Attlee, Bevin and "A Very Lame Horse": The Dispute Over Greece and the Middle East, December 1946-January 1947

by THANASIS D. SFIKAS

While it may be somewhat obscure, the dispute between Attlee and Bevin over Greece and the Middle East in December 1946 through January 1947 is worth examining for several reasons. Attlee's thesis represented a radical break from the strategic premises that had shaped British policy in Greece during the first part of the 1940s. In this light, had the view of the British Prime Minister prevailed, the course of Greek history in the latter part of the decade could have been different. The dispute pertained to the entire British strategic position in the Middle East, yet Attlee specifically referred to Greece as a prime example of the difficulties besetting British policy in the region. The nature of Anglo-American relations in the mid-1940s is also illustrated, especially with regard to Britain's dependence on the United States for economic and diplomatic support and her anxiety over future U.S. policy. A key aspect of the dispute is that insofar as it linked the particular (Greece) with the general (the Middle East), it affords an excellent opportunity to examine British perceptions about the implications of change in one part of their imperial system—whether formal or informal empire—for its other elements. The entire episode demonstrates that for a better understanding of the British role in the Greek

THANASIS D. SFIKAS is a historian of Modern Greek History currently residing in England.

Civil War of 1946-1949, Labor's attitude towards Greece has to be placed in the far broader edifice of Britain's external relations and policies.

In the first section I intend to sketch the background to the dispute, focusing on three main themes. The first is Greece's British connection in the early 1940s, which sets the main context through which the dispute can be understood. The second theme consists of the domestic objections to the foreign policy of the Labor government, which, as Attlee openly admitted, generated political difficulties. Next, Anglo-American relations in 1945-1946 will be briefly outlined, for these were a major consideration for all the protagonists of the episode. The second section will provide a detailed account of the dispute between the British Prime Minister and his Foreign Secretary, followed by a brief discussion of its wider implications.

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During the Second World War relations between Britain and Greece were shaped by two previously independent factors—the domestic and the international. From 1941 to 1944, when the country was occupied by the Axis, the prewar political divisions among Greeks were exacerbated by the British political and military intervention, motivated by the traditional requirements of British foreign policy in the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. These requirements necessitated the restoration of British influence in postwar Greece and the establishment of a friendly regime that would underpin Britain's imperial position by safeguarding sea communications and the routes to India and the vital oilfields of the Middle East. In May 1944, when it emerged that the future foe to guard against was the Soviet Union, the long term political and military objectives of the British were to retain Greece in their sphere of influence and to prevent her domination by the USSR, for that would gravely prejudice their strategic position in the eastern Mediterranean.

Inside Greece the main challenge to this objective was the massive, Communist-controlled, National Liberation Front (EAM), believed by the British and the Greek nationalists alike to aim at an armed seizure of power and the subjugation of the country to Stalin. Preceded by four years of political and diplomatic interference with Greek affairs, a bloody clash between British forces and the National People's Liberation Army (ELAS) in Athens in December 1944 temporarily clipped the wings of EAM, and under British auspices an anti-communist government was established in Athens. In order to ensure that the Greek Left was kept at bay until the Greek administration had firmly establish its grip throughout the country, on 15 February 1945 the British decided to retain a considerable degree of control over Greek politics. In the wake of the military confrontation of December 1944, this intervention would "take on a new form" that would effectively render Greece a British protectorate. Forty thousand British troops would be stationed in the country in order "to make the disarmament [of the ELAS guerrillas] effective" and "guarantee against a fresh rebellion"; Rex Leeper, the ambassador in Athens, would be "something in the nature of a High Commissioner," though "in deference to Greek susceptibilities he should not bear the title."[2] As seen by Nigel Clive, Second Secretary of the British Embassy in Athens, Leeper would have "a range of powers and responsibilities more akin to those of a colonial governor than to the head of a normal diplomatic mission."[3]

Within a matter of weeks, however, the domestic situation in the client state became a source of acute embarrassment for the British. Soon after the signature of the Varkiza Agreement of 12 February 1945, which purported to have achieved a political settlement between Greek communists and nationalists, a right-wing backlash engulfed the entire country. On 22 March 1945 Harold Macmillan, the British Minister Resident in the Mediterranean, confided to Alexander C. Kirk, the U.S. ambassador to Italy and Political Adviser to the Supreme Allied Commander, Mediterranean Theatre, that "a wave of reaction was sweeping the country and now that the Right felt the Government was firmly installed with British backing they were out for revenge."[4] The White Terror, principally manifested in the persecution of leftist and republican Greeks by the state apparatus and nationalist bands, became the cardinal feature of Greek politics throughout 1945-1946. Indicative of the atmosphere prevailing was the marked tendency of the Greek authorities to regard membership of EAM as a greater crime than past collaboration with the German occupiers—an issue that irritated the Foreign Office.[5]

One guiding principle of the British policy-makers in relation to Europe, unambiguously declared in July 1945, was Britain's "right as a Great Power to be concerned with the affairs of the whole of Europe, and not merely with those parts in which we have a special interest." In particular, Britain should "be ready to counteract every attempt by the Soviet Government to communize or obtain political control over Germany, Italy, Greece or Turkey," and "build them up as bastions of 'liberalism' "; to that end, she "must not . . . hesitate to intervene diplomatically in the internal affairs of other countries if they are in danger of losing their liberal institutions or their political independence."[6] The advent of the Labor Party to power in July 1945 changed very little with regard either to that theoretical framework or to its practical application. The new government recognized the White Terror which had swept Greece from the beginning of that year,[7] but the strategic premises that had in the past motivated British policy were still valid. On 1 October 1945, during a bad-tempered meeting with Vyacheslav Molotov in London, Ernest Bevin, the new British minister of foreign affairs, declared that the Soviet Union could not be allowed to sever "the lifeline of the Empire" in the Mediterranean. Anglo-Soviet friction over the Balkans and the Mediterranean was thus exacerbated, with Molotov retorting that Britain was seeking to monopolize influence in the region.[8] On 9 November 1945, in an eloquent private letter to Leeper, Sir Orme Sargent, the Under-Secretary of the Southern Department of the Foreign Office, set the ambassador's mind at rest that the Labor government would not relinquish the British objectives in Greece:

> I have no doubt that we are physically quite strong enough to establish a Cromerian regime in Greece and to govern that country through a puppet government of our own composing. But whatever Mr. Churchill's personal feelings may have been on this point, can you imagine the Labour Government *consciously* embark-

> ing on such a policy? On the contrary, they must inevitably be at pains, while maintaining their Greek commitment, to give it all the trappings of anti-Imperialist non-interventionist respectability. But this does not mean, and has not been interpreted in practice to mean, that we are going to give up the task of seeing Greece through this mess. It only means that the Government are going to explore other and more discreet methods of achieving their object.[9]

Ernest Bevin is credited with a foreign policy that was vividly his own, yet in the case of the Middle East and Greece there was no dispute between him and his advisors. His views were clearly stated in a memorandum that admirably placed British policy in Greece in its appropriate context. On 13 March 1946 the Minister of Foreign Affairs told the Defence Committee of the Cabinet that:

> The Mediterranean is the area through which we bring influence to bear on Southern Europe, the soft underbelly of France, Italy, Yugoslavia, Greece and Turkey. Without our physical presence in the Mediterranean, we should cut little ice with those States which would fall, like Eastern Europe, under the totalitarian yoke. We should also lose our position in the Middle East.

This was the prime reason why it was "essential" that Greece remained "with us politically." Besides, the very word "Greece" evoked connotations of liberty and independence, while Bevin was convinced that by protecting the eastern Mediterranean he was defending social democracy and the British "way of life." It was the apostolic approach:

> In the European scene . . . we are the last bastion of social democracy. It may be said that this now represents our way of life as against the red tooth and claw of American capitalism and the Communist dictatorship of Soviet Russia. Any weakening of our position in the Mediterranean area will, in my view, lead to the

> end of social democracy there and submit us to a pressure which would make our position untenable.[10]

Imperial purposes were thus clothed in suitably moralistic rhetoric, yet within a matter of weeks, and for the following three years, Bevin would have to explain to his party how "the last bastion of social democracy" could support so profoundly un-socialist a regime as that of Greece. The Foreign Office staff, who did not need to bother their heads about moralizing, stated the position in less refined diction. In addressing the issue of the Greek elections, scheduled for 31 March 1946, William Hayter, the Head of the Southern Department, argued that the best possible outcome would be a left-of-center coalition strong enough to hold the balance between Left and Right. The worst would be an electoral victory of the National Liberation Front, "which would mean the end of British influence in Greece and the rapid conversion of that country into another Yugoslavia." Notwithstanding the result of the polls, the Foreign Office feared that the situation in Greece would not be stabilized, and therefore that the British government had to learn to live with Greek politics even if they were to lead to a repressive or "reactionary" regime distasteful to them. Since it was impossible to plant a democracy of the British variety in Greece, London's sole aim should be mere independence so that Greece could serve the necessity of a buffer state against Soviet expansion. To that end, Britain would "bolster up Greece financially" and "make it plain that we regard her independence as essential to our security."[11]

This attitude of the British Labor government towards Greece was in part dictated by the collapse of the Center parties in the domestic political setup and the ensuing polarization of Greek politics between the Communist-dominated EAM and the monarchist Right. Though the British did have a few reservations about bolstering the latter, the monarchist faction was deemed the lesser evil compared with the alternative of EAM, which, it was believed in London, threatened to undermine British interests in the Mediterranean. This policy proved unpopular with sections of the British Labor Party. In the Cabinet Bevin faced queries—always unattributed save, on one occasion, by

Aneurin Bevan—about the repression of the Left and the timing of the Greek elections.[12] At the Foreign Office the philhellene Philip Noel-Baker, Minister of State, had a much troubled conscience as a result of the support granted by the Labor government towards so intractably right-wing a regime as that of Greece.[13] For the same reason in the House of Commons a few Labor MPs belonging to the leftist fringe of the party persistently castigated Bevin and called attention to the White Terror and the excesses of the Right.[14] The TUC Annual Reports for 1946 record some mild and indirect criticism of the government's Greek policy, and some more forthright condemnations of the conduct of the Greek authorities.[15] Among the British Press, *News Chronicle* stressed the discrimination by the Greek state against leftists and in favor of monarchists, while *The Times*, in opposition to Bevin, favored the postponement of the Greek polls on account of the White Terror.[16]

Dissent couched in more theoretical terms was voiced on 11 February 1946, when the left-wing Labor MP Konni Zilliacus sent Attlee a note expressing his perturbation over Labor's foreign policy. In the British "occupation of Greece" Zilliacus discerned a continuation of imperial policies. The attempt to bolster an anti-communist regime as a barrier against Soviet expansion in the Mediterranean was "the traditional language of power politics and these are the traditional aims of British Imperialism since the nineteenth century."[17] Attlee dismissed the note as "based on an astonishing lack of understanding of the facts,"[18] yet before the end of the year his thinking would undergo a drastic, if temporary, change. According to Hugh Dalton, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, from early March 1946 the Prime Minister started to press on the Chiefs of Staff and the Defence Committee of the Cabinet "a large view of his own," aiming at "considerable disengagement from areas where there is a risk of clashing with the Russians. We should pull out, he thinks, from all the Middle East, including Egypt and Greece."[19] It was this difference of assessment between Attlee and Bevin that was to culminate at the end of the year.

