

# H-Diplo

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Thomas Maddux and Diane N. Labrosse

Web and Production Editor: George Fujii  
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**“Cold War in the Aegean” in *Cold War History* 9:3 (August 2009)**

**Barin Kayaoglu. “Strategic imperatives, Democratic rhetoric: The United States and Turkey, 1945-52.” *Cold War History* 9:3 (August 2009): 321-345.**

**Konstantina Maragkou. “Favouritism in NATO’s southeastern flank: The case of the Greek colonels, 1967-74.” *Cold War History* 9:3 (August 2009): 347-366.**

**Sotiris Rizas. “Managing a conflict among allies: United States policy towards Greece and Turkey in relation to the Aegean dispute, 1974-76.” *Cold War History* 9:3 (August 2009): 367-387.**

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Review by **James Edward Miller**, Georgetown University

The United States’ Cold War involvement in the Eastern Mediterranean was marked by significant successes in advancing its original agenda and equally by the creation of considerable public and elite discontent with both U.S. methods and goals in Greece and Turkey. The roots of much contemporary anti-American feeling in these states lie in the actions of U.S. officials in the era that began with the Truman Doctrine and terminated with Henry Kissinger’s mismanagement of the Cyprus invasion crisis of 1974. The three essays under discussion approach the issues of U.S. involvement in this strategic and troubled region from differing optics. In looking at the origins of the postwar U.S.-Turkey relationship, Barin Kayaoglu provides a Kemalist critique of American policy. Konstantina Maragkou offers an overview of U.S. and NATO policy towards the Greek military junta (1967-74) rooted in Greek nationalist perceptions. Finally Sotiras Rizas writes a nuanced study of the Aegean islands crisis of 1974-76, which demonstrates convincingly that Henry Kissinger could learn from his mistakes without, of course, acknowledging he made any.

Turkey’s first democratic elections were the beginning of a long, difficult and, as yet, unfinished saga. The credit for initiating this change in Turkey’s authoritarian nation building program belongs in great degree to President Ismet İnönü. United States

involvement was minimal. However, in making his case, Kayaoglu substitutes nationalism for nuance: claiming too much credit for the founder of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, simplifying U.S. handling of the democracy issue, and ignoring the negative consequences for Turkish democracy of the dramatic 1950 election.

Possessing a preponderance of international power and keenly aware of the limits of its reach, the Truman administration built a mixed record of supporting democratic aspirations abroad. In areas where the U.S. was the occupying power, the effort to build democracies was intense and frequently successful. Washington viewed democratization in Germany, Japan, and Italy as critical. These states had, in U.S. judgment, unhinged the international system and plunged the world into war. In addition, they were areas in which Soviet Union and allied national communist parties appeared capable of taking control, endangering U.S. security. Democracy building was an essential tool for thwarting these threats. In the Mediterranean, the United States joined the failed international effort to oust Franco through diplomatic pressure, soft peddled the internal politics of its unwilling World War II strategic partner, Portugal, and tried to ensure the survival of a representative regime in Greece not only by confronting the communist led insurrection but by applying pressure to restrain King Paul's penchant for authoritarian government, reduce internal repression, and promote efficient administration and broad political coalitions, all with uneven results. U.S. officials publicly supported Turkish democratization and privately did nothing to undermine it.

In Turkey, the Truman administration received a major gift. A dramatic shift towards free elections came from the most unexpected of sources: Ataturk's heirs. The Father of modern Turkey was one of the great figures of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, but his devotion to democratic ideals is a post-mortem invention. The "six arrows" (fundamentals) of Kemalism do not include democracy and the dictator's flirtations with a managed opposition ended when he speedily pulled the plug on his former allies turned critics, executing some. Ataturk was in a hurry to impose a complex nation-building project, and democracy was a luxury he did not think Turkey could afford. His "populism" substituted one-man's decisions for informed consent from Turkish citizens. Moreover, the rigid interpretation he and his heirs gave to two of his fundamentals, secularism and nationalism, worked against democratic development. As Kayaoglu notes, this authoritarian state building enjoyed broad support among Turkey's ruling elites. Ataturk left a platform for implanting democracy, but neither a plan for nor commitment to achieving it.

