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The legacies of 'divide and rule'



By **Dr Jodie Matthews**
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As the UK government formally renews its offer to hand over half of its sovereign territory in Cyprus, questions continue to be asked in academic institutions from Nicosia to Yorkshire about the lasting effect of British colonial rule on the identity of Greek and Turkish Cypriots, on British expatriates on the island, and members of the Cypriot diaspora communities who now live in Britain.

The British Bases on Cyprus are, to some, an antagonistic physical reminder of both the island's subjugation and the divisive policies of its former rulers.

The offer to give up some of the 98 square miles was originally made in 2004 on condition that Cyprus accepted the Annan Plan. This latest offer is also qualified, an incentive for Mehmet Ali Talat and Demetris Christofias to reach accord.

It has met, not unsurprisingly, with a somewhat lukewarm reception.

Christofias has described the offer as a 'positive move', but Foreign Minister, Marcos Kyprianou, not only asserted that Britain should be placing more pressure on Turkey, he also emphasised that the Greek Cypriot side wants a solution with or without this kind of inducement.

There is, of course, a long and, at times, unsavoury history of English and British involvement in this strategically-placed land. Countless British couples who choose Aphrodite's birthplace as the ideal location for a sunny wedding may be unaware that Richard the Lionheart started the trend in 1191, when he left behind a Crusader garrison.

Britain's dividing tactics, however, can be traced back to at least 1925 and the Colonial Constitution (as scholars such as William Mallinson have noted), when separate Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot categories of citizenship were established.

No side in the complicated battle for independence, including Britain, emerges without blood on its hands.

The inhumanity of British actions at Gunyeli in June 1958 echo beyond their perpetration, contributing to Greek - and Turkish Cypriot constructions of each other in times of conflict, constructions that continue to affect people today.

It did not end there; intercommunal relations could only be harmed by the British training an exclusively Turkish Cypriot mobile reserve to combat EOKA.

The political effects of Britain's divide and rule policy are long lasting. There is no doubt that Britain encouraged Turkey to see Cyprus as a lost possession. Both sides were cynically manipulated, and Christopher Hitchens has angrily described how the partition 'necessitated the incitement of fanaticism rather than the conciliation of it'.

Britain did everything it could to undermine Greek-Turkish relations in order to maintain the colony.

Not only is it patently distressing that a European capital should still be divided in the very year that we celebrate the 20th anniversary of the falling of the Berlin Wall, the idea that Britain should still occupy 3% of Cyprus under the terms of a treaty Cyprus has no right to alter or terminate, is a post-colonial anomaly.

In 1965, the UN special mediator in Cyprus, Galo Plaza of Ecuador, called for the island to be demilitarised.

Nearly 45 years later, that call has not been answered.

And what of the cultural implications of this relationship?

Colin Thubron, writing about his walking tour of the island before the invasion proposed that the legacy of the British occupation was

chips, those 'greasy invaders'.

Hitchens, meanwhile, more seriously describes the 'chintzy reminders of the former colonial mastery' on the Sovereign Base Areas, with their rows of suburban houses and trimmed lawns.

Like everything connected to the British relationship with Cyprus, however, these strange few square miles cannot be unambiguously viewed.

In 1974, the well-kept cricket pitch on one base - a signifier of the British bureaucratically abroad if ever there was one - became the emergency home of Turkish Cypriots from the Limassol and Paphos districts.

According to estimates quoted by Gilles Bertrand in 2004, up to 200,000 Greek Cypriots and British citizens of Greek Cypriot origin and up to 90,000 Turkish Cypriots and British citizens of Turkish Cypriot origin live in Great Britain.

This demography makes questions of identity, Cypriotness and Britishness particularly acute.

Turkish Cypriots position themselves according to a complex set of cultural reference points: Cyprus; mainland Turkey; and Britain, former colonial master and implicated in Turkish Cypriot conflicts with Greek Cypriots.

These reference points are manifested in language, which satellite television station one chooses, whether or not children are sent to Turkish school on a Saturday, what food is cooked, whether one shops in Haringey or further afield, and which festivals are celebrated.

British Cypriot identity is an elaborate one, bridging two islands but also incorporating all the tensions of the occupations, dislocations and affiliations that Cyprus' people have borne.

Detailed questions about the impact of British involvement on islands such as Cyprus, and the contributions of diaspora communities to the concept of Britishness, will be asked at a novel conference at the University of Huddersfield in June 2010.

More information can be found at <http://www2.hud.ac.uk/asb>.

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