Different academic approaches towards the British intervention in Greece (1941-1944). A synopsis

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The Anglo–Hellenic diplomatic and military relations during this period have been the main focus for professional historians and produced a great dispute amongst them, thus leading to different conclusions about the British role and the Greek reaction to it. As a result, in order to form a clearer picture about the British intervention in Greece during this period, it is crucial to bear in mind that many British liaisons were sent to Greece to every major guerrilla group, irrespective of their beliefs and political goals concerning the post-war political status quo, that was to be created in the country, to organize sabotage operations against the Axis forces that were stationed in Greece and also that SOE (Special Operations Executive) was sent for exactly the same reason. The resistance movement in Greece (which took the form of active military action on the mountains of the mainland) was one of the largest in Europe, especially the one led by the Communists (EAM-ELAS), a fact that resulted in disagreements between the SOE responsible for Greece and the Foreign Office. This happened because SOE had only strategic goals, for the realisation of which they cooperated with all guerrilla groups without taking into consideration their political views or aims, whereas the Foreign Office had only political ones, which were opposed to the imposition of any Soviet-friendly regime after the liberation of the country.

None of the academic studies that have dealt with this period challenge the fact that there was a significant interference of Britain in the Greek affairs. The main point of differentiation is whether the British had predetermined their stand towards Greece or it was formed, as the war was raging. In any case, it becomes clear that they wanted

1 During the Nazi occupation of Greece, following the great famine of winter 1941-1942 and the spread of black market, guerilla troops were formed in the mountains of Greece. The biggest ones were EAM-ELAS, which was led by the communists, EDES and EKKA, which declared themselves as social democrats. Each one of them had a British liaison with the task to attack enemy targets and inform SOE of Cairo, which in turn informed the Foreign Office.

2 A British organisation formed in 1940 to conduct espionage, sabotage and to aid resistance movements in occupied Europe.

3 EAM: National Liberation Front, ELAS: Revolutionary Popular Liberation Army.
it to remain under their influence.

Gerolymatos argues in favour of the view that Britain had no previous plans concerning Greece and they only decided to aid the King’s cause after the fall of Crete in May 1941 and, since they would not tolerate any political change during the war, they only decided to move against EAM and ELAS in late 1944 to assist the Greek government. Furthermore, he points out that in order to achieve its military goals and not in accordance to the Foreign Office that supported the royalist cause, SOE was backing left-wing clandestine networks, a situation that contributed unwillingly to right-left polarisation of Greek resistance. Nevertheless, he maintains that Britain’s policy in Greece was attempting to balance short-term military gains with long-term political objectives. Papastratis’ study is also of the same view and includes that it was in a War Cabinet meeting in 1943 that England decided to fully aid the Greek King and his government, despite the fact that ‘patriotic elements in Greece were of a different political complexion’.

G. M. Alexander follows the same line of argument. According to him, it was since April 1944 that Britain focused its objectives concerning Greece towards the latter being a non-communist state in order to safeguard Britain’s strategic interests in the region.

Alternatively, Heinz Richter argues that Britain focused its efforts from an early stage (October 1940) on reinstating King George II to the Greek throne and left its protégé King as a sole master of his country’s destiny. In another study, he states that the December 1944 events in Athens were the result of an intervention that aimed to crush all resistance in order to restore the semi–colonial dependence of the past, something that had been decided by Churchill since 1943, because of the country’s

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5 Ibid., 160.
6 Ibid., 332.
8 Gerolymatos, Guerilla Warfare, 164.
Another advocate of the early British intervention theory about the country’s post-war political status is Richard Clogg. In his book, *Anglo–Greek Attitudes*, he writes that it appears that the Foreign Office was trying to ‘sell’ King George II to the Greek population as early as November 1941, so as to achieve political stability and create a post-war Greece that would be favourable to British interests.

A more raw criticism against Britain’s foreign policy is expressed by Kedros. According to him, Churchill was obsessed with keeping Russia out of the Mediterranean and preserving the imperial road to India and to the oil reserves located in the Middle East. He reaches the conclusion that the allies sacrificed the Greek people to their Great Power politics and the leaders of EAM-ELAS fell into the traps set for them due to their political myopia, thus bearing their share of responsibility.

Lastly, Sfikas has a very interesting approach to the subject. He says that, although academic historiography rejects terms such as ‘imperialistic’ for the reason that they relate to overly simplistic explanations, it is useful to remember that Britain’s basic mistake was that it acted as a 19th century colonial power instead of a modern state. He characterises Churchill as a supporter of British racial supremacy, who was claiming that Britain had to subdue smaller countries for the latters’ own protection. Moreover, according to Sfikas, he believed that monarchy suited best to Greek idiosyncrasy, which is not ideal for democracy in its developed forms.

As can be seen, there are different perspectives among scholars about England’s plans and the point of their finalisation, in connection with Greece. Nonetheless, whatever the means or whenever employed, a common conclusion permeates academic historiography on this issue: Britain sought - and in the end achieved, at least for some years – to keep Greece under its political and financial influence.

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15 Ibid., 59.
17 Ibid., 77-78.
Bibliography


