

*Politics of Forgetting: New Zealand, Greece and Britain at War*

By Martyn Brown. Australian Scholarly Publishing: Melbourne, 2019.

RRP: AU\$49.95 ISBN: 978-1-925801-68-2

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The conventional account of wartime relations between Greece, New Zealand and Britain is one of unwavering solidarity in the face of appalling odds, and few would question its truth as a general narrative. More recent approaches, however, have opened up the cracks in this tripartite relationship. Martyn Brown's *Politics of Forgetting* contributes to the on-going analysis of these rifts, demonstrating through an impressive range of scholarly evidence the way the political situation in Greece triggered tensions which sometimes had far-reaching consequences. The need to maintain morale meant that differences were pasted over; wartime censorship and the destruction of compromising documents helped to maintain a narrative of unquestioning mutual trust. But with the gradual release of some previously-classified material, things have begun to look rather different.

Brown's focus is on the New Zealand Official War History Project, which appeared gradually after the war under the general editorship of Howard Kippenberger, who along with Bernard Freyberg played a dominant role in commanding New Zealand forces in the Mediterranean. Citing the French philosopher Ernest Renan, he argues that "forgetting" is crucial to any narrative of nation: we usually remember what enhances an image of something honorable and heroic. These qualities certainly applied to New Zealand's immediate agreement to send troops to defend the small Balkan nation that at the time, in 1941, appeared to be the only country holding out against the advancing Axis forces on the continent of Europe. But what is left out of this narrative are the areas of doubt and disagreement, especially in this case the sometimes outright disagreement on the part of New Zealanders over British policy in Greece. These disagreements, suppressed in the Official War History and in most subsequent accounts of the war, in fact could be said to represent another level of honour, or at least of ethical concern, to which a climate of post-colonial enquiry is more hospitable.

Greece is remembered as having held a special place in New Zealand's affections. Freyberg, who helped to organise commemorative ceremonies after the war, had great admiration for the Greeks—not so much for their military capacity, of which he had a fairly low opinion, but for their heroism on an individual and community level. The New Zealand-Greek bond was, as Prime Minister Peter Fraser put it, one of exceptional trust and friendship on account of "the Greek [ . . . ] gallantry and self-sacrifice in sheltering our men" (80) on the run from the Germans after the routing of Allied forces in April- May 1941. Numerous stories survive of the brutal reprisals suffered by local people for failing to betray men who hadn't managed to evacuate. Fraser's awareness of the New Zealand debt to the Greek people, which led at times to his initiating protests to London about Foreign Office policy in Greece, makes him the hero of Brown's story. Wartime conditions, however, did not allow for consistency in this opposition. Of particular interest to New Zealand readers of Brown's book will be the detailed records of exchanges between Fraser and the military commanders as the dominion attempted to steer a delicate course between political and military exigencies. Using sentimental phrases such as that the Greeks are "enthroned in the hearts of our soldiers" (172-73), Fraser comes across as a man of impressive personal and political sympathies who was however often acting under severe constraints.

The achievements of New Zealand forces in Greece required some elaboration in the Official War History to fit a tale worthy of national memory. Hopelessly out-numbered by the advancing German army in April 1941, Commonwealth forces, after a brave initial stand, had retreated south to Crete or Egypt within weeks. And on Crete itself, where the defeat was significantly more dramatic (671 New Zealanders killed, 967 wounded and 2,180 taken prisoner), things went very wrong in ways recent historians have been less reluctant to conceal. But Crete was a different story for other reasons, partly because this fateful battle was fought under Freyberg's leadership, partly because this was the largest concentrated interaction between New Zealanders and Greeks, and partly because of the humanitarian outcome. From Crete the role played by a New Zealand platoon in helping the Greek king, George II, escape to Egypt was also given prominence in the official history. A later battle fought jointly by Greeks and New Zealanders in Rimini in September 1944 was hailed in the New Zealand press as "an historic occasion", "a reminder of the heroic days of gallant action in Greece and Crete" (134).

Such selective highlighting served to bolster morale but was often at odds with conditions on the ground. The Greek king, for example, was a contentious figure, mistrusted by the majority of the Greek population for his pre-war collaboration with the fascist government of Ioannis Metaxas. Republican sentiment dominated in the country, but Churchill and Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden had other ideas, stemming from a personal loyalty to the king as well as an aim to use him to further British interests in the Mediterranean after the war. British support for the monarchical government-in-exile being groomed to reinstate the king resulted in mutinies in the Greek forces in April 1944, and Brown records Fraser's discomfort, expressed only in a mild recommendation of a stay of execution for the mutiny leaders. Like many New Zealanders at the time, he seems to have shared the view of Dan Davin (who had fought on Crete) that "Princes now are like tonsils, even if they are any good, not much use" (123). As the Germans withdrew and the war seemed to be nearing its end, tensions mounted over British intervention, particularly when a peaceful protest in Athens in December '44 resulted in a violent police reaction, backed up shortly afterwards by British forces. Well aware of the dangers of civil war in the country, Fraser refused Churchill's request to send troops to support British actions. Feelings in New Zealand were running high, initiated by the unions, Labour Party branches and the Communist Party of New Zealand, and the news of the British using force against such stalwart allies was "especially repugnant" to New Zealanders, Fraser cablegrammed London on 20 December 1944 (245).

