

# "AFFORD REFUGE TO CHRISTIANS IN DISTRESS": AN (UNOFFICIAL) BRITISH HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE TO THE ARKADI EVENTS OF NOVEMBER 1866

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In November 1866, Cretan Christians seeking *enosis*, union with Greece, occupied the monastery at Arkadi, holding it against the forces of Mustapha Pasha. Following a short siege, Ottoman forces stormed the monastery and fought their way in through a breach in the walls. Rather than surrender, the besieged ignited a powder magazine within the monastery. A few weeks later, a British gunboat anchored off south west Crete and embarked some 315 Christian refugees and wounded taking them to Piraeus.<sup>2</sup> This action, carried out at the request of the British Consul in Crete, but without the knowledge or consent of the British government, was considered by the Ottomans to be a breach of their declared blockade of the island, and a breach of declared British neutrality. London, accepting, with reluctance, that the Consul and the ship's Captain had acted for humanitarian reasons, distanced itself from the consequences of the evacuation and took steps to ensure that no such action would be repeated by a British vessel.<sup>2</sup>

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**O**n 28 April 1866 Charles Hamner Dickson, the British Consul in Canea, reported to his direct superior Lord Lyons, the British Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire based in Constantinople, that "signs of disaffection are beginning to manifest themselves in various parts of this island;" a report copied to the Earl of Clarendon, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.<sup>3</sup> On 5 May Dickson reported that a gathering of nearly 1000 "Cretan Greeks" had taken place outside Canea, and that in spite of assurances from the Governor-General that their grievances would be investigated, the gathering had determined not to disperse until they had received a satisfactory reply from Constantinople. In the same

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1. House of Commons Command Paper (hereafter HCCP): 1867 [3771] *Correspondence respecting the disturbances in Crete: 1866-67*. Item 143, Enclosure 2. Pym to Vice Admiral Lord C. Paget, 13 December 1866.

2. HCCP 3771: 166/2, Ali Bey to Dickson, 20 December 1866. HCCP 3771: 170, Stanley to Dickson, 8 January 1867.

3. HCCP 3771: 1/1, Dickson to Lyons, 28 April 1866.

report, Dickson suggested that a British warship be sent to Crete "for the protection of British interests and as a measure of general security."<sup>4</sup>

By 14 May, Dickson was reporting that about 4000 "Cretan Greeks" had now gathered and Muslims were beginning to abandon their villages suspecting that the assembly was a precursor to military action against them. By 2 June, Dickson reported that the assembly had produced its petition to the Sultan and furnished copies to the various Christian consuls in Canea.<sup>5</sup> The petition reiterated the previous grievances and made specific reference to the failure of the Ottoman authorities on Crete to implement the provisions of the *Hatt-ı Hümayun*, the Sultan's 1856 proclamation guaranteeing freedom of religion throughout the Empire and lifting many discriminatory restrictions on non-Muslims.<sup>6</sup> Almost simultaneously however, another agenda was revealed by a separate address, in the form of a petition to the Sultan, which was copied to Lyons in Constantinople on 19 June by a representative of the Cretan Christians.<sup>7</sup> This petition, dated 15 May 1866, requested Queen Victoria, and the monarchs of the Protecting Powers of Greece, to unite Crete with Greece or, failing that, to obtain a separate political organisation for Crete; an agenda of which the Porte were well aware.<sup>8</sup> Lyons refused to accept the petition.<sup>9</sup>

The initial Ottoman reaction to the agitation was to send 2,500 troops, plus artillery, to the island (Dontas 1966: 68), followed by a further 5,700 in early June,<sup>10</sup> and to call on the assembly to disperse peacefully. The Ottoman response to the petition to the Sultan and the continued assembly of Cretan Christians was contained in instructions issued by the Porte to the Governor General of Crete on 15 July, ordering him to forcibly dissolve the Christian Cretan Assembly, if it did not immediately disperse.<sup>11</sup> To this end a further 6,000 troops were sent to the island bringing the total of Ottoman forces at this stage to approximately 22,000 (Dontas 1966: 70). The Cretan Christian reaction, as reported by Dickson on 18 August, was for many families to flee their towns and villages and take to the mountains,

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4. HCCP 3771: 2/2, Dickson to Lyons, 5 May 1866.

5. Consuls at that time included the British, Austrian, French, Russian, Italian, Greek, Swedish and American. HCCP 3771: 3/1, Dickson to Lyons, 14 May 1866. HCCP 3771: 5/1, Dickson to Lyons, 2 June 1866.