Ataturk had an acute sense of the value of history in promoting his modernization plans. His successors too have seen the value of installing a national narrative that supports government policy. The Kemalist view of history, inculcated throughout the national educational system, and safeguarded by a strict control of state archives, stresses the uniqueness of the Turkish experience, the centrality of Ataturk's vision to national

success, and foreign threats to Turkey's independence.<sup>1</sup> Even before George W. Bush's misadventures, post-Cold War polling showed the United States morphing from a valued ally into a significant threat for a majority of Turks. Kayoglu builds on the national narrative. In his black and white portrait of the 1940s, an idealistic İnönü carries forward Atatürk's "commitment to democracy" in the face of American cynicism and misguided internal party opposition. The author denies that any significant international considerations were at play in İnönü's actions. Turkey, however, was fully involved in the complex maneuvering that characterized the last year of the war and early postwar era. As World War II ended, three neutral dictatorships, Turkey, Spain and Portugal, reversed policies designed to appease the Axis and made moves to placate the victorious Allies. Salazar wallpapered his New State with all sorts of nods in the direction of representative government while Franco tried to whitewash his regime with appeals to anti-communism, a reduced *Falangist* influence, and a "constitution." İnönü, who faced a very serious threat from the Soviets, backed away from his regime's racially motivated economic warfare against its Jewish, Armenian and Greek minorities. Turkey joined the United Nations, and permitted the formation of an opposition party. By boldly announcing the end of one-party rule, İnönü sent a message that Turkey was an attractive partner for the West in a common struggle with the Soviet Union. These moves, in turn, eased Truman's effort to rally congressional and public support for aid to Greece and Turkey.

In claiming that İnönü brought democracy to Turkey, the author fails to make a clear distinction between free elections (the essential first step) and the creation of a climate of tolerance and respect for law that are essential to a functioning democracy. İnönü may have expected to lose the 1950 election, but he certainly did not foresee Turkish voters' massive repudiation of his Republican People's Party (CHP) and Kemalism. Stunned CHP elites retreated into non-elected bodies such as the army, public administration, schools and the courts (the "deep state") to block effective change in the existing structure of Turkey. Utilizing the state apparatus, Kemalist elites fought a long delaying action against democracy, including four military interventions that unseated their elected opponents.<sup>2</sup>

Maragkou is certainly on target when she claims that both the United States and its major NATO allies coddled the military junta that took power in Athens in April 1967. The Johnson Administration's performance was miserable and what followed, the Nixon-Kissinger enthusiasm for the Colonels, was both disgraceful and damaging to U.S. interests. None of the major European states covered themselves with glory in respect to

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<sup>1</sup> Atatürk's epic 1927 speech (the Nutuk) on the Turkish revolution was a remarkable essay at rewriting the past. In his later years he relentlessly tried to bend history to Turkish nationalism, developing the "Turkish History Thesis" that placed Turks at the center of world history from antiquity onward. These Kemalist ideas are exemplified in former President Turgut Ozal's ghosted book, *Turkey in Europe and Europe in Turkey* (English version: Ankara: T. Rustam, 1991), myopically distributed by Turkey's embassies after the nation applied for EU membership in 1987.

<sup>2</sup> The CHP never recovered from this defeat. On the mindset of Kemalist elites, Esra Özyürck, *Nostalgia for the Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006) is revealing.

reviving Greek democracy. In exploring the causes of this weak-kneed response, however, Maragkou runs into difficulties. The most debatable point in her recital of NATO policy is exaggerating the strategic importance of Greece. She also claims that Greece was a rock of stability in the Eastern Mediterranean. These views have street currency in Greece but neither holds water. Maragkou is on target when she notes that Greece was a valuable geographical support for Turkey. While Greece offered useful bases to NATO planners, the real game in the Eastern Mediterranean was preventing Turkey's isolation. Greek participation in the Balkan Pact and NATO were keyed to this objective. Ekavi Athanassopoulou's study of NATO's decision to admit the two states underlines Greece's tag along status in policy decisions regarding NATO membership for Turkey.<sup>3</sup> The reduction of U.S. military support for Greece post-1952 and the virtual elimination of civilian aid during the 1950s testify to Greece's declining strategic importance after its civil war. Together with Cyprus, aid became the major point of contention between the United States and Greek governments, post-1953. Meanwhile, Greece's Cyprus policy undermined the Atlantic Alliance. Determined to annex the island, successive Greek leaders from Field Marshal Papagos (1954) to Brigadier Ioannides (1974) provided military assistance to the Greek Cypriot Right in their efforts first to undermine British colonial rule, then to isolate and dominate the Turkish Cypriot community, and ultimately to overthrow the Greek Cypriot president, Makarios III, in order to achieve union with Greece. In the process, Greece jettisoned the Balkan Pact, undermined its British NATO ally, entered into a decades-long confrontation with Turkey and, with these actions, exposed the hollow nature of NATO's Southern Flank. Maragkou's failure to integrate the Cyprus issue into her analysis of NATO's Eastern Mediterranean role is surprising given the four major crises on the island that marked the 1967-74 period.

