

Military Recruitment and Selection in a British Colony: The Cyprus Regiment 1939–1944*

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Between 1939 and 1945, several thousand Greek and Turkish Cypriots enlisted and served in the Cyprus Regiment, a colonial regiment of the British Army.

Using archival material, this paper aims to examine the parameters set by the colonial authorities for the recruitment and selection of the personnel (Cypriot and other).

Seen in this context, the selection of personnel for the regiment offers us an interesting vantage point from which to explore the relationship between the British authorities and their Cypriot subjects during the watershed years of the Second World War.

Introduction

In the course of the Second World War, the inhabitants of the island of Cyprus (a British Crown Colony since 1925) joined assorted units of the British armed forces formed on the island; eventually these diverse army units (some formed in the very first days of the war) were amalgamated into the Cyprus Regiment.

The Cyprus Regiment was one of the numerous colonial regiments formed during the Second World War. Along with its sister formation, the Cyprus Volunteer Force (CVF),¹ it comprises the bulk² of Cypriots who fought during the Second

* This article is part of a larger project, currently under development. A note on sources: the Cyprus Republic State Archive (SA) is still in a sorry state; it is understaffed, a number of files are not available and despite efforts to supplement the sources from the London Public Record Office (now National Archives) material on the Cyprus Regiment still has considerable gaps.

¹ The CVF was initially a local force, similar to the Home Guard in the UK. Beginning in 1942, many of its members transferred to the Cyprus Regiment and served outside Cyprus. See SA 1584/39 (1) "Recruitment of Cypriots, reports by Chief Recruiting Officer", assorted reports.

² There is, however, a sizeable contingent of Cypriots in other British, US and Australian Forces; some Cypriots also joined the RAF and Royal Navy.

World War. The peculiarity of the unit was that it consisted primarily of individuals belonging to two ethnic groups whose motherlands had adopted radically different attitudes. Greece, firmly in the British orbit, was attacked by Fascist Italy in October 1940 and by Nazi Germany in April 1941. Turkey on the other hand remained neutral until the last phases of the war; for most of its duration it was flirting with both camps, who vied for its alliance. Yet, throughout the war, a British Army unit composed of Greeks and Turks (as well as a few Armenians and others) fought on many fronts (France, Ethiopia, Greece, Middle East, Italy), at times with distinction.

This article aims to examine other ranks recruitment and officer selection for the Cyprus Regiment, placing the process in the context of the struggle between the wartime contingencies of the metropolis (fighting a world struggle) and the attitudes of the British administration in the colony of Cyprus. The latter appeared torn between the short term need to play its part in the war effort and its genuine fears and concerns, as well as its perception of the long term interests of the Colony (as seen from the British angle) and the priorities of the colonial lobby in the metropolis.

Formation

Preparations to recruit Cypriots for armed units were made shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War. As early as 19 August a plan to recruit some 100 men in Cyprus was discussed; while on 29 August 1939 authority was granted to the British Forces in Egypt “to enlist up to 500 Cypriot drivers for general service in R.A.S.C. Cyprus section” in anticipation of mobilisation and war.³ However it was after the outbreak of war that the plans to raise “local native colonial forces”⁴ in Cyprus were put into effect.

On 2 September 1939, only a day before the official declaration of war, Major W. E. C. Davidson-Houston of the Royal Berkshire Regiment was appointed Chief Recruiting Officer for Cyprus; his instructions were issued by the Jerusalem military HQ.⁵ Major Davidson-Houston arrived in Cyprus on 4 September 1939 and immediately reported to the O.C. Troops in Cyprus and to the Governor “for instructions regarding local policy”⁶.

The scope of recruitment was initially modest: on 6 September 1939, the authorities took steps to prepare for “the enlistment of certain Cypriots to supplement the garrison”⁷. The first contingents were modest (initially a few hundred men were to be recruited) but the numbers increased gradually following the developing scale

³ See SA 1653/39/1 “RASC Cyprus Section, Raising of in Cyprus” SECRET HIGH GRADE CIPHER Tel. No. 56423 TROOPERS to EGYPFORCE. The same telegram was sent to the Governor of Cyprus on 31 August 1939 as tel. No. 140 SECRET.

