

Cultural Propaganda and Plans for a British University in the Near East

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An important but underresearched theme of the history of the British Empire has been the history of institutions associated with the promotion of British culture. Indeed, historians of the British Empire have paid little attention to the institutions and the strategy that has aimed at cultural hegemony as a key constituent of the political hegemony and domination of foreign lands.

The exploration of the British plan to establish a university in the eastern Mediterranean demonstrates two important aspects of the imperial grand strategy. First, it reveals British perceptions of the geostrategic significance of the diverse countries in the region. In particular, it shows the extent to which the Palestine question influenced the general strategy in the Middle East between the First and Second World Wars. The strategic importance of British colonies such as Cyprus had gained significance in the light of political instability in Palestine, and the connection among political events that were taking place in various countries of the Levant is evident. Second, this analysis highlights the significance of cultural propaganda as a key component of the empire's foreign policy. Archival documents make explicit reference to the necessity of launching a propaganda campaign. This essay examines these two aspects of imperial strategy as well as the perceived value and role of peacetime propaganda.

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Cultural Propaganda

Though much has been written on wartime propaganda practices, very little research has been conducted on propaganda campaigns during peacetime. *Propaganda* is today considered a purely pejorative term. Yet the term etymologically derives from the Latin word *propagate*, which essentially means to disseminate. It was originally used in the seventeenth century by the Catholic Church's committee of cardinals the Sacrée Congrégation de Propaganda Fide, that is, the congregation for propagating the faith.¹ The mission of the congregation was twofold: on the one hand, to reconquer the countries lost to Protestantism, and, on the other hand, to promote the Catholic faith among the pagan population of the New World. It was only after the First World War that the negative connotations linked to the term *propaganda* gained significant momentum in academic literature and public discourse. Since then the term has acquired strong negative connotations.

In the twentieth century propaganda was closely associated with antidemocratic and authoritarian regimes that were a menace to individual freedoms. It has been closely linked to Nazi Germany and fascist Italy during the interwar period, each of which had a Ministry of Propaganda. In popular culture, in the dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* a reader meets the Orwellian Ministry of Truth in Oceania, associated with the totalitarian and authoritarian state, where Winston Smith, the protagonist, works.

This essay, however, aims at illustrating that propaganda campaigns should not be associated only with war-torn totalitarian regimes. They are being regularly employed during peaceful periods with a rather preemptive mission. In particular, this essay analyzes the project of establishing a British university in the eastern Mediterranean in order to provide the foundation for the cultural propaganda campaign carried out by the British Empire in the region during the 1930s.

Cultural propaganda, according to Philip M. Taylor, is “the promotion and dissemination of national aims and achievements in a general rather than specifically economic or political form, although it is ultimately designed

1. For further information, see Peter Guilday “The Sacred Congregation de Propaganda Fide (1622–1922),” *Catholic Historical Review* 6, no. 4 (1921): 478–94.

to promote economic and political interests.”² Taylor discusses the institutionalization of cultural propaganda by examining the establishment of Foreign Office control over the British Council in 1934.³ The concept of power over opinion is also central in E. H. Carr’s magnum opus, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis*. The former British diplomat and historian highlighted the role of the establishment of the BBC and the British Council along with the well-known German practices of the Nazi Ministry of Propaganda to promote state opinion.⁴ For Carr, power over opinion is a form of material power and is equally important to any other sort.

Cultural propaganda can be understood via a three-dimensional view of power. Steven Lukes presents power as an essentially contested concept. In reviewing the scholarly work, Lukes notes that it has focused mainly on conceptualizing power within the decision-making process (first dimension of power) and agenda setting (second dimension).⁵ Lukes advocates that it is necessary to reach the invisible third dimension of power, which consists of the shaping of desires, preferences, and consciousness. This dimension includes the processes of socialization, ideology, and bias. Yet Lukes’s insights have never been systematically discussed in the context of cultural propaganda.

In a holistic approach to power one should incorporate cultural propaganda as a process of the third face of power. Lukes suggests turning one’s attention to the actions and inactions that shape the perceptions and preferences of actors. Clarissa Hayward, however, gives emphasis to structure rather than the agent that Lukes favors in his analysis.⁶ Hayward considers power to be a network of social boundaries that either enables or constrains behavior of the actors. This essay examines both the actors and the structures through which they exercise power, by investigating the project of establishing a British uni-

2. Philip M. Taylor, *The Projection of Britain: British Overseas Publicity and Propaganda, 1919–39* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 125–6.

