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# Three Times to Greece? — New Zealand State Attitudes and Public Projection about Greek Politics during the 1940s

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During the 1940s the Pacific Dominion of New Zealand either sent or was faced with the possibility of despatching army formations to Greece no less than three times. The specific contexts were very different. However, it was the same Labour government of Peter Fraser in every instance. The military was under the leadership of Lieutenant General Bernard Freyberg for two of them. Fraser and Freyberg were dominant personalities in directing the war effort. This essay uses the trigger of actual/possible military expedition as a vehicle to illustrate changing attitudes of the Dominion's military-political leadership to the complexity of Greek politics. The period under examination was also a time when the New Zealand state elite and wider community were first making expressions about a "special relationship" (MFAT, "Greece") between the Dominion and the Mediterranean country.

## **New Zealand and Greece**

The proponents of the special relationship argue that it was one forged in war — specifically, the battles of early 1941. The other major underpinning was the recognition of assistance given by Greek/Cretan civilians to New Zealand soldiers who were evading capture or had escaped the enemy. This sense of bonding may bring with it particular dynamics throughout New Zealand society. Unsurprisingly, the state sought to build a comfortable memory of the relationship, i.e. it sought to sanitise and depoliticise. However, New Zealand did not always hide only what was detrimental to a positive imagining of the Dominion nation state. As the following shows, it also made a sacrifice. This paper is therefore primarily a contribution to the study of the development of New Zealand independence in external affairs as well as a general observation on state-authored official histories.

## Relevance

The geographic location of this journal and its respective scholarly Association naturally generate a gravitational pull for the pertinence of the New Zealand-Greek focus. But the specificity can also be used as a starting point for a number of pathways for future wider exercises. Comparative studies between Dominion members of the Commonwealth over the same Greek landscape, and lens as this paper uses, can possibly provide rich opportunities for the Modern Greek Studies Academy and those who engage with it (students, members of the public and other academic disciplines). During the Athens *Dekemvriana*<sup>1</sup> fighting of 1944, for example, Australian and New Zealand governments were exchanging information which included their concern that their respective troops were involved (Minister External Affairs Canberra to Minister External Affairs Wellington, 22 December 1944. ANZ: R18873894). Canada went directly to London authorities to ensure “Canadian troops would not serve in Greece without their government’s consent” (Stacey, 1970:230). Regardless of whether or not there were any South African troops there, General Jan Smuts of South Africa thought the situation “is not a defensible or a pleasant position to be in” (Van der Poel, 1973:516).

## Limitations

This paper’s main thrust is gauging New Zealand’s willingness to discuss Greek political affairs, and what it would project publicly at the time or after when it constructed an official memory of New Zealand’s involvement in these contentious events. What constitutes “memory” is a highly discursive area. In this paper, it is largely limited to the published output of the New Zealand Official War History Project. The Project is considered a major influence on New Zealand historiography (Montgomerie, 2003). It was one of the largest publishing exercises in New Zealand’s history and involved public calls for information from veterans, radio broadcasts and other sources and resulted in an output of over 40 volumes. These have been migrated to an additional World Wide Web environment (NZETC). Arguably, it was more a national history than a military one.

A previous publication of the author’s examined the period 1942–1944 (Brown, 2014) and some its observations are included here. That exercise differs from this one in that the former stressed the variability between decision-making and actions of the New Zealand politico-military leadership. This paper is a blunter instrument that uses despatch of the centrepiece (in entirety or a component) of the New Zealand war effort, the Second New Zealand Division (2NZDIV), or the post-war army, as an analysis subject.

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<sup>1</sup> The name given to the battle between the Greek national government, its forces and its British sponsors against the left wing partisans of E.L.A.S. (*Ellinikós Laikós Apeleftherotikós Stratós* or *National Liberation Army*).

## 1940–1941 — “Unprovoked ruthless aggression”

General Bernard Freyberg, commander of the New Zealand Army in the Mediterranean throughout the war, addressed his troops as they prepared for the ill-fated campaign in mainland Greece in early 1941: “In the course of the next few days you may be fighting in defence of Greece, the birthplace of culture and learning” (Historical Publications Branch, vol. 1, 1949:244). This was shortly followed by the battle for Crete a few months later.

