

Cyprus Background

Cyprus is the third largest island in the southeastern corner of the Mediterranean Sea, covering 9,251 square kilometers. Its location is of strategic importance between the continents of Africa, Asia, and Europe, “which has historically transformed it into a constant target of its neighbors” (Hadjiyanni, p 10). In 1974 Turkey invaded Cyprus which led to the occupation of 37 percent of the island—the northern half—and the dislocation of 200,000 Greek-Cypriots who lived there. Close to 3,000 people lost their lives and another 1,619 people went missing. During the course of two weeks, half of the island's population became displaced. The “Greek-Cypriot refugees” have been internally displaced since then. They are not considered “refugees” according to the UN definition. However, those displaced due to the invasion call themselves “refugees,” as do their descendants. The island remains divided along what is called “The Green Line,” which separates the occupied territory from the government-controlled section of Cyprus.

The conflict between Greek and Turkish Cypriots follows a long history, whereby Greek and Turkish communities claim ownership of the territory. The Ottomans ruled Cyprus until 1878, when the island was leased to Britain, and in 1925 became a Crown colony. At that time, a gradual rise of both Greek nationalism and Turkish nationalism formed strong “motherhood” feelings toward Greece and Turkey (Zembylas, p. 8). The 1950s were a period of inter-ethnic distrust and fears between the Greek and Turkish Cypriots. In 1959, Cyprus gained independence (Cyprus Republic), whereby Greece, Turkey and Britain were to act as guarantors of the new state. Both Greek and Turkey Cypriot communities were left with “unfulfilled” aspirations, and ethnic violence continued. Both groups pursued separate objectives, and the Turkish Cypriots withdrew from the government of the Cyprus Republic (run exclusively by Greek Cypriots). In 1974 Greek Cypriot Nationalists (and the aid of the Greek junta) staged a *coup d'état* in an attempt at *enosis*, the incorporation of Cyprus into Greece. Turkey reacted by invading Cyprus. Since 1974 there have been a series of inter-communal negotiations, under UN direction, but no agreement has been reached. Zembylas reflects on the situation since then:

Since the 1974 conflict, the Green Line that divides the island separates the two communities and deepens further the status quo, feelings of mistrust, stereotyping, and psychological distancing between Greek and Turkish Cypriots. This decades-long physical and cultural separation has rendered the division in Cyprus almost complete—socially, emotional, and politically...The continuous issues that form the backbone of the official adversarial narratives in the two communities—such as for example, the settlers’ problems the militarization of the island, and the violation of human rights—prevent the building of a peace culture based on mutual understanding and respect. p. 9