

Anti-Americanism and Anti-British Sentiment in Greece (1955–1959)

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Abstract

This study investigates the development of anti-American and anti-British sentiment in Greece during the period 1955–1959, within the framework of the Cyprus Question and the broader geopolitical context of the early Cold War. It contends that the activities of EOKA, in conjunction with British colonial policy on the island, constituted the principal catalysts for a marked shift in Greek public opinion. Drawing upon contemporary press accounts, archival evidence, and intelligence reports, the analysis demonstrates how public discourse articulated growing hostility toward Britain as a colonial power and toward the United States as a perceived supporter of British policy. Particular emphasis is placed on the role of mass mobilization and the press in shaping these attitudes. While such sentiments emerged predominantly at the societal level, the Greek government maintained its Western orientation, revealing a divergence between domestic opinion and official foreign policy.

Keywords: Cyprus, Greece, anti-British sentiment, Balkans, EOKA.

1. Introduction

The Cyprus Question—constituting the principal catalyst of anti-American and anti-British sentiment in Greece during the formative stage of the Cold War—dominated Greek public opinion from the early 1950s until the Turkish invasion of 1974. The inauguration of this new phase of a protracted diplomatic dispute may be located in the so-called “plebiscite for union” of January 1950, which in essence represented a mass petition. A total of 224,747 Greek Cypriots, amounting to 95.7% of the island’s population, endorsed the call for *enosis* (union with Greece). Although the results of this initiative were received with relative coolness in Athens, it nevertheless became apparent that British colonial authority was entering a period of acute instability (Christodoulidis, 2012).

Very soon, the political dimension of the struggle for union gave way to a military one. Pivotal in this transformation was the establishment of the National Organization of Cypriot Fighters (EOKA) shortly after the plebiscite. Its leader, retired Colonel Georgios Grivas, was a controversial figure who, during the Axis Occupation of Greece (1941–1944), had founded the anti-communist paramilitary organization “X.” In the ensuing armed struggle, the future “Digenis” was compelled to cooperate with Archbishop Makarios of Cyprus, a dynamic and ambitious forty-two-year-old cleric whose political aspirations extended well beyond ecclesiastical boundaries. As will be discussed in subsequent sections, the armed campaign launched under Grivas’s direction set in

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motion a series of developments that profoundly shaped the trajectory of the Cyprus issue (Novo, 2025).

It is worth underscoring that the turbulence of the 1950s was not confined to Cyprus alone. Alongside the plebiscite, the enthronement of Makarios III in 1950, and the activities of Greek Cypriot insurgents, equally consequential shifts were unfolding within the other political centers implicated in the Cyprus Question. In Athens, successive governments succeeded one another, while a younger generation of politicians, most notably Konstantinos Karamanlis, prepared to assume leadership from an older cohort—Nikolaos Plastiras passed away in 1953, while Alexandros Papagos died in 1955 (Veremis and Koliopoulos, 2006). In London, Winston Churchill's final administration dissolved on 7 April 1955, only days after EOKA initiated its first attacks. He was succeeded by Conservative leaders such as Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan (Bogdanor, 2023). Meanwhile, in Ankara, the government of Adnan Menderes entered a phase of escalating instability, culminating in the military coup of 1960 and the subsequent execution of the prime minister one year later (Ozdemir & Coskun, 2021).

Against the backdrop of this intricate and shifting political landscape, the present inquiry sets out primarily to analyze the various manifestations of anti-American and anti-British sentiment as articulated within Greek society during the years 1950–1959. Concurrently, it aims to address two interrelated questions: what were the deeper structural causes underpinning these attitudes, and in what ways did they condition Athens' diplomatic relations with the two principal Western powers?