6. *Hatt-ı Hümayun*: Electronic source at: <http://www.anayasa.gen.tr/reform.htm>

7. HCCP 3771: 8, Lyons to Clarendon, 19 June 1866.

8. HCCP 3771: 7, Lyons to Clarendon, 19 June 1866.

9. HCCP 3771: 8, Lyons to Clarendon, 19 June 1866.

10. HCCP 3771: 5/1, Dickson to Lyons, 2 June 1866.

11. HCCP 3771: 22/1, Porte to Governor of Crete, 15 July 1866.

and to commence the formation of bands of armed men.<sup>12</sup> On 21 August, the Central Committee of Cretans, also referred to as the General Assembly of Cretans, declared to the Christian Powers (the "three protecting and guaranteeing Great Powers") in a communication apparently sent via Greece direct to the governments in question, that: "there was no other alternative left to the Christian population of Crete other than to take up arms to protect their honour, life and property by repulsing violence by violence."<sup>13</sup> By 2 September, when the General Assembly of Cretans declared "Ottoman dominion is abolished forever in the Island of Crete [...] [and] Crete, with all its dependencies is forever and inseparably united to Greece" a virtual state of war existed.<sup>14</sup> With four armed groups on the island, regular Ottoman troops, their Egyptian allies, Cretan Muslim irregulars (*başı bazuk*) and Cretan Christians, fighting continued sporadically throughout the next few months with both Cretan Christians and Ottoman forces claiming to have inflicted significant defeats upon the other and with each accusing the other of committing atrocities against civilians and prisoners.<sup>15</sup> Following an encounter at Vafe on 24 October, after which both sides claimed a victory, Dickson reported that the Ottoman commander had proclaimed an amnesty for all who had taken part in the insurrection on condition that they lay down their arms immediately.<sup>16</sup> This amnesty was ignored by significant numbers of insurrectionists, "malcontents" according to Dickson,<sup>17</sup> several hundred of whom, along with women and children, eventually rallied at the fortified monastery at Arkadi, several kilometres south of Rethymno.

The two-day siege of Arkadi ended on 21 November 1866 when the Ottoman forces stormed the building. Shortly after the Ottoman troops fought their way into the monastery complex, a powder magazine was deliberately exploded, either by the Abbot or by one of the Cretan Christian commanders, depending upon the version of the story. The explosion resulted in the deaths of the many of those inside, both Cretan Christian fighters and civilians, and Ottoman troops. Though frequently stated to-

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12. HCCP3771: 35/1, Dickson to Lyons, 18 August 1866.

13. HCCP 3771: Item 40 Central Committee of Cretans to Representatives of the Christian Powers in Crete, 21 August 1866.

14. HCCP 3771: 53/1, Erskine to Stanley, 21 September 1866. HCCP 3771: 49/1, Dickson to Stanley & Lyons, 3 Sept 1866.

15. HCCP 3771: 54, Lloyd to Erskine, 18 Sept 1866. N.B. Duplication of item number. HCCP 3771: 57/1, Dickson to Lyons, 11 September 1866.

16. HCCP 3771: 108, Dickson to Stanley, 3 November 1866.

17. Ibid.

day that a massacre of Cretan Christians followed the storming of the building, a figure of 114 being commonly quoted,<sup>18</sup> no such event is mentioned in initial reports from, or to, Dickson, although he later refers to the butchery and plunder carried out by *başı bazuks* at Arkadi.<sup>19</sup> However, the fate of the prisoners taken in the siege did cause some concern to observers; Dickson suggests that some were secretly beheaded while *en route* to prison and that at least 45 were eventually incarcerated in Rethymno,<sup>20</sup> while another, near contemporary, report recorded by a writer who travelled with the Greek insurgents, states that “more than one hundred women [were] spared at the time and soon afterwards set at liberty [...] along with a hearty looking priest who escaped from Arkadi just as it was stormed” (Skinner 1868: 76–77).

Following the events at Arkadi, the remnants of insurgent forces in the west of the island retreated over the mountains towards the districts of Selino and Sfakia, taking with them their families and being pursued by the forces of Mustapha Pasha. The potential plight of foreign volunteers fighting alongside the insurgents, if caught by the Ottomans, as well as the conditions of the refugees and the onset of winter, prompted Dickson’s request to Commander Pym, Captain of H.M.S. *Assurance*, that he take his ship along the west coast of the island and offer assistance to any Christians in distress.

### THE CONSUL AND THE COMMANDER

Charles Hamner Dickson, the British consul in Crete in 1866, was born in Tripoli in 1824 and entered the consular service in 1846, being appointed vice consul in Benghazi. After service as an interpreter in the Crimean War, for which he was awarded an Ottoman Imperial Order, he was appointed consul in Crete on 14 January 1865, leaving the island in 1868 (Herslet 1869: July) and dying in Constantinople in July 1869.

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18. <http://www.mlahanas.de/Greece/Regions/MoniArkadiou.html> Accessed 19 May 2016, states that 114 prisoners were killed. Numerous other websites quote this figure, but none give any reference to the source. Contemporary newspaper reports, quoting Ottoman communiqués, suggest around 42 insurgents and 90 women and children were taken prisoner: *The Tablet* 22 December 1866: 4. <http://archive.thetablet.co.uk/article/22nd-december-1866/4/the-cretan-insurrection> Accessed 12 June 2016.

19. HCCP 3771: 126 & 127/1&2, Dickson to Stanley, 26 November & 3 December 1866. HCCP 3771:132. Dickson to Stanley, 10 December 1866.