3. *Ibid.*, 126.

4. Edward. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).

5. Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

6. Clarissa R. Hayward, *De-facing Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

versity in the eastern Mediterranean.⁷ The central argument is that the drive of this project was political rather than ideological, insofar as propaganda was carefully employed to secure the British possessions in the eastern Mediterranean region. Propaganda during other periods was employed as a tool to pursue further strategic and foreign policy objectives.

British Empire in Decline

In the aftermath of the First World War, a new world order was emerging. Britain was an empire in decline bound to reassess its imperial policies. The rise of antagonistic powers with hegemonic aspirations in the Mediterranean was challenging British global primacy. The spread of nationalism was considered one of many challenges to the empire. The increasing tensions between the British authorities and local nationalist leaderships were threatening British dominance in the vital region of the eastern Mediterranean.⁸ The British aspired to control the nature of the ideas in which the local intellectual elites would be educated or indoctrinated. In order to secure British influence in the region, London prepared to launch an assertive propaganda campaign.

Academic literature on the British Empire has evolved through a Eurocentric understanding of world history. The historian Ronald Robinson was maybe the first who highlighted these biases in the historiography of the British Empire. Robinson's "excentric" or collaborative theory of imperialism challenges Eurocentric theories of imperialism and suggests that the determinant factors of the incidence, form, rise, and fall of imperialism have been indigenous collaboration and resistance.⁹ For Robinson, the formal acquisition

7. The distinction between soft and hard power is artificial for analytical reasons. The soft power notion, introduced in the 1990s by Joseph S. Nye, is highly contested. Nye defined soft power as "the ability to shape the preferences of other." See Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 5. For a critical assessment of the analytical value of the notion, see Todd Hall, "An Unclear Attraction: A Critical Examination of Soft Power as an Analytical Category," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3, no. 2 (2010): 189–211.

8. For the central role of the Mediterranean in the British Empire's strategy for global supremacy, see Robert Holland, *Blue Water Empire: The British in the Mediterranean since 1800* (London: Penguin, 2013).

9. Ronald Robinson, "Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism: Sketch for a Theory of Collaboration" in *Studies in the Theory of Imperialism*, ed. E. R. J. Owen and R. B. Sutcliffe (London: Longman, 1972), 229.

of territories was the result of local factors and the interactions between indigenous elites and European communities. Robinson's theory of collaboration in the periphery highlighted that collaboration on peripheral problems was the cause of imperial expansion. For Robinson it is a *sine qua non* precondition for the establishment of a formal empire; British rule was able to establish a colony in India, where there were collaborators, but the British retained only an informal empire in China, where there were no collaborators. Robinson highlighted another important dimension, which is that when the collaborating ruling elite chose resistance, a counter-elite opted-out of collaboration.¹⁰ The collaboration mechanism operates at two levels. At the first level, there is an arrangement between the agents of industrial society and the indigenous elites. At the second level, there is collaboration between the indigenous elites and the rigidities of local interests and institutions. The interplay between resistance and collaboration thus could explain the strategy Britain adopted regarding cultural propaganda for its empire and the plan to establish a university in the Near East. Britain was not a rigid power, and its rule was readily capable of adapting to local dynamics and developments.

The establishment of a British university in the eastern Mediterranean would offer to the declining empire an effective channel through which British values and ideas could be spread. The local elites would be educated using British educational standards that would make them familiar with Western ideas. In turn, educating the local elites with a British education would make the British Empire's rule over and control of its colonies and possessions easier.¹¹

10. *Ibid.*, 120–2.

11. Independent education, as Franz Fanon and Paulo Freire have highlighted, is necessary for the liberation and the rise of the oppressed. This is what Fanon's activism attempted to achieve, to emancipate the masses, especially in the postcolonial world. In the same realm, Freire's work endeavored to promote South American students' emancipation. See Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (London: Penguin Classics, 2001); and Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (London: Penguin, 1996). For the notion of cultural hegemony, the work of Antonio Gramsci is prominent. Although Gramsci did not explicitly provide a definition for the notion, he describes it as the "spontaneous" consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is "historically" caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) that the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production. See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971). It is clear from this description that in Gramsci's understanding of hegemony consent and force coexist.

