

Historein

Vol 22, No 1 (2025)

Centre, Periphery and Back: European Historiographical Itineraries

Centre, Periphery and Back European Historiographical Itineraries



221 2025

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Review of Gioula Koutsopanagou, *The British Press and the Greek Crisis, 1943–1949: Orchestrating the Cold-War "Consensus" in Britain*

Loukianos Hassiotis

doi: [10.12681/historein.32259](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.32259)

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To cite this article:

Hassiotis, L. (2025). Review of Gioula Koutsopanagou, *The British Press and the Greek Crisis, 1943–1949: Orchestrating the Cold-War "Consensus" in Britain*. *Historein*, 22(1). <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.32259>

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22.1 2025

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ιστορειν

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Gioula Koutsopanagou

*The British Press and the Greek Crisis, 1943–1949:
Orchestrating the Cold-War “Consensus” in Britain*

London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. 375 pp.

Loukianos Hassiotis

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

British policy in Greece during the 1940s has been thoroughly discussed in the historiography since about the mid-1970s. Early works analysed the strategic significance of Greece in British strategic planning during and immediately after the Second World War, the contradiction between Britain’s short-term military priorities and long-term geopolitical interests, and the concern over American and Soviet commitments in Greece, or over the designs of the neighbouring Balkan “people’s republics”.¹ Other studies have turned their attention to Britain itself. They examine questions like the interaction of its foreign policy with domestic political affiliations, the ideological biases of the British political and diplomatic elites, the importance of the Greek Civil War in the formation of the British Cold War mindset and the attitudes of the press and of public opinion.² These approaches include Gioula Koutsopanagou’s book, which was published in 2020, although its original version in the form of a doctoral thesis was submitted several years earlier, in 1996.

The book aims to reveal the attitudes expressed in the British press towards Greece between 1943 and 1949, and the extent to which those attitudes were influenced by government policy. Koutsopanagou focuses on the role of the mass media in the implementation of British foreign policy during what she calls “the formative early Cold War years” (63), when the Foreign Office shaped its policies for the postwar world order, and when the British press contributed significantly to the debate surrounding these policy choices. It should be recalled here that the Second World War and the experiences of the “Home Front” and the Nazi occupation of Europe had unleashed a wave of social radicalisation both in Britain and on the continent, which expressed fresh expectations of a new and better world, demands for more social egalitarianism and democracy, and hopes of a new international order that would guarantee true peace and would put an end to power politics.³ Although the British political elites were not immune to such considerations, anticommunist sentiment among them, especially among military and diplomatic officials,

remained strong and continued to affect Britain's postwar strategy, even after the rise to power of the Labour Party in 1945. For a while, the new foreign minister, Ernest Bevin, sought to promote the positive national projection of a British-led "Third Force" independent of the USA and the USSR, emphasising the virtues of British social democracy, such as its progressive welfare legislation. This policy was intertwined with the new anticommunist propaganda policy supported by the Foreign Office and the newly-formed Information Research Department (IRD) but was eventually abandoned in favour of participation in the Atlantic Treaty in 1949.

This period coincides with the period of Greek civil strife culminating in the Greek Civil War, probably the first major confrontation of the Cold War, which was largely influenced by direct British involvement in the country, hence the author's focus on the Greek crisis and its reflection in British public opinion. As Koutsopanagou points out, the survey of British newspaper attitudes towards Greece from 1943 to 1949 demonstrates both their slide from wartime and early postwar optimism to the ideological and political mindset of the Cold War, as well as the British government's efforts to coax and coerce them into adopting a more critical line towards the Soviet Union and the role of the communist parties (18).

The first, introductory chapter traces the growing body of literature on the role of the media in the Cold War era and provides a general picture of the attitudes of British public opinion towards the British government's political strategies and policies. Chapters 2 and 3 discuss the development of the "Cold War consensus" through the government's efforts to create an apparatus that would keep news and commentary within certain bounds. Koutsopanagou comments that as the world began to divide into two hostile blocks, the IRD advocated the introduction of a new language that would "reconstruct axiomatic concepts in the direction of anti-communist propaganda", in order to "construct an entire ideological structure by putting it at the service of the anti-communist machinery, and dominate public discourse going forward" (62). Chapter 4 provides a very interesting panorama of the British press and its political and social affiliations during the 1940s, which is essential to an understanding of the press-politics nexus in relation to the British policy in Greece. The author elaborates the main topic of the book in chapters 5–8, which address the development of the Greek crisis from the outbreak of Greek political rivalries in 1943 to full civil war in 1946–1949. Two points need to be made concerning the period of the war (1943–1944), when the feeling of the "anti-fascist alliance" was still dominant in British public discourse. Firstly, the persistent government interference in the mass media, in order to downgrade the Greek communist-led resistance of EAM/ELAS and to highlight its open support for King George II, despite his bad reputation among both the resistance forces in Greece and the exiled Greek army in the Middle East. As early as July 1943, the Political Warfare Executive reacted to a mention of the EAM/ELAS in a BBC broadcast by imposing

controls and censorship and by dismissing staff members suspected of holding left-wing views. Secondly, the government control of press articles was by no means certain. Indeed, in October of the same year, the British ambassador to Greece, Reginald Leeper, irritated by what he called “a stream of EAM propaganda in the British press”, asked whether the Foreign Office could make an effort to stop it (95, 98).⁴

British intervention in the Greek political rivalries culminated in the “December Events” of 1944 (in British literature known as the “Battle of Athens”), which for a while provoked an unprecedented storm in the British press and public opinion. As Geoffrey Chandler noted long ago: “No episode, during or after the war, provoked a greater outburst of indignation in the British press and the British Parliament than that caused by the intervention of the British forces in Athens.”⁵ The issue has already been widely discussed in English and Greek historiography, yet Koutsopanagou in chapter 6 gives us useful insights regarding the government’s attempts to convince press correspondents, columnists and editors – both British and American – of the sincerity of its cause in Greece. The author thoroughly examines the factors that contributed to the change in the press’ attitude towards Churchill’s policy during the “Battle of Athens”, a change that signified a broader turning-point for Liberal and Labour newspapers and periodicals, which until then had criticised (sometimes harshly) British foreign policy, advocating closer cooperation with left-wing resistance forces in Europe and with the Soviet Union. However, as the final chapters indicate, this shift became more evident later, after the outbreak of the Greek Civil War and, indeed, after the Marshall Plan (1948), and culminated in the *Times*’ support for the signing of the Atlantic Pact. Koutsopanagou shows that the new Labour government neither substantially challenged Churchill’s policy in Greece, nor changed its policy of interference in the left-wing British press, which continued to talk about Britain’s responsibility for the Greek political crisis or worried that the “good name of Britain” would be sullied in the world’s eyes (231). The “Cold War consensus” was consolidated as international tensions increased, especially after the Marshall Plan, which firmly divided Europe and changed the attitudes of British public opinion towards the Soviet Union. This change can be clearly seen in the Labour press that began to regard the Greek crisis “not as a result of the country’s internal differences, but through the lens of the political and ideological antagonisms of the Cold War” (311).

Koutsopanagou argues that, despite the fact that British policy towards Greece failed to unite Greeks around a stable and moderate government and to prevent civil war, most newspapers were not unwilling to follow the Foreign Office’s guidance and advice on the issue. Even the criticism expressed by Liberal and Labour newspapers “never amounted to a clear and unequivocal condemnation of British foreign policy” (320). Still, according to the author, the British media consensus was more fabricated than spontaneous, being a product both of state interference, manipulation and coercion on the one hand, and the deterioration of international relations on the other.

