Fighting EOKA: The British Counter-Insurgency Campaign on Cyprus, 1955-1959

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During his long and distinguished career David French, Professor Emeritus in the History Department at University College London, has published many highly respected works. He has now added to this list with the exceptional Fighting EOKA: the British Counter-insurgency Campaign on Cyprus, 1955–1959.

It is no easy task for anyone to write about the Cyprus emergency because it can excite passions from the various sides involved, but French succeeds because he tells it how it is. His account is impressive, especially the main chapters (two to eight), and logically structured. The argument is based on a thorough analysis of the archival material, including the recently released FCO files, which French was instrumental in having opened (some redacted though), although not the State Archives, Nicosia (yet most of the controversial files would have been ‘migrated’ and found in the FCO lot). His expertise in the history of insurgency and counter-insurgency shows in two areas: his successful integration of the political with the security/military/terrorist aspects of the story, which is the real strength of his study; and his comparisons with the Malayan and Kenyan, and sometimes Algerian, cases. Although he claims on to not label the violence as terrorism or terror, he does do so, which is fine by me, and I would have liked a brief theoretical section on terrorism – group and state based terrorism and counter-terrorism – to show how the three players in this violent saga do fit these definitions, models and typologies. For example there is a perception outside the academy that terrorism grows out of poverty and oppression, which is simply not the case and this example is no exception. Additionally, it would have been good if French had critiqued the idea that the
British sponsored TMT, which has been implied by several writers, such as Christopher Hitchens, in his popular account.

The book’s strengths are chapters two through to eight; the guts, so to speak, of the book. The story is expertly told, with clarity and impartiality, although some people may not agree with me on the last point. What I most admire about French’s book is how he manages to integrate the political aspects of the ‘Cyprus problem’ with the organised violence and oppositional violence from the state and from the opposing group, and the ramifications on each other.

Chapter two provides a good exploration of the origins, organisation and recruiting of EOKA (Ethniki Organosis Kyprion Agoniston). French brings to the debate a fresh perspective on why EOKA was a small group of dedicated individuals and why they were so young – fitting so well the traditional characteristic of a terrorist group. There are a few omissions in this chapter. French does not mention that Eden’s judgement, both as Foreign Secretary and as Prime Minister, was impaired by his addiction to amphetamines and barbiturates. As regards Grivas, although appropriately showing that he modelled EOKA on his ‘X’ organisation in Greece, Grivas also claimed (although I cannot seem to find the reference) that he modelled EOKA on the Jewish terrorist groups. Additionally, French does not mention that Grivas had been in Cyprus in the late 1940s and involved himself in clashes with Communists. Intriguingly, French discusses the early EOKA being under the name KARI (Cypriot Fighters and Audacious Leaders), but nothing is said about who they actually were and whether they were merely another name for EOKA. Additionally, although French provides information on the links between EOKA and Greece, the links with the Cypriot groups in London are less detailed and indeed remain unclear, although such links, as seen in other chapters as well (Reverend Kykkotis is mentioned as the chairman of the National Cypriot Committee in the UK, p. 156), were important. Indeed in his memoirs Grivas revealed that he planned to send from Cyprus an ‘execution group’ to London to kill ‘traitors’ who had worked for the British in Cyprus and had been given new identities and settled in the UK by the British. This squad would have been under the leadership of a prominent London Cypriot (who is not named). Grivas planned to do the same in Australia and Africa. French mentions a group in the UK called ‘Adelphotis’ that was monitored for fear they would kill Cypriots who had worked against EOKA, but the details are patchy.

Chapter three begins the more comprehensive chapters with a discussion of early EOKA strategy, reactions from the various players, especially the British, and the replacement of Governor Armitage with Harding. Additionally, there are some wonderful tables that breakdown EOKA operations, which allows the reader to obtain a statistical understanding to support the analysis. The discussion on why Armitage was replaced matches Baker’s, in his solid study. The chapter ends with the appropriate argument that Makarios’ exiling did not achieve the desired outcome – no moderate leaders stepped forward, given, in part at least, the intimidation by EOKA, and Grivas no longer had Makarios as a ‘check’ on his activities.

