

CYPRUS AND THE NOT-SO-SOFT POWER OF CULTURAL POLITICS:
LAWRENCE DURRELL'S *BITTER LEMONS* AND RODIS ROUFOS'
THE AGE OF BRONZE

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This article builds on postcolonial readings of Lawrence Durrell's work and offers a comparative analysis of *Bitter Lemons* and the 1960 novel *The Age of Bronze* by Rodis Roufos, a Greek diplomat and journalist, who wrote it in direct response to Durrell's text. My main objective is to show that any critical analysis of Durrell's work on Cyprus should take into account both the literary and political criticism that the work incited among the non-British, non-Anglophone intellectual circles of the time as well as the specific cultural political power dynamics that have allowed Durrell's work to dominate as the uncontested, monologic authority on the subject of Cyprus' decolonization. By presenting an extensive, in-depth textual analysis of a suppressed section of Roufos' novel, first published by David Roessel in 1994, my paper aims to demonstrate that beyond the veneer of its overwhelmingly positive reception, *Bitter Lemons* was in fact the subject of cross-cultural, international debate that bears testament to the capacity of cultural objects to shape political realities. Interpreting both texts as examples of cultural politics, the article also illustrates the powerful legacy of colonization in current European political discourse.

Durrell's Legacy on Cyprus

It is ironic, yet in many ways entirely unsurprising, that the most famous book on Cyprus is a British author's account of the turbulent years of the National Organization of Cypriot Fighters (EOKA) uprising against the British crown from 1955 to 1959 and the Greek Cypriots' demand for *Enosis*, or political union with Greece. Lawrence Durrell's *Bitter Lemons of Cyprus: Life on a Mediterranean Island*, is a semi-autobiographical memoir and travelogue of the British author's stay on the island from 1953 to 1956. It was published in 1957, the same year as *Justine*, the first novel of the *Alexandria Quartet*, which established Durrell as one of the most prominent writers of his time. While the legacy of *Bitter Lemons* weighs heavy on Cyprus and its residents, non-Cypriots, by and large, tend to accept Durrell's presentation of historical events in the work in question as straightforward, unadulterated fact. At a dinner party late last year where all the guests were either diplomats or the spouses thereof, an Eastern-European attaché asked me whether I could recommend any books written on Cyprus. I asked which books he had already read; unsurprisingly, Durrell's *Bitter Lemons* was the first work he mentioned, to the excited affirmations of the rest of the company present. He said he had used it for his personal instruction as an introduction to the history and politics of the island.

This use of Durrell's book as a quasi-official political handbook is not a recent development; it has been treated as such from the very moment of its publication in 1957. In

her 1958 review of *Bitter Lemons* for The New York Times, Freya Stark, a British explorer and travel writer, praised Durrell's 'assessment of the conflict and its causes' and gave the work political relevance by quoting Durrell's opinion that, 'Cyprus, the political question... will now be decided by international currents far distant from and stronger than its own island orbit...' 30 years later, in 1987, Alan Warren Friedman described *Bitter Lemons* as a work that 'not only captures an atmosphere and a tone, a way of life and a people, but it details and examines the destruction of the Cypriot peace...' (1987: 64). More recently, in a footnote detailing the bibliography on the 'Cyprus question' in his 2004 book *Human Rights and the End of Empire*, legal historian A. W. Brian Simpson cited Durrell's work as part of a long list of historical, political, legal and autobiographical sources from scholars and politicians alike, second only to what he calls 'the best near contemporary account' (2004: 884) of the Cyprus situation, Crawshaw's *The Cyprus Revolt*. As such, *Bitter Lemons* has had a readership that has put it to both public and private uses, a consequence of the fact that it has appealed to both literary and political sensibilities.

This article builds on post-colonial readings of Durrell's work and provides a comparative analysis of *Bitter Lemons* and the novel *The Age of Bronze* (1960) written by Greek diplomat and journalist Rodis Roufos in direct response to Durrell's text. It will focus on a section of Roufos' novel in which the narrator carries out a scathing review of Durrell's *Bitter Lemons*, targeting its claims of impartiality as disingenuous and immoral. This section was originally excised from the novel's first edition but was later brought to light by David Roessel in 1994. By offering a reading of *Bitter Lemons* through the lens of the counter-discourse it incited, my objective is to show that any critical analysis of Durrell's work on Cyprus should take into account both the literary and political criticism that the work incited among the non-British, non-Anglophone intellectual circles of the time, as well as the specific cultural political power dynamics that have allowed Durrell's work to dominate as the uncontested, monologic authority on the subject of Cyprus' decolonization to this day. Interpreting both texts as examples of cultural politics, the article also illustrates the powerful legacy of colonization in current European political discourse.