⁴ The phrase is from the War Office *General Return of the Strength of the British Army*, (various dates, 1939–1940).

⁵ “Enlistment of Cypriots into the British Army” in SA 1653/39/1.

⁶ SA 1653/39/1, Report no. 1, Ref. C.R./PAL/15233/AQ dated 2.9.39.

⁷ See SA 1132/39 “Enlistment of Cypriots to supplement the garrison”.

of the wartime emergency and the mushrooming manpower needs of the British Army. Beginning with 54 men in October 1939, the Cyprus Regiment reached 11,749 enlisted men by the end of the war, in units comprising RASC motor transport, Pack Transport (muleteers), Pioneers (labour contingents), Inland Water Transport Companies and other auxiliary units.⁸

From careful selection to mass recruitment

In the early days of the units' formation, the process of recruitment was very careful, with several layers of screening of the applicants. Applicants were instructed to register at police stations in the districts where they lived; subsequently, their record was checked by the police and they were then sent for a medical examination by the district health officer. It was only after they had successfully cleared all the previous hurdles that they were sent to the Recruiting Office in either Nicosia or Polemi-dhia (the main training camp, in the district of Limassol) to be officially attested.

The vetting process weeded out the undesirable applicants. There were a number of categories that could put a person in this group. A criminal record (initially for any offence) would stop cold the prospective military career of an applicant; the same applied to agitators and persons who had been deported; however communists were the least desirable, followed by nationalists: in March 1941, the Colonial Secretary felt he had to minute that "Our enlistments now include an excellent potential recruit, who has served his sentence for participation in the riots culminating in the burning of Govt. House some years ago!"⁹

Even when the recruiting standards were relaxed in March 1941, registered communists were to be refused enlistment, alongside persons with more than one conviction for theft or "Unnatural Offences" (and persons with more than three convictions for gambling). It is interesting to note that single offences for malicious injury to property, theft, coinage and "unnatural offences", knife carrying, murder, attempted murder, wounding, and even rape did not disbar applicants, while drunkenness became an obstacle only if applicants had more than six convictions.¹⁰

While the system seems to have worked reasonably well in the early days of recruitment, when offer and demand were unevenly matched in favour of demand, by January 1941 this over cautious procedure had become problematic, particularly when there was a need to expand the force or (after May 1941) when applicants became scarce.

The statistical data compiled reveals how carefully recruitment proceeded. By 4 January 1941, the recruiting authorities had interviewed 15,178 men to enlist 6,000; 9,178 men were rejected, of which 4,022 were rejected on medical grounds and

⁸ See "The Cyprus Regiment 1939–1950", *Cyprus Review*, March 1950.

⁹ SA 1584/1939/1, minute dated 3.3.41.

¹⁰ See SA 1537/39/W, "HM's Forces, Recruitment for", "Relaxed Criminal Standards", cover note dated 3 March 1941.

5,156 “for other causes”. By March 1944, it was estimated that between 1,600 and 2,000 men rejected on medical grounds had been ill with trachoma, a disease that could be completely cured.¹¹

The high ratio of rejections appears to have worried the Governor, as well as the recruiting authorities at large. On 27 February 1941, the Governor wrote to the Colonial Secretary asking for the reviewing of the applications of the 5,000-odd men rejected on grounds other than medical and remarked pointedly,

I suggest that the recruiting staff should now be less desirous of getting a regiment of priests (as the local people called it).¹²

Moreover, the military appeared puzzled as to why such a large number of potential recruits were rejected. On 3 March 1941, the Garrison Adjutant wrote to the Commissioner of Police:

1. It is not known how strictly the provision “a known bad character” or “a person with a serious crime record” have been interpreted before the issue of Identity Cards R.U2 to applicants for enlistment to the Cyprus Regiment.

