

‘The English despot’: Francis Noel-Baker and his support for the Colonels’ regime

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Francis Noel-Baker (1920–2009) was an English Philhellene politician and self-proclaimed benevolent landowner in Euboea whose relationship in his later years with Greek governments and people descended into acrimony and litigation. This stemmed from the decision he took to effectively become an apologist for the military junta which seized power in Athens between 1967 and 1974. This was despite London being a centre for Greek resistance-in-exile, the opposition to the regime shown by many of his fellow MPs and Labour Party colleagues, and his own earlier left-wing sympathies, including his support for the communist-backed partisans in Greece during the Second World War. Noel-Baker’s advocacy of the Colonels reflected not merely political reality and economic expediency, as with the similar stance of the British government, but stemmed from his outdated convictions that Greece required saving from international communism and internal weakness.

Keywords: Greece; Cold War; Greek Junta; communism; British diplomacy

From the 1940s to the 1960s, Francis Noel-Baker (1920–2009) was in the remarkable position of being simultaneously a socialist politician arguing for the nationalization of British industry and the inheritor of an estate in Greece who frequently referred to his tenants as ‘peasants’. With his maternal family’s seat dating as far back as the formative years of the Greek state, when Edward Noel had purchased Euboean land in 1832 from the departing Turks, Francis became an avowed Philhellene.¹ During the Axis occupation of Greece he had, much to his frustration, been restricted to desk duties by the British military on account of his support for the communist-led partisans. Post-war, he undertook increasingly unwanted initiatives to mediate between Archbishop Makarios and British diplomats involved in the demand of Cypriot Greeks for self-determination. By the end of his long life, however, it was

1 B. Noel-Baker, *An Isle of Greece: the Noels in Euboea* (Prokopi 2000), 60.

being reported that walls in the village of Prokopi, within the family estate of Achmetaga, were daubed with hostile slogans and a road renamed ‘Ninth of May Street’ to honour the occasion of a riot against the Noel-Baker ownership of local farmland and forest.² During the period in which a military junta seized power (1967–74), Noel-Baker’s colleagues in the British Labour Party expressed their opposition within Parliament and campaigned to dissuade tourists from travelling to Greece.³ However, in common with the journalist David Holden, who viewed the takeover ‘as a comprehensive and characteristic, albeit depressing, response to a genuine national crisis’,⁴ Noel-Baker chose not to oppose the Colonels’ despotism. This led him to face, in the 1970s and 1980s in particular, the enmity of the democratically-elected Greek governments which followed.

Noel-Baker’s fateful decision to become effectively an apologist for a brutal and dictatorial regime has aroused, at the time and more recently, much comment in academic and Philhellene circles. The author of the *Guardian* obituary evidently felt the need to provide the somewhat spurious exoneration that Noel-Baker ‘knew more about politics in Athens than most’.⁵ Richard Clogg, a prominent British historian of Modern Greece, has written in his memoirs of ‘the apparent inconsistency in Noel-Baker’s support for the far Left during the occupation and his support of the far Right during the Colonels’ regime’.⁶ Himself a campaigner for the reinstatement of democracy in Greece, Clogg records unsuccessfully reasoning with Noel-Baker in person, and seeking an explanation from another war veteran who had worked with the Greek resistance, the historian and Conservative MP C.M. Woodhouse: ‘Woodhouse replied that there was no such inconsistency. Noel-Baker in both instances was simply backing what he (mistakenly) thought would be the winning side.’⁷ Although, in conversation with a journalist in 1975, Noel-Baker apparently suggested that his friendly relationship with the Colonels in Athens was mere expediency – ‘I was naturally in contact with whomever was in power here as I live here and have interests here’⁸ – this article will suggest that his decision-making was

2 J. Barry, ‘The last of the English Milords’, 23. This magazine article, exact origin unknown but dating I believe from the 1980s, was located in the file relating to Francis Noel-Baker within the archive of the League for Democracy in Greece, now held at King’s College London (MGA/GRF25/NOE). I acknowledge here the assistance of the staff of the archives at King’s College London, and of the National Archives at Kew.

3 K. Maragkou, *Britain, Greece and the Colonels, 1967–74* (London 2019), 43.

4 D. Holden, *Greece Without Columns: the making of the Modern Greeks* (London 1972), 233.

5 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2009/oct/01/francis-noel-baker-obituary>, accessed 15 October 2022.

6 R. Clogg, *Greek to Me: a memoir of academic life* (London 2018), 52.

7 *Ibid.*

8 D. Tonge, ‘Axe hangs over lord of the forest’, *The Guardian*, 4 June 1975. It is clear, from their two writs of 1975 prepared for the High Court in London, that both Francis Noel-Baker and his father Philip were unhappy with the reporting by the (left-leaning) newspaper *The Guardian* and its Athens correspondent David Tonge. The complaint was that the Noel-Bakers were misrepresented as having ‘exploited and oppressed Greek villagers and had kept the villagers living in feudal conditions and in poverty contrasting unfavourably with the condition of other local villages.’ (newspaper clipping and writs in the archives of King’s College London, MGA/GRF25/NOE) From the vantage-point of 2023, the existence of post-1974

based as much on ideology as pragmatism. It will be argued that his negativity about the capabilities of the Greek people, his own politics which had veered from the Left towards the Right, his change of heart towards the actions of the Greek communists during the 1940s, and his rather outdated understanding of the threat posed by international communism, all affected his stance on the Greek political system and its future. As the fiftieth anniversary of its fall approaches, Panagiotis Zestanakis has noted that 'the dictatorship has preoccupied historians, political scientists and other scholars, especially in the last two decades.'⁹ This present contribution seeks to add to this evolving scholarly debate by probing in detail the motivations of a politician and landowner who considered, erroneously, that he was acting in the best interests of his adopted country as well as himself.