The difficulties of the Labor government over Greece were compounded shortly after the electoral victory on 31 March 1946 of the monarchist Populist Party, which was the result of the abstention of EAM, the White Terror, and the demise of the Center. Norman Dodds, Leslie Solley, and Stanley Tiffany, three Labor MPs who toured the country from 26 April to 9 May 1946, concluded that Greece was "rapidly becoming a fascist state. Under the face of democracy, there exists a unilateral civil war, the war of the extreme Right against all democratic elements who dare to disagree with the government. Murder, illegal imprisonment, brutal assault and intimidation are the fate of thousands of victims."[20] In the summer of 1946 it transpired that by way of intensifying the wave of repression against the Left and republicans, the Populist government had, in the words of the U.S. ambassador in Athens, "embarked on [an] all-out policy [to] root out Communism."[21] These assessments were substantially reinforced—albeit in more moderate language—by the report of a British Parliamentary Delegation that, after an official invitation by the Greek government and sanction by the British, visited Greece from 16 to 24 August 1946.[22]

In response to the White Terror, from the late summer of 1946 the Greek Communist Party endorsed limited guerrilla activity by former members of the National People's Liberation Army with a view—initially at least—to securing political concessions from the Populist government. Already devastated by the Second World War and the Axis occupation, Greece was slowly drifting into civil war. By November of that year Bevin was overcome by "a temporary revulsion against all things Greek."[23] The best exponent of the frustration permeating the Foreign Office was Hector McNeil. On 29 November 1946 the Minister of State wrote to Sargent that despite all that Britain had done for Greece since 1945, the situation there had deteriorated and the Communist Party was "exerting an apparently increasing influence." The answer to the Greek problem was not further military aid to defeat the guerrillas, but substantial economic reconstruction. Funds to that end, however, could only be forthcoming from the United States. Hence, before deciding to continue bearing the "political stigma" of occupying Greece for another year, Britain should seek to find out whether the Americans were prepared to lend a hand; if not, Britain could do no more to improve the Greek chaos, in which case it might be better to abandon Greece and defend her Mediterranean position from Cyprus.[24] Indicative of the economic difficulties of the British government were Hugh Dalton's attempts to resist pressure from the Foreign Office, hanging over his head " 'like a Damoclean sword,' " "to spend large sums on Turks, Greeks, and Afghans . . . we have not got the money for this sort of thing and . . . even if we had, we should not spend it on *these* people."[25]

The major challenge to the Labor leadership came when several dissenters within the party and the TUC voiced a strong dissatisfaction with the government's foreign policy. Prominent party members sent Attlee a private letter described by *The Times* as "both a dissentient declaration of faith and a survey of foreign policy after the manner of Mr. Henry Wallace."[26] The challenge culminated on 18 November 1946, when the House of Commons debated a foreign affairs amendment to the address. Signed by fifty-eight Labor MPs, not all of whom belonged to the left-wing fringe of the party, the amendment called for a British socialist alternative to the United States and the Soviet Union. Richard Crossman moved it by attacking the government's "drift into the American camp" and warning that anti-communism "is as destructive of true democracy and of Socialism as is Communism."[27] The Labor MP made one passing reference to Greece, whose people had "danced in the streets when the Labor Government came into power," only to be subsequently frustrated by Britain's anti-communist stance and alignment with the United States.[28] Bevin came under heavy fire for a foreign policy that enjoyed full Conservative support, but Attlee stood by his Minister of Foreign Affairs. The government eventually defeated the amendment by 353 votes to none, but sixty to seventy Labor MPs abstained and some 120 in all were unaccounted for.[29] Hugh Dalton recorded in his memoirs that though the dissenters' tactics "were besotted," he "was not unsympathetic to part of their cause," and he went on to accuse Bevin of being "much abroad and out of touch with parliamentary opinion."[30]

Insofar as it pertained to Anglo-American relations, this domestic criticism of the Labor government's foreign policy touched a sensitive cord. Since July 1945 the Foreign Office feared that the United States and the Soviet Union tended to view Britain as a second-rate power that could be treated as such. To compel them to treat her as equal, the Foreign Office advocated close co-operation between the Big Three on the handling of world problems, as this would give Britain "a position in the world which we might otherwise find increasingly difficult to assert and maintain." In Europe there was an acute economic crisis which the Soviet Union might try to exploit, hence Britain should obtain the co-operation of the Americans, who alone possessed the material means of coping with it: "We must have a policy of our own and try to persuade the US to make it *their own.*"[31]

However, in 1945-1946 Anglo-American relations were far from smooth. In July 1945 Labor's electoral victory was met in Washington by sensational and alarmist reaction that later gave way to more moderate feelings.[32] The sudden end of Lend Lease on 21 August 1945, arguments about the economic terms of the loan Britain sought from the United States, uncertainty over the policy to follow towards Moscow and about the atomic bomb, and the American belief that the British Empire had come to the end of its useful life marked a context of suspicion and tension.[33] Victorious yet bankrupt, in 1945 Britain stood in need of a loan from the United States, immediate economies abroad, and an increase of exports if she were to avoid what Lord Keynes called a "financial Dunkirk."[34] In more general terms, the Labor government feared that if the isolationist mood evident in Washington prevailed, Britain would be left alone to face the Soviet Union in a vast region stretching from Afghanistan to the Elbe. Anxious to eliminate this project, from August 1945 Bevin strove to promote a more uniform and consistent relation with the United States.[35]

With Britain's deep involvement in the running of Greece, with the unpopularity of this policy with sections of the Labor Party, and with the unsettled Anglo-American relations and British dependence on the United States, by the end of November 1946 the stage was set for the dispute between the British Prime Minister and his Minister of Foreign Affairs.