The next chapter looks more closely at how EOKA decided to tackle the British security forces between March 1956 and March 1957, that is, in the aftermath of the exiling of Makarios. French expertly proves his argument that EOKA followed a terrorist plan par excellence, targeting the British and the Greek Cypriots. Controlling their own community, pivotal for all terrorists groups, was important so that EOKA movements, tactics and secrets could not be betrayed, and politically vital because they did not want any moderate leaders stepping forward. It may seem obvious that EOKA would target the British, but, as French and other writers have shown, many Cypriots, both Greek and Turkish, worked for ‘the British’, directly or indirectly, in government, military or other sectors. These people became ‘legitimate’ targets in Grivas’ eyes. Harding’s failure to draw out a new moderate negotiator saw him turn his attention to planning the demise of EOKA, secondary schools using children to support EOKA, the Ethnarchy, AKEL (Anorthotikó Kómma Ergazómenou Laoú) and Radio Athens. Interestingly, for Harding AKEL presented the most serious threat to British interests (a constant since the early 1930s) and the British came down very hard on Communists, even though they were opposed to EOKA and were actually targeted by EOKA. The retrospective view expressed by the Colonial Secretary in Cyprus, John Reddaway, that this was a mistake because a chance was missed to divide the Greek Cypriots along ideological lines is intriguing and French could have explored this further. Also very interesting was the evidence of former EOKA men working for the British in
a counter-terrorist outfit (pp. 146–8). What were their motivations? Who were they?

Chapter five is in many ways the most important of the chapters. Here I was thoroughly convinced by the main argument that the British lost the battle for the hearts and minds of Greek Cypriots because they failed to lift the severity of EOKA intimidation of the Greek Cypriot population. Yet I was also pleased to read about the Greek Cypriot opposition to EOKA, although surprised at the public demonstrations against EOKA violence (p. 167). EOKA intimidation was successful because it was ruthless and violent, while the British were not willing to go to the same murderous lengths. So for example an English-language newspaper in the island became pro-enosis after EOKA threatened to blow up its offices. It was a similar story for the Greek-language Phileleftheros, which was pro-constitution until EOKA threats took their toll by 1957. EOKA also threatened parents who sent their children to inter-communal schools. British intimidation of the general population, in the form of collective punishments on villages and curfews, took its toll, but was not as intimidating, while British propaganda was more subtle, and revolved around (mis)information in the form of pamphlets (Lawrence Durrell wrote many of these). The British were fighting the losing war of who could control the population better because they were not as ruthless in their intimidation methods and on the other extreme because they were not able to provide the population with the security against EOKA intimidation.

The following chapter looks at the EOKA counter-narrative and how it and its supporters won the propaganda war. The chapter reveals a number of new and interesting facets of the story, such as the ‘human rights committees’ EOKA established in each district to expose torture and ill-treatment by the security forces. Of note is Grivas rejecting the efforts of the Famagusta committee to expose the ill-treatment of left-wingers. The combination of factual revelations and exaggerations from these committees, were met with denial by the British, which included lying to parliament. The treatment of Nicos Sampson is interesting; saved from hanging because the British did not want to make him a martyr, the evidence French has was that he was not tortured but neglected while in captivity, which does not match with the stories of Greek Cypriots that he was severely tortured with boiling eggs on his genitals and the removal of his nails. The chapter, although one of the longer ones, could have gone further into these EOKA myths and expanded the scope to discuss the songs that they had and which were sung for moral boosting purposes. Additionally, although French gives a nod to EOKA’s propaganda in the United Kingdom, it would have been good if he had done so also in the United States and Australian contexts (and others), since, for example, in Australia the Committee for Cyprian Self-Determination, which crossed party lines, and took a pro-enosis position, had representatives (including the future premier of South Australia, Don Dunstan) visit the island during the emergency. This dimension would have elevated this chapter even more. The ultimate conclusion that the actions of the British security forces were not as bad as EOKA claimed, but much worse than the British were willing to admit, is reflected by the evidence.