At war with the British ambassador and the Greek resistance movement

Francis Noel-Baker received an elite education at Gordonstoun in Scotland (at the same time as Prince Philip) and Westminster School, followed by King's College, Cambridge. Amongst his rather colourful ancestors he could claim a relative of Lady Byron, whilst his father, Philip Noel-Baker, had a distinguished political career as a wartime minister under Churchill and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1959 for his campaigning for nuclear disarmament. Francis later recalled that childhood house guests included a range of international statesmen including Venizelos, Stresemann, and Nansen.¹⁰ Accepted for officer training during the Second World War, his military instructors praised his overall 'keenness' and map-reading skills, but were otherwise somewhat lukewarm: 'He is rather dreamy and has not learnt as much here as he might have done had he paid more attention. He is not very tough and he does not like getting wet.'¹¹ Desperate to use the Greek connections and language skills he had inherited from his mother, Captain Noel-Baker's first posting involved being 'part of the Cairo back-up for the small British military teams which were operating inside occupied Greece and trying to cooperate with and unify the various Greek guerrilla bands.'¹² Although rising to Assistant Head in the Greek Section and making the acquaintance of such luminaries of undercover operations as Patrick Leigh Fermor, Noel-Baker was

local and national opposition towards Francis Noel-Baker is well-documented; however, any suggestion that the estate of the Noel-Bakers worked to the economic detriment of its tenants, relative to other landowners in Greece, is not the argument of this present paper.

9 P. Zestanakis, 'The rebellious 1960s via the prosperous 1990s: youth, modernity and consumption in Antonis Kokkinos' *Τέλος εποχής (End of an Era)* (1994)', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 46.1 (2022) 118–36 (119).

10 F. Noel-Baker, *Book Eight: a taste of hardship* (London 1987), 14, 1, 13, 10.

11 The National Archives, London, HS 9/78/4.

12 Noel-Baker, *Book Eight*, 28.

denied the opportunity to emulate their heroism.¹³ By mid-1944 his career had stalled at the hands of a British diplomat, Reginald Leeper, as a military report of 27 August makes clear: 'In view of his sympathy for EAM (the left-wing movement) he was precluded from going to Greece as a liaison officer, which was his desire, by a ruling of HM Ambassador to Greece.'¹⁴

Both at the time and later, Noel-Baker explained his support for certain resistance groups in Greece as based solely on an evaluation of their effectiveness: their 'superior training and experience in organisation and subversive work'; their 'discipline was better, and less dependent on personalities, than in the other guerrilla bands.' In contrast, the non-communist leader Napoleon Zervas, whom Britain favoured with money and materiel, had fewer men and limited geographical reach. Noel-Baker believed that the British approach was actually counter-productive because EAM, 'baffled and frustrated, became more and more Communist and more extreme'.¹⁵ In 1945 he anxiously returned to Greece to ascertain what remained of the family estate. It was then that eyewitness testimony, as he put it, 'modified my views a lot'. After 1943, he discovered, the communists who had replaced the Axis regime in effective control of Euboea had carried out 'quite literally a red terror' in their treatment of the locals and of alleged 'collaborators'.¹⁶ Even taking into consideration the work pressures of a newly-elected MP, it seems telling that Noel-Baker declined to attend a December 1945 London meeting of the League for Democracy in Greece at which a delegation from EAM was to be received.¹⁷

Fighting the communists had in his view now become essential: 'had they succeeded, there would have been little hope of democracy (as we understand it) in Greece.' Even so, at the time Noel-Baker did not regard this as part of a sinister international conspiracy: 'at no time during the [Axis] occupation was there evidence that EAM was being run from Moscow'.¹⁸ From the perspective of the 1980s, however, Noel-Baker emphasized that Russian financial support for the largest of the Greek communist parties had been forthcoming throughout much of the Cold War. By 'a narrow squeak', the Western powers of Britain and the US, through military and economic power, had saved Greece from 'Soviet subjugation'.¹⁹ Noel-Baker also chose to characterize communism as farce in his later description of a villager who led a 25 March Independence Day

13 Noel-Baker, *Book Eight*, 172; The National Archives, London, HS 9/78/4.

14 The National Archives, London, HS 9/78/4.

15 F. Noel-Baker, *Greece: the whole story* (London 1946), 37, 40, 43.

16 F. Noel-Baker, 'Francis Edward Noel-Baker, 1920–2009: a memoir from the war years, read by his daughter', www.noel-baker.co.uk/greece/warYears.html, accessed 7 April 2021.

17 Letter from Francis Noel-Baker at the House of Commons to Diana Pym, Executive Committee of the League for Democracy in Greece, 7 December 1945. Archives of King's College London (MGA/GRF25/NOE).

18 Noel-Baker, *Greece: the whole story*, 51, 54.

19 Noel-Baker, *Book Eight*, 42.

celebration, a passage which also has the effect of emphasising his own superior intellect and power in comparison to the local people:

Costa Caramousto, a nearly illiterate Vlach shepherd, who had been appointed 'Captain Costa' Commander of the local ELAS (communist guerrilla) detachment. He held forth, from a typescript he could scarcely read, all about the Alliance with Russia, the Imperialist Hyenas and so on. It was a pleasant morning and no one took much notice of Costa, who seemed relieved when 'his' speech was over and we all dispersed into the sunshine. Costa later took a job in my tree nursery where he was rather good.²⁰

Moving from Left to Right

In standing as a MP for the Labour Party in the first post-war British election, Noel-Baker was following not merely the example of his father (who was in Parliament from 1929–31 and 1936–70), but his own convictions: in the 1920s he had been troubled by the sight of 'bemedaled, unemployed ex-servicemen selling matches in the streets'.²¹ Following the defeat of the Axis, as John Strachey wrote in a socialist treatise at the time, it was clear that in Britain '43 million will not consent to go back to the old conditions of 1939'.²² At that point, Noel-Baker maintained, 'I believed every word I said about the Labour Party and our election manifesto.' However, finding himself at odds with both policies and leadership, he announced in 1968 his intention to stand down as an MP, and by the following year had resolved to resign from the party altogether, thus formally leaving the world of British politics for which, according to his daughter, 'he was as temperamentally unsuited as it was possible for anyone to be'.²³ He confessed that 'I was no longer a socialist', and by the 1980s he had veered so far to the Right that he was praising the Prime Minister, the Conservative Margaret Thatcher, for her reforms which curbed the trades unions and promoted privatization.²⁴

