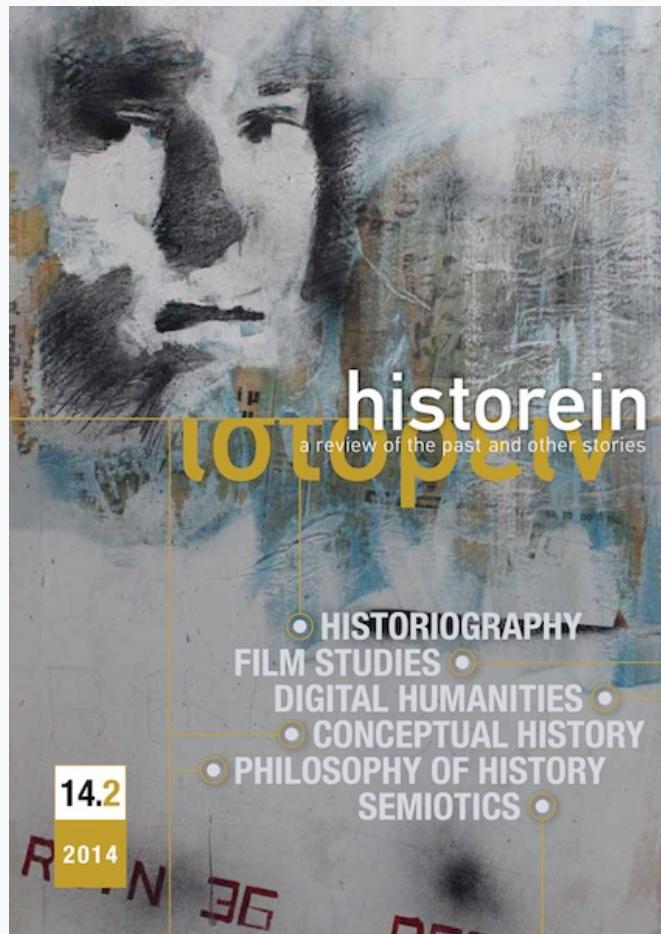


## Historein

Vol 14, No 2 (2014)

Historein 14/2 (2014)



**Review of Alexandros Nafpliotis's Britain and the Greek Colonels: Accommodating the Junta in the Cold War**

*Yannis Skalidakis*

doi: [10.12681/historein.262](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.262)

Copyright © 2015, Yannis Skalidakis



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

### To cite this article:

Skalidakis, Y. (2014). Review of Alexandros Nafpliotis's Britain and the Greek Colonels: Accommodating the Junta in the Cold War. *Historein*, 14(2), 154–157. <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.262>

στην Ανατολική Ευρώπη [Order arms: political refugees of the Greek civil war in eastern Europe] (Thessaloniki: University of Macedonia, 2005). Katerina Tsakou, *Προσωρινώς διαμένοντες... Έλληνες Πολιτικοί Πρόσφυγες στη Λαϊκή Δημοκρατία της Βουλγαρίας (1948–1982)* [Temporary residents: Greek political refugees in the People's Republic of Bulgaria, 1948–1982] (Thessaloniki: Epikentro, 2010); Loring M. Danforth and Riki van Boeschoten, *Children of the Greek Civil War: Refugees and the Politics of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Riki van Boeschoten, *Anάποδα Χρόνια. Συλλογική Μνήμη και Ιστορία στο Ζιάκα Γρεβενών (1900–1950)* [Hapless years: memory and history in Ziakas, Grevena, 1900–1950] (Athens: Plethron, 1997); Riki van Boeschoten, *Μνήμες και λήθη του ελληνικού εμφυλίου πολέμου* [Remembering and forgetting the Greek civil war] (Thessaloniki: Epikentro, 2008).

**Alexandros Nafpliotis**

*Britain and the Greek Colonels: Accommodating the Junta in the Cold War*

**London & New York: IB Tauris, 2013. 307 pp.**

**Yannis Skalidakis**

Panteion University

Historical research in and academic interest on the period of the military dictatorship in Greece (1967–1974) has advanced in recent years to include university courses, seminars and dissertations on many of its aspects. This previously under-researched period has evolved thus into a growing field of historical study and some important works have already seen the light.<sup>1</sup>

This fruitful process has resulted in a renewed public discussion on controversial topics, such as the causes of the colonels' coup d'état and the nature of their regime, the social and economic history of the period, resistance against and consent towards the regime, the impact of the 1973 student revolt and the 1974 Cyprus incidents that marked the end of this troubled period. Nevertheless, 40 years after the transition to a democratic system, known as the *metapolitefsi*, many aspects of the junta period have not been clarified thoroughly. As a result, public discussion is still dominated by stereotypical approaches, leaving it easy prey for political misuse. The foreign policy of the dictatorship and the role of foreign powers in the imposition, support or guidance of the colonels or in confronting them and defending democracy are among these unclear aspects.

In this context, Alexandros Nafpliotis' study concerning the relations between Britain and the Greek dictatorship represents a valuable

contribution that sheds light on a very specific topic of great importance. Based on extensive research in primary sources, such as the records of the Foreign Office and other British, Greek and American archives, the author offers us a solid delineation of the diplomatic relations between the two parties, the British rationale behind the policy towards the regime in Greece and its eventual differentiations from it, and the actions and reactions of the junta. This study should therefore be seen as a reference for future research on the subjects of either the international relations of the dictatorship or British foreign policy in the late 1960s–early 70s.

Britain's role in internal Greek affairs had been very important since the foundation of the modern Greek state and even crucial in certain periods, such as the interwar period and the Second World War until 1947, when the British embassy and the Foreign Office had the Greek governments under their wing.<sup>2</sup> However, that was not the case during the period of the dictatorship, and the awareness of that by the British side is well documented. Nafpliotis summarises British interest in the Greek situation through the participation of the country in Nato, British commercial interests and the situation in Cyprus. These priorities were shared by both Labour and Conservative governments throughout the 1967–1974 period, while the interest in the restoration of democracy is well portrayed as secondary, besides any differences in the discourse of Wilson's and Heath's governments. As the author rightly argues, British foreign policy could be characterised as the triumph of *Realpolitik*.

While the days of British predominance over Greek affairs were long gone, Britain still had some special issues concerning Greece, such as the status of the Republic of Cyprus and relations with the Greek royal family and also

with many of the "old gang", as the members of the Greek political elite were often referred by British officials. But as the international role of its former empire was generally diminishing, Britain adopted a "wait and see" approach towards Greece, while trying to find a new role by the side of the United States and in the European Economic Community. The author describes how Britain aligned itself with the expulsion of Greece from the Council of Europe in 1969 while simultaneously trying not to damage its "good working relationship" with the colonels and Greece's membership in Nato. This policy led to a doctrine of "disconnected responsibilities" between membership in the Council of Europe and Nato, as democratic credentials were clearly needed in the case of the former. This ambiguous policy caused some divergences in the Labour government, but not so much in the next Conservative government, which adopted it. While Britain became an official member of the EEC in 1973, the main points of interest concerning Greece didn't really change; there were re-ordered, if not re-worded.

Another interesting topic concerns British economic relations with Greece. The author provides data about UK imports from and exports to Greece during the dictatorship period; these were generally on the increase, especially after 1970. But Britain was especially interested in selling arms to the regime. British officials felt they were losing ground in this field to the Americans or even the French, and often referred to this fact to rebuff objections of a political or moral nature regarding trade with the colonels. The pragmatic British stance was portrayed in this matter in a distinction between large arms used for Nato purposes and lighter items, such as grenades and small rifles, that could be used against the civilian population. As a true representative of a cynical diplomacy, the British ambassador, Sir Robin

Hooper, in his report on the student uprising of November 1973, explained that “the lack of proper riot equipment may, ironically enough, have left the military with no alternative to cracking a nut with a steam hammer”. In general though, as the author suggests, Greece used this British interest for political leverage, as it had no intention, not to mind the necessary funds, to proceed with arms purchases.

This book is, as the author himself asserts, largely based on his doctoral dissertation. Inevitably, it has the virtues and vices of that kind of study. The archival research in Foreign Office records concerning the period under examination seems exhaustive and the presentation of official British policy is complete with consistent conclusions. However, the book could have been improved on the thesis in terms of content and structure. Regarding the latter, arranging the chapters chronologically according to each year of the colonels’ rule is monotonous and often results in repetitions concerning Britain’s – quite consistent – priorities, which were reaffirmed each year. Perhaps a structure combining the political changes (and different subperiods) in Greece and Britain with the basic themes of their relations – such as Cyprus, European pressures on the regime, Nato and the situation in the eastern Mediterranean, or economic relations – could have been more interesting and productive.

Such an approach would embed Britain’s relations with the colonels within the framework of the Cold War, as the subtitle of the book suggests it does, in a more efficacious way. The presentation of British policy could be seen in a better light and fruitful assumptions could be made through a comparison – of the basic topics mentioned above – with the respective policies of the USA, Soviet Union (the years between 1968 and 1973 repre-

sented the zenith of the Soviet naval presence in the Mediterranean), France or Germany. For example, the economic relations between the two countries and with Western Europe in general could be seen in reference to those with Eastern Europe. These relations, in turn, are perhaps connected with the tougher line taken by the Council of Europe in comparison to the stance of the US and Nato and thus the dilemmas of Britain. And again, the arms sales could be more clearly connected to the Cyprus crisis of 1967 and the US embargo that opened the Greek market to Western Europe. In this framework, the case of the British frigates could become clearer to the reader and conclusions could be drawn from this British failure, in contrast with Greek business with Germany or France.

In Nafpliotis’ book the main actor is the British side, the British embassy and the Foreign Office. That is why this study is useful also for (and perhaps mainly) those interested in British foreign policy during this period. The other side, that of the Greek colonels, is mostly examined through the British perspective. A more synthetic approach could also have added more information about other factors, such as the Greek political system – the party leaders and also parts of Greek resistance organisations. Apart from the references to the League for Democracy in Greece and the European Atlantic Committee on Greece, research on the links of other resistance groups, such as Democratic Defence (Demokratiki Amyna) or the Panhellenic Antidictatorship Front (PAM) and personalities such as Helen Vlachos and Amalia Fleming, with British networks would be very interesting. This is an untold story, for which only hints have been revealed, such a recent mention by Pericles Korovessis of a meeting with Chris Woodhouse in the presence of Vlachos and Fleming. How is the case of Greece’s expulsion from the Council of Europe connect-

ed with the choice of some Greek organisations (that evolved into powerful parties after the fall of the junta) to appeal to European institutions, networks and public opinion for support? Britain, being the shelter of many expatriated Greeks, seems to have been the basis of such developments and that should have left traces for researchers. The narrative in official diplomatic sources is one part of the story. The other (or others) is to be found in many, different places and times. Nafpliotis has provided, with his book, a firm footing from where new research can begin and interesting questions can be raised and answered.

As a final remark, a brief introduction to the deep-rooted British policy towards Greece could have helped the reader to understand the importance of the traditional relationship between the two countries.<sup>3</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 Sotiris Rizas, *Η ελληνική πολιτική μετά τον Εμφύλιο Πόλεμο: κοινοβουλευτισμός και δικτατορία* [Greek politics after the civil war: parliamentarism and dictatorship] (Athens: Kastaniotis, 2008) and *Οι Ηνωμένες Πολιτείες, η δικτατορία των συνταγματαρχών και το κυπριακό ζήτημα 1967–1974* [The United States, the colonels' dictatorship and the Cyprus issue, 1967–1974] (Athens: Patakis, 2002). Sotiris Walden, *Παράταροι εταίροι: Ελληνική δικτατορία, κομμουνιστικά καθεστώτα και Βαλκάνια, 1967–1974* [Unseemly partners: The Greek dictatorship, communist regimes and the Balkans, 1967–1974] (Athens, Polis, 2009). Kostis Kornetis, *Children of the Dictatorship. Student Resistance, Cultural Politics, and the “long 1960s” in Greece* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2013).
- 2 Robert Holland and Diana Markides, *The British and the Hellenes: Struggles for Mastery in the Eastern Mediterranean, 1850–1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). Procopis

Papastratis, *British Policy towards Greece during the Second World War, 1941–1944*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984. Heinz Richter, *British Intervention in Greece: From Varkiza to Civil War, February 1945 to August 1946* (London, Merlin Press, 1986).

3

See Holland and Markides, *British and Hellenes*.