From our records, 5,200 potential recruits have been rejected for reasons other than medical, and these must include a large number of rejections for the reasons quoted above.

2. [...] It is however, thought that perhaps a certain number of excellent potential recruits may have been refused identity cards for serious offence, but committed on the spur of the moment.¹³

The result was a relaxation of standards, as regards offences. From March 1941, one conviction of theft or “unnatural offence”, wounding, malicious injury, murder or attempted murder, was not to be an obstacle to recruitment. The same applied to rape or coinage offences (any number), knife carrying, six convictions for drunkenness, or three for gambling, or even a serious criminal record, provided no further offence had been committed for two years. Registered communists were still not eligible to join.¹⁴ Only in the summer of 1943 did political affiliation stop being an obstacle, when AKEL (Ανορθωτικό Κόμμα Εργαζόμενου Λαού) urged its members to enlist, causing the number of new recruits to rise from 43 in May 1943 to 372 in June.¹⁵

Despite the efforts of the authorities and a relaxation of the recruiting (as well as the criminal) standards in March 1941, the rejection ratio continued to be high: it

¹¹ SA 1584/39/1, HQ Troops Cyprus – Secret, 28 February 1941. Recruits were considered medically unfit if they suffered from trachoma, hernia, V.D., serious varicose veins or serious cardiac lesions or showed obvious unfitness; see SA 1537/39/W. For the trachoma patients’ estimate see SA 1537/39/W, letter from the Commander of the Polymedia [Polemichia] training depot to HQ, 25 Corps, 10 March 1944.

¹² SA 1584/1939/1.

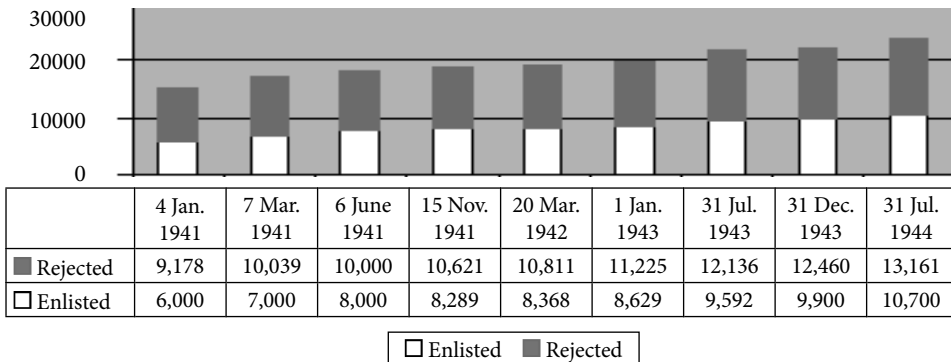
¹³ SA 1584/39/1, “Recruiting, The Cyprus Regiment, 3.3.41 TC1187/A, The Garrison adjutant to the Commissioner of Police, Cyprus”.

¹⁴ SA 1537/1939/W, “Relaxed Criminal Standards”.

¹⁵ SA 1584/39/1, Report 171, S/CY/42/177, 5 August 1943.

was estimated that by March 1942, over 56.4% of the 19,179 persons who had applied since the beginning of recruitment had been rejected.¹⁶ The rejection ratio continued to be high: by July 1944, 55.15% of the 23,861 applicants had been rejected.

Enlistments and Rejections for the Cyprus Regiment, 1941–1944



Source: SA 1584/39 (1) Recruitment of Cypriots, reports by Chief Recruiting Officer; SA 1584/39 (2) Recruitment of Cypriots. Reports by Chief Recruiting Officer. No figures are available after July 1944.

