

France and the Cyprus Issue*

From the War of Independence to the Crisis of 1964

English Summary** of *La France et la question chypriote*

Introduction

This article reviews the content and context of the crucial dialogue on the Cyprus issue which took place in Paris on separate occasions in early July 1964. De Gaulle met separately with Turkish prime minister Ismet Inonu and the Greek prime minister George Papandreou, respectively. The article draws upon the official verbatim transcript from the Quai d'Orsay only recently released to researchers by the French Foreign Office.

Overview

France, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, has always been interested in the eastern Mediterranean and Cyprus. Late president Mitterand was keenly aware of the need for peace in this sensitive area of the world. In 1988, he described Cyprus as a delicate problem which must necessarily be solved without bloodshed. Mitterand's words in a message to visiting Turkish prime minister Ozal could indicate that French policy excluded the sharing of Cyprus. Quite a departure from de Gaulle who tended to deny that Cyprus existed as a state. In fact, early in the island's war of independence and decolonization, France adopted a guarded, not to say hostile, attitude towards Cyprus.

France and the Cypriot War of Independence

The Cypriot war of independence broke out on April 1, 1955, a few months after the Algerian insurrection against French colonial authorities. This coincidence and the similarity of the British and French reaction to the conflicts are worth examining. Both Great Britain and France considered these uprisings as domestic problems, thus excluded from UN intervention. Both powers refused to grant their respective colonies the right to self-determination.

Although a NATO ally of France's, Greece did not think it necessary to be aligned with the French on the Moroccan and Tunisian issues. Knowing the Cyprus issue would come up at the UN, Greece had abstained from voting to postpone the inclusion of the Moroccan and Tunisian issues on the agenda. In retaliation, France voted against including the Cypriot issue on the agenda of the General Assembly in 1954. In the subsequent year (1954-55), Greece sought support among Arab states in order to obtain diplomatic influence at the UN and

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to avoid Islamic solidarity with Turkey. For the same reason, Greece openly declared its support for Algerian independence.

The French position at the UN showed that Paris minimized the importance of Cypriot fighting. France based its diplomatic policy on information obtained in Nicosia and did not consider demonstrations by AKEL, the Cypriot communist party, a serious threat. According to French intelligence, AKEL party leaders were working for the English.

The Suez Canal crisis in 1956 reinforced Anglo-French solidarity and fed the anti-French feeling in Nicosia and Athens because the armed British and French expedition in Suez was directed from Cyprus. Greece was officially neutral in this conflict, which saw Egypt pitted against France and Britain. In the name of neutrality, no French or British planes en route to Cyprus were allowed to land on Greek soil. Pierre Charpentier, French ambassador to Greece at the time, criticized the tone of the Hellenic press and the expensive propaganda spread by Arab missions within the country.

In December 1958, just before the conclusion of the Zurich and London agreements which declared Cyprus an independent state, Greece failed in its attempt to have the UN deal with the Cyprus issue. Guy Girard de Charbonnières, French ambassador to Greece at the time, described the botched effort as the result of a lack of coordination within the Greek government. Despite his desire and efforts, de Charbonnières could not figure out Greece's real diplomatic position on the issue. Even at the UN debate on the issue, the French ambassador, who delivered to de Gaulle the Greek prime minister's message on Cyprus, noted that the most recent Greek proposals delivered in Manhattan by Averoff were completely different from those proposed 48 hours before. Given the "hesitant, out-dated, even contradictory" Greek attitude towards Cyprus, the French ambassador was not surprised when the proposal failed.

The same ambassador considered Averoff a "very poor minister of foreign affairs" and stressed Caramanlis' lack of experience in international politics. As a result of these Greek diplomatic errors, the Hellenic interests lost ground. In fact France, one of the countries signing Lausanne Treaty of 1923, was insulted because it claimed not to have been adequately consulted on the treaties establishing Cypriot Independence.

France had always doubted the viability of the Republic of Cyprus. The same French ambassador to Greece wrote in February 1959 that "giving the right to veto to a minority [the Turkish Cypriots] will only hamper the operations of any human enterprise and paralyze it." Nonetheless France realized that peace in Cyprus meant a permanent agreement between Greece and Turkey. French authorities believed that the peace would encourage Greece to distance itself from the Arab countries and the Algerian issue.

This was not to be. Neither was the Cypriot model taken up by the French to solve the Algerian problem. Algeria gained independence in 1962; the French minority left the former colony to return to France.

