or 'men on the spot' theory applies to Cyprus in an interesting way. It was not men in the island or in the vicinity in the 1870s that called for its occupation, but consuls that had lived in Cyprus in the 1840s. Beaconsfield's government used their reports when researching into Cyprus' potential. Those justifying the choice of Cyprus drew on the report compiled from the old consular reports to make their case and to convince themselves that they had chosen a future pearl of the Empire.

Robinson and Gallagher offered another explanation. Strategy and security had led British politicians to seek an African empire. The British had expanded informally by exerting commercial, diplomatic and cultural influence. The scramble for formal annexations in Africa during the 1880s aimed to preserve the security of these informal interests and wider imperial interests, specifically the routes to India (the Suez Canal) and Australasia (the Cape of Good Hope), from local movements in Egypt and South Africa. In short, local factors pulled European powers into expansion. In taking Egypt, London started the scramble, inviting the jealousy of other powers, notably France, to seize territory to balance the strategic equilibrium. London reacted to secure these new acquisitions and France and other European powers followed with counter-annexations.<sup>59</sup> Thus they argued that policy to protect imperial interests – imperial strategy – was the main reason for imperialism. This involved occupying strategic positions where coaling stations and harbours of refuge could be established to protect imperial strategy. British supremacy had largely been founded on maritime trade.<sup>60</sup> Ships in wartime required sheltered waters for repairs and replenishment of supplies, and as maritime operations increased, possessing natural harbours became more vital. Naval bases were established. Steam resulted in the need for coal, so coaling stations were established because steam needed coal depots. Initially servicing trade, they came to supply naval needs. By 1880, Britain had the largest

overseas empire and biggest mercantile and naval fleets.<sup>61</sup> Fortified or garrisoned territories defended imperial interests in wartime, so sea power, empire and strategy were linked. Imperial defence was the first problem that involved all the Empire in the age of 'new imperialism'<sup>62</sup> and Robinson and Gallagher argued that formal expansion aimed to defend such bases.

No doubt Cyprus was primarily occupied for strategic reasons. The local crisis was not on the island, but numerous crises raged around it: in the Balkans, Asia Minor and Egypt. British political and economic interests in the Ottoman Empire, Egypt and India were thought in need of protecting. But why select Cyprus, especially when it did not become a valuable strategic asset? How does one explain the fantastic disparity between the justifications that underpinned its occupation and the outcomes and what impact do these explanations have on explaining its occupation in the first place?

One criticism of Robinson and Gallagher's theory came from a pupil of theirs, A.S. Kanya-Forstner, who, with C.W. Newbury, claimed that the 1882 crisis in Egypt did not trigger the 'scramble', because in 1879 the French conquest of Senegal was well progressed, London and Paris were vying for the African west coast and King Leopold of Belgium had taken the Congo.<sup>63</sup> Kanya-Forstner offered the 'mythical' or 'Eldorado' thesis to explain French expansion in Africa. He attributed French expansion to the myths and delusions of the official mind, primarily of men on the spot, who convinced the politicians back home of the value of the resources of western Africa.<sup>64</sup>

Thus, it is exaggerated perceptions of value that explain imperial expansion. The French recreated medieval legends about the wealth of Senegal when contemplating informal control in the 1850s, and men on the spot revived these in the 1870s to justify formalising control. The economic illusions took the form of fantastic official estimates of the resources and population of western Africa, which were used to justify turning it into 'the India of the French empire' in 1879. Kanya-Forster claimed that the French saw the Western Sahara as an 'Eldorado' of boundless wealth. But that was a fallacy. The perceived threat to French strategic interests and prestige after the British occupied Egypt motivated French expansion into the Upper Nile, aiming to remove the British from Egypt. After diplomacy failed, the French decided on force in the 1890s, setting their sights on Fashoda. The move nearly resulted in an Anglo-French war. However, Kanya-Forstner showed that the aims behind the Fashoda strategy were based on unrealistic illusions and a perceived importance in its strategic vitality. The move on Fashoda aimed to scare the British into negotiations, but instead ended in the humiliating French withdrawal.

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The 'mythical theory' was heavily criticised. It was claimed that Kanya-Forstner failed to place the decision-making in a socio-economic context or to link it with 'a frame of mind' of imperialism.<sup>65</sup> G.N. Sanderson thought the evidence to support the 'mythical theory' was not persuasive and it did not explain why the myths suddenly took control of French policy in 1879. Robert Tignor wanted to know when and how the myths of wealth originated and why they were held in the face of accumulating counterevidence.<sup>66</sup>

Yet, there are other examples of the 'Eldorado theory'. John Wright showed that explorers, missionaries, politicians and intellectuals created myths to justify the Italian occupation of Libya. They wanted Italy to secure economic resources, settle a growing population (ten million had migrated from 1896 to 1915), increase prestige after losing a war with Abyssinia in 1896, and obtain a strategic position in the Mediterranean to end the perceived suffocation from France and Britain, especially the former, which had taken Tunis, the point in Africa nearest Sicily. All the territory suited to colonisation and Mediterranean strategy was taken except Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. A lobby consistently promoted their advantages and in March 1911, Italian nationalists launched a newspaper to promote Tripoli as the 'Promised Land'.<sup>67</sup>

There were also British examples. In 1898 the British leased Weihaiwei from China to convert it into a naval base. First under the Admiralty, then the War Office, it proved a poor base and in 1901 it was handed to civilian administrators. Successive British governments considered it worthless, but did not relinquish it to China until 1922. Two historians called Weihaiwei's occupation the 'irrationality of empire'<sup>68</sup> and it is a good example of occupying territory based on misguided perceptions of advantage. An earlier example (not identified by historians), was the British occupation of the Ionian Islands in 1815. They were perceived as strategically vital, but the British did not fashion a strategic role for them and ceded them to Greece within fifty years (see [Chapter 3](#)). Palestine was another case. Although it did not figure in British strategic plans at any level – official or popular – it was built up as the Promised Land within a popular culture that associated it with the family Bible, Sunday school and home. But British soldiers and officials ruling it after 1917 were shocked that its appearance was so different from the biblical imagery and yet the religious impulse was still drawn upon.<sup>69</sup>

This study shows that Cyprus fits very well into the 'Eldorado' theory of imperial expansion. Beaconsfield's government perceived it would be a great strategic asset to the Empire based on its location and past role during the Crusades. It was also claimed that Cyprus'