A further consideration for the authorities was how to keep the ethnic balance in the Cyprus Regiment. Available evidence indicates that even before the first Cypriot unit was formed, the British authorities had decided to replicate within it the ethnic balance of the island's population, at least as far as the two largest ethnic groups were concerned. On 14 September 1939, barely two weeks into the war, Major Davidson-Houston, the first recruitment officer appointed to raise forces in Cyprus, stated in his report that "a proportion of Turks will be taken as this is most necessary from the point of view of local policy".¹⁷

At least in the early days of recruiting, the authorities appear to have bent the rules to achieve the desired ethnic mix. On 6 October 1939, reporting after the first batch of recruits had been sent to Egypt for training, Davidson-Houston wrote: "A slightly reduced educational standard was accepted in the case of Turkish Cypriots and miners. It is essential from the point of view of local policy that the Turkish Cypriots [are] included".¹⁸ Throughout the war, the recruiting reports carefully monitor the ethnic composition of the regiment; it remained almost constant, at an approximate ratio of around 79% Cypriot Greeks to around 20% Cypriot Turks. It is not clear at this stage if this was a result of specific efforts on the part of the

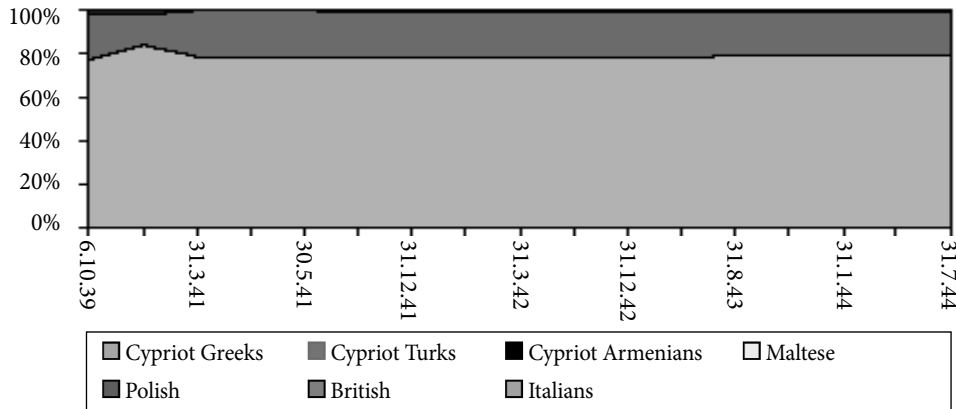
¹⁶ SA 1584/39/1, Report 133, 20 March 1942.

¹⁷ SA 1653/39/1, Report no. 2, 14th September 1939, para. 2(a). The wording indicates that this might have been a request originating from the Governor.

¹⁸ SA 1653/39/1, Report no. 5, 6th October 1939, para. 1: "General Policy". The same paragraph refers to labour unrest due to the partial closing of the mines and the Governor's wish that "all miners possible" would be recruited for the army.

recruiting staff or of the circumstances prevailing in wartime Cyprus that were affecting the general population.

Ethnic Composition of the Cyprus Regiment, 1939–1944



The numbers of Maltese, Polish, British and Italian recruits were so small, as is shown in the table below, that they are not visible on the above figure.

Ethnicity Date	Cypriot Greek	Cypriot Turk	Cypriot Armenian	Maltese	Polish	British	Italian	Total enlisted
6.10.39	42	11	1					54
17.11.39	211	34	5					250
31.3.1941	5,970	1,599	17					7,586
30.4.1941	6,190	1,666	19					7,857
30.5.1941	6,283	1,681	22	1				7,987
31.10.1941	6,504	1,739	29	1	1			8,274
31.12.1941	6,550	1,746	31	1	1	1		8,330
28.2.1942	6,578	1,754	32	1	1	1		8,367
31.3.1942	6,580	1,755	32	1	1	1		8,370
30.4.1942	6,585	1,757	32	1	1	1		8,377
31.12.1942	6,784	1,816	34	1	1	1		8,637
30.6.1943	7,154	1,942	35	1	1	1		9,134
31.8.1943	7,689	1,964	37	1	1	2		9,624
31.10.43	7,826	1,983	37	1	1	3		9,851
31.1.1944	7,967	1,999	37	1	1	3		10,008
30.4.1944	8,194	2,065	39	1	1	1		10,303
31.7.1944	8,510	2,121	41	1	1	3	1	10,679

Sources: SA 1653 / 1939 / 1 RASC – Cyprus section, Reports No. 5 to 15; SA 294/39 Muleteers (for Service in France); SA 1584/39 (1) Recruitment of Cypriots, reports by Chief Recruiting Officer, Reports No. 72 to 171; SA 1584/39 (2) Recruitment of Cypriots. Reports by Chief Recruiting Officer, Reports No. 172 to 176.