It is now clear that London was well aware but ignored the implications of the way the quisling government in Athens during the occupation was tolerant of the right-wing Security Battalions, who were collaborating with the German SS. Rather than being denounced and tried after liberation came in November '44, many of these individuals were incorporated into new government forces while those of left-wing sympathies, who had fought a determined resistance, were scrupulously weeded out. This bias was the cause of much political unrest in Greece itself. Brown doesn't mention this here, but one New Zealander serving in Greece, John Mulgan, noted in a communication to Wellington that one reason the Greeks loved the New Zealanders was because they knew the support of this distant Pacific nation came with no strings attached. Britain's insistence on restoring the monarchy came at the price of tolerance of fascist elements in the country. It was within this murky political environment that the seeds of civil war were sown.

Much of this has been reasonably well documented in both Greek and Anglophone accounts. Brown's contribution is to provide examples of enlisted New Zealanders who picked up on the risks involved in British policy and were side-lined for their criticism. One Lieutenant-Colonel James Samson commanding the New Zealand Training Team in Haifa in 1942 was removed from his post in the training of Greek recruits on account of his opposition to British policies, which included a requirement to report on the political sympathies of his trainees. Demoted to Major, he soon returned to New Zealand. In his rebellion, Brown assesses, Samson seems to have had a sympathetic ear in Brigadier Alexander Falconer, commander of the huge New Zealand camp at Maadi on the outskirts of Cairo. But under the pressure of circumstances overtaking the Allies in North Africa, these untimely insurrections were quietly suppressed.

To what extent then were the British to blame for the civil war that tore Greece apart in the years 1945-49? The Greek left by this time had certainly gained enough strength and support to challenge British aims. Brown hovers on the sidelines of this debate, but most recent historians from within Greece and beyond have agreed that the British leadership's panicked reaction to the rise of the left in Greece led to a serious under-estimation of the country's desire and capacity to form a broad-based democratic government with widespread popular support. As scholars such as Elisabeth Barker have demonstrated, the Soviets gave no indication of a desire to influence events in Greece,<sup>1</sup> and the left-wing army of ELAS (Greek People's Liberation Army) proved that in spite of British predictions, it had no intention of staging a coup in Athens after the German withdrawal. Attempts at reconciliation were made on both sides but in the final analysis promises were broken and the Greek monarchy was restored to oversee a harshly repressive right-wing regime. An internal report in New Zealand in January 1948, as Brown records, described this regime as "exhibit[ing] features which are extremely repugnant to our conception of democracy" (271).

But in spite of all these voices of protest from New Zealand (in the press and from government sources) there was a small but influential contingent of New Zealanders in Greece itself who toed the British line and were actively anti-ELAS. Ironically, it was their activities (though not their politics) which were showcased in the Official War History. An early volume of the history was dedicated to the topic of *Special Service in Greece* (1953), a 32-page booklet by M.B. McGlynn which championed the daring exploits of New Zealand engineers ("sappers") who operated under cover in occupied Greece. Most spectacular was the demolition of two of the giant viaducts running along the north-south railway line, which were being used by Axis forces to supply Rommel's army in North Africa. The British commander of Allied forces in the Middle East, Harold Alexander, had specifically requested that New Zealanders be involved: in this way the names of Tom Barnes, Arthur Edmonds and later Don Stott form part of the story of heroic resistance in wartime Greece.

These SOE (Special Operations Executive) agents were instructed by their British commanders to keep right out of politics, but if the New Zealanders were distinguished for one thing it was independence of mind, an inclination to do things their own way. Brown follows the official history in playing up the skill and courage involved in their successful acts of sabotage, which are beyond dispute. But at the same time questions need to be (and have been) raised about the consequences of some of their personal initiatives. Barnes was a fanatical follower of Napoleon Zervas, the leader of the monarchy-supporting partisan group EDES (National Republican Greek League), even after Zervas had finally fallen out of favour with his British sponsors. Stott, of a similar right-wing persuasion, took it upon himself to attempt a peace negotiation with the German commander of the secret police in Athens, an attempt which the distinguished historian Mark Mazower has described as "one of the most extraordinary and potentially