Early on during his time in Parliament, Noel-Baker was intolerant of the 'arrogant Marxism' of some of his more extreme colleagues. He then visited Russia in 1958 and reached negative conclusions about the practical effects of radical socialism: the housing situation was 'dreadful', as was 'the evident inefficiency of many sectors of the Soviet economy', and 'the class structure and the privileges of the ruling class were much more inflexible and brutal than anything I had yet met.' Meanwhile in Britain, he argued, 'nationalisation was mostly a flop', and the expansion of the Welfare State had led to 'too many cheats'.²⁵ Hartley Shawcross, a Labour

20 *Ibid.*, 43.

21 *Ibid.*, 10.

22 J. Strachey, *Why You Should be a Socialist* (London 1944), 89.

23 Noel-Baker, 'Francis Edward Noel-Baker, 1920–2009: a memoir from the war years'.

24 Noel-Baker, *Book Eight*, 59, 198–9, 217, 225, 154.

25 *Ibid.*, 90, 122, 225.

politician who first entered Parliament in the same post-war cohort, took much the same intellectual journey, and his more extensive writings on the subject would appear to mirror Noel-Baker's thinking. As early as 1948, Shawcross' 'rose-coloured Socialist spectacles were getting misted over by doubts' and he 'was coming to realize that Socialism was not the panacea for all ills'. The power of trade unionism had 'helped to destroy British competitiveness in world markets', although this was later tackled by Margaret Thatcher's 'courage and legislation'.²⁶ But as a practising lawyer, Shawcross' belief in individual freedoms remained: he appeared in a legal action *against* the British government over its support for the Colonels.²⁷ By that time, however, Francis Noel-Baker was an establishment figure in Greece, the landlord of estates where he was accused of ignoring the wishes of the villagers he lived among.

From British socialist to Greek landlord

As disillusionment with his British political career had set in, Noel-Baker 'began to neglect my work, and spend more time in Greece', resulting in him being dubbed the 'MP for Euboea North'.²⁸ Reflecting in the 1980s, Noel-Baker conceded that he had a 'double life', the closest he came to admitting that his status from the 1950s onwards as a socialist as well as a landowner had at the very least been paradoxical.²⁹ Hartley Shawcross had turned against the Labour Party's policy on land ownership on the basis that 'the State would not be a good landlord and that nationalization would create an inefficient overstaffed bureaucracy'.³⁰ In Greece, however, the agenda of 1970s and 80s governments meant that, as the historian David H. Close has explained, for huge areas of the economy such as transport, communications, power supply and education, 'the state possessed a near or complete monopoly'.³¹ Noel-Baker was, at the same period, expressing the politically unpalatable view that maintaining his own status was vital for the tenants he served: 'a dedicated family will work harder and better to preserve the amenity and viability of their home and property than any number of expensive, ambitious civil servants waiting for a better posting'.³² In his twilight years, as this position became morally and legally more untenable, Noel-Baker became a besieged figure in Euboea, one journalist bestowing upon him the title 'last of the English Milords', and a banner hung in the village reportedly proclaiming him to be 'the English despot'.³³

26 H. Shawcross, *Life Sentence* (London 1995), 162, 161, 325.

27 Maragkou, *Britain, Greece and the Colonels, 1967–74*, 43.

28 Noel-Baker, *Book Eight*, 196; B. Noel-Baker, *An Isle of Greece*, 335.

29 Noel-Baker, *Book Eight*, 3.

30 Shawcross, *Life Sentence*, 217.

31 D.H. Close, *Greece since 1945* (London 2002), 179.

32 Noel-Baker, *Book Eight*, 226.

33 Barry, 'The last of the English Milords'; Tonge, 'Axe hangs over lord of the forest'.

During the Second World War, disaster had seemingly befallen the Noel-Baker inheritance when an Italian captain in occupation 'got drunk with his colleagues one night and set fire to the house. When the blaze reached the small cellar, explosives in it blew up and nothing was left standing but the four corners.'³⁴ In making his return to the estate, Noel-Baker thought himself a saviour, and not merely of his own fortunes: 'I am literally the only person available to start getting the place going again and to try to save our many destitute dependents.' He emphasized in private correspondence that 'Out of two hundred families in our village only about half a dozen people had any shoes at all, and they were all pre-war and in tatters.' His ambition, expressed to his brother David, was that 'Given a little peace and stability, I hope our two villages will become the best and happiest in Greece.'³⁵ After the death of his mother and having taken over the estate himself during the 1950s, one vehicle towards this aim was the establishment in 1961 of the charitable North Euboean Foundation 'to help the then poor and workless people of our district'.³⁶ By the 1980s it had 'spent over £100,000 on medical, social, veterinary and agricultural aid', and also had a focus on 'keeping live traditional – indeed prehistoric – Hellenic crafts'.³⁷

However, the benevolence Noel-Baker intended to exhibit through such initiatives could easily tip over into condescension. When, following his death, his wartime letters were released, his daughter Irene evidently felt the need to reassure readers that whilst 'political correctness was a completely alien concept to FNB', he had 'nothing but the highest respect' for the estate-workers he had described as 'peasants' and 'faithful retainers'.³⁸ In his 1960 introductory book to Greece's geography and history, Noel-Baker had portrayed this 'peasant country' as backward and undeveloped, emphasizing that there were some villages 'without any roads that wheeled vehicles can use' and with 'no running water or electricity'.³⁹ Formal education had, in his view, failed to aid development, with the curriculum focusing on ancient history, rather than training the 'technicians, engineers and mechanics' the country was desperately in need of. Noel-Baker's Foundation would show Greece the way forward through 'economic and educational development projects'.⁴⁰ Initially, the results of the Foundation's efforts to promote a cottage industry in textile production were dismissed by Noel-Baker's wife Barbro as 'second-rate, useless materials imitating better made factory stuff', but she was determined to show the appointed teachers how to make progress through her personal attendance at a weaving course – in London.⁴¹ Apparently regarded by his 'loyal workers' as their 'effendi', Francis Noel-Baker