Beyond Greeks and Turks, the other (remotely) sizeable contingent in the ranks were the Armenians: one Armenian was present in the very first batch of recruits in October 1939, the number reaching a total of 41 in July 1944. Thus, except in

the very beginning (in October 1939, when the one enlisted Armenian in 41 men made up approximately 2% of the total), the overall percentage of Cypriot Armenians was very small. For statistical purposes the recruiting authorities seem to have included with the Greek Cypriots the Maronites, whose number also appears to have been rather small.¹⁹

Officer selection

The original guidelines stated that “Officers and the majority of Warrant Officers and Non-Commissioned Officers will be British to begin with, but it is possible that, with your concurrence, some Cypriot Non-Commissioned Officers may be recruited from the Cyprus Police Force”.²⁰ Eventually a considerable number of Cypriots reached Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) status (either recruited from the Cyprus Police Force or from the general population), serving alongside the British NCOs.²¹

Thus the Commanding Officer and the majority of the officers were initially British, either seconded or transferred from other regiments or locally recruited. Given that close to 80% of other ranks were Greek, Britons who were living in Cyprus (and were thought to know the “mentality” of the Cypriots) and Britons with knowledge of Greek were considered particularly suitable.²²

However, in October 1939, the British Armed Forces announced that all British subjects from the colonies (including persons “not of pure European descent”) would be considered eligible both for voluntary enlistment and for consideration for emergency commissions.²³ Soon Cypriots (Greek and Turkish) began to apply for commissions.

Even more than with “other ranks”, officer selection brings out in bold relief both the social structure of the island and the fears and concerns of the British

¹⁹ See SA 1584/39/1, Reports no. 87, 88, 116, 117, 127, 134, 137, 141, 137, 141, 170, 171, 172, 173, 174, 175, 176, 1/45. The total number of Armenians in Cyprus according to the 1946 Census was 3,686 (or “3,962 in their widest definition”); see *Cyprus, Census of Population and Agriculture, 1946 report*, Nicosia, 1949, p. 11. See SA 1584/39/1, minutes for report no. 87, dated 5.5.[41].

²⁰ SA 294/39 “Muleteers for Service in France”, SECRET from Malcolm Macdonald to W. D. Battershill, 19 August 1939. See also SA 575/40 “Members of Cyprus Police released for service with the Army”.

²¹ For example, Charles C. Stadden (1919–2002), was a British NCO in the Cyprus Regiment; see <http://www.stadden.homecall.co.uk/CC%20Stadden.htm>

²² For the applications of British residents in Cyprus see SA 1272/39/1 “National Service, Offers to Join H.M. Forces. Applications for Commissions”. It appears that the Cyprus Regiment included in its ranks a number of officers who appear to have been more or less nominally attached to it. Among them was Lt. “Dick” Jones, an intelligence operative, as well as Major Victor (Mike) Rallis, a member of the Rallis family, a UK resident who died in Egypt in August 1944. For Jones see http://www.geocities.com/schlosscoldiz/town_castle_8.html which refers to Le Vernay, Alec, *Without Drums or Trumpets*, London (Sphere Books), 1990; for Rallis see http://www.christopherlong.co.uk/ralligen1/fh01_022.html

²³ SA 1419/39, Confidential Telegram Circular No. 98, Secretary of State for War to Governor of Cyprus, dated 18.10.39.

administration. The vetting process for officers was even more careful than was the case with other ranks. Aspiring applicants had to pass through a rigorous selection process. Educational qualifications were checked, applicants were interviewed by the local Commissioner, their police records were checked and (if the applicants were in public service) their employer was asked for a reference; in some cases the applicants themselves either supplied references or mentioned local notables (Sir John Cakoyiannis among them) who might vouch for them. The question of whether applicants would “fit to the mess”, or were physically and morally strong were among the issues considered. The final word was left to the Governor; however, when no objection was raised by other sources, but the applicant did not receive favourable comments, often the Governor left the decision to the military authorities.