2. Limitations of the research

The present inquiry is inevitably subject to several constraints that must be acknowledged at the outset. Foremost among these is the restricted accessibility of archival material, a limitation stemming from both institutional and political factors. The British Foreign Office has long displayed a marked reluctance to digitize or declassify documents pertaining to the Cyprus Question, resulting in a fragmented and uneven archival record. Similarly, the corresponding Greek services have imposed frequent bureaucratic obstacles, particularly regarding the consultation of postwar records. Such procedural barriers not only limit the range of primary materials available but also introduce a degree of asymmetry between British and Greek sources, which in turn complicates efforts to construct a balanced narrative.

To mitigate these constraints, the research adopts a compensatory strategy that emphasizes the triangulation of alternative sources. Chief among these are the declassified CIA archives, which offer valuable insights into the American perception of the Cyprus Question, as well as the contemporary press, whose reportage and editorial commentary provide an indispensable supplement to official documentation. Moreover, primary accounts such as the *Memoirs* of Georgios Grivas serve as critical substitutes for missing state records, offering first-hand testimony that—despite its inherent subjectivity—illuminates the motivations and internal dynamics of key actors (Grivas, 1961). Cross-referencing these sources with diplomatic correspondence and parliamentary debates helps to minimize the distortions that may arise from relying on personal or ideologically inflected narratives.

A further, and no less significant, restriction derives from the prohibition of the newspaper *Rizospastis* during the period under examination. As the central organ of the Communist Party of Greece (KKE), *Rizospastis* could have furnished valuable perspectives on the intersection of the Cyprus Question with broader ideological and geopolitical struggles of the Cold War. Its absence limits the researcher's ability to fully capture the spectrum of anti-American and anti-British sentiment within Greek political discourse, particularly as articulated by the Left. Although secondary references to KKE positions can be gleaned from official party publications

after the paper's reappearance and from later retrospectives (*Rizospastis*, 4 November 2016), the lack of contemporaneous primary material necessarily restricts the depth of analysis regarding left-wing interpretations of the conflict.

Finally, the enduring politicization of the Cyprus Question—even seventy years after the initiation of the EOKA campaign—poses an additional and more intangible obstacle. The ongoing “memory wars” in both Athens and Nicosia continue to shape the parameters of public debate and scholarly inquiry alike. Competing national narratives, often centered upon the contested figure of Georgios Grivas and the moral legacy of EOKA, have given rise to a polarized historiographical environment. This polarization has, in turn, constrained the production of dispassionate scholarship, as historians navigate between state-endorsed interpretations, partisan commemorative practices, and public expectations. The predominance within popular historiography of works of questionable academic rigor—frequently marked by overt political agendas or apologetic tendencies—further complicates the researcher's task (Athanasiadis, 2015). In this respect, the study must remain acutely aware of its own position within this contested terrain, striving for analytical balance while recognizing the limitations imposed by the historiographical and political context.

3. Review of the literature

Cold War–era anti-Americanism has attracted the sustained attention of a broad range of scholars. Some have concentrated on the resentment provoked by U.S. interventions in Latin America (McPherson, 2009; McPherson, 2006), while others have chosen to focus on European perceptions of American hegemony (Stephan, 2005; Stephan, 2004; Muller, 2010; Lacorne, Rupnik, and Toinet, 1990). A more comprehensive treatment of the subject was undertaken by Max Paul Friedman in his *Rethinking Anti-Americanism: The History of an Exceptional Concept in American Foreign Relations* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012). Similarly, the collective volume *With Us or Against Us: Studies in Global Anti-Americanism* (Palgrave Macmillan, London 2005), edited by Denis Lacorne and Tony Judt, sought to map the phenomenon in a global perspective. Yet in neither of these works is the Greek case—or, indeed, that of any Balkan state—systematically examined.

The sole exception to this general neglect of the Greek experience in the international literature may be found in the doctoral dissertation of Donald Munn, which investigates what the author terms the “birth of anti-Americanism” in Greece, situating it chronologically in the period of the Colonels' Dictatorship (1967–1974) (Munn, 1980). Nevertheless, as the present study will demonstrate, the roots of the phenomenon must be traced back several decades earlier, above all to the reactions of the Athenian populace to American policy on the Cyprus Question.