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As an immediate cause, it was perhaps the cumulative effect of the above difficulties that prompted Clement Attlee to undertake an initiative towards a drastic reevaluation of British foreign and defence policy. The strategic importance of the Middle East—Anglo-Soviet relations, but also British policy towards Greece—were at the core of his thesis. On 1 December 1946 the Prime Minister sent Ernest Bevin a letter that, based on three innovatory premises, proposed the creation of a neutral zone between Britain and the Soviet Union. In the first place, Greece served as an example of the high economic and political cost accruing from the policy of backing unworthy and unstable regimes abroad:

> I think that we have got to consider our commitments very carefully lest we try to do more than we can. In particular, I am rather worried about Greece. The COS [Chiefs of Staff] are suggesting that we must keep our forces there for at least another year. I cannot contemplate the financial and economic burden with equanimity... Meanwhile we have to accept a very great deal of criticism. I feel that we are backing a very lame horse.
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> While I recognize the desirability of supporting the democratic elements in south-eastern Europe and while I am conscious of the strategic importance of oil, I have, as you know, always considered that the strategic importance of communications is very much overrated by our military advisors... I agree wholeheartedly with you that the real line of the British Commonwealth runs through Lagos and Kenya. The Middle East position is only an outpost position. I am beginning to doubt whether the Greek game is worth the candle.

Arguing that neither were Greece, Turkey, Iran, and Iraq strong enough to become effective barriers against the Soviet Union, nor did Britain command the resources to make them so, Attlee put forward a bold alternative. His proposal for a neutral zone between Britain and the Soviet Union was, however, accompanied by an attempt to interpret what appeared to be Soviet expansionism as the Kremlin's search for security against the possibility of attack by Britain and the United States:

> If it were possible to reach an agreement with Russia that we should disinterest ourselves as far as possible in them, so that they became a neutral zone, it would be much to our advantage. Of course it is difficult to tell how far Russian policy is dictated by expansionism and how far by fear of attack by the US and ourselves. Fantastic as it is, it may very well be the real grounds of Russian policy.

The third motive behind Attlee's proposal for an Anglo-Soviet agreement lay in his anxiety over future American policy, which might leave Britain alone in a would-be confrontation with the Soviet Union:

> There is a tendency in America to regard us as an outpost, but an outpost that they will not have to defend. I am disturbed by the signs of America trying to make a safety zone round herself while leaving us and Europe in No Man's land.
>
> While I think that we should try to find out what the Americans are prepared to do, we should be careful not to commit ourselves.[36]

With Bevin absent in New York for the Council of Foreign Ministers, on 2 December Attlee summoned Hector McNeil, the Minister of State at the Foreign Office, to elaborate on his position. The Prime Minister was "particularly sore" about the fact that even if the Americans offered Greece economic aid, Britain would still have to shoulder the "political animus" of occupying that country.[37] The unfolding civil war between the monarchist government and the Greek Communst Party posed three urgent questions for the British government—the retention of the British troops in the country, the maintenance of the Greek economy and armed forces, and, above all, Britain's political and strategic interests in Greece. Attlee intended to raise the whole issue of Anglo-Greek relations in the Cabinet, where it was desirable to consider the three facets of the problem as a whole and as part of the general long-term British policy *vis-à-vis* the Soviet Union, on the one hand, and the United States, on the other.

McNeil communicated Attlee's views to Bevin on 4 December. Though the Cabinet would await his return to discuss the matter, in the meantime it would be useful if he could obtain "some more definite indication as to what the Americans propose to do for Greece and Turkey." Yet the Minister of State warned the Minister of Foreign Affairs that there was growing impatience in London:

> I think I should tell you that, in my opinion, the whole question of our policy towards Greece and Turkey is in the melting pot, and that there is a very great reluctance here to contemplate a continuation of our military, financial and political commitments in Greece.[38]

Bevin was surprised and shocked. It would be useless for him, he wrote to MeNeil, to raise the question of Greece and Turkey with James F. Byrnes, his U.S. counterpart, pending an apparent reconsideration of British policy in these quarters. But had it not always been a fundamental assumption that those two countries were essential to Britain's political and strategic position in the world? "Am I to understand that we may now abandon this position? I really do not know where I stand."[39]

On 9 December 1946 Pierson Dixon, Bevin's Principal Private Secretary, prepared a note for a possible reply to Attlee. Though, according to Bevin's biographer, the Minister of Foreign Affairs seems to have made no use of it,[40] there is no reason to doubt that Dixon voiced his master's views, or at least those of the top Foreign Office officials. The note held that the rendering of the countries over which Britain and the Soviet Union squabbled (Greece, Turkey, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq) into a neutral zone would not be "practical politics." A neutral zone there would mean "the loss of the British position in Egypt and Arabia as well," and would "bring Russia to the Congo and the Victoria Falls." Indeed, since the Mediterranean was no longer of use to Britain as a communications route in war, the preoccupation to retain the British position there was "to keep others out," for in the event of a Soviet encroachment in the region "we should lose our influence in Italy, France and North Africa." Besides, there was a need for defences: "In an atomic age we cannot afford to dispense with a first line of defence. Even if a neutral zone was feasible, can we risk having no first line of defence between Central Africa and Russia?"[41]