34 Noel-Baker, *Book Eight*, 246. A photograph is reproduced in B. Noel-Baker, *An Isle of Greece*, 301.

35 Noel-Baker, 'Francis Edward Noel-Baker, 1920–2009: a memoir from the war years'.

36 Noel-Baker, *Book Eight*, 247; B. Noel-Baker, *An Isle of Greece*, 335.

37 Noel-Baker, *Book Eight*, 248.

38 Noel-Baker, 'Francis Edward Noel-Baker, 1920–2009: a memoir from the war years'.

39 F. Noel-Baker, *Looking at Greece* (London 1967), 3, 10, 15.

40 *Ibid.*, 45, 15.

41 B. Noel-Baker, *An Isle of Greece*, 340.

refused to use the new village name of Prokopi, adopted in preference to Achmetaga because of the latter's Turkish connotations, a change he derided as 'pointless, mindless, nationalistic'.⁴²

The residents of Prokopi, acknowledged even by the Noel-Bakers as 'a remnant of feudalism',⁴³ chafed against this outdated air of authoritarianism. One villager is said to have commented to the reporter John Barry that when the Noels had purchased the land from Turks, an alien landlord had merely been replaced by another: 'It was the relationship of a tyrant to his people.'⁴⁴ Across different decades, both Barry and *The Guardian's* journalist David Tonge emphasized the open campaigning taking place in the village, including a graffitied slogan which read 'Baker to the oven'.⁴⁵ Barbro recalled with sadness how a 'mob' had later attacked a plaque, unveiled by Queen Frederica at the opening of the Foundation-funded health centre, with cries of 'down with the feudal landlord!'⁴⁶ When, in 1989, the establishment of a nature reserve was mooted as a partial solution to the ongoing controversy over the estate, this was, according to British diplomatic documents, rejected by five ('communist') villagers because 'any link with the Noel-Baker name would be unacceptable'.⁴⁷ Having by his own account suffered from depression in the period leading up to his official resignation from Parliament in 1969, Noel-Baker's daughter Irene later underlined that he subsequently 'never really recovered' from the anger directed at him after 1974.⁴⁸ His intransigence when confronted with local opposition was, in John Barry's account, a source of frustration for Barbro in their later years: 'Listen to what he says. . . Why won't you ever listen?'⁴⁹

Francis came to regard the difficulties he experienced over the estate as merely part of a long family history of conflict with the government. His grandfather Frank Noel (1844–1919) had been treated as a 'scapegoat' during the 1870 Dilessi Affair, the authorities 'ludicrously alleging that he was in league with the brigand chief' who had killed a group of English travellers.⁵⁰ After 1922, land from the estate was expropriated for Greek refugees forced from their homes in Asia Minor. Noel-Baker dismissed them as 'shopkeepers and artisans

42 Effendi is the term used in the recollections of Barbro: B. Noel-Baker, *An Isle of Greece*, 333; F. Noel-Baker, *My Cyprus File* (London 1985), 4.

43 B. Noel-Baker, *An Isle of Greece*, 334.

44 Barry, 'The last of the English Milords', 28.

45 Tonge, 'Axe hangs over lord of the forest'.

46 B. Noel-Baker, *An Isle of Greece*, 336.

47 The National Archives, London, FCO 9/6479.

48 Noel-Baker, *Book Eight*, 198–9; Noel-Baker, 'Francis Edward Noel-Baker, 1920–2009: a memoir from the war years'.

49 Barry, 'The last of the English Milords', 28. In a letter of 24 January 1989 to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London, Sir Jeremy Thomas gave a similar impression: 'The poor chap is now almost past it and Barbara is sometimes at her wits' end over him.' (The National Archives, London, FCO 9/6479)

50 F. Noel-Baker, 'Brigands of Hellas' (review of R. Jenkins' *The Dilessi Murders*), *The Spectator*, 16 June 1961, <http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/16th-june-1961/27/brigands-of-hellas>, accessed 19 March 2023;

and [who] had no idea of farming in our strange valley. They arrived before houses were built for them (rotten little soft-stone houses which split) and lived in tents for the first winter. They died like flies.⁵¹ He also accused the legal system of being against him from the 1970s onwards: 'Several of our buildings were burned, our family's graves desecrated, our house invaded and searched, and I myself threatened with assassination. The Government interfered with the courts, so we could get no justice.'⁵² It might be said, however, that the Greek justice system was scrupulously even-handed. On 2 March 1976 a British newspaper reported that Noel-Baker 'was today sentenced to 15 days' imprisonment, commuted to a fine, for building a wall and shed on a beach on his Greek estate without permission.' The following day, this was followed up by a story that 'A Greek provincial court has found six Greek villagers guilty of acts of hooliganism against the bailiff and two friends of Mr Francis Noel-Baker.'⁵³

