

Not so strategic: colonial Cyprus's harbours and railway

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ABSTRACT

In popular and standard accounts of Cyprus and British historiography, Cyprus is considered as a strategic asset for the British empire especially in the beginning (1878) and at the end (1950s until independence in 1960) of British colonialism in the island. Harbours were strategic to European colonial empires as interfaces between metropole and colony, on civil and military levels. These characteristics are emphasised when one considers Cyprus as the only sovereign British land within the context of the Middle East. However, a closer look at the classic strategic technological assets of an island colony, namely ports and railways, suggests quite the contrary. By analysing harbour and railway developments in Cyprus, one may conclude to what extent Cyprus's strategic importance was questionable from the outset.



Cyprus Government Railway line

The occupation of Cyprus by the British Empire took place in 1878 immediately after the Berlin Congress. This was a period when maritime prowess was substantially important for war, commerce and politics of competing empires. This is why it comes as no surprise that Cyprus's harbours attracted the interest of contemporary seamen and politicians. Within this framework, Famagusta Harbour was the major attraction point. Famagusta, an ancient city with a glorious medieval past in the Levant, possessed a harbour that was considered to be significant for imperial use. However, in 1878 the harbour was filled with mud, serving only small sailing vessels of coastal trading thus far from an immediate strategic asset i.e. a coaling station. Despite its condition, contemporary British engineers and seamen widely accepted that it possessed superior natural characteristics. In the phrasing of the time, it could be made "second to the Great Harbour of Alexandria" or "first-class Harbour" such as the grand harbours of

Alexandria in Egypt and in Valetta (Malta).

The fate of Famagusta went hand in hand with that of the island. If Cyprus was strategic, it was because it possessed a harbour like Famagusta. However, Famagusta city needed serious sanitation works, and the harbour required substantial reconstruction. So, the city and the harbour had to be rebuilt to render them—and hence the island—appropriate for the Empire's aims. With the fall of Egypt to British control in 1881, the route to India was safe, so Cyprus was rendered insignificant as a strategic asset. Consequently, the money needed for the reconstruction and rehabilitation of Famagusta was redirected to pay the British and French creditors of the Ottoman Empire. An annual payment from the general revenue of the island was channelled for the repayment, called the Tribute. This was a term imposed by the Cyprus Convention—the agreement which placed the island under British control—and drained the resources of the island for infrastructural development. Larnaca Harbour, the main connection point between Cyprus and the outside world, remained the chief port of commerce and transport. In the following years, the British Government invested money in the construction of a pier in Larnaca and the development of the port in Kyrenia, a small isolated township by the north coast. Locally, the latter was considered as a waste of money and a financial disaster by the Government despite the 'cost-cutting' use of convict labour. The construction of the contours and quay, which were considered as a measure to increase safety, took three years longer than planned (1892-1899) and over £2,000 more than estimated (i.e. £9,356).

By the turn of the 20th century, Famagusta Harbour had not found the funds necessary for its development. From 1903 onwards, the situation changed, under the term of Joseph Chamberlain as Secretary of State for the Colonies. The Harbour was given more space and better facilities for ironclad and ordinary vessel traffic. However, the developed dimensions of the harbour were inappropriate for significant naval use and quite limited for economic purposes. In the best-case scenario, this development was intended for economic self-sufficiency of the island within the Levant. After this redevelopment, Famagusta's trade started to show a gradual increase which was boosted during the First World War. The flow of traffic at the ports of the island took a different course sometime after the First World War. The number of steamers calling to the Famagusta Harbour nearly doubled from the late 1910s to the mid-1920s but within five years 1924-1929 the numbers increased by 70%. By 1926, Famagusta became the primary port in the value of imported/exported goods and Larnaca fell behind the city of Limassol, which had now a burgeoning industry and trade. This would be the pattern of trade until the end of British colonialism in the island with the significant rise of Limassol city/harbour. Up until the post-independence period, the capacity and the use of these harbours remained within the framework of the 1910s. Besides sporadic improvement works, the minor extension of Famagusta Harbour in 1930s, there was never another 'Chamberlanian-type' of development project during this colonial period.

In connection with Famagusta and Larnaca ports, Joseph Chamberlain's policy gave birth to a railway as well. The late 19th century British Empire had a practice of constructing railways stretching to the hinterland that had termini in developed harbours. This practice was most visible in West African colonies but can also be traced in the West Indies or Egypt. In a similar fashion, the development of Famagusta Harbour was accompanied by the construction of the island's first and last public railway line. The Chamberlanian railway was proposed to stretch from Famagusta to the Messaoria plain, connecting it with the capital Nicosia and the small port of Karavostassi with an authorised budget of £141,526. The Famagusta Harbour and the railway would serve as one integrated infrastructure, serving the island's own trade with the nearby countries in the Levant and Egypt. The construction started in 1904 and the first locomotives began on narrow-gauge tracks between Famagusta and Nicosia in 1905. The story of the Cyprus Government Railway, the government body owning the railway, is an uncertain one. While working with constant governmental subsidies, and recording losses nearly every year, it also served for the shipping of valuable materials, most importantly mine ores such as copper. The most significant use of the railway for military purposes was during the Second World War. Despite Cyprus remaining outside of the war, the line served to carry British troops arriving at Famagusta Harbour. During its lifetime beginning in 1905 and ending in

1952 with its abolition, the Cyprus Government Railway had never invested a single penny for renewal of the initial capital. The decision of whether to invest or not also involved the evaluation of the railway's strategic importance within the context of British interests in the Middle East. The colonial Government decided that neither the island nor Britain needed a railway and sold most of the stock to an Italian metal company in 1952. By 1957, the British government had already decided that it was time to leave Cyprus to the Cypriots. British interests did not demand the control of the whole island. Although Cyprus was no longer a British island, its infrastructure took on strategic importance for Britain through two sovereign bases, which, to this day, are still home to the Royal Air Force's military and surveillance infrastructure.

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