Although in his letter to Bevin Attlee had specifically referred to Greece as an example of the difficulties besetting British policy in the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, Dixon avoided, perhaps deliberately, any concrete references to that country. Instead, he chose to counter Attlee's arguments on account of the implications of change in one part of the British world system for the entire edifice. Within a matter of days the Foreign Office would concede that its Greek policy had indeed generated political difficulties at home, yet the tactics of contextualizing the Greek question would assist in combating Attlee's views. Nonetheless, on 11 December 1946 Greece was again brought to the fore, and the debate seemed likely to gather new momentum, as the British Chiefs of Staff recommended the speedy withdrawal of all British troops from the country. Their decision was prompted by the alarming report of Lord Montgomery, who, after a brief visit to Athens, argued that if the Greek army failed to crush the Communist guerrillas by spring 1947, "then that would be the end of Greece and the country will go under."[42] The Service Chiefs concluded that, irrespective of the outcome of the struggle, the retention of British troops would be meaningless: if the guerrillas were defeated, the troops would be unnecessary, whereas, if the reverse happened, they would have to be withdrawn hastily in order to avoid a possible entanglement in hostilities. They suggested therefore that the Cabinet should consider whether to provide the Greek government with the arms and money needed to beat the guerrillas, and whether to continue to finance its army beyond the end of March 1947.[43]

Thus far there were concrete signs from Attlee, the Treasury, and the British warlords that British policy in Greece might have to alter on political, economic, and military grounds. Though the Foreign Office watched these signs with unease, its determination to stand firm did not abate. In a memorandum drafted in December 1946, Michael Williams, the Acting Head of the Southern Department, conceded that opposition to Bevin within the Cabinet was anticipated on the following scores: first, a British Labor government could not possibly support a regime that conducted itself as had the Populists; secondly, the continuation of British assistance to Greece would be detrimental to the already strained Anglo-Soviet relations; and, finally, Greece's strategic importance was not paramount. Williams accepted that there was some grain of truth in these claims, yet he reckoned that the disadvantages of relinquishing Greece would be far more grievous. If British support to the Populist government ceased, Greece would fall to the Communists, with the result that the will of the Iranians and the Turks to resist Soviet pressure would weaken. Britain's interests in the Persian Gulf and her commercial undertakings in the Middle East would be in jeopardy, while the consequences for the western Mediterranean, especially Italy, would be undesirable. If Greece were sold to the Communists, Britain's world image as a champion of social democracy would be damaged and Anglo-American relations would be at risk. Williams reasoned that the United States would probably interpret this as "the beginnings of a new Munich" and come to view the British as "doubtful supporters of the principle of national independence and integrity"; this, in turn, would be most unfortunate at the moment when Britain had to rely on American goodwill on a number of fields.[44]

In a fashion similar to Dixon's, Williams countered Attlee's arguments by way of contextualizing the Greek situation and emphasizing the adverse implications of withdrawal for the entire strategic position in the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. In this sense, Williams' apocalyptic prognostications for the future could be hoped to offset the embarrassment accruing from the support to the Greek regime. Even so, the confidence permeating his memorandum could not conceal the fact that the Foreign Office was confronted with difficulties greater than those hitherto implied. Exasperated by the inefficiency and extremism of the ruling Populist Party in Greece, the Southern

Department momentarily toyed with the idea of whether the British ambassador in Athens could intervene towards the establishment of an all-party government including, possibly, the Left. The suggestion proved faint-hearted, for it was swiftly abandoned as soon as the ambassador counseled against it, mainly on the grounds that the Populist government was an elected one enjoying a comfortable parliamentary majority.[45] The Foreign Office was convinced. McNeil minuted that the British "should not have any part in Cabinet-making." The matter was left to rest on this premise until Bevin's return from New York, since the Minister of Foreign Affairs "had often expressed himself against Cabinet-making in Greece." Moreover, by the time of his return the British government might have decided to terminate all aid to Greece, in which case the British would have little right to press their views on the Greeks and even less interest in what might happen to them.[46]

Yet Bevin's troubles persisted. On 5 January 1947 Attlee sent him a memorandum that reiterated the sharp break with long-standing notions of British strategy and foreign policy. This time the Prime Minister took as his starting point the conclusions of the Chiefs of Staff and the Imperial Defence College on Near Eastern Policy. According to them, the only possible future enemy was the Soviet Union, which could be deterred from attacking Britain only by the threat of counter-attack. In the wake of the Second World War air-power had assumed cardinal importance for the defence of Britain, for if she found herself at war with the Soviet Union without her strategic positions in the Middle East, she would lose vital air bases for the sort of action that alone could decrease the threat of attack on the British Isles. By contrast, if Britain retained her air bases in the Middle East, she could strike at the Soviet industrial heartland in the Ukraine and at the oil supplies in the Caucasus. Since, therefore, the importance of the Middle East lay no longer in safeguarding imperial communication lines but in defending Britain herself, British influence and troops in the region should be maintained. The support of several states, which this policy necessitated,[47] was a source of acute concern for Attlee. Greece again served as the main example for the Prime Minister's case, only this time the incompatibility of Labor's support to the reactionary regime in Athens was voiced in forthright terms:

> Greece appears to be hopelessly divided. In the other countries there is a small class of wealthy and corrupt people at the top and a mass of poverty-stricken land-workers at the bottom. Their governments are essentially reactionary. They afford excellent soil for the sowing of communist seed. Our position is, therefore, made very difficult before the world and our own people. We shall constantly appear to be supporting vested interests and reaction against reform and revolution in the interests of the poor. We have already that difficulty in Greece. The same position is likely to arise in all these other countries.