The Greece that the New Zealanders were going to was a still largely intact authoritarian state. Dictator Ioannis Metaxas had died several months before after nearly four years of rule. His regime had initially received critical exposure in the New Zealand press. Within several days of assuming power, he had carried out “ruthless action against labour organisations” that had involved mass arrests and “maltreatment” (*Evening Post*, 8 August 1936). The new ideological direction of the country was made evident within a month. Metaxas was shaping a society “along the lines of Italy and Germany”, and a return to parliamentary democracy was not being considered (*Evening Post*, 2 September 1936). In these stories, one can already see a historical context that New Zealand would have to eventually contend with in its own national war story-telling.

The ill-fated Greek and subsequent Cretan venture never seemingly attracted any recorded comment by Freyberg, confidential or otherwise, about the internal Greek political makeup. Freyberg freely admitted his limitations in international diplomacy. In his official report to the New Zealand government on Crete and the timing of the exit of King George II, he commented: “I am no judge of diplomacy or of political questions, especially ‘Haute Politique’” (*Report on the Battle for Crete*: 22, ANZ: R18871878). But his lack of understanding of some basic political matters was extreme. After Crete, he told a group of his troops that the Greek Gendarmerie was



Lieutenant General Sir Thomas Blamey, Lieutenant General Sir Maitland Wilson and Major General Bernard Freyberg in 1941 during the battle of Greece. (Australian War Memorial Image AWM 128425) (Credit: Wikimedia Commons)

“a type of modified Gestapo” (*Address to NCOs at Helouwan Camp*, ANZ: R5057422). And this came from a man who never demonstrated any critical analysis of the Greek government-in-exile or monarchy.

There was also no comment from the Wellington administration to Freyberg about the Greek political complexity. In international relations, Fraser is credited with an idealistic outlook. Discussing the Trieste confrontation, which he saw as blatant annexation by Tito’s forces in May 1945, Wood argues “An appeal to moral principle never failed to move Peter Fraser” (Wood, 1958:365). He also pursued international idealism in the sense of the United Nations Organisation (U.N.O.) (Bassett & King, 2000, Ch. 16; McKinnon, 1993, Ch. 4). From the time when Greece was invaded by the Italians and became involved in the war, Fraser spoke publicly of Greece as a sovereign state. Freedom meant rescuing that organism from overt foreign control — by Italy and Germany. The October 1940 Italian invasion led Fraser to send Metaxas a message: “The Government and people of New Zealand extend cordial good wishes to the Government and people on the struggle into which Greece has now been forced by unprovoked, ruthless aggression”. That fight was “to defend and restore international order and justice” (*Auckland Star*, 6 November 1940).

The Wellington administration had shown no interest in internal Greek matters even when the British Dominions Office had, in admittedly a highly theoretical way, raised the possibility of Britain using its influence to force the Greeks to liberalise their administration. In early 1940, a British diplomatic circular received in Wellington asked, “Can a regime admittedly so unpopular (as a result of its despotic and arbitrary



Group of senior NZ officers waiting for the arrival of the Greek Minister of War, Mr S. Dimitrakakis, when he decorated the first two of the following officers named with the Greek Military Cross Class A. From left: Major General Freyberg VC, Brigadier R. Miles, Brigadier J. Hargest, Brigadier H. E. Barrowclough, Brigadier G. B. Parkinson, Brigadier A. S. Falconer. Taken September/October 1941 by an official photographer. Source: <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/22779228> (credit: Wikimedia Commons)

treatment of its opponents and critics) be trusted to lead the nation into war?” The assessment concluded it was best to continue support, and indeed strengthen Metaxas. It argued, “We had better shut our eyes to the disagreeable elements of the regime” (*Balkan States*, 1940:1, ANZ: R18873894).

One confidential telegram Fraser sent to Britain showed how he could mix his idealism with a similar blind eye. He argued that New Zealand would send its troops to meet the anticipated German invader because the Allies “cannot contemplate the possibility of abandoning the Greeks to their fate, especially after the heroic resistance with which they have met the Italian invader. To do so would be to destroy the moral basis of our cause and invite results greater in their potential damage to us than any failure of the contemplated operation” (Historical Publications Branch, vol. 1, 1949:258).

The post-war official state memory-making project went to extraordinary lengths to make such a statement paramount in depicting the 1941 New Zealand army’s venture to Greece. The trigger was the release of a published volume of official telegrams. The general editor of the project wrote individually to the country’s newspapers and broadcasters about the “remarkable message” from Peter Fraser to Churchill quoted above and the latter’s positive response. The two were “perhaps among the most notable documents in New Zealand’s history” (Kippenberger to editors, [n.d.], ANZ: R12325929). Three years after the 1941 misadventures, there was a different attitude and level of state public expression over Greek matters.