Noel-Baker had a long history of expecting his personal political career and family name to give him traction with both British and Greek governments over such disputes. Formerly secret government papers reveal he initially met with some success, so that in 1988 the British Embassy wrote to the Prime Minister, Andreas Papandreou, expressing how 'British ministers are growing increasingly concerned at the way this case has been dragging on.' On 2 August that year, Noel-Baker was thus hopeful that Margaret Thatcher, in Rhodes for an international summit, 'will give Mr Papandreou a good wiggling'. British diplomats did have some sympathy for Noel-Baker's predicament, with Sir Jeremy Thomas, the Ambassador to Athens, suggesting that 'he has had a bad time with the Greeks and I'd clearly like to secure a settlement.'⁵⁴ However, exasperation is the most prominent feature of these internal government documents. The Foreign Secretary was said to have commented in 1988 that 'it was a subject which made him switch into auto-pilot', and as S.D. Page of the Southern Europe Department rather colourfully described it in 1991, 'The Noel-Baker case is an itch in our bilateral relations with Greece which no amount of scratching seems to soothe.'⁵⁵ Irene Noel-Baker believed that her father was 'tragically misunderstood in later life', and, indeed, Sir Jeremy was rather pitiless in his portrayal of a deluded figure: 'I'm afraid Francis is in rather poor shape nowadays and clings pathetically to the hope of ennoblement.'⁵⁶

Noel-Baker, *Book Eight*, 244; B. Noel-Baker, *An Isle of Greece*, 226–50; R. Jenkins, *The Dilessi Murders: Greek brigands and English hostages* (London 1998; first published 1961), 141–63.

51 Noel-Baker, *Book Eight*, 245.

52 *Ibid.*, 248–9.

53 *The Guardian*, 2 and 3 March 1976, clippings in the archives of King's College London (MGA/GRF25/NOE).

54 The National Archives, London, FCO 9/6100.

55 The National Archives, London, FCO 9/6100 and FCO 9/7327.

56 Irene's note as editor of Noel-Baker, 'Francis Edward Noel-Baker, 1920–2009: a memoir from the war years'; The National Archives, London, FCO 9/6479.

In addition to having grown up in London meeting international political figures, a more youthful Francis had written of being equally well-connected in Greece. Due to his father's involvement with the plan for the 1923 Exchange of Populations, by the 1940s he believed that 'the name Noel-Baker has an enormous influence among the Greeks now.'⁵⁷ His mother, from whom he inherited the estate, 'was popular at the Greek Court and there are old photographs at home at Achmetaga and signatures in the visitor's book which record visits there by members of the Royal Family.'⁵⁸ Such personal contacts continued into the 1960s, with King Paul and Queen Frederica agreeing to stand godparents to his fourth son.⁵⁹ Noel-Baker thus felt emboldened to involve himself in the crisis over Cyprus, arguing that 'I might be able to use my connections with Greece and my personal relations with Greek leaders to encourage a more co-operative spirit among members of the Greek delegation to the forthcoming talks.'⁶⁰ On various occasions he had meetings with, amongst others, the island's premier Archbishop Makarios, Greek Prime Minister George Papandreou, and King Constantine, who 'asked me to see him at the Palace in Athens'.⁶¹ This was a mission which, as he emphasised in a letter to Downing Street in 1984, he pursued over many decades: 'I have just returned from my 46th visit since Eden sent me in 1956 to mediate between Harding and Macarios.'⁶²

Noel-Baker's interventions seem to have been viewed as another irksome tendency by most politicians involved, although Makarios was sufficiently appreciative during his 1956 exile in the Seychelles to volunteer that 'We Cypriots will be grateful for everything you have done and are doing for the solution of the Cyprus problem.'⁶³ When writing later of his relationship with the Archbishop, Noel-Baker flattered himself that 'Perhaps there were not so many people – probably no other non-Cypriots – whom he trusted enough to talk to so freely.'⁶⁴ In British diplomatic circles, despite his protestations of Anthony Eden's earlier blessing, Noel-Baker's initiatives on Cyprus met with discouragement. Eden's successor as Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, was said to have been 'strongly against this sort of irregular channel', and even Eden himself commented that 'This correspondence makes a very bad impression on me.'⁶⁵

The Greek government was equally unimpressed by Noel-Baker's efforts to save the Euboea estate for his family. Well into the twenty-first century, the travel writer John Mole met with Francis' heir Philip, who confirmed that 'The Noel-Baker ownership of

57 Noel-Baker, 'Francis Edward Noel-Baker, 1920–2009: a memoir from the war years'.

58 Noel-Baker, *Book Eight*, 4.

59 Reported by the *Daily Mail* in November 1962, clipping in the archives of King's College London (MGA/GRF25/NOE); B. Noel-Baker, *An Isle of Greece*, 335.

60 The National Archives, London, FO 371/117671.

61 Noel-Baker, *My Cyprus File*, 67, 82.

62 The National Archives, London, FCO 9/4520.

63 The National Archives, London, FO 371/123903.

64 Noel-Baker, *My Cyprus File*, 2.

65 The National Archives, London, FO 371/117671 and FO 371/123903.

forest lands was still being contested in the courts until a few weeks before I arrived.'⁶⁶ Francis himself consistently complained of radical elements behind a sinister campaign to oust him. As late as 1991, he was writing to the recently-appointed British Prime Minister, John Major, that 'the present Greek Government is continuing the policy initiated by the Greek Communist Party which aimed at depriving us of our property and income.'⁶⁷ Local Leftist politicians had allegedly sought to gain votes through promises that 'we will drive out the Englishman and share his Estate among you.'⁶⁸ In retrospect, the sequence of events was clear: the fall of the Colonels in 1974 had been followed by the restoration of democracy and the rise of the socialist politician Andreas Papandreou, first as the leader of the opposition party PASOK, then as Prime Minister from 1981. As the journalist John Barry put it, Francis 'got too close to one regime – and then its enemies took power.'⁶⁹

From opponent of fascist dictatorship in Spain to supporter of a Hellenic Junta

On 21 April 1967, the day the Colonels took over in Athens, Helen Vlachos (Eleni Vlachou), the proprietor of the centre-right newspaper *Kathimerini*, was astonished to find tanks on the streets, 'because no serious threat of any disturbance, no fear of any imminent danger was present on the Greek horizon.'⁷⁰ As freedom of speech was curtailed and even merely potential opponents of the regime were rounded-up, Western observers, such as travel writer Herbert Kubly, had to come to terms with the idea of Greeks committing 'systematized tortures [which] evoked the forgotten nightmares of Nazi Germany.'⁷¹ The Philhellene writer Peter Levi discovered that the National Archaeological Museum was uncomfortably close to a street where such atrocities took place: 'at times you could hear the screaming from the sculpture galleries.'⁷²