The University Project

Throughout the 1930s, the British Foreign Office collaborated closely with the Colonial Office to plan the establishment of a British university in the eastern Mediterranean.¹² The project was never realized due to the outbreak of the Second World War. However, it is interesting to explore the strategic design for establishing a university predominately for two reasons. First, it stresses the significance that this project of cultural propaganda had in British grand strategy for the area. It is evident in the official documents that the Foreign Office perceived that the formation and development of national identities takes place mainly through education. Thus, by controlling higher education the empire would have gained control and imposed a certain set of ideas and values that the new generation of the local intellectual elite would have encompassed and then circulated widely. The second reason is that this exploration reveals British perceptions of the social and political environment of the region.

In the 1930s the Colonial Office had begun to plan the establishment of the university in order to attract students from all over the region.¹³ The first reference to this was in a dispatch from Sir Percy Loraine, the British ambassador to Turkey, dated 9 November 1933.¹⁴ The Near East Committee of the

12. It is worth noting that the project referred interchangeably to the Near East and the eastern Mediterranean. For consistency in this essay, eastern Mediterranean will be used throughout. Very few scholarly works have examined the cultural propaganda campaigns in the region during the interwar period. On the British Council, see Donald S. Brin, "The War of Words: The British Council and Cultural Propaganda in the 1930s," *Peace and Change* 14, no. 2 (1989): 176–90. On the early consideration of the project, see Pinhas Ofer, "A Scheme for the Establishment of a British University in Jerusalem in the Late 1920s," *Middle Eastern Studies* 22, no. 2 (1986): 274–85. On social influence by propaganda, see Haavard Koppanga, "Social Influence by Manipulation: A Definition and Case of Propaganda," *Middle East Critique* 18, no. 2 (2009): 117–43. The most authoritative scholarly works in the field of cultural propaganda in the British Empire are John M. MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion, 1880–1960* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984); and Philipp M. Taylor, *The Projection of Britain: British Overseas Publicity and Propaganda, 1919–39* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

13. National Archives [henceforward TNA], CO 67/273/4 (1938), "Proposed Establishment of a British University in the Near East," London; TNA, CO 67/273/3 (1937), "Proposed Establishment of a British University in the Near East"; TNA, CO 67/259/16 (1935), "Proposal for a British University in Cyprus"; TNA, CO 67/264/15 (1937), "Proposal to Establish a British University in Cyprus"; TNA, FO 141/675 (1937), "Projected Establishment of a British University in the Near East."

14. See TNA, FO 141/675 (1937), "Projected Establishment of a British University in the Near East," transmits a copy of memorandum by the Colonial Office for observation.

British Council gave some consideration to the matter, but its general impression was that unless the very large sum that would be necessary for the foundation of the university could be obtained, either from private benefactors or from public sources, the proposition was not yet a sufficiently practical one to warrant spending a great deal of time on it. Subsequently, Sir Philip Cunliffe-Lister, the secretary of state for the colonies, took a personal interest in the scheme, and, despite the financial impediments, the Colonial Office officially held informal discussions among different departments with a view to determining the official attitude of the government toward the project, whenever it might materialize.¹⁵ Before questions of finance and organization were dealt with, the most important question to consider was the site of the university. The locations considered were Cairo, Cyprus, and Palestine.

The Foreign Office, in a series of reports, indicated that British strategy in the eastern Mediterranean confined the British outlook too narrowly to politics and commerce and neglected to stress the importance of cultural power.¹⁶ The Colonial Office held the view that the “most promising approach” for cultural propaganda was “undoubtedly along educational lines.”¹⁷ Meanwhile, reports prepared by the Foreign Office reveal the two main aims of the project. The first was to control the spread of nationalist ideas and make the local elites familiar with British values. The second objective was to combat Italian propaganda.¹⁸ Since the early 1920s, with the advent of Mussolini’s fascist regime, Italy had gradually developed revisionist aspirations in the eastern Mediterranean. Two of the most significant tools in the pursuit of these imperial ambitions were the activities carried out by the Italian press agency Agenzia Stefani and the radio station Radio Bari, established in 1934 to systematically spread fascist propaganda throughout the Mediterranean

15. *Ibid.*

16. Brian McKercher accurately points to the primacy of the Foreign Office in British foreign policy making in the interwar period. In particular, he argues that from 1925 until 1937 the Foreign Office regained its power to influence British foreign policy. See Brian McKercher, “Old Diplomacy and New: The Foreign Office and Foreign Policy, 1919–1939,” in *Diplomacy and World Power: Studies in British Foreign Policy, 1890–1950*, ed. M. Dockrill and B. McKercher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 87.