explosive episodes of the whole war”.<sup>2</sup> (A detailed account has been given by Hagen Fleischer.)<sup>3</sup> Another SOE operative serving in the mountains on the mainland, William Jordan, conducted a passionate crusade in the New Zealand press against ELAS (which he called the “red swindle”), whose forces he claimed had willfully murdered his Hamilton friend Arthur Hubbard. His version of what happened appeared in his book misleadingly titled *The Truth About Greece* (Melbourne 1945); an official enquiry by a joint British and Greek team pronounced Hubbard’s death an accident. Brown doesn’t go into details about this, but another British Liaison Officer on the ground, Nicholas Hammond, himself no ELAS sympathiser, recorded that the findings were accepted by SOE, in spite of Churchill’s twice-repeated demand for retribution against ELAS.<sup>4</sup> And while even some British sources were blaming the schism in the country on the Security Battalions, “who are now quite out of hand and are fully co-operating with German SS”, Brown reveals, Jordan was justifying their actions as necessary self-defence against the left (233). Another lesser-known New Zealand case that Brown brings to light concerns Ted Aked, who remained after the German withdrawal and attached himself to the Greek Mountain Brigade, which had done good service in Rimini but was now dedicated to the task of eliminating ELAS—contrary to specific instructions given him by both Freyberg and Fraser. Another more high-profile New Zealander, Major-General Stephen Weir, ended up in early 1945 in command of the British 46th Infantry Division, whose role was to search out and arrest anyone of left-wing sympathies in what was at this stage effectively British-occupied Greece. Although Brown doesn’t put it in these terms, it could be argued that Fraser’s attempt to align his country with the movement towards democratic self-determination in Greece was seriously compromised by these individuals.

Contrary to this, it has to be stressed, is the story of the many New Zealanders who did keep right out of politics (as far as this was possible) and simply dedicated themselves to the support of the partisans defending their families and villages. Arthur Edmonds, for example, in spite of the occasional critical comment continued to play a leading role as a British Liaison Officer working with ELAS. John Mulgan, also attached to ELAS (16<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> Divisions) made a name for himself for his capacity to work alongside the partisans on equal terms, performing an impressive number of sabotage operations. Other New Zealanders such as Tom Moir, Bob Morton, Dudley Perkins and Lou Northover either stayed on or returned after evacuation to continue the cause. The cold reality of what the New Zealanders suffered defending Greece is brought home today by the sight of cemeteries spread across the country or, equally poignant, the lonely slabs of stone, like that in western Crete in memory of Perkins, or that on the wind-swept slopes of Mt Olympus commemorating John Poutu, Charlie Kaimoana and Matiu Ropata of the 28<sup>th</sup> Maori Battalion.

Nation-building narratives will inevitably bury the dark patches and it is hardly surprising that it has taken over half a century for some of these details to emerge. Brown’s approach to conflicting accounts is to repeat at every turn that “the Greek situation defied distinct black and white analysis” (274), which may be true of every historical moment but hardly helps his reader navigate a path through his wealth of miscellaneous material. Themes include Allied war policy in both Britain and New Zealand, 20<sup>th</sup>-century Greek history, the Greek community in New Zealand and (in an exceptionally long and over-detailed chapter, Chapter 5) the relief programs to the Mediterranean country. Sometimes Brown would seem to be edging close to a thesis. An example here is when he states that a contemporary New Zealand novel, Martyn Uren’s *They Will Arise: An Epic of Greece under the Axis* (1945), gives a bland account of the political situation within the country and avoids mentioning conflict, a “denial of history” he calls “comical”. Britain, he adds, is treated by Uren as an “umpire with no ulterior motive” (259). But nowhere in his own book does Brown himself go into any detail about Britain’s motives

in supporting the vastly-numerically-inferior right-wing resistance group EDES. It's as if he too, for all his evidence, is reluctant to take too provocative a stand. In this he runs counter to a large body of recent writing on Britain's ill-advised involvement in wartime Greek politics.

This lack of a clear political focus makes *Politics of Forgetting* a difficult read, not helped by the very short sub-sections, often only half a page long, which give a dispersed, patchwork effect. Based on a PhD thesis, the book also needed a thorough going-over by a copy editor to eliminate repetition and tidy up the grammar and syntax. This is a pity, as there is a great deal of interest for future scholars here. An impressive range of sources (from New Zealand in particular, but also from Britain and Greece) is carefully documented, and even if the author doesn't always follow things up in his exposition, the comprehensive list of secondary sources will provide a useful resource for those wishing to do so.

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<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Barker, "Greece in the Framework of Anglo-Soviet Relations 1941-1947". In Marion Sarafis (ed.), *Greece: From Resistance to Civil War* (Nottingham UK: Spokesman, 1980), 15-31.

<sup>2</sup> *Inside Hitler's Greece: The Experience of Occupation, 1941-44* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2001), 328.

<sup>3</sup> Hagen Fleischer, "The Don Stott Affair: Overtures for an Anglo-German Local Peace in Greece". In Marion Sarafis (ed.), *Greece: From Resistance to Civil War* (Nottingham UK: Spokesman, 1980), 91-107.

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Hammond, *Venture into Greece: With the Guerrillas 1943-44* (London: William Kimber, 1983), 142; for Churchill, see Richard Clogg (ed.), *Greece 1940-1949: Occupation, Resistance, Civil War: A Documentary History* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 181.