From London, which became a centre for Greeks in exile, a plethora of individuals and organisations shone a light on the nefarious activities of the Colonels. The still newly-founded Amnesty International produced dossiers of human rights abuses, the League for Democracy in Greece (established in 1945 and long associated with the cause of the Greek Left) focused on the suspension of the political constitution, and a specific Committee against the Dictatorship in Greece was formed.⁷³ Richard Clogg has contrasted Vlachos, one of many exiles who acted as 'a very effective thorn in the

66 J. Mole, *Harley and the Holy Mountain: through the heart of Greece to its soul* (n.p., 2020), 62.

67 The National Archives, London, FCO 9/7327.

68 Noel-Baker, *Book Eight*, 248.

69 Barry, 'The last of the English Milords', 24.

70 H. Vlachos, *House Arrest* (London 1970), 22.

71 H. Kubly, *Gods and Heroes* (London 1970), x.

72 P. Levi, *The Hill of Kronos* (London 1983), 149.

73 Maragkou, *Britain, Greece and the Colonels, 1967–74*, 132, 33, 45, 82.

side of the regime', with Noel-Baker, who 'became an advocate for the military regime' and 'made a nuisance of himself, for instance, by accusing the BBC Greek service of lack of impartiality in its coverage of military rule.'⁷⁴ Making what he called an uncharacteristically lengthy contribution about Greece in the House of Commons, Noel-Baker referred to 'alleged police brutality against detainees' as 'distorted propaganda'.⁷⁵ In contrast, a number of Noel-Baker's comrades in the Labour Party were very active in their condemnation, passing resolutions at their annual conference and initiating Parliamentary debates.⁷⁶ Even Prime Minister Harold Wilson's dismay at the 'bestialities' being committed in Greece were a matter of public record.⁷⁷

However, as with Noel-Baker, the British government's official stance throughout the rule of the Junta was to continue engagement with Greece. This was predicated on pragmatism rather than ideology. There were military concerns such as avoiding any Greek interventions in Cyprus which might destabilize the delicate status quo of the island's independence and imperil its use as a British base. Politically, Britain felt that 'the morality of its foreign policy' should be overridden by 'the vital importance of the Colonels as one of the very few remaining pro-Western bastions in the eastern Mediterranean'.⁷⁸ Above all, there was the economic benefit from potential trade deals and bidding for major infrastructure projects, avenues which the Greek government repeatedly threatened to close off to those countries which publicly stated their opposition to the current regime.⁷⁹ In his contributions to British parliamentary debates, Noel-Baker likewise argued that antipathy towards the Colonels would cause economic damage to the British as well as to the Greek tourism industry: 'statements of this kind are hardly calculated to assist British exports and orders under negotiation at the present time.'⁸⁰ However, it is clear that his personal political journey, from a socialist and wartime advocate for communist-backed Greek partisans to becoming a supporter of the market reforms of Margaret Thatcher, also determined the fateful decision he took in the late 1960s to hold out the olive branch to dictators.

In his youthful letters from Greece, Noel-Baker had written that 'all forms of dictatorship are bad.' As an army officer, he believed he was fighting for 'the freedom of peoples to choose the regime they are to live under.'⁸¹ After becoming an MP in 1945, unexpectedly winning for Labour in the supposedly safe Conservative seat of Brentford and Chiswick, he finally fulfilled his wartime desire to work behind enemy

74 Clogg, *Greek to Me*, 75, 52.

75 Parliamentary Records, House of Commons, Volume 768, Column 1738, 18 July 1968.

76 Maragkou, *Britain, Greece and the Colonels*, 1967–74, 36–7.

77 Parliamentary Records, House of Commons, Volume 767, Column 241, 25 June 1968.

78 Maragkou, *Britain, Greece and the Colonels*, 1967–74, 27, 37, 130.

79 *Ibid.*, 28.

80 Parliamentary Records, House of Commons, Volume 738, Column 27, 8 July 1968; and, citing the effects on Greek businesses, Volume 768, Column 1738, 18 July 1968.

81 Noel-Baker, 'Francis Edward Noel-Baker, 1920–2009: a memoir from the war years'.

lines, entering Franco's Spain on a self-imposed investigative mission. In his resulting book, Noel-Baker reiterated that 'dictatorship of any kind was evil' and he demanded, in the face of inaction from his own party currently in power, that 'the nations which destroyed Hitler and Mussolini remember that their fight is still unfinished while fascism survives in Spain.'⁸² He dismissed any suggestion that the coup had successfully forestalled a communist revolution, rather pragmatically concluding that 'a legitimate democratically elected government was attacked by a group of Spanish generals, supported by defeated monarchist and right-wing political leaders.'⁸³ Twenty years later, by now elected as MP for Swindon and installed as a Euboean landowner, Noel-Baker seems to have reached a very different judgement when faced with a similar takeover in Athens. In speaking to a journalist in 1975, Noel-Baker is recorded as having defended his support for the Colonels as not merely due to self-interest but also keeping open political channels on behalf of Britain in his capacity as chairman of the Anglo-Greek group within parliament.⁸⁴ In her own memoir, his wife claimed for him the even loftier aim that 'in keeping in touch with the Colonels, [he] thought he might be able to exercise a moderating influence upon the regime.'⁸⁵ In reality, Noel-Baker forged a somewhat closer connection, at least to the individual Clogg has called 'the most buffoonish of the troika of Colonels who misruled Greece.'⁸⁶ Barbro admits that this 'friendship' included Brigadier Pattakos arriving at Achmetaga 'in his helicopter while flying around Greece to his political meetings'.⁸⁷