## **1944 — “We might prejudice our very friendly relations with the rest of the Greek people”**

After 1941 and before 1944, Fraser and Freyberg had stayed uncommunicative (Brown, 2014) over Greek political matters. In North Africa, Middle East and Italy, the General met intermittently with the Greek King George and other members of the Royal family, e.g. Prince Peter, who was a senior Allied Liaison Officer (GOC DIARY, ANZ: R16700546, R16700545, R16700590).

New Zealand and other Dominion governments received regular group communications about the changing situation from the British Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs (TNA:DO 35/1545). There were, at least in New Zealand, stories in the press as well (*Auckland Star*, 24 September 1943; *Evening Post*, 28 October 1943). They relayed that civil war had erupted in occupied Greece in late 1943 and that a Leftist resistance-based administration had been established in the mountains of occupied Greece early in the following year. This was an anathema to the Greek government-in-exile and its British sponsors. It was also not just a simple question of the Greek Left and Right. When representatives from the leftist mountain-based Greek Resistance administration visited the Middle East in mid-1944, they issued statements condemning the actions of the Leftist political mutiny of the free Greek military there in March/April 1944. This suggested a lack of cohesiveness within the Left and added to the complexity of the situation to the New Zealanders (Secretary

for Dominion Affairs to Dominions, 16 May 1944, TNA:DO 35/1545). It was not an attractive environment to enter.

While New Zealand had accepted the risk of the 1941 expedition, by August/September 1944 it was not willing to do the same again (Brown, 2014:203–204). At least in terms of its army (as opposed to individual New Zealanders involved in clandestine British operations), the Dominion leadership never wanted its troops involved in Greek politics. Freyberg told Fraser: “As you know, there are several factions in Greece, with all of which we are on friendly terms, and if we were to involve ourselves at this stage in support of one or other of the parties we might prejudice our very friendly relations with the rest of the Greek people” (Historical Publications Branch, vol. II, 1951:399). The Freyberg–Fraser pair successfully prevented New Zealand from sending a unit of troops and therefore escaped involvement in what is popularly known as the *Dekemvriana*, i.e. fighting that broke out there during the final month of 1944 between Britain and its sponsored Greek administration/forces and the left-wing partisans.

As a result of the pressurised domestic (there were many protest telegrams about British intervention) and international situation (especially initial American objections), the government made public its previously made decision not to send its troops to Greece. Understandably, it kept its cable of protest to London (Brown, 2014:207) hidden from its citizens. Fraser had even said that it was obvious the return of monarchy was not popular with the Greeks and he should not be given any support. Concealment was also applied to its official history. It is this state silence over what could easily have been utilised by it in a positive national imagining that is most striking. For, while the 1941 expedition has received maximum analysis and discussion in the literature and public sphere, the 1944 one is only indicated by a few sentences in a state history (Wood, 1958:288, 365). The basic argument is that New Zealand had an “unwillingness to take sides in Greek politics” (Wood, 1958:365), i.e. they stress neutrality. Again, it is devoid of any indication of the genuine New Zealand interest. Similarly, the next prospective Dominion military excursion has not seemingly attracted any attention in the literature or public arena. The concluding part of this paper offers some argument as to why this may be so and considers a reticence about using a thread of the New Zealand-Greek narrative to underpin the state’s legitimacy in the midst of decades-long official and community-based expressions of a bond with Greece.

## **1947–1948 — “entirely repugnant to our conception of democracy”**

For the remainder of the decade, Britain, and to a far lesser extent New Zealand, were interacting with successive domestic Greek administrations which academic historians have described as exhibiting “demoralisation of the state administration” (Close, 2002:17) and “divided and paralysed” (Koliopoulos & Veremis, 2002:295). It is no surprise that Greece was still moving along a path to years of open civil war. The

interim period between *Dekemvriana* and the elections of early 1946 showed “The failure of the succession of governments in the aftermath of the December Uprising to effect even a modicum of reconciliation and their ability to control the lawlessness of the right-wing gangs roaming the countryside practically paved the way for another confrontation” (Gerolymatos, 2004:185).