In the Greek-language literature, the treatment of anti-Americanism remains strikingly limited. Aside from the works of Ioannis Stefanidis (*In the Name of the Nation: Political Culture, Irredentism and Anti-Americanism in Postwar Greece, 1945–1967*, Epikentro, Thessaloniki 2010) and Zinovia Laliouti (*Anti-Americanism in Greece, 1947–1989*, Asini, Athens 2016), scattered references may be identified in the writings of Evanthis Hatzivassiliou on postwar international relations (Hatzivassiliou, 2005; Hatzivassiliou, 2009), as well as in Sotia Triantafyllou's study of European literary hostility toward the United States (Triantafyllou, 2018). It is also noteworthy that, with only rare exceptions, Greek authors tend to downplay the role of EOKA's campaign as a catalyst of anti-American sentiment in the 1950s, concentrating instead on the strictly diplomatic dimensions of the period.

Moreover, the existing works offer virtually no sustained analysis of the ways in which, for Greek society, anti-Americanism intersected with anti-British sentiment. Indeed, in the case

of the latter, no monograph exists at all, and opposition to British policy is often subsumed wholesale under the broad and diffuse rubric of anti-imperialism (Taber, 1965).

4. Analysis

The liberation of Athens from German occupation forces in October 1944 generated an atmosphere of euphoria among the Greek people. In this context, thousands of citizens flooded the streets of the capital, expressing not only their enthusiasm at the departure of the occupiers but also their gratitude toward the advancing Allied armies. The photographic archive of the Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation (ERT) even contains images of members of the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) carrying Greek, Soviet, British, and American flags (ERT Archive, Petros Poulidis' Collection, 0000005102/1.1.48.51; ERT Archive, Petros Poulidis' Collection, 0000005101/1.1.48.50). What, then, transpired in the intervening years that led, by 1955, to British symbols being set aflame in the very center of Athens?

If British—and later American—support for the government during the December events (Dekemvriana) and the Civil War had estranged the Greek Left from the two major Western powers, this was not necessarily true of those situated within the Center or the Right. Moreover, although this latter segment of the population was undoubtedly disillusioned by the failure to secure Northern Epirus for Greece (Kontis, 1994), such frustration alone was insufficient to turn them against the very states whose intervention had proved decisive in ensuring their prior ascendancy within the country's political arena.

The principal cause of the subsequent transformation in public opinion must therefore be sought on the island that dominates the eastern Mediterranean—Cyprus. There, the Greek population remained under British administration but persistently aspired to union with Greece. As already noted, a kind of plebiscite was organized in 1950, which deeply unsettled London. Only a few months later, Archbishop Makarios III, a political and religious leader of markedly radical inclinations, ascended to the archiepiscopal throne. It was largely through his initiatives that EOKA was created, an armed irredentist organization placed under the leadership of retired Colonel Georgios Grivas (Novo, 2025).

EOKA commenced operations in dramatic fashion on 1 April 1955. In the early hours of that day, a series of bombings and commando raids shook the principal cities of Cyprus. Immediately thereafter, Grivas's first proclamation was issued, the British authorities announced their initial countermeasures, and the Greek press reacted with enthusiasm (Grivas, 1961).

Among the most prominent and historically significant Greek newspapers of the period was *Empros*, owned by the Kalapothakis family. Although its influence in the 1950s no longer matched that of earlier decades, its prestige remained unrivaled, and thousands of readers continued to trust its reporting. On 2 April, *Empros*, relaying dispatches from the BBC, referred to what it described as the “first patriotic uprisings” in Cyprus. For the time being, however, the newspaper restricted itself to enumerating the results of the attacks, refraining from further commentary beyond the implicit message contained in its front-page headline.