In 1967, a BBC radio producer, Austen Kark, questioned Colonel Papadopoulos about his reasoning for the coup: 'Athens was the seat of democracy but when danger hovered at the gates firm government was needed. What danger? The communist menace. And then there was the decadence from which the people, and particularly the young, must be protected.'⁸⁸ In the late 1950s and early 1960s, democratically elected Greek governments had been pleased to promote what Argyrios Tasoulas has recently characterised as the 'spectacular development of trade relations with the Soviet Union and the Soviet bloc'; but, equally, due to worries about the political Left at home, 'Athens was determined to keep the Soviets at arm's length as far as political relations were concerned.'⁸⁹ Over a period of just a few years, the wall had severed Berlin, crises had erupted in Cuba and the Congo, and Khrushchev had outraged Greeks by his response in the affirmative when asked whether using nuclear weapons against military targets meant he was prepared to destroy the Acropolis as collateral

82 F. Noel-Baker, *Spanish Summary* (London 1948), 13, 84

83 *Ibid.*, 58.

84 Tonge, 'Axe hangs over lord of the forest'.

85 B. Noel-Baker, *An Isle of Greece*, 341.

86 Clogg, *Greek to Me*, 53.

87 B. Noel-Baker, *An Isle of Greece*, 341.

88 A. Kark, *Attic in Greece: a very English adventure* (London 1994), 227.

89 A. Tasoulas, 'Greek-Soviet Relations 1959–1962: the Greek Response to the Kremlin's Challenge', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 45.1 (2021), 96–109 (96).

damage.⁹⁰ As a result, Gonda Van Steen has argued, ‘Greece of the 1950s through to the early 1960s may be characterized as a police state that virulently persecuted communists.’⁹¹

From the mid-1960s, this fear of an internationally-backed communist conspiracy in Greece was sharpened through the rise in domestic popularity and power of father-and-son George and Andreas Papandreou. Margaret Papandreou reflected in her memoirs that left-wing politicians such as her husband Andreas were considered as the ‘handmaiden of communism’.⁹² Establishment figures – and friends of the Noel-Bakers – such as Queen Frederica were in no doubt about the reality of the Communist who ‘tries to impose his philosophy by violence, in the service of a foreign master and his evil designs; he does not respect the freedom of the individual and therefore violates our people’s sacred rights.’⁹³ This refrain that international communism, through the medium of Andreas Papandreou, was unstoppable in Greece without intervention by the military was prominent in early official statements defending the so-called ‘April Revolution’.⁹⁴ Even David Holden, the chief foreign correspondent of *The Sunday Times* whom Richard Clogg later accused of being an apologist for the regime, conceded that in this important respect the Colonels were out of touch:

their alarmist view of communism as a treacherous and expansionist tyranny intent upon enlarging its domains throughout the world in general and Greece in particular seemed more appropriate to the Iron Curtain world of the late 1940s than to the more complacent coexistence world of the late 1960s – as if they had all been living in a cave for twenty years.⁹⁵

Noel-Baker’s support for the imposition of the Colonels’ regime appears to have arisen from genuine convictions about the necessity of holding back a tide of international communism that threatened to engulf 1960s Greece. In his 1954 book outlining recent spy activities in Japan, Canada, Sweden and Greece, Noel-Baker had asserted that Russia ‘regards every non-communist State not merely as a potential, but as an actual enemy.’⁹⁶ Believing that ‘a final conflict between communist and non-communist countries was inevitable’, he noted that Greece had already proved vulnerable to a whole range of ‘sinister’ activities committed by ‘The Vavoules Group’.⁹⁷ By 1968, as evidenced by his comments to the House of Commons, Noel-Baker had partially

90 *Ibid.*, 102–3.

91 G. Van Steen, *Adoption, Memory and Cold War Greece: kid pro quo?* (Ann Arbor 2019), 28.

92 M. Papandreou, *Nightmare in Athens* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ 1970), 52.

93 Queen Frederica of the Hellenes, *A Measure of Understanding* (London 1971), 97.

94 R. Clogg, ‘The ideology of the “Revolution of 21 April 1967”’, in R. Clogg and G. Yannopoulos, *Greece Under Military Rule* (London 1972), 36–58 (36, 38).

95 Holden, *Greece Without Columns*, 237; Clogg, *Greek to Me*, 61.

96 F. Noel-Baker, *The Spy Web* (London 1954), 9.

97 *Ibid.*, 57, 203.

modified his worldview, coming to the conclusion that 'official Soviet and East bloc policy is non-interference in Greece', but also that the Soviet leadership had a 'deep preoccupation with maintaining the *status quo* and the existing balance of power in Europe'.⁹⁸ However, he also argued that, as late as 1986, 'Russian financial and other support' for Greek communists 'continues on a massive scale'.⁹⁹ With Greece in the 1960s plagued by 'corruption, instability and a gradual breakdown of law and order',¹⁰⁰ he had become convinced that only a putsch by the forces of the Right could avert the disaster of internal chaos fuelled by internationally-assisted, if not officially sanctioned, radicalisation. It is also clear that this older Noel-Baker had abandoned his youthful confidence not merely in Communism but also in democracy, as his 1987 memoir reveals: 'oligarchies and dictatorships did produce almost all, if not all, the great human achievements in art and culture.'¹⁰¹ The travel writer Monica Krippner had, in 1957, damned rural Greece as existing in 'an air of lethargy and hopelessness, the people are shackled by old customs, conditions are extremely primitive, and all of the innate energy and vitality is sapped from the peasants.'¹⁰² Noel-Baker may not have used such emotive language, but he certainly described the inhabitants on and around his estate as 'peasants', and he evidently extended this colonialist attitude to the country as a whole. The strong and undemocratic leadership by the Colonels included plans for essential economic revitalization¹⁰³ which resembled the more local aspirations of the North Euboean Foundation.