External intervention and aid in the form of military assistance and financial/economic provisioning, continued on the part of Britain and subsequently the U.S.A. There were arguments that Greek borders were being compromised by Communist forces in neighbouring Balkan countries. Regardless of the intent of these non-Greek entities, the pronounced instability was very evident. The New Zealand public learnt through the press of “plotting” by monarchists (*New Zealand Herald*, 14 July 1945) and a “Prolonged Greek Crisis” (*Evening Post*, 29 October 1945). The surrender of weapons by left-wing partisans following the Varkiza Agreement of February 1945, enabled a subsequent “right wing revolution” (*New Zealand Herald*, 2 August 1945). A Greek government minister’s reasoning that so many communist leaders were committing suicide in his jails because they feared their comrades (*Dominion*, 25 February 1949) might lack plausibility, especially in the light of earlier headlines such as “Greek Gendarmes kill 25 communists in jail” (*Dominion*, 16 April 1948). By the first month of 1948, Fraser was voicing his fears about Greece to the Australian government: “Today, there is a reactionary despotic government in office in Athens operating often through gangs of cut-throats, while the alternative is a Communistic cut-throat horde ready to pounce on Greece and establish another and even more cruel and drastic dictatorship with the final crushing of any semblance of democracy” (Fraser to Evatt, 13 January 1948, ANZ: R18869668).

Fraser did not see a simple black and white solution but was faced with a growing dilemma. On Christmas Eve 1947, the communist Democratic Army of Greece (D.S.E.) had established its own mountain-based government. It was the second occurrence since the invasion of 1941, the first being the wartime resistance “Free Greece” in the mountains. The possibility of formal recognition by foreign countries was raised. Fraser told Australian Minister for External Affairs, H. V. “Doc” Evatt, that this was “unthinkable” (Fraser to Evatt, 13 January 1948, ANZ: R18869668). Neither was it supportive of the Athens administration. An internal New Zealand report reinforced Fraser’s assessment of the Greek government: “...its internal policy exhibited features which are entirely repugnant to our conception of democracy” (*Greece*, 9 January 1948:2–3, ANZ: R18869668). The wartime link came into play: “New Zealand is regarded as having ties of sympathy with the Greek people in view of the common role played by both countries in the resistance to Fascism, but it is not so certain whether those ties can continue firm in the face of the more undesirable tendencies exhibited in the internal policy of the recent Greek Government” (*Greece*, 9 January 1948:4, ANZ: R18869668). Those experiences from the global struggle also included the regime purportedly including “a number of officials who collaborated with the Germans” (*Greece*, 1 September 1947:3, ANZ: R18869668).

Against this background, and weeks after Fraser's frustration was vented, one New Zealand assessment discussed the possibility that the Dominion might have to send its troops to Greece again. Freyberg and his New Zealand Division were obviously not the focus of these deliberations. The General was now Governor General, and his Division had been demobbed at the conclusion of the world conflict. The previously discussed grudging acceptance of British-led Commonwealth leadership in Greek affairs was still evident in internal deliberations. It was a continuation of a long-established predominant relationship, but now the United Nations Organisation (U.N.O.) also had a presence. An internal analysis dated 5 February 1948 examined the possibility that the Greek government might invoke United Nations Article 51 and request assistance. This pointed to British involvement (its troops were still there, and they were being encouraged to remain by the Americans) — "It is this possibility which perhaps constitutes the crucial issue in the Greek situation for the United Kingdom, and indirectly, for New Zealand" (*Greek Situation*, 5 February 1948:4, ANZ: R17709718). If a request were received, it would be a valid one under the international law. But the implication was that New Zealand would be supporting an Athens government it deplored. And New Zealand was a strong supporter of the United Nations. Yet, again, at the same time, its assessment of the Greek government was one permeated with values and critical thinking. It was a far cry from the silent days of 1941 and the emergency-laden 1944 episode. In the end, there was seemingly no requirement for New Zealand troops to be sent to civil-war-torn Greece.