Attlee's proposition was equally stark. Unless Britain was convinced that the Kremlin was "irrevocably committed to a policy of world domination," she should, before opting for a confrontation strategy, "seek to come to an agreement with the Soviet Union after consideration with Stalin of all our points of conflict." Contemplating some sort of an Anglo-Soviet understanding, the Prime Minister proceeded to hint at possible initiatives: Britain, for instance, could convince the Soviet Union that she had no offensive intentions against her, the question of the Dardanelles could be settled according to principles applicable to all international waterways, while it might even be feasible to reach an agreement on oil rights in Iran.[48]

Bevin replied on 9 January, after he had consulted with top Foreign Office officials (Sir Orme Sargent, William Hayter, Christopher Warner, Pierson Dixon) in a meeting where two premises prevailed: first, that for Stalin British withdrawal from the Middle East "would be a Munich and an incentive to ultimate world domination rather than a sedative"; and, second, that "even if Russian world domination can be discounted bear will not certainly resist pushing paw into soft places."[49] Bevin's reply to the Prime Minister came along these very lines, except for the omission of the beastly metaphor. The Minister of Foreign Affairs dismissed Attlee's thesis on both political and military grounds, but chose to expand on the former:

> You point out that the Middle Eastern countries are a fertile ground for communism. This is indeed the case, and this makes it all the more certain that if we leave the Middle East, the Russians will move in.

Then came the much-favored historical parallel. Negotiations with Stalin and a possible withdrawal from the Middle East "would be Munich over again, only on a world scale, with Greece, Turkey and Persia as the first victims in place of Czechoslovakia." Next, the consideration of the effect a withdrawal would have on Anglo-American relations:

> The effects on our relations with the USA would be disastrous. We are to a large extent dependent on them economically, and without their help we cannot maintain the standard of life of our people. We are hardly less dependent upon them militarily. With great labor, we have at least succeeded in persuading them that their strategic interests are involved in the maintenance of our position in the Middle East. If we now withdraw at this moment, I should expect them to write us off entirely.

Bevin was in no hurry for negotiations with Stalin until Britain had acquired a position of strength. This was a paradoxical argument, for it implied that despite his full cognizance of Britain's economic weakness or perhaps *because of it*, the Minister of Foreign Affairs found it imperative that the Labor government continue to think and act imperially:

> Your proposal would involve leading from weakness. Our economic and military position is as bad as it will ever be. When we have consolidated our economy, when the economic revival of Europe which you mentioned has made progress, when it has become finally clear to the Russians that they cannot drive a wedge between the Americans and ourselves, we shall be in a position to negotiate with Stalin from strength. There is no hurry.[50]

The records suggest that Attlee was not entirely—or, at least, immediately—convinced, but also that he did not persist in his initiative. On the same day, 9 January 1947, the Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs held a meeting with the Defence Secretary Albert Alexander. Immediately afterwards Bevin dictated a note to Dixon to the effect that no further withdrawal of troops would take place and that his overall policy would continue. Attlee confined himself to the reservation that, in his judgment, British defence plans did not require adherence to the present policy in the Middle East. Nevertheless, within a few weeks he would irrevocably abandon his notion and become as fervent a custodian of the British position in the region as Bevin himself.[51] Though inadequately explained by the records, his *volte-face* must certainly have been due to pressure from Bevin and the Service Chiefs. Throughout the duration of the dispute the Minister of Foreign Affairs and his staff stood determined to entrench British preponderance in the Middle East, whilst Lord Montgomery, in his capacity as Commander of the Imperial General Staff, and the other two Service Chiefs threatened their resignation should the Prime Minister insist. Quietly, as it had started, the dispute was over. "We heard no more about it," Montgomery recorded in his memoirs.[52]

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Attlee's initiative represented a sharp, if short-lived, break from the strategic proposition whereby Greece, handsomely situated in the northern tier of the Middle East, was assigned the role of the bulwark against Soviet expansion southwards. Had his views prevailed and the British withdrawn, it is a moot point whether this would have led to the immediate collapse of the government in Athens, a takeover by the Communist Party, the tumbling down of the dominoes right across the Middle East and the Mediterranean, and, ultimately, to the triumph of the Infidel. More likely, and far more modestly, the news could have shattered the morale of the Greek nationalist camp, especially that of its ill-trained armed forces, and thereby undone the policy of armed confrontation with the Communists. If this momentarily raised the prospect of a compromise solution to the Greek Civil War, the signs from the Communists were auspicious: while Attlee's main proposal was the creation of a neutral zone between Britain and the Soviet Union, from August 1946 onwards the Greek Communist Party also requested that Greece be declared a neutral country under the guarantee of the Great Powers or the United Nations.[53] This quixotic aspiration bore no fruit, for the British were soon to be joined by the Americans in an unflinching common effort to prevent a communist victory in Greece. On 21 February 1947, six weeks after the dispute was over, the Labor government requested from the State Department that the United States assume the economic responsibility in Greece; three weeks later President Truman enunciated his famous Doctrine. It is, however, of crucial importance to point out that the British request signified Whitehall's resentment of the economic incubus accrued by the Greek Civil War, not any intention to relinquish Greece as a sphere of strategic and political interest.