As I have shown elsewhere, generations of Western observers have asserted their superiority over Greece on the basis that their ideas about progress would assist – politically, economically, or militarily – a society that was allegedly held back by its previous, 'oriental', history under the Ottoman Empire.¹⁰⁴ This included the longstanding accusation that the Greeks were unfit for self-rule, which was successively levelled against the warlords who had fought for Independence, supporters of Venizelos in the 1920s, and populist politicians such as Andreas Papandreou.¹⁰⁵ Andreas' American-born wife, Margaret, bitterly observed from exile that the Greeks' political immaturity meant that 'Their concept of democracy was closer to the notion of anarchy: everyone should be free to do whatever he wanted.'¹⁰⁶ Noel-Baker's friend Frederica, the ousted Dowager Queen, refrained from referring to her people as 'kids' as Papandreou had, but instead more obliquely cautioned that

98 Parliamentary Records, House of Commons, Volume 768, Column 1736, 18 July 1968.

99 Noel-Baker, *Book Eight*, 42.

100 Parliamentary Records, House of Commons, Volume 768, Column 1735, 18 July 1968.

101 Noel-Baker, *Book Eight*, 236.

102 M. Krippner, *Beyond Athens: journeys through Greece* (London 1957), 28.

103 Clogg, 'The ideology of the "Revolution of 21 April 1967"', 44.

104 D. Wills, *The Mirror of Antiquity: 20th century British travellers in Greece* (Newcastle 2007), 104–5.

105 S. Ploumidis, 'An antidote to anarchy? Images of monarchy in Greece in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 45.2 (2021), 240–54 (243, 249).

106 Papandreou, *Nightmare in Athens*, 20.

‘Democracy in modern Greece is a little over a hundred years old’ and ‘We have not yet digested its fruits and dangers’.¹⁰⁷ In a book written for children, Noel-Baker himself stressed that the Greeks ‘have often in the past suffered from unstable governments and inefficient administrations’, and, somewhat condescendingly, attributed this in part to an ‘independent spirit’.¹⁰⁸ As a result, he concluded, ‘the Greeks have taken longer than most European states to improve their country’, an argument which Noel-Baker used to further justify his family’s ongoing stewardship of farms, forests and villages in Euboea.¹⁰⁹ Elsewhere, he reproduced a calumny common to British observers – that of the alleged incapacity of the ‘childlike’ Greeks to ape the modernist norms of Western civilization – when he characterized the growing city of Athens as ‘the most polluted, ugliest, least hospitable capital in Europe’.¹¹⁰ For Noel-Baker then, the Greeks were a people backward in aesthetic taste, economic skills, and political nous, and only a disciplined hand could save them – whether on his own estates or in keeping the whole country on the ideologically correct side of the Iron Curtain.

Conclusion

At both individual and institutional levels, there were many reasons for finding accommodation with the Colonels. It was, of course, a terrifying prospect to risk incarceration and torture, and as Peter Bien, the literary scholar and translator, confided to his diary after encountering one firebrand Greek student, very easy to be an opponent from the safety of London: ‘How naïve he is! He should have been there himself, to get a belly full of machine-gun slugs.’¹¹¹ Successive British Prime Ministers were deeply uncomfortable about maintaining normal relations with Greece in these circumstances, but determined that the greater national interest lay in the economic opportunities and strategic military benefits. Similarly, Francis Noel-Baker had very pragmatic reasons for being as friendly to the new regime as he had been with the Hellenic royal family. Welcoming the dictators to his home would keep its nationalization at bay.

107 Queen Frederica, *A Measure of Understanding*, 114–5. For her use of this word, see Papandreou, *Nightmare in Athens*, 39.

108 Noel-Baker, *The Land and People of Greece*, 10; Noel-Baker, *Looking at Greece*, 63.

109 Noel-Baker, *Looking at Greece*, 63.

110 Noel-Baker, *Book Eight*, 18. For a recent discussion in a different context of this longstanding trope about Greece, see D. Wills, ‘James Bond in Greece: from Cold Warrior to strolling tourist’, *Journal of Greek Media and Culture* 8.1 (2022), 3–17. Such twentieth century criticisms of Athens conveniently overlooked the severe air pollution in more ‘developed’ cities such as London, which was, in contrast, ‘largely accepted as a consequence of industrial activity’, at least until the 12,000 excess deaths caused by the ‘Great Smog’ of 1952: D. Fowler *et al.*, ‘A chronology of global air quality’, *Phil. Trans. R. Soc. A*, 378.2183 (2020), 1–28 (8).

111 P. Bien, ‘Peter Bien’s entries in his journal regarding the Colonels’ Junta, April 21, 1967 – September 23, 2001’, *Journal of Modern Hellenism* 35 (2023), 129–57 (146).

However, as I have shown, Noel-Baker had also in some respects become a political kindred spirit of the Junta. Despite his enthusiastic support for the communist partisans during the Second World War, by the 1960s it was clear that his youthful faith in the Labour movement had faded. These changed convictions influenced his decision to support the undemocratic Athens regime. In keeping with their alleged worries about modern morals, the Colonels had adopted a heavy-handed paternalism. On the pilgrimage island of Tinos, for example, it was decreed that women should wear church-appropriate dress, such as long skirts, at all times.¹¹² Noel-Baker himself explicitly railed against 'Progress', which 'is no longer progress but is taking many of us backwards'.¹¹³ As a virtual feudal lord, Noel-Baker could promote the preservation of traditions he favoured – such as certain weaving styles – whilst criticizing what he called 'peasants' for their failure to modernize effectively. At a larger level, he also shared with the Colonels a somewhat outdated concern about the spectre of a communist revolution in Greece. A strong military hand was seen as beneficial for saving the allegedly child-like Greeks from left-wing chaos. For Noel-Baker then, the paternalism he exhibited towards his family estates was scaled-up to a colonial-style 'rescuing' of the whole Greek nation.

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112 D. Facaros, *Greek Island Hopping: a handbook for the independent traveller* (London 1981), 175.

113 Noel-Baker, *Book Eight*, 231.