CHAPTER NINE

BUSINESS AS USUAL, 1945–74

Britain emerged from the Second World War much weakened but still a world power with far-flung interests, not least in the Middle East. As for Turkey, the war was barely over before it was apparent that it had become a frontline state in the West’s emerging ‘Cold War’ with the Soviet Union. Over the coming years, therefore, it was inevitable that the British Embassy in Turkey would have to deal with many questions pressing heavily on British interests. Among these were integrating Turkey into the Western alliance system, providing it with economic aid and technical assistance, and ensuring that it remained indulgent to the use of its sovereign territory for intelligence gathering and over-flying by military aircraft. After the mid-1950s another question constantly threatened the smooth conduct of Anglo-Turkish relations and thus became the embassy’s main preoccupation: the fate of Cyprus. First, though, how did the embassy adjust to peacetime mode? How, in other words, did it organise itself for business as usual?

Return to Peacetime Mode

During the lifetime of the first post-war government in Britain, a Labour one, the embassy’s transition to peacetime mode was initially slow. This was because the southern extension of Soviet influence in the last years of the war, together with the outbreak of the Cold War, discouraged any rush to run down the defence section. However, following the announcement in 1947 that an exhausted Britain could no longer afford to continue its existing level of support for Turkey (and Greece), and President Truman’s declaration that the United States would take up the burden, the pace of change in the embassy accelerated. How did it evolve during these years? What role did it play in rebuilding the relationship that had been soured by Turkey’s policy of neutrality in the war?

Turnover in staff was the most marked feature of the embassy of the new ambassador, Sir Maurice Peterson, who arrived in October 1944. When he left less than two years later only three of the diplomats he
inherited were still there. The defence section maintained its exception-
ally high numbers until as late as 1947 (see Table 9.1) but thereafter was
dramatically halved. This reflected not just a change in British policy
towards Turkey but a general retrenchment in the posting of service
attachés worldwide.

Changes were afoot, too, in regard to the embassy’s buildings in
Ankara. In late 1944 the Foreign Office decreed that the time had come
to re-fit the much abused residence for its proper representational pur-
poses: Peterson was to be moved in as soon as possible. Accordingly the
chancery was squeezed into the smaller building, although it could not
accommodate the commercial secretariat and information section, and
a new wing had to be added a few years later. The disruption caused
by these developments suited the new ambassador, for he was able to
enjoy a full six months of the summer of 1945 in Istanbul with a clear
conscience. After all, the old capital remained the haunt of press editors
and leader writers, the major commercial centre of Turkey, and home
to much the greater part of the resident British community. While
living in Pera House, as it had come to be known, Peterson naturally
took a close interest in its tenants. These now included consular officers
as well as spies and saboteurs.

To the satisfaction of the Treasury, the original mid-nineteenth cen-
tury premises of the consulate-general in Galata had been vacated at the

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Table 9.1  The structure of the embassy, 1944–51

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<td>26</td>
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<td>23</td>
<td>21</td>
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Source: FO List. Excludes posts listed but vacant at the time.

¹ On 14 August 1949 the RAF component of the embassy’s defence section was
completely wiped out in a crash at the military airport at Ankara, The Times, 15 Aug.
1949.

² Helm, 'The Beginnings', pp. 9–11.

³ Peterson, Both Sides of the Curtain, pp. 245–7.