



Book Review

Andreas Constandinos. *The Cyprus Crisis: Examining the Role of the British and American Governments During 1974* (Plymouth, UK: University of Plymouth Press, 2012), 407 pp.

Reviewed by Chris Delisoⁱ

This is a formidable book. Not only because it is thick enough and heavy enough to crush a small mammal, but also because it succeeds in demolishing some lingering conspiracy theories surrounding the role of US and British diplomacy and intelligence in the period up to, during and after the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in July 1974.

Based on recently declassified archival governmental sources as well as interviews with some of the figures involved, *The Cyprus Crisis* is required reading for scholars and anyone interested in this tragic period in Cypriot history, one that remains disputed and unresolved almost 40 years later. Having spent five years researching it, author Constandinos concludes with a plea for a renewed and more responsible take on these controversial events: “until both [Greek and Turkish] Cypriot communities are able to take responsibility for the events of 1974 and accept the roles played by their respective motherlands,” he writes, “the prospect of the two communities peacefully co-existing in a unified Cypriot state will continue to look bleak.”

More specifically, the conspiracy theories the author challenges in the *The Cyprus Crisis*, which have survived among some Greek and Greek Cypriot circles, hold that Britain, the former colonial controller of Cyprus, and the US assisted the military junta in Athens in its overthrow of Cypriot President and Archbishop Makarios, and then assisted a Turkish invasion of the island. The intensity of these feelings registered not only in protests but in the assassinations and threatened assassinations of officials from both countries in the days and years after the events, and in a legacy of anti-Americanism in Greek politics that had a negative impact on Greece’s diplomatic clout for many years.

In some ways, the truth is even worse than the theory. For rather than a malevolent and cunning master plan that would have at least required a certain amount of evil genius, the actions of the UK and US exemplified a range of less flattering attributes—cowardice, cynical disinterest, incompetence, arrogance and poor intelligence assessment, to name a few. Occurring as it did during a time of considerable external distractions (most conspicuous being the ignominious end of the Nixon presidency), this situation created the ideal conditions for both the Greek and Turkish governments to vie for control of the island.

The British come off as timid but righteous arbiters with a certain moral sympathy for the island they were legally obliged to protect, but little military capacity to do so, embarrassingly reliant on the Americans to influence the relevant parties. The US – dominated by the towering presence of Henry Kissinger – comes off as perceiving the conflict only within the grand geo-strategic parameters of the Cold War. The author proves how Kissinger’s ‘one-man show’ approach to diplomacy left him tone-deaf to the views of more informed diplomats and led him to ignore important local intelligence from what he disparaged as a “third-rate island.”

Still, the voluminous amount of official transcripts cited indicate that both British and American officials followed events closely, but did not find sufficient ‘national interest’ to carry out measures that could have stopped the coup against Makarios, first of all, or the first and second Turkish invasions of the island thereafter.

As the author concludes, these allied governments were guilty only for sins of omission, not commission. Actually, the bulk of the blame is reserved for the recklessness and stupidity of the colonels in Athens, who incredibly did not believe that a coup in Cyprus would hand Ankara a golden opportunity for an invasion— one it had been planning in detail for over a decade.

According to the author, the US was apparently unaware that the previously existing direct communications channel between Athens and Ankara, which had successfully defused crises in the past, had been severed by de facto ruler Ioannidis. The exposition provided in *The Cyprus Crisis* is too complex to be summarized here, but in this and subsequent events, it seems that individuals (possibly, overeager Greek-Americans in the CIA supportive of the junta) rather than the Agency as a whole, were responsible for a communication breakdown that led Ioannidis to think that he had US support for overthrowing Makarios. (Indeed, as the author points out in further refutation of the ‘CIA vs. Makarios’ theory, on two earlier occasions the Agency had given Makarios specific warnings of assassination plots against him being planned by Greek Cypriot hard-liners).

Indeed, as much of the context-setting first half of *The Cyprus Crisis* emphasizes, it was the chronic internecine struggle between Greek Cypriots more than anything else that created the conditions for the Turkish invasion. The quixotic goal of *enosis* (unity with Greece) captivated and connected right-wing Cypriots and the junta in Athens, leading to bitter and bloody internal struggle. Whereas Turkey then and now has argued that it invaded the island to safeguard the Turkish minority, the author finds zero evidence for this (intriguingly, he notes that it was impossible to get any comments from a prior author who had supported the Turkish theory based on a document of dubious authenticity).

Rather, the sad truth that is reaffirmed time and again in *The Cyprus Crisis* is that none of the external protagonists – Turkey, Greece, the US or Britain – cared at all about the well-being of the Cypriot people of either ethnicity. The first two countries saw the island as a strategic element of their own power projection and as a symbolic element (with political application) for internal nationalist sentiment, whereas the latter two understood Cyprus as a host of strategic bases. And in dealing with the unfolding crisis, they understood the strategic role of Greece (and especially Turkey) as paramount in their policy-planning, which again had to do with other strategic bases and containing the Soviets.

At the time, it was deemed strategically unwise to use either diplomatic or peace-keeping means to prevent the junta from deposing Makarios, and/or to stop the Turkish armada from making landfall, and subsequently carrying out its orchestrated ethnic cleansing campaign against the Greek Cypriots of the north. In retrospect, Kissinger's fear that an angered junta would 'kick out' the US 6th Fleet from Greek waters seems a paranoid fantasy, while the British reluctance to enforce a naval blockade when it had ships and soldiers on the spot unless the US join them comes across as pure cowardice (one could not imagine a leader like Margaret Thatcher having given up so easily).

And this is the great tragedy that *The Cyprus Crisis* reveals: that the unwarranted bloodshed in Cyprus could easily have been avoided. In hindsight, it does not appear that whatever temporary diplomatic hiccups would have occurred at any stage of the game could possibly have been worse than everything that has happened since, right up to the present day. Of course, there is 'a reason for everything,' and the author does admirably provide a very wide context that gives readers a broad view into what current events, past historical precedents, and future concerns influenced the decision-making of diplomats at the time, in a day-by-day treatment of the unfolding crisis.

The only question that does not seem to have been posed in interviews with diplomats active in 1974 for *The Cyprus Crisis* is that of cultural intelligence. A large part of the tragedy seems to have had to do with accidental or even willful ignorance of local

realities. Transcripts of discussions between Kissinger and CIA Director William Colby, among other sources, indicate that the former had very little knowledge of the island (to the point of mispronouncing names of key towns) and very little interest in the mentality of the cultures involved. It does not take a genius in the art of diplomacy to know the precise ways in which Turks and Greeks will behave under certain conditions. It just takes the input of persons who know and understand these cultures. Unfortunately, the powers-that-were chose more often than not to ignore such sources of information, even when they were in their own employ. For future policy planners, this may well be one of the important unstated lessons of *The Cyprus Crisis*.

¹This review appeared in *Balkananalysis.com* at the time of the volume's publication. We think *The Cyprus Crisis* deals effectively with controversial speculations regarding the Turkish invasion of 1974. We reprint with the permission of the original publisher, whose articles offering comprehensive coverage of the Balkan nations.

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