Chapter seven explores the next phase in the conflict, the drift into inter-communal violence, or is it civil war? French handles this well. He shows that no side wanted the escalation of the violence but all sides made decisions that made such a cycle of violence inevitable. The addition of Turkish Cypriot political violence and the role of Turkey is informative and even though chronologically it appears at this time it does not seem, at least in the initial way that French presents it, to be integrated into the story. Perhaps had some discussion taken place earlier about Turkish Cypriot reactions to EOKA it may not have seemed ‘tacked on’. Also who was behind the Turkish Cypriot violence is not entirely disclosed.

In Chapter eight I am pleased that French agrees with my argument published (twice) in 2010, namely that Macmillan’s government never offered to grant independence to Cyprus (the best it was willing to offer was a tri-condominium) and that the Zurich-London agreements were, in the words of French, ‘brokered over its head by the Greek and Turkish governments’. Although our overall argument is the same we veer in different directions: my article focusses more on the strategic considerations that underpinned British policy and saw the formation of the British Sovereign Base Areas; French focusses on the reactions of EOKA and the various players, especially the British, to the policies that pushed the various sides into negotiations and eventual agreement. I entirely agree with the argument by French that the majority of the Greek Cypriot population was disenchanted with the violence from all sides and not supporters of EOKA as claimed in
To not using my article, French also does not use several sources, old and new. I am especially thinking of a group of biographical books produced at the time, on both Makarios and Grivas; a later biography of Makarios; a recent book chapter on Makarios; Bitter Lemons, by Lawrence Durrell, who worked for the Cypriot government; British left-wing opposition to Tory policies in Cyprus, as seen through Guilty Men and other sources; and the role of women. Also, French could have provided an analysis of the visual media, mostly news stories, on the emergency, which are accessible on the British Pathe website. On the other hand I am very glad that French did not confuse me with Andreas Varnava, the author of the EOKA propaganda study, as one historian and friend once did, exclaiming as he left the bookshop where he ran into me: ‘I’ve got your book!’

My main criticism is the weakness of chapter one, which aims to set the historical background from the start of the British occupation in 1878 to 1950. French frames the enosis movement as a consistent and continuous movement led by Greek Cypriot political elites, including the church, from late Ottoman times, and how the majority of the Greek Cypriot community was ‘instinctively’ sympathetic to it. My research (and indeed that of others) has shown that it was far from the case. My work on Archbishop Sophronios has shown that the Cypriot Orthodox Church did not unite behind enosis until after his death in 1900 and even then there were differences in method, while recently Alexis Rappas has shown that even after the events of 1931 (which French mostly skips over) there was a strong constitutionalist movement that the British should have worked with.

The author’s lack of Greek and Turkish language proficiency does not hinder the quality of the book, since the British did translate relevant sources in those languages, though there are a few errors as regards the names of villages, such as Pakhana / Pakhna (p. 133) and Athnax / Ahna (p. 153), and he does, incorrectly, state that there was a District Commissioner of Troodos!

Fighting EOKA is an engaging and, thankfully, not overly long read. In my view, it hits the spot. Some people may not like it, but French calls a spade a spade, and for this, as a Cypriot (who had one side of his family ‘serve’ in EOKA, including a cousin of my mother’s as an Area Commander’, and the other side of my family be prominent, at least locally, AKEL supporters), I am pleased and relieved, and as a historian I am thankful that he has done such a thorough job that I am not tempted to take to the archives on this subject.

Notes


Alastos was Evdoros Ioannides, a prominent member of the Cypriot community in London. He had been expelled from the Communist Party of Great Britain in May 1953 and he was the brother of Reverend Kykkotis.


The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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