The newspaper's stance was revealed more explicitly on 9 April, when it published on its front page a pivotal article by the Cypriot lawyer Savvas Loizidis, under the evocative title “On 1 April Began the Liberation Movement of the Cypriots.” From the outset, the author departed from the prevailing rhetoric, which portrayed the events merely as isolated bombings, and instead insisted that what was unfolding on the island was a struggle of far-reaching significance.

Loizidis wrote, among other things:

On the night of 31 March to 1 April, the first bombs exploded in the principal cities of Cyprus—Nicosia, Limassol, Larnaca, and Famagusta—against British targets.

Thus nostalgia, the dream, the longing for freedom began to transform into action directed toward its conquest. Neither the Greek people nor world public opinion was surprised by this development. It constitutes the natural progression of liberation struggles everywhere and always. This martyred course has been followed by all Greek communities in reclaiming their freedom. It is inevitable that the Cypriots, too, will return to the embrace of the Greek family—not as fortunate recipients of a gift of freedom, but as true Hellenes who will achieve it through their own struggle and sacrifice. (Empros, 2 April 1955)

He went on to launch a scathing attack against the British, charging them with disregarding both Greece's contribution to the Allies' earlier victory and the Cypriot people's right to self-determination. On these grounds, he concluded: "It was therefore natural and inevitable that such cynical and brutal British intransigence should drive the Cypriot people to their present liberation struggle" (*Ibid.*).

Although more carefully crafted and stylistically coherent, Loizidis's article nevertheless reflected almost entirely the spirit of Grivas's first proclamation. The irredentist rhetoric imbued with historical references, the denunciation of Britain's rule over Cyprus as illegitimate under international law, and the emphasis on the Cypriots' right to armed resistance were among the common features of both texts. Extending his argument further, however, the Cypriot lawyer offered a remarkably perceptive analysis, predicting the mass popular character that the EOKA struggle would ultimately assume.

The adoption of these views by *Empros* demonstrates that Grivas had, to some degree, succeeded in his aims from the very outset of his organization's campaign. An indicative measure of the impact of the ideas expressed in this article may be found in the fact that Loizidis was elected to the Greek Parliament in 1956 as a candidate of the National Radical Union (ERE).

In a similar vein, the majority of newspapers published in Athens and the provinces aligned themselves with this position, thereby reinforcing the mobilization of Greek public opinion in favor of the demands advanced by EOKA. It is also noteworthy that the Greek population at large appeared to have already formed the conviction that an extensive armed movement was imminent in Cyprus. Indeed, *Kathimerini*, a widely read newspaper under the ownership and editorial direction of the dynamic Eleni Vlachou, hastened from the very outset (2 April 1955) to emphasize that "enslaved Cyprus finds itself in a phase of insurrection," since, according to its editorial staff, the disturbances had erupted across the entirety of the island and engaged a substantial segment of its population (*Kathimerini*, 2 April 1955).

Whereas *Empros* and *Kathimerini* at the time expressed views broadly representative of the political Right—although the former was not organically tied to this camp—the stance of *Eleftheria* proved particularly significant. This relatively new newspaper, founded during the period of Occupation (1944) by Panos Kokkas, positioned itself from its inception within the political Center, voicing predominantly moderate anti-monarchist perspectives. In light of these origins, it might appear somewhat paradoxical that *Eleftheria* initially adopted a radical position with respect to EOKA's earliest operations.

More specifically, in early April 1955, *Eleftheria* articulated criticism directed both at the British authorities and at the political Left. With respect to the former, its editorial stance was particularly uncompromising, frequently invoking the prior failures of colonial forces to suppress peoples seeking self-determination. For instance, on 3 April 1955, an article entitled *The Great Voice* concluded with the following assertion:

And the time shall come when the hard-faced rulers of London, who through their cynicism have shattered all illusions of the Greeks, shall realize that they cannot hold Cyprus by force, just as they were unable to retain India, Burma, or Egypt. They shall then be compelled to grant her freedom and, in time, will be ashamed of

the disgraceful and contemptible acts they now commit, whether in the diplomatic or sovereign domain. For the demand for national liberty is irresistible. (Eleftheria, 3 April 1955).

From this excerpt—and indeed from the broader body of articles published in the newspaper throughout 1955—several observations may be drawn concerning the general stance of the Greek Center toward EOKA's struggle. Firstly, the political groups affiliated with this milieu interpreted the attacks of 1 April as the inception of an anti-colonial struggle with broader implications. Secondly, much like their colleagues at *Empros*, the contributors to *Eleftheria* employed a rhetoric that recalled the sacrifices of the Greeks during the Second World War, simultaneously alluding to the ingratitude of the Allies, and in particular the British. Finally, they underscored the right of the Cypriot people to determine their own future free of coercion imposed by the Great Powers.

Although these grievances were directed primarily against Britain, they nevertheless influenced public sentiment with regard to the leading Western superpower, the United States. Yet intelligence agencies appeared reluctant to acknowledge seriously the development of anti-Americanism in Greece. Indicatively, in June 1955, CIA officials contributing to the drafting of a program on the economic dimension of the country's defense policy stressed that: "Greece and Turkey regard the United States as the principal source of support in building military strength and economic development, goals which they identify as of the highest importance" (CIA, CIA-RDP63-00084A000100040006-6, 6 June 1955). A few months later, in September 1955, a report by the same agency not only emphasized the uniformly anti-communist orientation of Greek public opinion but also asserted that it was preoccupied exclusively with domestic concerns (CIA, CIA-RDP80B06076R004200110031-2, 23 September 1955).

Meanwhile, the Greek government under Konstantinos Karamanlis expressed acute concerns that both the operations of EOKA and the intensification of anti-British sentiment endangered the Western orientation of the country. Particularly vocal was the Minister of Foreign Affairs and close associate of the Prime Minister, Evangelos Tositsas Averoff, who did not conceal his indignation toward Grivas. For him, only the government possessed the authority to manage national issues such as the Cyprus Question, and no other actor should be allowed to impose constraints. More broadly, Athens found it difficult to conceal its dissatisfaction with the growing internationalization of the Cyprus issue, treating with suspicion any discourse that risked undermining its alliance commitments (Stefanidis, 2010).

The wave of anti-British and anti-American sentiment arguably reached its apex in the spring of 1956. Responsibility for this development lay primarily with the British government, which imprudently fell into EOKA's strategic trap: rather than decisively eliminating the Greek insurgents by leveraging its numerical superiority, it opted instead to implement a campaign of intimidation against the Greek Cypriot population. This course of action inevitably intensified the internationalization of the Cyprus Question, while simultaneously encouraging numerous volunteers to join Grivas's organization (Varnavas, 2004).

Within this context, one of the most controversial decisions undertaken by the British authorities was the imposition of the death penalty by hanging upon two EOKA members, Michalakis Karaolis and Andreas Demetriou. Almost immediately, a substantial segment of the Greek populace took to the streets, participating in massive demonstrations. These demonstrations, unsurprisingly, did not escape the attention of Washington. Commenting on developments in Greece, CIA officials noted in March 1956 the following:

Any further mass demonstration in Greece is likely to be directed against Turkey and the United States, as well as against Britain, particularly since communist agitators will probably attempt to give them a broader anti-Western character. The government's anger toward London and the necessity of maintaining [its]

popular support may perhaps impel it reluctantly to take measures to restrain the general public (CIA, CIA-RDP79T00975A002400460001-4, 11 March 1956).

The tension soon reached a climax. On 9 May 1956, one day prior to the scheduled execution of the two EOKA members, thousands of Athenians assembled in Omonia Square. Prominent among their banners and chants were slogans directed against the “indifferent”—as they termed them—United States, and, of course, against Britain. From this central location in the capital, demonstrators attempted to march toward the British Embassy in Kolonaki but were blocked by police forces. Some, however, reached the vicinity of the American intelligence offices, where they inflicted extensive damage. In response, police opened fire on the crowd, resulting in the deaths of three individuals (*Eleftheria*, 10 May 1956).