Once all these hurdles had been overcome, applicants were referred to the military authorities, who had the final say on their suitability. A number of applicants were commissioned from the ranks; even in these cases, a number of checks were once again made by the District Commissioner, the police and the military authorities.²⁴

The remarks attached in the relevant files are quite revealing: applicant N. T. (an employee of the Medical Services) was considered better suited as a “non-commissioned officer”, while “until recently [he] has given trouble [...] in view of his apparent inability to handle the public presenting themselves at dispensaries where he was doing duty and his disinterestedness in his duties in general”. The letter of reference concluded that “the Army will do him good”.²⁵

In another case an applicant, C. I., was rejected as the Commissioner for Nicosia considered him unsuitable as “his education, standard of life, appearance and general bearing impressed me unfavourably”.²⁶

Political affiliation and sympathies was also checked. When C. J. S. applied for a commission, the reply by the Commissioner for Nicosia and Kyrenia to the Colonial Secretary was quite clear:

This person is quite unsuitable to receive a commission in the Cyprus Regiment. He is a well known communist and is unemployed. During last year he lived at Kalavassos and it was due to his influence that a lot of trouble took place at the mines. This man has lived in London for a while but was repatriated to Cyprus. He was also turned out of Greece for political reasons.²⁷

²⁴ SA 1584/39/2, Report 175, S/CF/42/180, 22 June 1944.

²⁵ SA 1272/39/2 “National Service, Offers to Join H.M. Forces. Applications for Commissions”. N. T. applied for a commission on 5.7.40 and the correspondence continued until 15.7.40.

²⁶ C. I. applied on 13.1.41, was originally (18.1.41) considered suitable and was recommended for a commission on 29.1.41. However, the Commissioner for Nicosia judged him unsuitable (7.2.41) on the basis of an interview, and upon request (12.2.41) provided the above characterisation on 14.2.41. See SA 1272/39/2.

²⁷ SA 1272/39/2. C. J. S. applied for a commission on 1.7.40; the letter to the Colonial Secretary is dated 10.7.40 and concludes: “Further details concerning this person can be found in C.S.M.P. 310880 particularly at Red 14”. It has not been possible to trace the above file reference in the State Archive in Cyprus.

Even in early 1943, long after the USSR had joined the fight against Fascism, communist sympathies appeared to be a problem for the colonial authorities. On 29.1.43, asked for his opinion on G. M., another prospective officer, the Commissioner for Limassol wrote:

He is a member of the AKEL but I do not think that need be held against him. In the army he will have no opportunity to mix himself in politics and he will be pretty closely watched. I heard nothing against him but I understand from Polemidhia where he is at present [...] that his general standard of education is not probably such as to offer him a good chance of passing his training.²⁸

On the contrary, when K. K. applied on 10.12.40, the reply of the District Commissioner of Larnaca was quite favourable: not only was he employed as a schoolmaster in the American Academy, he also spoke excellent English, “and has always been a supporter of England and entirely outside local politics”.²⁹

Social skills were also considered important. In the case of D. S., on 7.4.43 the Commissioner for Limassol wrote:

[he] appears to be a reasonably vigorous and intelligent young man. The police say that nothing is known against him, and in spite of the fact that he came into my office with his hands in his pockets and said “Cheerio” as he walked out, he is the most suitable candidate for a commission that I have seen for some time.³⁰

On occasion, the authorities seem to have faced quite thorny problems, such as that of K. Ky. According to the Commissioner for Limassol (29.1.43), K. Ky. was

a graduate of the Limassol Lyceum, but is unfortunately married to a woman who was formerly a common prostitute. He also is undergoing training in Polemidhia. I understand from his officers that he is the most promising of the three [candidates]. Nothing is known against him.³¹