17. TNA, CO 67/273/2 (1937), “Confidential Memorandum: Proposals for Expenditure by the British Council in the Near East during the Financial Year 1937–38.”

18. *Ibid.*

and nurture anti-British feelings in the local populations.¹⁹ In other words, it was imperative to place the British cultural propaganda, in this region at any rate, in a positive rather than a negative light.

There were three basic parameters under consideration: the site of the proposed university, the scope and the aim of the project, and the expenditure from public funds. This essay focuses on the locations that were carefully considered. The strategic plan was similar to the systemic calculation of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats used in economics; such calculations were carried out for every potential site. The final decision about the establishment of the university was made on the basis of the most updated information and recommendations by the relevant embassies. Therefore, the Colonial Office obtained detailed information from Palestine and Cyprus while the Foreign Office collected information about the universities at Athens, Beirut, Cairo, and Istanbul. Based on this information, the British Council prepared a detailed scheme. Subsequently, the Treasury was informed at the same time that the proposal was being worked out in conjunction with the British Council and that a request for financial assistance would be submitted to the Treasury.²⁰

Kenneth Roy Johnstone of the Foreign Office made observations in 1936 that were relevant for the British political interests in the area.²¹ In a memorandum he noted, “French, Italian and German cultural propaganda was seriously injuring, or threatening to injure, British political interests in the Mediterranean.”²² It is worth noting here that the Italian press had covered the project under consideration extensively and had pointed out its main objectives. According to Italian journalists, on the one hand, the British aimed to educate men who would be entirely loyal to British interests, while, on the other hand, Britain had an urgent need to counteract the vehemence of the Italian propaganda in the Mediterranean.²³

19. Ilia Xypolia “From Mare Nostrum to Insula Nostra: British Colonial Cyprus and the Italian Imperial Threat,” *Round Table* 105, no. 3 (2016): 287–98.

20. TNA, CO 67/273/4 (1938), “Proposed Establishment of a British University in the Near East.”

21. TNA, FO 141/675/8 (1937), “English Education and Culture,” containing K. R. Johnstone, “British Cultural Propaganda in the Mediterranean Area,” memorandum, Foreign Office, dated 1936.

22. *Ibid.*

23. TNA, CO 67/273/3 (1937), “Proposed Establishment of a British University in the Near East.”

The Foreign Office was constantly monitoring the activities of the French, German, and Italian propaganda campaigns. In 1936 and 1937 it was estimated that the French, German, and Italian governments spent more than £1 million for cultural institutions and propaganda expenditure while Britain was spending only £30,000.²⁴ The Foreign Office, in dissecting the foreign propaganda campaigns in the eastern Mediterranean, concluded that “propaganda can only be met by propaganda.”²⁵ The purpose of this was twofold: first, the retention of the loyalty of Britain’s “own people,” and, second, the assurance that their interests in foreign countries would not be automatically ignored.²⁶ In this light, the establishment of a British university in the region gained momentum as it was perceived as viable and an outstanding channel through which a cultural propaganda campaign could be realized.

In general, the Italian propaganda campaign in the region increased significantly in the late 1930s and was perceived as the greatest threat to the vital interests of the British Empire. Orchestrated by the Italian Ministry of Press and Propaganda, it included the establishment of schools and hospitals, the creation of a news agency in Cairo, the sponsorship of local press, and the institution of Radio Bari, the mouthpiece of the fascist regime.²⁷ For the Italian propaganda strategy, a turning point was the development of the Abyssinian crisis and the British reaction. It was only in 1935, when the British reacted to the Italian invasion, that Italian propaganda acquired a clear anti-British tone.²⁸ Until then, it generally cast Britain in positive terms, aiming at generating sympathy for Italy.²⁹ However, since 1933 Radio Bari had broadcast programs in the local languages of the various regions of the eastern Mediterranean, clearly attempting to exploit and stimulate anti-British sentiments in populations under the sphere of British influence.³⁰ It

24. TNA, FO 141/675/8 (1937), “English Education and Culture,” minutes from the Cultural Print, Foreign Office, 22 February 1937.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*

27. Massimiliano Fiore, *Anglo-Italian Relations in the Middle East, 1922–1940* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2013), 35.

28. *Ibid.*, 36.

29. Manuela A. Williams, *Mussolini’s Propaganda Abroad: Subversion in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, 1935–1940* (London: Routledge, 2006).

30. See Callum A. MacDonald, “Radio Bari: Italian Wireless Propaganda in the Middle East and British Countermeasures, 1934–38,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 13, no. 2 (1977): 195–207. The paradox

is in this wider context that the project of establishing the British university was considered. The inauguration of BBC Arabic Service in 3 January 1938 and the expansion of the British Council at the same time demonstrated the gravity of the perceived threat. The British Empire decided that in order to safeguard its interests in the region it should put forward a more a comprehensive strategy of cultural propaganda.³¹

While the Anglo-Italian imperial rivalry determined the overall British strategy of cultural propaganda in the 1930s in the region, it should be noted that Germany and France also systematically conducted cultural propaganda campaigns in the 1930s. Nazi propaganda with shortwave broadcasts in Arabic by Radio Berlin pursued a strategy with goals similar to the Italian effort: to promote Anti-British sentiments among the Arab populations.³² As a result, from the early 1930s Britain began to develop a more long-term cultural propaganda strategy that targeted the local elites. The project to establish a British university was an important component.

The Possible Locations

The possible locations that received the most focus were Cyprus, Egypt, and Palestine, although Turkey, Transjordan, and Lebanon were also considered. Palestine and Cyprus were assessed as offering the most suitable settings. In Turkey, the rise of Turkish nationalism concerned the Foreign Office;³³ any cultural propaganda campaign might jeopardize the cordial bilateral Anglo-Turkish relationship.³⁴

of the “unlikely partnership” between Italy and the anticolonial Arab movement is explored in Williams, 63.

31. A good overview of the era can be found in Lawrence Pratt, *East of Malta, West of Suez: Britain's Mediterranean Crisis, 1936–39* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

32. For an overview, see Jeffrey Herf, *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

33. Ilia Xypolia, “Racist Aspects of Modern Turkish Nationalism,” *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 18, no. 2 (2016): 111–24.

34. The following passage from the Colonial Office is indicative of these concerns: “Political relations between Turkey and Great Britain are extremely cordial; on the other hand, the intense nationalism of the Turks renders them suspicious of any foreign attempt to secure economic or cultural influence in their country. For this reason it is desirable to attempt only so much cultural propaganda as the Turks themselves either invite or are ready to welcome. Any endeavour to advance further will be certain to meet with stern opposition and to arouse suspicion that will not be easily

The establishment of a British university in the area would meet “a genuine need in Palestine, Cyprus and Transjordan, both from the point of view of the inhabitants of those countries and also from that of general British interests in this region.”³⁵ At that time the nearest university centers were the American University of Beirut (AUB) and three universities in Cairo.³⁶ The University of Beirut at one time enjoyed a fairly strong reputation but began to see its reputation decline in the 1930s, especially in Palestine.³⁷ In Cyprus the British government saw as an additional objective the combating of the strong attraction of the Universities of Athens and Istanbul to the local Cypriot communities.

The AUB was perceived by the Foreign Office to be an opponent of the British cultural propaganda imperatives as it was considered to have an anti-British leanings.³⁸ Bayard Dodge, the newly appointed president of the AUB, sent a dispatch to the Foreign Office in 1937. He was concerned about the potential of the establishment of a British university in the Near East and attempted to highlight the close relationship and cooperation of the AUB with the British interests. Praising the work of the AUB that encouraged ‘the understanding between the “Orientals and the British authorities,” Dodge made several suggestions to the Foreign Office with the intention of making the AUB come into even “closer touch with British ideas and traditions.”³⁹

Egypt, as the important geopolitical area in the region, was considered

allayed. . . . In these circumstances any extensive plans for cultural propaganda among the Turks themselves are best set aside, although any individual items of such propaganda which from time to time are put forward as acceptable to the Turkish Government should be readily undertaken.” TNA, CO 67/273/2 (1937), “Confidential Memorandum: Proposals for Expenditure by the British Council in the Near East during the Financial Year, 1937–38.”

35. *Ibid.*

36. The AUB was established in 1862 as the Syrian Protestant College by American missionaries and in 1920 was renamed the American University of Beirut. The three Universities in Cairo were the Cairo University, established in 1908; the American University in Cairo, established in 1919; and the Al-Azhar University, founded in 972.

37. TNA, CO 67/273/2 (1937), “Confidential Memorandum: Proposals for Expenditure by the British Council in the Near East during the Financial Year, 1937–38.”

38. *Ibid.*

39. TNA, CO 67/273/3 (1937), “Proposed Establishment of a British University in the Near East,” dispatch from Bayard Dodge to Foreign Office, 10 August 1937.

to be one of the most useful sites for a British university in the Near East.⁴⁰ The Foreign Office asked the British embassy at Alexandria to supply it with information about the American University of Cairo and the University of Cairo, which were not great centers of attraction for students outside Egypt. The required information included the history, the academic standards, and the educational standards of the universities. The Foreign Office was particularly interested in the number of foreign students from the Near East that had been educated there and whether a British university could be a greater attraction to the students of the countries administered by the British.⁴¹ The British embassy at Alexandria sent all the relevant information to the Foreign Office. The embassy's dispatch concluded, "The proposed British university to be established in the eastern Mediterranean would not justify the expenditure required."⁴² Egypt was eventually excluded from consideration mainly because it was not under British control and had the potential to become "prey to xenophobia."⁴³

Competition between the rival potential centers of attraction for students from the Near East was a major concern for the Foreign Office. The high academic standards of already established universities were an obstacle, as they would have made it difficult to attract students to the proposed university. One other important issue for the Egyptian universities was their location. Indeed, the British embassy in Alexandria stated, "The position of Cairo as the undoubted cultural, political, economic and religious center of the Arab world and the Near East generally must inevitably render it more attractive to foreign students than an outlying British dependency such as Cyprus or even Palestine."⁴⁴

On the other hand, by the late 1930s the political future of Palestine was so uncertain that it was simply impossible to make any plans for long-term work there. It is interesting to note that before the question of the partition of

40. TNA, FO 141/675 (1937), "English Education and Culture," minutes of meeting of Advisory Committee, 2 October 1937.

41. TNA, CO 67/273/3 (1937), "Proposed Establishment of a British University in the Near East."

42. *Ibid.*

43. TNA, CO 67/273/2 (1937), "Confidential Memorandum: Proposal for Expenditure by the British Council in the Near East during the Financial Year, 1937–38."

44. TNA, CO 67/273/3 (1937), "Proposed Establishment of a British University in the Near East."

Palestine, Sir Arthur Wauchope, the Palestine high commissioner, was of the opinion that Palestine would be a better center for a British university than Cyprus because it could attract students from adjacent Arab territories, with the belief that the spread of British culture among the Arabs in the Near East would have been very considerable. But when the Royal Commission Report and the British statement of policy in favor of a scheme of partition were published, the whole question started from a new basis.⁴⁵ With the prospect of bringing into being the plan for partition, a university site would “form part of a permanent British enclave in which Great Britain would be freer in matters of administration” than under the existing Mandatory system.⁴⁶

There were believed to be six main advantages to establishing the British university in Jerusalem over Cyprus.⁴⁷ First, its location was considered more central to the entire region of the Near East. Second, being a center for all three Abrahamic religions, it was considered a place that would attract Palestinian Arabs. Third, it was believed potential private benefactors were more likely to support Palestine over Cyprus. Fourth, given that the project was mainly targeting elites, Palestine already had a “considerable population of intellectuals of all sorts and could also provide some of those contacts with ‘research.’”⁴⁸ Also, in case the expected partition of Palestine occurred, interracial détente could be translated into a smooth collaboration between a newly established British university and a Hebrew one. Fifth, Jerusalem’s landscape fit well with the main pattern of landscapes where other British universities were situated. Finally, there were already established British institutions, such as a number of British primary and secondary schools, which the planned university could build on. However, the memorandum of 1937 that was based on the relevant information collected from Nicosia, Palestine, Athens, Cairo, Beirut, and Istanbul concluded that due to ongoing political uncertainty in Palestine, there was inevitably

45. TNA, CO 67/273/2 (1937), “Proposed Establishment of a British University in the Near East,” confidential letter from Arthur Wauchope, High Commissioner for Palestine to the Secretary of State for the Colonies Orsmby-Gore, 20 July 1937.

46. TNA, CO 67/273/4 (1938), Draft notes on the British University in the Near East, Internal CO correspondence, 6 May 1938.

47. TNA, CO 67/273/4, 10/2/1938 internal CO correspondence.

48. *Ibid.*

a very strong reluctance to suggest Jerusalem as the site of the proposed university.⁴⁹

Therefore, Cyprus, then a British crown colony, was the best option because of its location and the relatively stable political situation on the island. In comparison to the “obscure political future” and the stormy politics of the situation in Palestine, Cyprus appeared to be much “less tempestuous politically” in the eyes of the Foreign Office.⁵⁰ Moreover, the choice of Cyprus would serve other British interests, such as controlling the increasing nationalistic agitation of the local Greek population.⁵¹ In 1931, the nationalist agitation of the Greek Cypriots led to a shift in the imperial educational policies on the island. The British government in Cyprus reported to the Foreign Office that until the early 1930s Greek and Turkish propaganda had been allowed to spread their influence without effective restraint, “the former insisting that Cyprus must be united to Greece and the latter drawing away to Turkey the Muslim minority in the island, particularly the younger Turkish Cypriots.”⁵² Boosting a British identity then became the imperative for the government. For this reason, the British government attempted to divert the education of Cypriots away from Greek and Turkish universities.

The governor of Cyprus, Richmond Palmer, was very supportive of the establishment of a British university in Cyprus. Palmer argued that the nationalist sentiment should and would gradually diminish in both volume and intensity, in proportion to the degree to which the government promoted British education and other British national ideals and culture. Palmer believed that these would also be very beneficial for the Cypriots because the gains of the British connection would appear to them as a concrete advantage.⁵³ In June 1937 the governor of Cyprus sent a letter to the Foreign Office with

49. TNA, CO 67/273/4 (1937), “Proposed Establishment of a British University in the Near East.”

50. TNA, CO 67/273/2 (1937), “Confidential Memorandum: Proposals for Expenditure by the British Council in the Near East during the Financial Year, 1937–38.”

51. Indicative of its educational policy in Cyprus is that in 1934 the British government in Cyprus planned to alter the curriculum in order that “English history to be in as much, if not more detail than that of Cyprus.” Cyprus State Archives, SA1 731/1934/2, “Revision of Curriculum for Elementary Schools,” internal Colonial Office correspondence, 5 September 1936.

52. TNA, CO 67/273/2 (1937), “Proposed Establishment of a British University in the Near East,” Confidential Memorandum: “Proposals for Expenditure by the British Council in the Near East during the Financial Year, 1937–38,” May 1937.

53. TNA, CO 67/273/2 (1937), “Proposed Establishment of a British University in the Near East,” confidential letter from the Governor of Cyprus Sir Richmond Palmer to Ormsby-Gore the secretary of state for the colonies, 30 June 1937.

detailed information and comments on the potential for the establishment of a university in Cyprus.⁵⁴ In his dispatch Palmer included the recommendation of the director of agriculture in Cyprus, who had pointed out that the demand for agricultural teaching was for training of a strictly practical nature to encourage agriculturalists to work their holdings more efficiently. The British government had closed down the agricultural school in 1934 on the grounds that the training was too advanced to meet the local needs and that practically the only opening that existed for these studies was in employment in the government service. The agricultural school was replaced by a system of practical training at experimental centers.

The only concerns and difficulties relating to choosing Cyprus were of a practical nature. As the aim was to attract students from all over the eastern Mediterranean and not only Cyprus, transportation and the accessibility of the island was considered a serious issue.⁵⁵ At that time, it was very difficult for Middle Easterners to get to the island, and the cost was very expensive.⁵⁶

54. TNA, CO 67/273/4 (1938), "Proposed Establishment of a British university in the Near East."

55. "Cyprus might be to the British Empire what Rhodes is intended to be to the Italian, namely, a standing demonstration to the whole Near East of civilized colonial government. Yet with every advantage of climate, scenery and historic attraction, Cyprus remains off the main lines of travel and commerce, while every year brings boatloads of admiring tourists to Rhodes. It may be that the more discerning of these visitors marvel at the expense, as well as the beauty, of the Italian achievement and reflect also on the administrative oppression of the Fascist rule in the Dodecanese. That does not lessen the greatness of the opportunity which we might seize, and are not seizing, in Cyprus, to place, as it were, on view our own solution of the same problem which the Italians are facing in Rhodes. . . . It does not fall within the scope of the present report to consider this question in detail, although no general survey of British cultural propaganda in the Near East would be complete without an allusion to it. It is in fact unlikely that Cyprus will attract more visitors until, in the first place, the island possesses a harbour in which large passenger vessels can be sure of finding an anchorage in all weathers, and secondly, until it also possesses adequate hotel accommodation. So far as the first of these requirements is concerned, Famagusta harbour is said to be capable of development at relatively small expense, and a project for its enlargement may be considered at some future date." TNA, CO 67/273/2 (1937), "Proposed Establishment of a British University in the Near East," Confidential Memorandum: "Proposals for Expenditure by the British Council in the Near East during the financial year, 1937–38," May 1937.

56. "We are a little sceptical as to the practicability of establishing a British University in Cyprus—at any rate until the means of communication with that island are very greatly improved. Apart from the difficulty of getting there, the cost there and back would be an extremely important item in the very modest budgets of the great majority of the students who would compose such a university. And the difficulty of staffing this university with an adequate professional personnel we would also have to face. It would be disastrous if the teaching were found to compare badly with that obtaining in the long-established institutions in the Lebanon and elsewhere." TNA, CO 67/273/2 (1937), "Proposed Establishment of a British University in the Near East, Consulate General from the British Consulate General at Beirut, Lebanon to the News Department of the Foreign Office, 21 July 1937."

However, the prospect of establishing a naval and air base on the island would have immensely improved the suitability of Cyprus as an academic center.⁵⁷

In 1937 the conclusion was that Cyprus would be recommended as the most appropriate place for the realization of the British university project. However, the project never took place, due to the outbreak of the Second World War. Indeed, the last memorandum on the project based on the relevant information collected from Nicosia, Jerusalem, Athens, Cairo, Beirut, and Istanbul elucidated that in the most fundamental debate over the site of the proposed institution it had been decided that Cyprus was the appropriate place for the proposed university. Due to the political uncertainty in Palestine, the Foreign Office was reluctant to suggest Jerusalem as the site.

Conclusion

This essay aims to shed light on the unsuccessful attempt to institutionalize cultural propaganda by examining plans for establishing a British university in the eastern Mediterranean in the 1930s. The university was considered to be one of the most important and effective channels through which British propagandist ideas could be disseminated among the local intellectual elites. The project was eventually scrapped due to the outbreak of the Second World War. However, the significance of this planned project provides an important example of British soft-power strategy in the eastern Mediterranean during the interwar period.

While other tools in the cultural propaganda campaigns, such as radio broadcasts and printed material, have an immediate short-term effect, the establishment of a university would have helped the empire pursue longer-term imperial goals. Cultural propaganda was perceived by the Foreign Office as an essential component of the British Empire's overall strategy and legitimacy in its sphere of influence. Moreover, the ideological compliance of the empire's subjects was believed to be a *sine qua non* condition for the persistence of British rule in the eastern Mediterranean.

57. TNA, CO 67/273/2 (1937), "Proposed Establishment of a British University in the Near East," Confidential Memorandum: "Proposals for Expenditure by the British Council in the Near East during the Financial Year, 1937–38," May 1937.

Nevertheless, the British Empire was based first and foremost on hard power, that is, military, political, and economic power. The root of imperialism was the act of conquering by establishing political power in a target colony, which in turn was sustained through the installment of sympathetic collaborative governments. It was therefore essential to convince the subject colonies and their people that the maintenance of British imperial rule was beneficial to them as well.

Education is an important tool in cultural propaganda strategy, and it was an essential component of the British Empire's legitimization of its colonial possessions. Therefore, British plans for a university in the Mediterranean region should be examined within the context of its wider cultural propaganda strategy that in turn influenced British grand strategy in the region.