Koutsopanagou’s research is based on articles in the main daily newspapers and

periodicals of the time, on memoirs or the personal archives of newspaper editors, leading journalists and foreign correspondents. It also makes good use of a broad, though not always up-to-date, bibliography. The author could of course expand the concept of “public opinion” beyond the press, and also examine other factors, such as trade union or collective resolutions, public manifestations, Mass Observation research, private correspondence and diaries, in order to reconstruct a wider picture of the attitudes of British society towards the official foreign policy. However, her book remains a valuable source not only for Britain’s intervention in Greece and its repercussions at home, as well as its early Cold War policy, but also for the history of the British mass media in general.

¹ John O. Iatrides, *Revolt in Athens: The Greek Communist “Second Round”, 1944–1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972); Phyllis Auty and Richard Clogg, eds., *British Policy Towards Wartime Resistance in Yugoslavia and Greece* (Oxford: Macmillan, 1975); Richard Clogg, *Anglo-Greek Attitudes: Studies in History* (Oxford: Macmillan, 2000); Lars Baerentzen, “British Strategy towards Greece in 1944,” in *British Policy in South-East Europe in the Second World War*, ed. Elizabeth Barker (London: Palgrave, 1978), 130–50; John Hondros, *Occupation and Resistance: The Greek Agony 1941–1944* (New York: Pella, 1983); Prokopis Papastratis, *British Policy Towards Greece During the Second World War 1941–1944* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Ole L. Smith, “The Memoirs and Reports of the British Liaison Officers in Greece, 1942–1944: Problems of Source Value,” *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora* 11, no. 3 (1984): 9–32; Basil Kondis, *Η αγγλοαμερικανική πολιτική και το ελληνικό πρόβλημα: 1945–1949* [Anglo-American politics and the Greek problem, 1945–1949] (Thessaloniki: Paratiritis, 1986); Hagen Fleischer, *Στέμμα και Σβάστικα: Η Ελλάδα της Κατοχής και της Αντίστασης, 1941–1944* [Crown and swastika: The Greece of the occupation and the resistance], 2 vols. (Athens: Papazisis, 1988, 1995); and Heinz Richter, *Η επέμβαση των Αγγλων στην Ελλάδα: Από την Βάρκιζα στον Εμφύλιο, Φεβρουάριος 1945–Αύγουστος 1946* [The British intervention in Greece: From Varkiza to the civil war, February 1945–August 1946], trans. Pericles Vallianos and Giorgos Giannaris (Athens: Estia, 1997).

² Thanassis D. Sfikas, *The British Labour Government and the Greek Civil War 1945–1949: The Imperialism of “Non-Intervention”* (Keele: Keele University Press, 1994), and also his *Το «χωλό άλογο». Οι διεθνείς συνθήκες της ελληνικής κρίσης, 1941–1949* [The “lame horse”: The international conditions of the Greek crisis, 1941–1949] (Athens: Vivliorama, 2007). For the attitude of British public opinion towards the official policy in Greece, see John Sakkas, *Britain and the Greek Civil War, 1944–1949: British Imperialism, Public Opinion and the Coming of the Cold War* (Mainz: Franz Philipp Rutzen Verlag, 2013); Loukianos Hassiotis, “British Public Opinion and Military Intervention in Greece, December 1944–January 1945: Stories from Mass-Observation,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 50, no. 2 (2015): 296–317, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022009414552870>, and also “Γεια σας, εγγλεζάκια!” *Βρετανοί στρατιώτες στην Ελλάδα (1941–1945)* [Welcome, English lads! British soldiers in Greece, 1941–1945] (Athens: Metaximio, 2019).

³ Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe’s Twentieth Century* (London: Penguin, 1999), 185–214.

⁴ See also Ioannis Stefanidis, *Substitute for Power: Wartime British Propaganda to the Balkans, 1939–1944* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 194.

⁵ Geoffrey Chandler, *The Divided Land: An Anglo-Greek Tragedy* (London: Macmillan, 1959), 26.