Local Responses

By the time he reached Cyprus, Lawrence Durrell was no stranger to the Mediterranean region: he had lived in Corfu from 1935 to 1939, in Cairo and Alexandria between 1941 and 1945, and in Rhodes from 1945 to 1947. He had also held multiple roles within the British Civil and Foreign Service including that of junior press officer in Cairo and director of public relations for the British Overseas Information Service in Rhodes, prior to becoming Director of Information Services in Cyprus in 1954. This, combined with his reputation as a well-respected writer of international acclaim, makes *Bitter Lemons* at the very least a text worth studying for anyone interested in the politics of British decolonization in the Mediterranean. But whether Durrell's Mediterranean experience justifies the unquestionable historical credibility and authority that an international, anglophone readership has consistently attributed to this work since the time of its publication in 1957 is an entirely different matter.

Soon after *Bitter Lemons* was published, Greek and Greek-Cypriot commentators criticized it for its disingenuous nature, drawing attention to its numerous fictional constructs and accusing Durrell of making fiction appear as fact for his personal and professional benefit.

While Turkish and Turkish-Cypriot reactions are not nearly as well-documented or systematized as those in the Greek language—in fact, a rigorous search of this topic has yielded a lamentable dearth of scholarly works on the topic—there are some references that may indicate similarly frustrated sentiments in the Turkish-Cypriot reception of the work, but less about the book's historical and political accuracy¹ and more about the representation of Turkish Cypriots.² While David Roessel (1994, 2000), Stefan Herbrechter (1999) and Vangelis Calotychos (2004) all discuss Roufos' text as an example of the criticism that *Bitter Lemons* incited in Greece and Cyprus, the counter-discourse remains largely understudied in the book's corresponding popular and academic treatments. A more detailed examination of Roufos' literary strategies within the framework of the novel's broader cultural political context remains to be undertaken. Going beyond a definition of cultural politics as 'the exploration of what precisely is *cultural* in politics and what is *political* in culture' (Armitage, Bishop, Kellner 2005: 1) this article is interested in 'examining the character and agency of cultural and political explanations' (Armitage, Bishop, Kellner 2005: 2), as well as the strategies of legitimization and delegitimization employed by Durrell and Roufos in their works. By engaging in a textual analysis of *Bitter Lemons* and *The Age of Bronze*, this article offers the first extensive comparative examination of the two works, with an emphasis on their role as a site of cultural political debate.

The Age of Bronze was not the only book to have been written in response to Durrell's work on Cyprus. Kostas Montes, a famous Greek-Cypriot poet who was also an active political member of EOKA, penned a literary response to *Bitter Lemons* in 1964: a Greek novella titled *Kleistēs Portes (Closed Doors)*. While Montes and Roufos have different ideologies of response, they both target the same Durrellian characteristics: the British author's claims of being apolitical, impartial and objective. Roufos and Montes read these elements in light of Durrell's 'diplomatic' textual strategies that mark the confluence of his work as a literary author and a colonial official in charge of what was effectively British propaganda on the island.³ This article will focus solely on Roufos' response to Durrell for a number of reasons. First, both Durrell and Roufos' works were written before Cyprus reached an independence deal in 1960, meaning that they address similar political facts without the privilege of hindsight. Montes, on the other hand, wrote *Closed Doors* after Cypriot independence, when the loss of *Enosis* as a political possibility was a *fait accompli* and disappointment in both the British Empire and Greece was running high.⁴ Second, Roufos was the Greek Consul in Cyprus between 1954 and 1956, which made him a member of the international diplomatic circle on the island of which Durrell was also a member. In fact, as David Roessel mentions, it was Roufos that 'helped facilitate Durrell's introduction into Cypriot literary society, as the two men had friends in common in Athens' (1994: 132). This enables a comparison between two authors whose 'day jobs' fell under their respective national foreign service, and which had similar objectives: to further their own country's claim on the island.

Post-colonial Cultural Politics and Europe

That *Bitter Lemons* can be read within the framework of Orientalist and colonial discourse has been amply and persuasively demonstrated.⁵ Postcolonial theory, from Said's *Orientalism* onwards, has attributed the kind of representational paradox embodied by *Bitter Lemons'* canonical role vis-à-vis Cyprus to a self-perceived supremacy of knowledge that the Westerner exercised over the colonized spaces and peoples of the so-called East.⁶ According to his fans,