It is in this sense that Attlee's initiative had only little to do with the ideologically inspired calls for a socialist foreign policy, promulgated from some Labor quarters. Instead, it amounted to a pragmatic and radical alternative, prompted primarily by Britain's economic predicament and dependence on the Americans, the fear of the United States lapsing into isolationism, and, to some extent, a few qualms about Labor's support for the thoroughly un-socialist Greek regime. The Prime Minister was in no mood to repudiate British world power. The letter to Bevin on 1 December 1946 was permeated by his alarm at the possibility of an American withdrawal that might expose Britain to a solitary confrontation with the Soviet Union in Europe and in the Middle East. Attlee's reaction was to cast doubt upon the values of attempting to defend singlehandedly the vast and unstable area stretching from the Elbe to Afghanistan, and to urge a grand strategic withdrawal.

His case crashed under the determination of Bevin, the Foreign Office, and the Chiefs of Staff to preserve Britain's predominant position in the Middle East. For Bevin, in particular, this was a sacrosanct axiom, sharpened in 1945-1946 by his perception of the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East as a weak and unstable area, by fears of Soviet encroachment, by the corollary desire to retain air-bases in the region giving access to the southern Soviet Union, and, not least of all, by the prodigiously enhanced importance of the Middle East as a producer of oil.[54] It was perfectly obvious to both Attlee and Bevin that support from the United States was vital not only in order to underpin the British position in the Middle East, but also to cope with the acute crises in economically prostrate western Europe. Hence from late 1946 through early 1947 the Labor government was anxious to patch up its differences with the United States (especially over Palestine), whilst the Foreign Office tried not to create new difficulties by endorsing strategic novelties such as the one advocated by Attlee. Bevin set his heart on ensuring that Britain, in his eyes the last bastion of social democracy, would not deprive herself of the American diplomatic and economic support needed both for the pursuit of a nationalist foreign policy and reconstruction at home.

There existed a paradox in that the Minister of Foreign Affairs was fully conscious of Britain's economic weakness, yet this reinforced his determination to think and act imperially. Of course the paradox is by no means inexplicable: after all it was as early as mid-July 1945 when the Foreign Office was hoping that by acting as a great power, with legitimate, tenable, and defensible spheres of influence, Britain would secure American respect and support for her overseas positions. Simultaneously, on the home front, reconstruction along democratic socialist lines seemed to imply a policy of vigorous—and, quite often, rigorous—leadership in international affairs. Its prestige as a great power assisted the application of British diplomacy throughout the world, and Bevin was not prepared to relinquish either the claims that underwrote it or the prestige itself. His exchange with Attlee revealed the extent to which the Minister of Foreign Affairs was anxious to secure American goodwill for the realization of his objectives. Britain's economic and military dependence on the United States made it imperative that she display the utmost resoluteness in standing firm towards what was seen as Soviet expansionism. Attlee had no doubts as to the need for America's helping hand, but he seemed to disagree with Bevin as to whether this should be obtained whatever the short-term costs.

The Greek situation entered the picture on precisely this score, for it had become an embarrassment to the British Labor government. This was vividly reflected in Attlee's dispatches to Bevin, which specifically referred to Greece as the most pertinent example of the difficulties haunting British policy in the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. The Prime Minister implicitly argued that, since Britain could not pose as the last bastion of social democracy and at the same time support deeply reactionary regimes like the Greek Populists, alternative means would have to be found to underpin her security. Yet Bevin and the Foreign Office, having few scruples about the moral capital to be sacrificed in the process, persisted in bolstering the Populist government, which was seen as the only alternative to a communist Greece. It was precisely for this reason that from 1945 to the end of the Greek Civil War, in 1949, the Labor government maintained a pugnacious and belligerent posture towards both the internal Greek Communist insurgents and the presumed Soviet involvement.

This leads to what may be seen as the single most significant implication of the dispute both for Anglo-Greek relations and the British policy-makers' habit of mind in their approach to foreign policy. Insofar as it linked the particular (Greece) with the general (the Middle East), the ephemeral dissension between Attlee and Bevin sheds ample light on British apprehensions for the consequences of change in one part of their imperial system for its other elements. Whatever their merits *per se*, individual cases, like that of Greece, were invariably contextualized in the wide and labyrinthine edifice of Britain's overseas relations and policies. The dispute demonstrates that the fundamental premises underlying British policy towards Greece were hardly decided on the basis of what was actually happening inside that country. Even after 1945 British policy-makers adhered to the thesis dating back to the times of Cromwell and William III, and which had become standard policy since the Younger Pitt and Palmerston, that British preponderance in the Middle East was vital to the security of Britain's world position.[55] Developments within Greece played an important part in the tactical aspect of British policy there, but they could have no influence upon this cardinal strategic consideration. In a not altogether different context John Gallagher has remarked that a state that operates a world system cannot isolate any single individual situation and examine it on its own merits, for "every possible solution squeezes the trigger of another problem" and "every strategic case modulates into another."[56] No wonder then that Labor's foreign policy was determined by the broader considerations of imperial and national self-interest, especially in relation to the requirements of imperial defence and the needs of the British economy. For British policy-makers this was the guiding principle of Anglo-Greek relations, even though it was openly admitted that Greece was "a very lame horse." The tactics whereby this principle was to be pursued could only be allowed to accommodate the domestic situation in Greece insofar as they did not impinge on the overriding strategic necessity. But they invariably did.

NOTES

[1] WO 201/1598. For Britain's policy towards Greece in 1941-44 see Papastratis.

[2] FO 371/48257 R3559; FO 371/48257 R3669; FO 371/4857 R3559, Sargent; FO 371/48257 R3559, "Greece."

