

**From *Mare Nostrum* to *Insula Nostra*:
British colonial Cyprus and the Italian imperial threat**

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Abstract

As part of its growing imperial aspirations that were part of the so-called *Mare Nostrum* attempt, the Italian Empire sought to build up nationalist propaganda on Cyprus. The irredentist activities and propaganda coordinated by the Italian Embassy in Cyprus alarmed the British governors and the Foreign Office. By drawing upon archival documents, I analyse the evolution of the strategic importance of Cyprus for the British Empire, which had begun to evolve in response to the perceived threat posed by the Italian Empire during the interwar period. The main argument put forward here is that under these new circumstances Cyprus became a significant geostrategic possession for the British Empire. The Italian Empire, having colonised the Dodecanese islands of the Aegean Sea, was gradually making its presence felt in Cyprus in the 1920s and went on to do so more vigorously in the 1930s. The Italian ambassador was perceived as *persona non grata* by the British government in Cyprus. It was therefore difficult for the British Empire under the actual or at least the perceived threat of Italian influence to permit Cypriots to exercise their right of self-determination.

Keywords: Cyprus, Italian Empire, interwar period, British Empire, Mediterranean.

Scholars who stress the geostrategic importance of Cyprus often consider her to be the ‘unsinkable aircraft’ of the Mediterranean (O’Malley & Craig 2001). George Hill demonstrated that throughout the centuries the empires that had controlled Cyprus were the rulers of the Eastern Mediterranean to emphasise the geopolitical attraction of the island to foreign rulers (Hill 1952). However, Cyprus’s geostrategic importance has not been static but has evolved over times at a speed that has depended on the developments in the wider geopolitical context of the Eastern Mediterranean. By drawing upon the perceived threat that Italian ambitions in Cyprus were posing, I seek to shed light on the gradual change in the geostrategic importance of Cyprus that had a direct impact on the colonial rule and the administrative policies that were in force on the island. The new reality of world order in the aftermath of the First World War had serious repercussions for the strategic importance of Cyprus in the vital Eastern Mediterranean area for the declining British Empire. The Eastern Mediterranean had definitely been a vital zone for British imperial interests since its emergence as a global power.¹ The Mediterranean was not only a route used by the British but a region of critical importance for the Empire (Holland 2012). As Pratt demonstrates, Mediterranean played a role of a paramount importance in British global strategy in the late 1930s (Pratt 1975).

One aspect that is often omitted by scholars studying the history of British Cyprus is the extent to which the Italian imperial ambitions for the island and the policies that were applied to it had impacted the British policies in force on the island. I argue in this article that the evolution of British policies applied to the island also has to be better understood in the context of the Anglo–Italian imperial rivalry in the Mediterranean during the interwar period. By examining the British fears of Italian expansionism under Mussolini, it is argued that the future of Cyprus was never going to be determined only by Britain and the local population.

According to a Foreign Office memorandum, at the beginning of the First World War, it was understood that the future of Cyprus would have to be reconsidered when peace was made and be related to the whole Eastern settlement.² The great powers of the period, Britain, France and Italy, were constantly concerned with the status of Cyprus.

In the late 1930s, as the potential for a Second World War seemed more likely, the British Foreign Office was planning the establishment of more military bases in key geostrategic areas. Many reports and plans were prepared by the Committee of Imperial Defence that aimed to establish Cyprus as a defence base in the Eastern Mediterranean in the late 1930s.³ However, the Colonial Office was monitoring the evolving situation in the Mediterranean and the Middle East before making a definite decision regarding the British defence policy *vis-à-vis* Italy.⁴

Mare Nostrum

One of the most important elements in the British strategic considerations relating to the Eastern Mediterranean during the interwar period was the growing Italian imperial ambitions. In this article I explore how the British perceived Italian ambitions in the Mediterranean. In particular, I draw upon the archival material found in the British National Archives in order to demonstrate that the British were seriously concerned about the Italian Empire's aspirations for Cyprus. Reports on the Italian consul in Cyprus and official correspondence in the Foreign Office show British fears about the Italian influence in the British colony.

The advent of Mussolini's fascist regime in Italy was soon translated into the revisionist aspirations of the Italian Empire in the Eastern Mediterranean (Cassels 1999). The guiding principle of Italian foreign policy in the interwar period was the *Mare Nostrum* (Our Sea) quest through which domination over the areas that had formerly been ruled by the Roman Empire was regarded as the foremost aim of

fascist Italy. It was thought that this was needed to achieve national regeneration after the 'mutilated' victory in the Great War. By 1937, *Mare Nostrum* constituted Italy's official policy (Mallett 2003, p.107). As Salerno illustrates, these grand imperial ambitions of Mussolini to control the Mediterranean sea was posing a major concern to the British global interests (Salerno 2002).

Mussolini's geopolitical vision was articulated in his 1939 remarks to the Grand Council. For Mussolini, Italy was "a prisoner of the Mediterranean, and the more populous and prosperous Italy becomes, the more its imprisonment will gall". For Mussolini the "bars of this prison are Corsica, Tunis, Malta, Cyprus" (Knox 1982, p.40). The first step that Italian policy should follow was to "break the bars of the prison". For Mussolini, the plan to make the Mediterranean a *mare italiano* was of paramount importance to annihilate the British and French influence in this sea. He considered the presence of Britain and France as parasitical (Simms 2014, p.328). Mussolini believed that Britain was an "avaricious' and essentially 'bourgeois' nation" that was only pursuing the maintenance of the "existing geopolitical status quo, thereby keeping Italy 'imprisoned' within its own sea" (Mallett 2003, p.35).

In the light of this imperial goal, Italy posed a serious threat to the British Empire which controlled the Eastern Mediterranean at the time. With the advent of the First World War, Italy's ambitions for the expansion of her dominions in the Levant seemed very threatening to the British Empire. In 1914, Italy, as did France, showed that she was not indifferent to Cyprus's fate. According to a British memorandum, Italy would have preferred Cyprus to remain under British sovereignty because she did not want Greece to have it.⁵ Italy perceived that any cession of Cyprus to Greece would have significantly strengthened Greece's claims to Rhodes.⁶

Italian Consulate in Cyprus

The British government in Cyprus started to be concerned about Italy's Mediterranean ambitions from the late 1920s (Fiore 2013). However, it was only during the mid-1930s and especially after the 1935 Italian invasion of Abyssinia that the British government in Cyprus consistently monitored the activities of the Italian consul in Nicosia. Despite the fact that there were numerous reports describing an "increased dislike of the Italians"⁷ among Cypriots after their invasion of Abyssinia, the Foreign Office was still continuously fearful of Italian expansion in Cyprus. Sometimes it seemed as if it was more worried about Italy's activities than those of the Greek and Turkish consuls who were usually the focus of British attention.

Even in the late 1920s, when the petitions from the Greek Cypriot delegates calling for the Union with Greece were increasingly annoying, the British held that even the Greek Cypriots knew that it was very likely that if the British left the island the Italians or the Turks would eventually incorporate Cyprus into their respective territory. In particular, Mr Dawe, an official from the Colonial Office, wrote in 1929 that "Greek Cypriots are afraid that if they were handed over without some such arrangement, the Island sooner or later would be snapped up, either by Italy or Turkey".⁸ Mr Dawe was confident that "Greek Cypriots would far rather be under the British than under the Italians or the Turks".⁹ This confidence was based upon the increasingly deteriorating Greek-Italian relations during this period.

Although the 1931 October Revolt had only just occurred, the British government in Cyprus were concerned about the 'Italian threat'. In November 1931, in private and confidential correspondence, a Foreign Office official, Mr Bayle, wrote about the prospect of a Union of the island with Greece: "Then, of course, there is

the other side of the question. If Cyprus were handed over to Greece how long would it remain Greek? Italy, France and Turkey would be fighting, like dogs over a bone, for her; and Rhodes is a good example of what the Italians can do to a Colony. No, when all is considered I think Cyprus is very well off indeed and the people ought to be thankful for what they have got.”¹⁰ Italy’s growing aspirations and influence were definitely and directly affecting British policy in Cyprus.

The British were concerned that because all the consulates were moved to Nicosia this could increase their influence in local politics. The Colonial Office worried about the transfer of the offices of the consuls of Greece, Turkey and Italy to Nicosia because “opportunities for intrigue and the spread of propaganda” were “far greater than in Larnaca”.¹¹ In 1937, a report on the political situation in Cyprus regarding the first five months of the year stated that “the Turkish and Italian consuls have not openly been active during the period”.¹²

Giuseppe Brigidi arrived in Cyprus from Canada as the new Italian consul *de carrière* in 1936.¹³ British intelligence monitored his activities. A secret report in 1936 strongly warned that his early activities were pointing to the fact that his “undercover intentions of his post” were to “spread Italian propaganda in Cyprus”.¹⁴ Giuseppe Brigidi kept the office of Italian consul for only one year as he left Cyprus on 9 November 1937 to transfer to the Italian consulate at Hankow, China.¹⁵ The significance that the Italians were giving to Cyprus had been illustrated by the appointment of this important consul.

Numerous intelligence reports gave a detailed account of the Italian consul’s activities in Cyprus. In 1936, Governor Richmond Palmer sent a secret report on the political situation in Cyprus to Ormsby-Gore, the secretary of state for the colonies.¹⁶ In the report Palmer referred to the ceremony of 4 November 1936 the Italian consulate had held in order to celebrate the birthday of the King of Italy, Vittorio Emanuele III. Palmer described it as a gathering that was exclusively for

known fascists. The Italian consul, wearing his uniform, along with forty Italian fascists, attended the ceremony. Palmer's report gives a detailed account, even describing the badges on the uniforms of the officials. The branch of the Italian Navy League that (in 1936) had just been established in Cyprus was wearing a badge that had the *Mare Nostrum* (Palmer translated it as 'the sea belongs to us') inscription.¹⁷ Palmer also reported that five Italian children had been sent from Cyprus during the past summer to attend a fascist camp in Italy.

The tense relations between the British government and the Italian consul were also demonstrated during the government's celebration for the coronation of King George VI. On 12 May 1937, throughout the British colony of Cyprus a number of official ceremonies were held in honour of the British king all across the island. However, "all the Italian Consular authorities in the Island boycotted the Coronation ceremonies".¹⁸

At the same time as making efforts to nurture anti-British feelings, the Italian consulate aimed to enhance a close connection with the powerful Greek Orthodox Church.¹⁹ Governor Palmer attempted to alert the Colonial Office of the good relationship that had been built up between the Italian consulate and the Greek Orthodox Church. In a secret report Palmer gave an account of "the prospect of an *entente cordiale*" between the Italian consul and the *locum tenens*.²⁰ Palmer, in order to support his point, described one occasion on which the Italian consul called on the *locum tenens*, who returned the call immediately.²¹ The Greek consul also opposed the close relation between the Italian consul and the Greek Church. The Greek consul was reported to have said that "the Locum Tenens is endeavouring to play off the Italian consul against him in political and church matters".²² However, this Greek-Italian rivalry was accurately described in a British intelligence report, which said that there was "no love lost between these two Consuls".

The Italian consulate was also gradually building good relations with the minority Maronite community of the island. In 1936, the especially dedicated thanks-giving service in Larnaca that was held to celebrate Italy's successful invasion of Abyssinia was also attended by members of the Maronite community.²³ The presence of the Maronites, who are affiliated with the Catholic Church, was embraced by the Italian consulate, and after the service they were "shown over an Italian merchant vessel which was in harbor".²⁴ The British government was deeply concerned by this affinity and ordered an investigation into the motives of their attendance. During the investigation the government discovered that a Cypriot Italian who lived near the Maronite village of Kormakitis was "indulging in some Italian propaganda on his own behalf".²⁵ Yet the intelligence service reported to the British government that "he has been severely warned and it is unlikely that he will indulge in propaganda in future".²⁶

Press Control and Propaganda

In the aftermath of the October Revolt of 1931, an authoritarian regime was imposed in Cyprus (Georgallides 1985; Rappas 2014). A series of laws that was passed during the 1930s abolished any notion of the freedom of the press and granted to the British colonial government strong control over the censorship of the press and films. Despite this extensive control of the information network, the British government was deeply concerned with the Italian propaganda efforts in Cyprus and the British government in Cyprus insisted that the Reuters news agency should be the sole information source for the local press in relation to international affairs. The British government was agitated when an intelligence report outlined that the Italian consul had arranged "to have transmitted free of

charge all world news received by him through Stephani Agency”, the official fascist news agency, “provided that newspapers which took this news should cease to publish Reuter’s”.²⁷ The report also revealed that this move from the Italian consul had appealed to at least one local newspaper, whose editor was publishing “almost daily articles which have already appeared in the Italian Press”.²⁸ In 1936, it was also reported that the Italian consul himself was, “under cover of his post”, actively spreading fascist propaganda in Cyprus.²⁹

The fascist radio station Radio Bari, which had been broadcasting since its establishment in 1934, had acted as a propaganda medium and was systematically spreading fascist propaganda throughout the Mediterranean (Williams 2006, p.82). In 1937, the Foreign Office considered establishing a wave transmitter on Cyprus that would be controlled by the Foreign Office in order to effectively combat Italian propaganda throughout the Arab world (MacDonald 1977, p.202). Radio Bari’s activities and its efforts to spread Italian propaganda and stimulate anti-British sentiments also included several publications in local languages, especially Arabic, that were distributed in Arab-speaking countries in the region. In Cyprus it had also published and distributed books in Greek. In 1937, the Italian Broadcasting Company at Bari published a book featuring the history and activities of Radio Bari during the first three years of its existence. The book, which was “printed in Greek and Italian”, emphasised “the friendly relations between Greece and Italy”.³⁰ The Italian consul himself distributed “several copies of this book” in Cyprus.³¹

The overlooked project of establishing a British university in Cyprus in the 1930s also highlights the British fears of Italian expansionism under Mussolini.³² British possessions in the Eastern Mediterranean were at stake in the aftermath of the First World War. Since the early 1930s the Foreign Office had been eagerly planning the establishment of a university in the region in order to ‘shape the local elites to be favorably familiar with the culture and values of the West’.³³ Cyprus

was considered the most likely location for the establishment of this institution. Although the project was eventually not realized due to the outbreak of the Second World War, its significance lies in the demonstration of the British grand strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean during the interwar period. Reports prepared by the Foreign Office disclose two of the main aims of the project.³⁴ The first was to control the spread of nationalist ideas and make the local elites familiar with British values. The second objective was to combat the Italian propaganda.³⁵ Johnstone characterised the Italian cultural propaganda as a menace as it was “seriously injuring, or threatening to injure, British political interests in the Mediterranean”.³⁶

After the Abyssinian Invasion

The Italian activities on Cyprus and in the Middle East were also closely followed by all the British consulates and embassies across the region of the Eastern Mediterranean. Throughout the 1930s, between the Foreign Office and the British Embassy in Ankara there was voluminous correspondence regarding the Italian government’s Eastern Mediterranean policy.³⁷ After the 1936 Italian conquest of Abyssinia, a change in the Italian policy in the Eastern Mediterranean was noticed by the British officials in the Foreign Office (Barros 1982).³⁸

The 1930s Anglo–Italian rapprochement was perceived with a certain amount of scepticism by the Foreign Office. The British officials considered that Italy ostensibly desired close and friendly relations with Britain but that she was deliberately waiting before attempting to fulfil her imperial ambitions. Sir Percy Loraine argued that the 1936 Anglo–Italian agreement was a product of the Italian *volte-face* after the Italian conquest of Ethiopia. Loraine held that it would be a “natural and reasonable calculation that Italy can more easily and more effectively

spread her influence and her power in the Eastern Mediterranean in the sun of Anglo-Italian friendship rather than in the icy shade of Anglo-Italian tension”.³⁹ The British ambassador continued to argue that Italy was merely attempting to “guard and reinforce by diplomatic methods her eastern naval flank”.⁴⁰

In 1938, Governor Palmer was invited to attend a party as the representative of the government of Cyprus at the Italian consulate in Nicosia for the birthday of the King of Italy, Vittorio Emanuele III. However, Richmond Palmer, in an interview with the Italian consul, explained that it was an established practice in Cyprus that the government’s representative at consular functions should be the commissioner of the district. The Italian consul used this occasion to speak about the status of consuls in Cyprus.⁴¹ The Foreign Office was very upset by the behaviour of the Governor Palmer. On 9 March 1939, an official from the Foreign Office commented on the occasion and said that he could not understand “why the Colonial Secretary should be too grand to go to this party. The Governor might consider it beneath his dignity but is the person of the Colonial Secretary so sacred?”⁴² The Foreign Office official held that “the attitude of the Cyprus authorities towards foreign consuls is stupid and is doing us a certain amount of harm, but it is no use trying to get any sense into the head of Sir Richmond Palmer, who is fortunately leaving Cyprus on the 22nd April. His successor may have more tact”.⁴³

As the Second World War approached, the British Empire was even more alert to the Italian advances in the Mediterranean. The British Empire was concerned that the Italians were using Cyprus in order to supply their army in North Africa.⁴⁴ For instance, on 14 October 1937 the Criminal Investigation Department in Nicosia sent the colonial secretary a secret intelligence report detailing that the Mantovani shipping agency from Larnaca was “approached by an Italian firm in Port Said and asked to quote prices for a large supply of mules. It is thought that these mules are required for the Italian Army in North Africa.”⁴⁵ At

the same time, the British government in Cyprus became agitated about information regarding an alleged plan to establish air facilities for Italy in Cyprus. In particular, it had been reported that the Italian Air Transport Company that operated an air service “between Italy-Greece-Rhodes and Haifa” requested “the Socony Vacuum Oil Company in Cyprus to establish a petrol depot at Polis (near Cape Akamas)”.⁴⁶

Conclusion

An examination of Italian imperial policy in the Eastern Mediterranean is of paramount importance in order to understand British imperial policy in Cyprus and the Eastern Mediterranean during the interwar period. I have highlighted the strategic considerations of the British Empire and examined the evolution of the British policy underlying the continuities and the changes throughout the period in question.

I argue that the evolution of the strategic importance of the island for the British Empire should be examined in the context of the power politics of the period and the events that were taking place at the same time in the Eastern Mediterranean region. Though Cyprus is an island, the events there were not marginalised or isolated from developments in the Eastern Mediterranean. The insular territory of Cyprus was influenced by the events that were taking place in the region. The evolving geostrategic significance of Cyprus for the British Empire had a direct impact on the policies of the British administration. Cyprus was, relatively, the safest and most stable place among the British-influenced areas of the Levant.

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¹ Robert Holland's latest seminal book on the Britain and Mediterranean attempts to fill the gap in the historiography of the Empire. While the historians of the Empire tend to focus on the Indian Subcontinent, Holland argues for the significant importance of the Mediterranean Sea for the British Empire. Holland, R, (2012) *Blue-Water Empire: The British in the Mediterranean since 1800*. London: Penguin Books. For a brief macro-historical account of the great-powers rivalry in the Eastern Mediterranean, see (Evriviades 1996).

² The National Archives [henceforward TNA] TNA: FO 286/922 (1925) 'Future of Cyprus'. Confidential Memorandum by Mr Headlam-Morey and Mr Childs respecting Cyprus, sent from Mr Austen Chamberlain to Sir Milne Cheetham, dated 30 January 1925.

³ TNA: CO 67/278/7 (1937) 'Development of Cyprus'. Secret despatch from R.B. Howard, Office of the Cabinet, to A. J. Dawe, Colonial Office, dated 28 June 1937.

⁴ TNA: CO 67/278/7 (1937) 'Development of Cyprus'. A.J. Dawe's internal CO correspondence, dated 8 July 1937.

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⁶ *ibid*

⁷ TNA: CO 67/265/11 (1936) Intelligence Report "The Political Situation in Cyprus from the 1st April to the 30th June, 1936.

⁸ TNA: CO 67/228/1 (1929) 'Movement for union of Cyprus with Greece'. Dawe internal Colonial Office correspondence, dated 16 September 1937.

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ TNA: CO 67/241/4 (1931) 'Administration: individual criticisms'. Confidential letter from Bayle, at Limassol, to Samuel, dated 2 November 1931.

¹¹ TNA: CO 67/265/11 (1936) Political situation: monthly police intelligence reports. Governor Richmond Palmer sent the Intelligence Report to Ormsby Gore, the Secretary of State for the Colonies on the: "Secret Report on the Political Situation in Cyprus from 1st July to the 1st October, 1936".

¹² TNA: FO 141/643/6 (1937) 'Cyprus: general situation; includes reports on political situation for periods 1 October 1936 to 31 October 1937'. The report in the situation in Cyprus in respect of the period ended 31

December 1936 points out that 'all the consuls de Carriere- viz: the Consuls for Greece, Italy and Turkey, have now settled into their new homes in Nicosia'. The following Report on political situation in Cyprus for the period ended April 30th 1937 holds that 'the Turkish and Italian Consuls have not openly been active during the period'.

¹³ TNA: CO 67/265/11 (1936) 'Political situation: monthly police intelligence reports'. Richmond Palmer sent the Intelligence Report to Ormsby Gore, the Secretary of State for the Colonies on the: "Secret Report on the Political Situation in Cyprus from 1st July to the 1st October, 1936."

¹⁴ *ibid*

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¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ TNA: CO 67/274/5 (1937) Intelligence Report "The Political Situation in Cyprus from the 1st May to the 30th June, 1937.

¹⁹ In a secret despatch, W.C.C. King, the Chief Commandant of Police in Nicosia, attempted to explain the relationship between the Italians and the Locum Tenens. King wrote that the 'Locum Tenens is delighted with the present amicable relations between Italy and Greece which have resulted in the appointment of a new Governor of Rhodes, who has granted certain liberties to the people.' TNA: CO 67/266/13 (1937 Secret despatch, W. C. C. King, Chief Commandant of Police, to the Colonial Secretary, 27 November 1936.

²⁰ TNA: CO 67/265/11 (1936) 'Political situation: monthly police intelligence reports'. Intelligence Reports: Secret Report on the Political Situation in Cyprus from 1st October to the 31st December, 1936.

²¹ *ibid*

²² TNA: CO 67/274/5 (1937) Intelligence Report "The Political Situation in Cyprus from the 1st March to the 30th April, 1937.

²³ TNA: CO 67/265/11 (1936) Intelligence Report "The Political Situation in Cyprus from the 1st April to the 30th June, 1936.

²⁴ *ibid*

²⁵ *ibid*

²⁶ *ibid*

²⁷ TNA: CO 67/265/11 (1936) Intelligence Report "The Political Situation in Cyprus from the 1st October to the 31st December, 1936."

²⁸ *ibid*

²⁹ TNA: CO 67/265/11 (1936) Intelligence Report "The Political Situation in Cyprus from the 1st July to the 1st October, 1936.

³⁰ TNA: CO 67/274/5 (1937) Weekly Police Intelligence Report (summary), 7.10.1937 – 13.10.1937."

³¹ *ibid*

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³⁴ For more on the project of establishing a British University in Cyprus in the 1930s, see, Xypolia, Iliia (forthcoming) Cultural Propaganda and the Project of a British University in Cyprus, *Mediterranean Quarterly*.

³⁵ TNA: CO 67/273/2 (1937) Confidential Memorandum. Proposals for Expenditure by the British Council in the Near East during the financial year 1937- 38.

³⁶ TNA: FO 141/675/8 (1937) 'English Education and Culture'. 'British Cultural Propaganda in the Mediterranean Area' memorandum prepared by K.R. Johnstone, Foreign Office, dated 1936.

³⁷ TNA: FO 141/445/4 (1937) 'Italian Government's Eastern Mediterranean policy. Includes correspondence relating to a rapprochement between Italy and Yugoslavia'.

³⁸ James Barros' book give a detailed account of the neglected aspect in the evolution of Greek-Italian relations during the Abyssinian crisis.

³⁹ TNA: FO 141/445/4 (1937) 'Italian Government's Eastern Mediterranean policy. Includes correspondence relating to a rapprochement between Italy and Yugoslavia'. Sir Percy Loraine, British Embassy Ankara, telegram to Foreign Office, dated 18th February 1937.

⁴⁰ *ibid*

⁴¹ TNA: FO 371/23824 (1939) 'Status of Italian consul in Cyprus. Code 22 File 1499'. Extract from secret despatch from Governor of Cyprus to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, dated 13 January 1939.

⁴² *ibid*

⁴³ *ibid*

⁴⁴ TNA: CO 67/247/5 (1932) 'Amendment of Imperial Orders in Council by local legislation'. Intelligence Reports, 1937.

⁴⁵ *ibid*

⁴⁶ TNA: CO 67/274/5 (1938) Intelligence Report "The Political Situation in Cyprus from the 1st November to the 31st December, 1937.