## Discussion

Examining the three episodes (1941, 1944 and 1947/1948), one can see several lines of argument that might explain the extent and characteristics of what the New Zealand state publicly expressed in the immediate and long-term about its interest in Greek politics. Greek "Freedom" in 1941 meant national sovereignty. Longer-term public projection combined the "moral cause" with the same. That the 1941 adventure was a disaster which nearly cost New Zealand its army obviously meant that the state had to justify the cost, and that, in turn, meant emphasising these themes when it came to considering Greek politics. Newspaper statements in 1941 were augmented in the long term by considerable state publication investment. This included two entire volumes (McClymont, 1959; Davin, 1953) and another with most of a chapter (Wood, 1958: Ch. 14). That Greece was a military dictatorship is played down in these publications. Using the indexed pages as a reference point, in the McClymont work, the dictatorship is specifically mentioned once (the name "Metaxas" appears more) and that is at page 365 well away from the deliberations of going to Greece. Wood has the name once, Davin not at all although the long-standing republic versus monarchy conflict is noted — "It was at this stage, too, that the problem of whether or not to arm the Cretan populations came up again. But that question brought its difficulties: danger to the Government was feared" (Davin, 1953:35).

On the other hand, we have the omission of a clearly distinctive narrative of New Zealand promoting democracy in Greece. It was late in coming, but it extended for years. Not even a diluted version of the December protest to London and pursuit of a democratic solution for the strife-ridden country emerged in any of the official (or for that matter non-official) publication outputs. This is in contrast to the plight of other countries such as Poland. The history of that East European country in the seminal Wood study of external affairs goes right up until 1947 (Wood, 1958:364). This may be before the 1948/49 possible military expedition, but it was after a lot of New Zealand diplomatic effort had been invested in discussing a democratic Greece.

It can thereby be reasonably argued that the New Zealand state sacrifice a strut that would have supported the notion of its special relationship with Greece and also its independent thinking. There was also a possible strengthening of its legitimacy in the eyes of its citizenry. If one looks at what was published, there are the Fraser-Freyberg telegrams about a possible contingent to newly liberated Greece. These stress neutrality and non-involvement. There is another set of related telegrams that I have discussed elsewhere (Brown, 2014:202). They concern the possibility that Greek troops serving temporarily with Freyberg in Italy might engage in political agitation. These stress New Zealand assertiveness against the British direction (just months before, the widely reported Greek armed forces political mutiny had been put down by force in Egypt). But there is no one unifying stream of actions and behaviours depicted in the published record. The process of producing the relevant official memory was well underway right through the decade following the war. Fraser's interest in its gestation was so strong that he had a direct relationship with its general editor, thereby bypassing his own minister (Bassett, 1997:133). But to reveal the activities of the state would have exacerbated ongoing divisions in New Zealand society about Greek politics. Some examples are now provided. Dan Davin may have alluded to some of the Cretan republican sentiments in the official history, but he was much more provocative in his 1947 novel, *For the Rest of their Lives*. His characters show the affinity of King George II of Greece with Metaxists and ongoing predation on Greeks outside of Axis-occupied territories — “Don't you know? The Ministry of the Interior brought its Secret Police along when it left Greece. Now they get anyone they do not like or who does not like them sent off to India on one pretext or another” (Davin, 1947:39–40). Besides such cultural artefacts, there were living reminders of the past. At the end of the same year the Davin work was published, an Australian aid worker, in transit, announced in Auckland that there were two New Zealand soldiers fighting with the Greek Communist forces. They had been left behind after the exit of 1941, married Greek women, and were now platoon leaders. He said, “I have spoken to one of them” (*Dominion*, 29 December 1947). In September 1949, just before Fraser's government lost office, a student body of what would become the Victoria University of Wellington condemned the Western policies toward Greece (“Glory that was Greece”, 1949).

For the New Zealand state not to resurrect Greek controversies was a more attractive option than informing its citizenry of its aspirations for Greek democracy. The narrative the New Zealand state promoted was intended to provide a comfortable image of the New Zealand-Greek connection.

## Conclusion

During the Second World War, and once during the Greek civil war of 1946–1949, New Zealand faced the prospect of sending its regular army to Greece. The first instance was to face the Axis enemy. The last two were into the cauldron of civil war and major power intervention. Silence over the political contours of Greece gave way to value judgements of the same by the New Zealand leadership, i.e. they took a stance.

Immediate public expressions and formulated official memory show forfeiture by the New Zealand state of an element that would have perhaps enhanced its stature with its own citizenry. On the other hand, it would have meant exposing itself to criticism at various levels, e.g. sections of its own society, Commonwealth members and the major powers who were openly involved in Greek matters. The cost of disclosure was too great. In the longer term, the risk of re-opening the Greek issue in the public arena was such that the Government declined to reveal its thoughts and actions.

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