20. HCCP 3771: 132. Dickson to Stanley, 10 December 1866.

His employment background, apparently solely within the Ottoman Empire or on the disputed border with Russia, opened him to allegations that he was unduly pro-Ottoman in his reporting from Crete. A later critic observed that "Consul C. H. Dickson at Crete, who was soon to embarrass his government with his highly-colored and misleading pro-Turkish reports on the Cretan uprising of 1866-67, had twenty-one years' service in Turkey" (Iseminger 1968: 300); while his fellow (American) consul W. J. Stillman alleged that "Dickson, a man of the most humane character and entire honesty, had an unfortunate weakness before constituted authorities, and the greatest possible respect for the Turks, coupled with an Englishman's innate dislike for a Greek", and later described him as "the honest, if too pro-Turkish, Dickson" (Stillman 1874: 44 and 1901: ch. XXI, 33).

In contrast to much of the later British newspaper reporting of the conditions that led to the insurrection, Dickson, though he had only been on the island for a relatively short time, took the view that all the peasantry were suffering under the burden of Ottoman mismanagement, though not all suffering equally or in the same manner. At the start of his reporting on the insurrection, he noted that "the grievances complained of are not confined to the Greek rural population alone, but affect the Mahometan peasantry as well."<sup>21</sup> A year later, 4 April 1867, after the events at Arkadi and after the voyage of H.M.S. *Assurance*, though sympathetic to the Cretan Christian complaints, he was still unwilling to support the insurrection:

I shall not recapitulate the several grievances specified in the petition to the Sultan [...] and which I consider to be in a great measure well founded, yet, as I distinctly declared to the Cretans at the time, by no means to such a degree as ought to provoke insurrection.<sup>22</sup>

Concerns were expressed about his apparent over-reliance on the official Ottoman version of events in Crete. His alleged bias in reporting was challenged by Edward Erskine (British Minister Plenipotentiary to Greece) who, as early as 10 November 1866, complained:

I perceive that [...] Dickson's intelligence is mainly derived from official sources; and although the versions published here of what is taking place in Crete may not be altogether trustworthy it is as well to have both sides of

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21. HCCP 3771: 1, Enclosure 1. Dickson to Lyons, 28 April 1866.

22. HCCP Paper No.3854/3994 Part II Volume/Page; LXXV.601-693. *Reports received from Her Majesty's Ambassadors and Consuls Relating to the Condition of Christians in Turkey*: 14/14: 47.

the story. At all events I do not find that anyone here believes that the insurrection is as nearly at an end as is supposed by [...] Dickson.<sup>23</sup>

Dickson's initial reports on the Arkadi event illustrate his approach to the insurrectionists, describing, on 26 November 1866, the Cretan Christians who fought there as "a band of malcontents [who] had resolved on offering resistance at the noted monastery of Arkadi."<sup>24</sup> A short while later, 10 December, Dickson had a somewhat clearer picture of the events which lead to the explosion at the monastery and its consequences. Though acknowledging the bravery of those who died, he was highly critical of insurgents for allowing so many women and children to be at Arkadi:

The brave defenders of the monastery have on that occasion evidently been true to their motto (Liberty or Death!); yet the cruelty if not the wickedness of permitting a number of defenceless women and children to remain on the premises after it was known that a large Turkish force had left Retimo town to attack them remains to be explained.<sup>25</sup>

Whatever his personal preferences may have been, Dickson's instructions from his immediate superior, Lord Lyons, made it clear as early as 12 August 1866 that Dickson was to "promote all endeavours on the part of the Ottoman authorities to restore tranquillity and maintain the legitimate authority of the government without recourse to force", and to "avoid all unnecessary interference in the unhappy dispute."<sup>26</sup> The constraints on Dickson's course of action were confirmed in October 1866 when, whilst accepting that his previous instruction was now outdated by the outbreak of fighting, Lyons reminded Dickson of the need to maintain "a careful neutrality;"<sup>27</sup> Lyons previous posting as Ambassador to Washington during the American Civil War and his involvement in the "Trent Incident", in which a US warship boarded a British merchant vessel and removed two Confederate diplomats,<sup>28</sup> had made him sensitive to the potential consequences of breaches of neutrality. However, at Dickson's instigation, British neutrality was to be put at risk by a relatively junior Royal Navy officer.

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23. HCCP 3771: 106 & 119. Erskine to Stanley, 10 & 27 November 1866.

24. HCCP 3771: Item 126. Dickson to Stanley, 26 November 1866.

25. HCCP 3771: 132, Dickson to Stanley, 10 December 1866.

26. HCCP 3771: 22/4, Lyons to Dickson, 12 August 1866.

27. HCCP 3771: 80/1, Lyons to Dickson, 15 October 1866.

28. Oxford Dictionary of National Biography Electronic source at: <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/17292?docPos=4>, Accessed 11.35 hrs 3 Jan 2011.

William Henry Pym was born in 1828, and in 1866, while holding the rank of Commander, was the Captain of the gunboat H.M.S. *Assurance*. Described as having:

a certain defiance of red-tape and a feverishness to distinguish himself which did not always measure carefully the purport of general orders, and which, perhaps, in battle would have made him turn a blind eye to a signal of recall, and now disposed him to abandon on any pretext the cold blooded neutrality of his government (Stillman 1874: 91),

he was ordered to Canea in order to be on hand to provide protection for British citizens and property, arriving there in late October/early November 1866.<sup>29</sup> According to Dickson in a despatch dated 17 November, i.e. before the events at Arkadi, on arrival in Crete, one of Pym's first actions was to go, with Dickson, "about the beginning of the month" to meet Aali Bey, the Acting Governor General of Crete. At this meeting they discussed with Aali Bey the proposal that:

as the insurrection might now be happily considered at an end, whether Her Majesty's ship might not be of service in transporting some of the Christian families in distress (along with their men) who might be desirous of quitting the island and proceeding to Greece.<sup>30</sup>

In the same despatch Dickson wrote that "Aali Bey assured us that he would write to Mustapha Pasha on the subject"; a promise that Dickson was later to turn to the claim that "before requesting Captain Pym to proceed to the western end of the island, I obtained the consent of the Imperial Commissioner to that step."<sup>31</sup> According to Dickson, the French Consul agreed with sentiments he and Pym had expressed to Aali Bey, but declined to take action without orders. Subsequently Pym and Dickson also decided to take no further action on the matter, Dickson reporting that "no Christian families [...] signified to us any anxiety to leave the island."<sup>32</sup>

It is unclear from the content of the despatch of 17 November whether this meeting with Aali Bey took place before or after Dickson had received

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29. HCCP 3771: 118, Dickson to Stanley, 17 November 1866.

30. *Ibid.* Writing much later, Stillman, the American consul, claimed that it was at his initiative, and on his pleading, that Dickson and Pym acted. However, he claims to have done so on or after the receipt of a despatch from his superiors in America dated 25 December (Stillman 1901: 28). Pym and Dickson had clearly been considering such action from early November and the voyage of H.M.S *Assurance* took place on 10 December.

31. HCCP 3771: 150, Dickson to Stanley, 13 December 1866.

32. HCCP 3771: 118, Dickson to Stanley, 17 November 1866.

orders from Lyons instructing him to “urge the Ottoman authorities to take, and to take himself, every feasible and proper measure to save the women and children not only from insult and injury, but also from hunger and cold.”<sup>33</sup> However, this instruction was given in the light of the belief that the insurrection was almost at an end, and following a request from the King of Greece for the Protecting Powers to provide ships to evacuate Cretan Christian refugees to Greece—a request which was turned down.<sup>34</sup> Dickson later acknowledged that on the 10 November he had received orders that he “was in no way to promote or encourage the embarkation of Cretans in foreign ships, as Her Majesty’s Ministers had determined to maintain the strictest neutrality on this question.”<sup>35</sup> Notwithstanding the issue of neutrality, the matter of using a Royal Navy vessel, or any other foreign vessel, to pick up refugees was further complicated by the Ottoman proclamation, in a circular addressed to the consuls in September 1866, of a partial naval blockade of Crete.<sup>36</sup>

By 8 December 1866, Dickson had reached the conclusion that the potential plight of “foreign insurgent volunteers” facing execution if captured (Stillman 1874: 86) had reached such extremities that direct action was required, even if this action was contrary to the letter and spirit of his instructions.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, conflating the interests of the volunteers with those of the refugees, a step which was subsequently referred to in the House of Lords as “imprudent”, he requested Pym to:

cruise close to the western coast of the island [and] seize every available opportunity for affording refuge to any Christian in distress who may seek protection on board your ship, and [...] convey the same to any port in Greece that you may deem advisable.<sup>38</sup>

On arrival off Selino-Kastelli (modern Paleochora, on the extreme southwest of the island) on the afternoon of 10 December, Pym discovered:

25 wounded and sick men, 126 women, and 164 children (Christians) [who] sought refuge on board from the district of Selino; and as they were ex-

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33. HCCP 3771: 140, Lyons to Stanley, 7 November 1866.

34. HCCP 3771: 110, Erskine to Stanley, 15 November 1866.

35. HCCP 3771: 118, Dickson to Stanley, 17 November 1866.

36. HCCP 3771: 113/1, Mustapha Pasha to Dickson, 23/24 September 1866.

37. HCCP 3771: 132. Dickson to Stanley, 10 December 1866. See also HCCP 3771:131, H. Elliot, Consul in Florence, to Stanley, 19 December 1866, re the execution of two Italian volunteers captured during fighting at Kissamos.

38. House of Lords Debate 8 March 1867. Vol.185 c.1541. Earl of Kimberly. HCCP 3771: 132/1, Dickson to Pym, 8 December 1866.



posed to hunger and the inclemency of the weather (the mountains being covered with snow), their villages having been destroyed and as they expected no quarter from the Turks [...] I considered it my duty to receive them on board, and having being requested to take them to Piraeus, I did so accordingly [...]<sup>39</sup>

Meanwhile, on 13 December, having received further instructions not to take any action which might be a "manifestation of sympathy with the insurgents,"<sup>40</sup> Dickson again wrote to Pym, this time requesting him not to "receive any insurgents on board but [...] return without delay to Suda Bay." By now however, Pym had made the journey, arriving in Piraeus with the refugees on 13 December where he received Dickson's cancellation of the original request.<sup>41</sup>

In the aftermath of the evacuation, H.M.S. *Assurance* returned briefly to Crete on 18 December before departing the following day for Malta, a move in station initially reported in the European press as being at the request of the Porte because of Pym's activity—reports which were later refuted since the orders to replace the *Assurance* could only have been sent before Pym's voyage to Selino-Kastelli.<sup>42</sup> News of H.M.S. *Assurance's* arrival in Piraeus with the refugees reached Lyons in Constantinople on 17 December and formal notification appears to have reached the Foreign Office in London on 26 December via a dispatch from the British consul in Syra.<sup>43</sup> News of the voyage was broken to the British public in *The Times* on 28 December.<sup>44</sup>

Pym's actions were investigated by the Admiralty and Pym was described as being "justified in his proceedings" on the grounds that he acted out of the best humanitarian motives and at the request of Dickson. This view was accepted by the Foreign Office with some alacrity, both the Foreign Office and the Admiralty stressing the humanitarian aspects of the voyage in order to forestall any accusations of offering aid and support to the insurgents.<sup>45</sup> Though Pym was cleared, the Admiralty criticised Dickson for seeking to use a British vessel of war to "carry away foreign merce-

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39. HCCP 3771: 143/2, Pym to Vice Admiral Lord C. Paget, 13 December 1866.

40. HCCP 3771: 150, Dickson to Stanley, 13 December 1866.

41. HCCP 3771: 143/5, Dickson to Pym, 13 December 1866.

42. *Manchester Guardian*, 31 December 1866: 3 and 5 January 1867: 6.

43. HCCP 3771: 133, Lloyd to Stanley, 15 December 1866.

44. *The Times*, 28 December 1866: 7.

45. HCCP 3771: 143, Admiralty to Stanley, 27 December 1866. HCCP 3771: 144, Hammond to Admiralty, 29 December 1866

naries who are aiding and abetting an insurrection to overthrow their [the insurrectionists'] Government, in case of their defeat."<sup>46</sup> Clearly the Admiralty did not appreciate a relatively junior diplomat getting the Royal Navy involved in a potentially serious diplomatic situation.

In spite of his exoneration, Pym was "severely reprimanded" in March 1867 in connection with a court-martial of one of his crew and returned to England on the grounds of "ill health" that July. He never held a seagoing post again and after further reprimands, poor fitness reports and a suspension to avoid his own court-martial for making false journal entries, he retired in 1873, dying in March 1886.<sup>47</sup>

Dickson's superiors in the Foreign Office, in their turn, could do little other than endorse Dickson's actions, particularly since, by early January 1867, British public reaction to events on the island had, in part, manifested itself with the formation of the "Candian Refugees Relief Fund." However, it is clear from the despatch from Foreign Secretary Stanley to Dickson on 8 January 1867 that there were doubts over Dickson's claim that the trip was authorised by the Ottoman authorities and concern that the "proceeding was in strictness open to objection as being not altogether consistent with the neutrality of the British Government in regard to the contest in Crete." In the circumstances, Stanley told Dickson: "I will not disapprove your conduct"; going on in the same communication to remind him to maintain neutrality and declining to sanction Dickson's suggestion of a combined consular approach to the Ottoman authorities on Crete,<sup>48</sup>—clearly a matter of being "damned with faint praise."

Despite the efforts of the Foreign Office to paint the trip of H.M.S. *Assurance* as a humanitarian voyage carried out by a consul without government sanction,<sup>49</sup> other navies were quick to seize the voyage as a precedent. On 26/27 December 1866 the Russian frigate *Grand Amiral*, went from Canea to Tripiti Bay, near Selino-Kastelli, where she embarked some 1,100 people, including fighters and returning "volunteers," taking them to Piraeus. On being challenged by an Ottoman steamer as to why they were breaking the blockade, the Russian Captain responded that he was acting on his own initiative and:

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46. HCCP 3771: 143/1, Vice Admiral Paget to Admiralty, 22 December 1866.

47. National Archives (NA), Admiralty Series ADM 196/37 and ADM196/13.

48. HCCP 3771: 170, Stanley to Dickson, 8 January 1867.

49. HCCP 3771: 147, Stanley to Fane (Interview with French Ambassador, 29 December 1866.)

that the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Sultan had besides stated [...] that "the fact of a first transport of Cretan refugees by the English gunboat, totally changed the aspects of things" and that the Porte could not henceforth object to ships of other nations following that example.<sup>50</sup>

The Porte however, did object and made clear its objections to the picking up of refugees when, on 17 January 1867, the Ottoman authorities requested the assistance of Dickson and other European consuls in providing naval forces to evacuate foreign volunteers who wished to take no further part in the Cretan fighting. In doing so, Aali Bey specifically stated that "no Cretans, whether men, women or children must be removed,"<sup>51</sup> a distinction made to ensure that the insurgents were not relieved of the burden of feeding and caring for their non-combatant dependents. This time, Dickson, presumably having learned his lesson, declined to request the use of a British warship, in part, he stated, because this would be a "breach of neutrality."<sup>52</sup> By August 1867, the Ottoman policy towards refugees had become unsustainable and the evacuation of Cretan Christians grudgingly tolerated.<sup>53</sup> However, with the French, Russian, Austrian, Italian, and Prussian navies all sending warships, in September the Ottoman authorities again sought to stop the evacuation.<sup>54</sup> Throughout the Porte's changes of policy towards the evacuations, irrespective of Dickson's continuing requests and hints from the Royal Navy, the British Government remained adamant that no British warships would be involved.<sup>55</sup>

## THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT AND THE CRETAN INSURRECTION

Intervention by foreign consuls to prevent massacre was not unknown in the history of Greek-Ottoman relations. In 1823, the French, Austrian and Dutch consuls in Athens, and the captains of two French ships, had been responsible for saving some 550 Ottoman soldiers from Greek soldiers and the citizens of Athens following the surrender of the Turkish garrison of

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50. HCCP 3771: 193/2, Extract from *Journal de St. Petersbourg*, January 19/20 1867.

51. HCCP 3771: 201, Dickson to Stanley, 19 January 1867.

52. *Ibid.*

53. HCCP 3965 (*Reports by Consul-General Longworth, respecting Island of Crete, 1858*): 229, Ellis to Stanley, 3 August 1867.

54. HCCP 3965: 265, Dickson to Stanley, 28 September 1867. HCCP 3965: 267, Musurus Pasha to Stanley, 13 October 1867.

55. HCCP 3965: 230/4, Dickson to Ellis, 21 July 1867. HCCP 3965: 253/1, Paget to Secretary of Admiralty, 1 September 1867. HCCP 3965: 254, Hammond to the Secretary of Admiralty, 21 September 1867.

the Acropolis (Brewer 2003: 171–172). Additionally, Britain's military intervention in the Greek War of Independence was triggered in part by reports of Ottoman atrocities and rumours of a plan to depopulate Greece, selling the inhabitants into slavery (Bass 2008: 124). By 1866, however, the Ottoman Empire was an ally alongside whom Britain had gone to war against Russia in the recent past, and whose territorial integrity was considered vital to British interests in the Mediterranean; while Greece was viewed with exasperation. From its creation, the new-born Greek state had been in a chaotic political and financial situation. In 1858, Greek finances were in such a state that the country was forced to submit to an international commission from the Protecting Powers who took control of a portion of her finances in order to repay debts incurred during, and since, the creation of the state (Woodhouse 1977: 100). That this financial mismanagement influenced British governmental reaction to the Cretan Insurrection was highlighted by Stanley:

Opinion here is undecided about the Cretan quarrel. Nobody much believes in the Turks, but the old Phil-Hellenism is dead, and cannot be revived. Greece is too much associated in the English mind with unpaid debts and commercial sharp practice to command the sympathy that was felt thirty years ago. And now that questions of more interest, and nearer home are being discussed, Crete will drop out of men's minds.<sup>56</sup>

London's reaction to the prospect of expansion of the Greek state by the incorporation of Crete or by expansion into the Ottoman territories in the north of Greece was conditioned in part by the fear of Russian reaction to any such move. Additionally, British Imperial policy necessitated supporting the authority of the established Ottoman Empire against insurrectionary forces; to do otherwise would have given a claim to legitimacy to those, both within the British Empire and within the United Kingdom, who wished to break away from British rule. In March 1867 Stanley stated:

We thought that prima facie the Porte had the same right to put down an insurrection in Crete as England had in India, or France in Algeria or Russia in Poland. We could not complain of the government of the Sultan for doing that which every Government in the world [...] had done and would do again when the necessity presented itself.<sup>57</sup>

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56. Stanley to Lyons, undated. Quoted in Dontas 1966: 80.

57. HCCP 3965: 56, Stanley to Cowley, 27 March 1867. See also Pottinger Saab 1977: 1383–1407.

Although Britain was one of the Protecting Powers guaranteeing Greek territorial integrity, and although British diplomacy and military power had played a part in the formation of the Greek state, the insurrection in Crete was an Ottoman affair. No matter how sympathetic Britain was towards the sufferings of Christians in Crete, Britain was not going to get involved. Speaking to the House of Commons in February 1867, Stanley hoped:

the House will believe that our sympathy for the Christian races of the East is not less real or sincere because we have not thought fit to give a semblance of encouragement to a hopeless insurrection or to compromise ourselves or them by a precipitate and premature action.<sup>58</sup>

The lack of British governmental sympathy for the insurgents, as opposed to the civilian victims of the insurrection, was apparent as early as September 1866 when Stanley told the Turkish Ambassador in London that while they believed that there might be some cause for grievance amongst the Christians of Crete, "there was great exaggeration made by the Cretans as to their grievances [and] it was the desire of Her Majesty's Government that the Porte should be able to maintain its authority."<sup>59</sup> This view of the seriousness of the ostensible causes of the insurrection coincided with the reports being sent by Dickson. The suggestion that the Cretan Christians were not wholly innocent parties would be supported to a certain extent by the report made by the previous Consul in Crete, J. A. Longworth, on the causes of the 1858 rebellion on the island.<sup>60</sup> Longworth's report was published in 1867 in an effort to justify the Government's non-interventionist stance.

The news of the Arkadi explosion had no discernible impact on the British government when it reached them.<sup>61</sup> There was no change in London's attitude to the insurrection but, conscious of the potential propaganda effects of the news of the explosion, the Porte was urged to allay the feelings of sympathy towards the insurgents that were developing in Europe "by displaying clemency towards the vanquished and giving them assurances of a mild and equitable administration for the time to come." The urging of such a policy on the Porte was however not pressed beyond

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58. Stanley. House of Commons Debate 15 February 1867. Vol. 185 cc. 406-50.

59. HCCP 3771: 36, Stanley to Lyons, 4 September 1866.

60. House of Commons Command Paper No. 3965. I. Volume/page LXXIII.503  
*Reports by Consul-General Longworth Respecting the Island of Crete, 1858.*

61. HCCP 3771: 119, Erskine to Stanley, 27 November 1866.

"the limits within which a friendly and allied Government [was] entitled to offer advice."<sup>62</sup>

The report of the voyage of H.M.S. *Assurance* had a greater impact in government circles in London and Constantinople. London's fear was that Pym's actions would be interpreted by Greeks and Cretan Christians as Britain offering support to the insurrection; a fear that was justified by the enthusiastic responses to the evacuation of the refugees reported by British Consuls Ongley in Patras, Lloyd in Syra, and Stuart in Janina.<sup>63</sup> In spite of the enthusiasm with which the evacuation was greeted in Greece, and even in the absence of instructions from London, British diplomats were swift to distance themselves, and British policy, from being seen to support the Cretan insurrectionists. Most painted Pym's voyage as a humanitarian gesture but one that would not necessarily have been supported by the British government had they been aware of its taking place: Lloyd advised those who congratulated him on Pym's actions to refrain from "calculating upon it as a pledge for further intervention."<sup>64</sup> This was a somewhat more robust approach than that taken by Erskine who, after responding favourably to an approach from the Archbishop of Athens concerning his possible role in distributing funds to the refugees, had to be reminded by London that:

It is clear that every endeavour is made to create an impression that the British legation in Athens countenances and sympathizes with the disturbances in Crete, and that nothing should be said or done by you which is calculated to encourage that impression.<sup>65</sup>

The British Government, having once been caught wrong-footed by the actions of two junior British representatives and fearful of the consequences of even accidental involvement in the Cretan Rebellion, were in no mood to allow even the possibility of the misinterpretation of any humanitarian gestures carried out by their consular staff.

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62. HCCP 3771: 120, Lyons to Stanley, 28 November 1866.

63. HCCP 3771: 152/1, Ongley to Erskine and Stanley, 17 December 1866. HCCP 3371: 133, Lloyd to Stanley, 15 December 1866. HCCP 3771: 180, Stuart to Lyons, 3 January 1867.

64. HCCP 3771: 133, Lloyd to Stanley, 15 December 1866.

65. HCCP 3371: 137, Erskine to Stanley, 19 December 1866. HCCP 3771: 140, Stanley to Erskine, 27 December 1866.

## CONCLUSIONS

From the political point of view of the British government, the timing of the outbreak of the Cretan insurrection was fortuitous. The Liberal Government fell on 26 June 1866 and though swiftly replaced by a Conservative regime under the Earl of Derby, Parliament was prorogued in August and did not sit again until 5 February 1867. Thus the news of both the fall of Arkadi and the voyage of H.M.S. *Assurance* came when Parliament was not sitting, allowing the Earl of Beauchamp to remark in the opening session of the House of Lords:

I think it is a matter of some satisfaction that the insurrection took place while Parliament was not sitting. [...] I cannot but rejoice that the insurrection in Crete took place when this House was not in sitting because expressions of sympathy might have been regarded as promises of material assistance which we were unable to afford.<sup>66</sup>

From the start of the insurrection the British government had been resolute in its determination not to do anything which might jeopardise the status quo with respect to the borders of the Ottoman Empire. While there was a degree of sympathy for the plight of Cretan Christian refugees, manifested via diplomatic channels in polite requests that the Ottoman authorities seek to alleviate their suffering and take some measures to remedy the complaints which ostensibly triggered the insurrection, nothing beyond this was done. Stanley went as far as to seek to discourage any display within Parliament that could be considered to be offering support to the insurgents stating:

it is not the duty of the British Government to lend a hand or precipitate [the fall of the Ottoman Empire] [...] and perhaps the very last thing to be done is to point out in the British parliament the defects of the Turkish Government [...] and to show unbounded sympathy for those who are in open revolt against the constituted authority of the country.<sup>67</sup>

Two further factors undoubtedly influenced British policy towards Crete at this time. The British Government could not but fail to take into account the need not to offend the ever-increasing number of Muslims within the British Empire. Such a concern was of particular import at this time since the establishment of Crown rule in India in 1858, following the Indian Mutiny, was leading to a closer identification by Indian Muslims

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66. HL Debate. 5 February 1867. Vol.185 c.10. Earl Beauchamp.

67. HL Debate. 8 March 1867. Vol.185 c.1532. Earl Derby.

with the Ottoman Empire and Caliphate as the strongest Muslim state at the time still uncolonised by a Western power (Pay 2015: 285). Closer to home, the British could not be seen supporting insurgent groups revolting against a foreign ruler of a different religion while Fenian activity was taking place both in Ireland (Campbell, 2012: 6) and in Canada.

Though in practical terms of the Cretan struggle for unification with Greece, the events at Arkadi were irrelevant to the outcome of the insurrection and although in spite of this for some Cretans, Arkadi has "become simplistically symbolised in public memory [as the] single event [...] calculated best to reinforce a special [Cretan] identity" (Hastings 1997: 191),<sup>68</sup> the Cretan Christian self-sacrifice had no influence on the development or application of British policy towards Crete. This policy had already been determined and did not envisage a union of Crete with Greece, whatever the cost to Cretan Christians. The actions of Dickson and Pym in initiating the trip to collect refugees, however, had a greater impact on the British government; the voyage came as an unwelcome surprise and ran the danger of being seen as a change of British policy to date. As well as the voyage impinging on embargoed Ottoman territory, the language used by Dickson in his request to Pym, referring to the plight of "foreign insurgent volunteers" and requesting that Pym "afford refuge to any Christian in distress,"<sup>69</sup> was open to misinterpretation and could have been seen as a request to offer support to Christian fighters as well as to Christian refugees. Fortunately for London, the Ottoman authorities were unaware of the wording, and even when made public, they overlooked, by accident or design, its implications.

Ultimately, while the British government had publicly to accept that the trip had been made for humanitarian reasons, they made it clear in the House of Lords that it was unauthorised, out of line with British policy and was not intended, nor was it to be allowed, to set a precedent for future British activity.<sup>70</sup> That European navies in their turn sent warships to collect foreign volunteers and refugees, and later transported further civilians from Suda Bay to relative safety in Greece, vindicated British fears of foreign power interference in what Britain saw as a purely internal Ottoman

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68. An internet search for "Arkadi Crete" in June 2016 gave over 253,000 links to the search title. Furthermore, family memories of those who died in Arkadi in 1866 were still extant in the late 1970s (Herzfeld 1985: 9,10).

69. HCCP 3771: 143/4, Dickson to Pym, 8 December 1866.

70. House of Lords Debate. 8 March 1867 Vol. 185 cc 1537 & 1538. Earl of Derby



affair—however distasteful that affair might be. There is little evidence that either the events at Arkadi or the trip of H.M.S. *Assurance* had any impact on public reaction in Britain. While the launch of the London based Candian Refugee Relief Fund followed shortly after the news of Arkadi reached Britain, there is no mention of it, or Pym’s trip, in any of the literature announcing or discussing the fund. British public philanthropic reaction appears to have been directed towards the totality of events in Crete and was displayed by a short lived sympathy for the plight of Christian refugees. The practical aspects of that sympathy, as measured by the existence of and contributions to the Candian Refugee Relief Fund, died down within a year amid growing concerns about the responsibility of the Greek government, the Cretan Central Committee and the insurgents themselves for the continuing misfortune of the refugees. In addition, there was little sympathy for the refugees in some quarters as one correspondent responding to an appeal for funds in the Times wrote:

[Why should we] put our hands in our pockets and relieve those pestilent revolutionaries from the natural penalty which has fallen upon them for infringing international laws. We might just as wisely and morally unite with Irish servant girls in clubbing our money for the relief of distressed Fenians<sup>71</sup>

a sentiment which, consciously or unconsciously, probably echoed part, the attitudes of the British Government.

In the end, the British government did nothing materially to aid the Cretan refugees while the British public did something, raising at least £13,000 (over £1.34 million in today’s terms) from a relatively small donor pool, with the Greek ex-patriot community doing the most.<sup>72</sup>

## POST SCRIPT

While History does not repeat itself, speaking in the House of Commons on 8 March 1897, George Curzon, Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, reported that on 4 March, H.M.S. *Rodney*, with Sir Alfred Biliotti, the British Consul from Canea, aboard, had gone to Selino-Kastelli to relieve Cretans blockaded by their fellow Cretans in Kandanos: this time it was Cretan Muslims besieged by Cretan Christians.<sup>73</sup>

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71. *The Times*, 28 August 1868, letter from John Vickers.

72 1867 figures obtained from *The Times*, 1 February 1867: 6 and the *Manchester Guardian*, 6 April 1867: 1.

73 House of Commons Debate. 8 March 1897. Vol.47. c.199.

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