On the following day, 10 May 1956, all of Greece mourned the loss not only of Karaolis and Demetriou but also of the three demonstrators and a policeman. This situation, as might be expected, further inflamed public opinion, with many accusing the Karamanlis government of passivity toward London. As anti-British and anti-American sentiment intensified, Averoff conceded in October 1957, from the parliamentary rostrum, that the conduct of foreign policy ought to be harmonized with the prevailing domestic climate within the country (Stefanidis, 2010).

Yet despite attempts at conciliation, both the conduct of the police during the demonstration of 9 May 1956 and, more broadly, the Karamanlis government’s handling of the Cypriot struggle continued to attract criticism. Characteristically, commenting on Anglo-American differences of opinion regarding the Oman Question, Thanasis Papakonstantinou wrote caustically in *Eleftheria*:

The dramatic events in Oman are weighty and most revealing. For, first, they demonstrate once more that the methods of the English colonialists inevitably lead to international crises and bloody confrontations. And second, they reveal that the United States, so sensitive to the susceptibilities of its ‘ally England’ when it comes to the Cyprus Question and to a servile Greece, forgets its delicacy when its own interests are at stake, and does not hesitate to enter into open conflict with its sinful ally for the sake of oil (*Eleftheria*, 24 July 1957).

Beyond its critique of the Greek government, such commentary captured, albeit indirectly, the view held by a large portion of the Greek population regarding the posture of the two great Western powers. In relation to Britain, the prevailing image among Greeks was that of a ruthless colonial power. Conversely, the United States was charged with exhibiting a biased alignment in favor of London and with displaying a complete unwillingness to uphold the principles of international law. This latter view was embraced even by much of the press sympathetic to the political Right, most notably by *Kathimerini* (Laliouti, 2016).

The Zurich–London Agreement (February 1959), a triumph of pragmatism and of the desire of the parties involved to reach a compromise, ultimately brought EOKA’s campaign to an end. It did not, however, signify the simultaneous cessation of anti-British and anti-American sentiment. The intensity of this feeling was vividly encapsulated in a brief exchange between Grivas and the British editor of the Cypriot newspaper *Times of Cyprus*, shortly before the EOKA leader’s departure from the island. Seizing the opportunity, Digenis did not fail to reproach the British once more, asserting that during the Second World War they “did not fight (...) for the freedom of peoples, but in order to hold them in bondage and oppress them” (Grivas, 1961).

5. Conclusions

The emergence of an anti-British and anti-American current in Greece during the period 1955–1959 demonstrated, above all, that the Western bloc was not entirely monolithic. It

was, after all, unprecedented for Greek insurgents—such as those of EOKA—to engage in direct action against states that had traditionally been regarded as Greece’s allies. This development appeared all the more paradoxical given that Athens had openly aligned itself with the anti-Soviet camp, had been materially supported by the United States during the Civil War, and owed its liberation in 1944 to the advance of the Allied forces. The Cyprus Question thus placed severe strains upon Greek society, turning it against both London and Washington.

What, however, were the deeper causes of this anti-British and anti-American sentiment? The answer is to be sought primarily in the press clippings of the period, as well as in the slogans voiced by demonstrators. According to these sources, both major Western powers pursued a unilateral and inflexible policy, one that disregarded the right of peoples to self-determination as well as the very international norms that these same powers had once proclaimed. Such a stance precipitated the radicalization of many Greeks, who in numerous instances expressed their opposition through violent means.

Finally, it is worth underscoring that negative attitudes toward the United States and Britain were in large measure a phenomenon “from below.” That is, the Greek government itself sought desperately to reach a compromise on the Cyprus Question while simultaneously striving for closer alignment with Washington. Consequently, Athens’ diplomatic relations with the two leading Western powers remained largely intact. This reality, however, inevitably diminished the popularity of Karamanlis and his associates on the domestic front.

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