France and the 1964 Crisis

As soon as Cyprus became independent, France recognized the country and opened an embassy headed by Louis Keller in Nicosia. Yet it was only days before de Gaulle's resignation in 1969 that Cyprus finally opened an embassy in Paris. As a result, Quai d'Orsay learned of Cypriot events primarily from Greek and Turkish diplomats posted to Paris rather than from French sources in Nicosia. French-Cypriot misunderstandings during the 1964 crisis would seem to stem from the partial information provided to French authorities.

Back when de Gaulle returned to power in 1958, he enjoyed a positive image in Greece and Cyprus as the great man and leader of free France. He developed close ties with the Greek prime minister, Constantine Caramanlis. This relationship led the Greeks to break away from the American diplomatic fold and lean toward the European Community. Subsequent to armed clashes between Cypriot Turks and Greeks after Archbishop Makarios announced his intention of revising the island's constitution in December 1963 and the threat of a Turkish invasion, London and Washington proposed a NATO intervention in Cyprus. Paris disagreed, saying that NATO did not have valid reasons to intervene and that France had not signed the Zurich and London agreements.

A few weeks later, the UN Security Council decided to send a peacekeeping mission to Cyprus. France abstained because of de Gaulle's mistrust of the international institution. The Cypriot government however felt that France shared its position that the London and Zurich agreements were impossible to apply. Turkish criticism of France reinforced this mistaken Greek and Cypriot impression. But during the turbulent spring of 1964, the French position, similar to the American one, became clear. It did not promote Greek or Cypriot interests.

De Gaulle's government wanted to play a role in settling the Cypriot issue, so France appeared impartial. On June 20, 1964, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution extending the stay of UN forces on the island. However, the French representative, Seydoux, criticized Cypriot Greeks for their violent behaviour towards Cypriot Turks without mentioning any of the armed Turkish provocations on the island. The French government actually considered Archbishop Makarios responsible for the crisis.

Nine days later, de Gaulle received the Greek prime minister, George Papandreou. The French leader said that his government was under the impression that the crisis was sparked by Makarios to take advantage of the situation. When de Gaulle received Turkish prime minister Ismet Inonu two days later, he revealed in detail French positions that appeared to support Ankara.

According to the records, de Gaulle implied that Cyprus did not exist as a state. France knew “only Turkey and Greece.” He also said that Makarios had seized this opportunity to become a head of state. The French general responded to a question from Inonu by saying that “if Greece and Turkey resolved to seek a new solution that considered the rights of Greeks and Turks and put an end to Makarios’ regime, perhaps there would be less reason to fight.”

De Gaulle’s apparent hostility toward Makarios stemmed from the widespread idea that the Cypriot archbishop would make his island the “Cuba of the Mediterranean”. The soviet threat was uppermost in the mind of de Gaulle, who preferred the simpler solution of partition (sharing the island) over *Enosis* which would mean the annexation of Cyprus by Greece with a special status for Cypriot Turks guaranteed by world powers. Yet he understood the practical difficulties of a border and a scattered Turkish population. Inonu informed de Gaulle that only partition would be acceptable to the Turks. The Turkish leader thus cleverly never denied comments in his country’s press which described the French position as quite distant from the Turkish.

In August 1964, Turkish planes bombarded Cyprus with the pretext of some incidents on the island. Makarios responded with an economic blockade of the Turkish villages. The Western world disapproved only mildly of the Turkish action because the Americans were bombing the North Vietnamese in the Tonkin Gulf at the same time. In fact, the international press actually criticized the Cypriot government’s attitude toward Cypriot Turks. Quai d’Orsay realized that Athens’ support of Nicosia was weakening and heeded rumours that the Greek government was buying the votes of Cypriot deputies.

In the summer of 1964, France declared that it was willing to facilitate an agreement between Greece and Turkey. This declaration by Peyrefitte confirmed de Gaulle’s wish as expressed to Papandreou and Inonu that France wanted to bring Greece and Turkey together on the Cyprus issue. However the French declaration led nowhere and the Cypriot press denounced Paris’ attitude.

Meanwhile Turkey managed to regroup the Cypriot Turks on the island so that the partition or sharing solution, previously considered difficult because of population dispersion, became a realistic option for Ankara and the western powers. Over the following ten years, relations between France and Cyprus cooled somewhat. Only in 1974 when the Turks invaded Cyprus, a military initiative begun in 1964, did President Giscard d’Estaing restore the traditional ties between France and Cypriot Hellenism.