The fundamental weakness of both these essays is their failure to challenge the dominant national narrative in Greece and Turkey. U.S. records do not supply the best platform for this exercise. But in the absence of Greek or Turkish state archives they can be a useful resource if employed with sophistication. Margakou, who fails to support many of her key assertions, repeats the Greek national narrative without ever questioning its verisimilitude, and unaccountably gives only limited attention to the key source for U.S. policy after January 1969, the Nixon Presidential Materials.<sup>4</sup> Kayaoglou rests his case for American disregard of democratic principle largely on a single 1950 generalization by George Kennan.

Rizas's essay, in contrast, is grounded on a rich documentary base and makes effective use of the secondary studies and memoirs. Rizas provides essential historical context, argues

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<sup>3</sup> Turkey: *Anglo-American Security Interests, 1945-1952* (London: Frank Cass, 1999). As does U.S. documentation. See *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1951*, vol. 3 and 1952-54, vol. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Maragkou would have found that Nixon discussions of Greece revolved around military hardware and manpower, not bases. Her arguments might have been stronger if effectively conveyed in clear English. *Cold War History* did a disservice to the author by failing to provide editorial assistance to a scholar working in a second language.

convincingly for the importance of the 1976 Aegean confrontation in reviving damaged U.S. influence, and stresses the diplomatic realism of the Greek and Turkish governments in the wake of the 1974 Cyprus crisis. Both Greece and Turkey had long been upset with an “even handed” U.S. policy that since the 1950s had avoided a commitment to either party’s nationalist objectives in the name of NATO solidarity. In addition, after providing full support to the Greek dictatorship until July 1974, Kissinger misread Soviet objectives, abandoned the Greeks as they installed a democratic regime, tilted toward Turkey, and effectively isolated the 1974 Greek -directed coup’s target, Makarios, assuring the Greek Cypriot’s emergency government could not deliver any effective compromises. Taking advantage of U.S. blunders, Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit kept Kissinger at bay while Turkey’s armed forces partitioned the island. The U.S. secretary of state got no credit for his appeasement from either Turkish leaders or public opinion. Turks recalled President Johnson’s humiliating 1964 veto of a Turkish plan to invade Cyprus. They were upset further by the embargo the U.S. Congress placed upon them in the wake of the partition of Cyprus. Greek reactions, enflamed by the history of U.S. support for the junta, were even more negative. It appeared that Kissinger had cooked up the perfect recipe for dismembering the Southern Flank of NATO. Fortunately, America’s pocket Metternich, still usefully hamstrung by congressional oversight, carefully managed the U.S. role in the 1976 Aegean crisis. The Turkish government decided to send a research ship, the *Sismic*, into contested waters to challenge Greek territorial claims and to stake its own to underwater energy resources. Once again, NATO’s wobbly Southern Flank appeared to verge on dissolution. Despite the deep mistrust between Kissinger and Greek Prime Minister Constantine Karamanlis and the widespread hostility toward the secretary of state in Turkey and Greece, the two parties to the issue showed admirable realism in cooling down their rivalry with help from America’s chief diplomat. Given his past mishandling of the region’s issues, it was something of a coup for Kissinger.

Rizas’s article demonstrates that despite lamentable gaps in Greek, Turkish and Cypriot documentation, it is possible to write a convincing analysis of Eastern Mediterranean politics provided that one is ready to examine critically the nationalist narrative that serves as a launch point for so many scholars.

**James Edward Miller** teaches at Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service and the State Department’s Foreign Service Institute. He has a PhD in history from the University of Illinois. His most recent book is *The United States and the Making of Modern Greece, 1950-1975* (University of North Carolina Press, 2009). Miller is currently working on a comparative study of modernization in Southern Europe.

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