[3] Clive 213-14. For a similar view of Greece as a British protectorate see also Thomas 326, 545.

[4] FRUS 1945, 8, 122.

[5] FO 371/48264 R6325; Woodhouse 241.

[6] DPDO 1.1.102, Memorandum and Annex 2.

[7] FO 800/468/GRE/45/1; DBPO 1.1.505; FO 800/468/GRE/45/6.

[8] FO 371/50922 U9974.

[9] FO 800/276/GRE/45/10.

[10] CAB 131/2/DO (46) 40.

[11] FO 371/58676 R3032; FO 371/58678 R3496.

[12] CAB 128/1/CM21 (45); CAB 128/5/CM23 (46); CAB 128/5/CM25 (46); CAB 128/5/CM50 (46).

[13] Material in Noel-Baker papers, qtd. in Morgan 252.

[14] These parliamentary critics were, mainly, Major Lyall Wilkes, Seymour Cocks, John Platt-Mills, Leslie Solley, William Warbey, Stanley Tiffany, Norman Dodds, and, almost inevitably, the two communists, William Gallacher and Philip Piratin. A small sample appears in HC Deb. 413, cols. 310-11, 588-09, 20 and 22 Aug. 1945; 414, cols. 674-76, 1156-57, 15 and 17 Oct. 1945; 417, col. 380, 12 Dec. 1945; 424, cols. 545-54, 20 Jun. 1946; 425, col. 1665, 22 Jul. 1946; 428, col. 580, 29 Oct. 1946.

[15] *TUC Annual Reports*, esp. 259-61, 435-40.

[16] *News Chronicle* 7 Jan. 1946; *The Times* 8, 17, 28, 29 Mar. 1946.

[17] *Attlee Papers*: Box 31, Folios 166-74.

[18] *Attlee Papers*: Box 31, Folio 242.

[19] Diary entry for 9 Mar. 1946 in Dalton 105.

[20] Dodds, Solley, and Tiffany 61.

[21] FRUS 1946, 7, 186-87.

[22] FO 371/67017 R2822; also in CAB 129/15/CP(46) 447. For the origins and composition of the Delegation see FO 371/58698 R10234; HC Deb. 426, col. 260 (Philip Noel-Baker, 1 Aug. 1946).

[23] FO 371/58890 R17285.

[24] FO 371/58716 R17463.

[25] Dalton 171 (entries for 29 Nov. and 20 Dec. 1946).

[26] *The Times* 18 Nov. 1946.

[27] HC Deb. 430, col. 529.

[28] HC Deb. 531.

[29] For the whole debate, see HC Deb., cols. 525-94; *The Times* 18 and 19 Nov. 1946.

[30] Dalton 168 (entry for 12 Nov. 1946).

[31] DBPO 1.1.102: Memorandum.

[32] See FO 371/44661, FO 371/44662.

[33] Morgan 262-63; Thomas 285.

[34] CAB 129/1/CP (45) 112.

[35] Morgan 263.

[36] FO 800/475/ME/46/22.

[37] FO 371/58659 R17594.

[38] FO 800/468/GRE/46/39.

[39] FO 800/468/GRE/46/40.

[40] Bullock 340.

[41] FO 800/475/GRE/46/24.

[42] FO 371/58716 R17687.

[43] FO 371/58718 R18419.

[44] FO 371/66996 R532. See also FO 371/58659 R18501.

[45] FO 371/58717 R17830; FO 371/58717 R18152: Minute and Foreign Office; FO 371/58717 R17830; FO 371/58715 R17200.

[46] FO 371/58717 R17830: Minutes by Williams, Warner, McNeil.

[47] FO 800/502/SU/47/2; see also CAB 131/4/DO (47) 23.

[48] FO 800/476/ME/47/1.

[49] FO 800/476/ME/47/2.

[50] FO 800/476/ME/47/4.

[51] FO 800/476/ME/47/5; Bullock 354; Darwin 77.

[52] Montgomery 436.

[53] See *Avgi* 2 and 5 Dec. 1979.

[54] A joint paper by Bevin and Emanuel Shinwell, the Minister of Fuel and

Power, on 3 Jan. 1947, emphatically pointed out the critical importance of the oilfields of the Middle East, which supplied a stunning 60 percent of Britain's oil needs; see CAB 129/16/CP (47) 11.

[55] Gallagher 149-150.

[56] Gallagher 128.

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New Evidence on Greek Music In the U.S.A.: Spottswood's Ethnic Music on Records

by OLE L. SMITH

The publication of Richard Spottswood's magnificent discography of pre-war ethnic recordings in the U.S.A. will surely be a stimulus to renewed research into this rich area, which Spottswood himself has been one of the first scholars to map out. His various contributions to the study of ethnic music in the U.S. have established him as one of the leading authorities in the field.[1] It has been known for some years that this *magnum opus* was on its way, and now we have in our hands an indispensable tool, irrespective of which language or culture we are interested in. The amount of material presented is staggering, and one can only admire Spottswood's energy and patience in collecting this information, scattered as it is and until now completely indigested. It is to be hoped that scholars in their various special fields will contribute to further clarification of the many unsolved problems still left. No one would have expected that this first major attempt to deal with the whole area would have filled out every hole and blank spot in our knowledge.

The following remarks should be seen partly as a contribution to further clarification of the Greek recordings (3:1133-234), partly as a first outline of future research possibilities on the basis of Spottswood's book. I should emphasize that I have concentrated on the recordings of *rebetika* and *dimotika*. I have

Ole L. Smith is a historian and Chairman of Greek Language and Literature at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden.