
This is not the first time that the American Society of International Law and this Journal have come across the international law issues involved in the Cyprus question.1 Cyprus is an island of some 3,600 square miles in a strategic location at the crossroads of three continents in the eastern Mediterranean. Its history dates back to 6000 BC, with many foreign occupations, which have left traces of their presence but have not altered Cyprus’s unity and ethnological character. Cyprus’s native Greek population, whose ancestors came to the island before the Trojan War and who constitute about 80 percent of the island’s current population of approximately one million, has retained intact its language, religion, and cultural traditions. The majority population has coexisted with minority communities, the largest of which (18 percent of the population) is that of the Turkish Cypriots, most of whose ancestors arrived on the island after the Ottomans conquered Venetian-controlled Cyprus in 1571.

[...]

Overall, An International Relations Debacle is a significant contribution to the understanding of the Cyprus problem in terms of both international politics and international law. It is essential reading for all who have studied or lived through this complicated, but solvable, problem. And for those who would invoke the UN machinery in resolving their conflicts, the book provides lessons concerning what to pursue and also what to avoid in the process of doing so.

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To this reviewer – a former diplomat who was representing the Cypriot government over the course of different phases of the problem’s evolution, from 1960 to 1997 – the most salient feature emerging from this account of a truly international debacle is that, through a combination of circumstances (and not only through the ill-advised activities of some in the UN Secretariat) a significant opportunity to reach a fair and agreed settlement of this long-standing international dispute was lost. The Cyprus situation is not, as this reviewer sees it, an “unending problem,” and in this respect he differs from Richard Haass, another distinguished author, currently the president of the Council of Foreign Relations, and one of the State Department’s special coordinators on Cyprus in the 1980s. In fact, in October 1984, President Reagan’s letter to then President Evren did produce some positive movement in the intercommunal negotiations, but not enough to lead to a breakthrough. In fairness, other distinguished personalities who, over the years, dealt with different phases of the problem (George Ball, Dean Acheson, Brian Urquhart, Kurt Waldheim, Xavier Perez de Cuellar, Boutros Boutros-Ghali) have in various ways expressed their frustration with their inability to reach a solution. “Anyone who thinks he understands the situation in Cyprus is misinformed” was the epigrammatic way the matter was put by a former British colonial governor of Cyprus. Anyone who carefully reads Palley’s book would not be misinformed.

This reviewer, on the basis of long experience, is of the conviction that, given a minimum of political goodwill, the problem is capable of a compromise solution, provided that such a solution is functional and not incompatible with the applicable rules of international law; there is much more that unites all Cypriots than the differences that at present divide them. Genuine demilitarization, as endorsed by the U.S. House of Representatives in 1995, would be a key ingredient of such a solution. For many years, and in the absence of a practical possibility for resorting to contentious proceedings before the International Court of Justice (ICJ), this reviewer advocated resort to the Court, through a decision of the General Assembly or of the Security Council, for an advisory opinion—one that would clarify the applicable rules of international law on several key aspects of the Cyprus situation. In the view of this writer, such an advisory opinion might address issues concerning unilateral intervention under Article IV of the 1960 Treaty of Guarantee; the 1983 Unilateral Declaration of Independence of the “Turkish Republic

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3 For example, the Turkish Cypriot-controlled unit would be reduced to “29 percent plus” of the territory of the federation, and the presidency would have not have to rotate between the communities.