On 6.2.43, H. G. Richards, Acting Colonial Secretary noted again that there was “nothing known to the detriment of K. Ky.” but that he was “not considered likely to possess the requisite strength of character to make a suitable officer”.³²

A number of Cypriot doctors also enlisted and applied for commissions. Since they were well-known and respected members of the community, their applications received quick consideration and, given that their services were considered necessary, they were accepted into the ranks and commissioned. Cases such as this were Dr Vias Michael Skoufarides who joined the RAMC (Royal Army Medical

²⁸ G. M. was, however, judged suitable for training as an officer on 7.4.43. SA 1272/39/3 “National Service, Offers to Join H.M. Forces. Applications for Commissions”.

²⁹ K. K. applied 10.12.40. In his reply (19.12.40) the Commissioner for Larnaca added that the applicant spoke “excellent English” (SA 1272/39/2).

³⁰ D. S. applied for a commission on 15.3.43, information about him was requested on 19.3.43 and the reply of the Commissioner was received on 7.4.43. On 9.4.43, the Governor wrote that D. S. “might well prove suitable for commissioned rank in the C[yprus] R[egiment]” (SA 1272/39/3).

³¹ See SA 1272/39/3.

³² See SA 1272/39/3.

Service) in June 1940, and the dentist J. G. Marcellos who was commissioned in the Army Dental Corps in May 1940.³³

Conclusions

The above observations go some way towards illustrating a number of general points. Maintaining an ethnic balance in the regiment was important for the British. It is also clear that the authorities of the Colony of Cyprus were very careful (even wary) of recruiting its subjects into an armed force, even when faced with a major worldwide crisis, a crisis that caused significant stress to the metropolis. This general wariness became even more marked when dealing with politicised individuals (mainly but not exclusively communists) despite the fact that by June 1941 Soviet Russia (traditionally the homeland of international communism) was an ally of Great Britain. It is also significant that political worries seem to have been directed towards the Greek element of the population.

Examination of recruitment also gives us a snapshot of the medical and legal status that prevailed for a significant part of the male population of Cyprus. In January 1941, after more than 60 years of British rule in Cyprus, over 4,000 men of the 20 to 35 age group had been judged unfit for military service on medical grounds; over 5,000 more had either been convicted or were considered undesirable: part of the population of Cyprus seems to have been in rather bad health and certainly on bad terms with the law. Cyprus, far from being a version of a rural, near-eastern Arcadia, was a colony with an impoverished population, for which the financial aspects of military service (and possibly the medical cover offered by the military) were as important as the ideological ones.

On the other hand, officer selection, dealing as it does with a much smaller group, largely part of the higher and/or better educated strata of society, points out more markedly the political worries of the British administration, as well as the class aspect of selection.

What surprises is the resilience of both colonial policy and colonial and social habits: even when faced with the crisis of a world war, the Government of the Colony of Cyprus largely attempted to maintain its pre-war position towards its subjects.

All this puts the British rule under a rather unfavourable light, at least as regards the image of Britain as the benevolent ruler of Cyprus that the colonial administration was trying to project. In any event, as far as the recruits were concerned, their period of service would give them a new view of the world, it would politicise many more of them and it would perhaps give them a new confidence; all these would shape their attitudes in the post-war world of the 1940s and 1950s.

³³ See SA 1337/39 "Offers from Cypriots and others to join H.M. Forces". Skoufarides, District Surgeon of Pano Panayia in June 1940, was released from Government service on 19.6.40 and became a Medical Practitioner with the Army on the same date. He received his commission initially as a Lieutenant and participated in recruitment tours in Cyprus (see eg. SA 1584/39/1, Report no. 75, 7 Feb. 1941). Dr Zardis and Dr A. P. Mikellides applied for commissions in October 1940 and were subsequently commissioned (SA 1272/39/2).