

Cyprus: Small Island, Big Role in History

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Turkey's invasion of Cyprus in 1974 included sending tanks to Nicosia.

The EU and Russia are having one of their biggest spats in recent times over the future of the Cypriot economy. It's not the first time that the Mediterranean island nation of barely a million people has been home to the intrigues of much bigger powers. Here's a look at how small Cyprus has played an outsized role in history:

Antiquity: In ancient times, Cyprus' strategic location between three continents guaranteed it a role in flourishing trade routes and made it a coveted prize. Alexander the Great in 333 B.C. captured the island as part of his campaign against the Persians. After Alexander's death, Cyprus was embroiled in the power plays of his generals, before enjoying a period of stability under the Ptolemy dynasty during which Greek culture became dominant. As the supposed birthplace of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, Cyprus gained cult status in the Hellenic world. Then the Romans invaded in 58 B.C. and held onto Cyprus for nearly five centuries, interrupted by a short period under Cleopatra of Egypt. Roman rule brought a measure

of stability, and the economy flourished. When the Roman empire split in two at the end of the 4th century, Cyprus was part of the Byzantine empire, and a generally more chaotic era began.

Crusades: From the middle of the 7th century, Cyprus suffered wave after wave of Arab raids before the Byzantine emperor re-established a firm grip on one of his prized assets toward the end of the millennium. From the 11th century, Cyprus was embroiled in the Crusades, becoming a launching pad for Christian armies aiming to reclaim the Holy Lands from Muslims. England's King Richard I — "the Lionheart" — invaded after the Cypriot ruler made the mistake of trying to imprison Richard's sister and his betrothed. Richard eventually sold the island to fellow crusader Guy of Lusignan, the displaced king of Jerusalem, in 1192. The Lusignan dynasty lasted for three centuries and marked a period of prosperity, with the island's elites profiting from growing trade with Venice and Genoa. Average Cypriots, however, chafed under these feudal times and few became rich.

Venetian Power Base: In 1489, the streetwise Venetians took control of Cyprus, maintaining the unpopular feudal system as they used the island as a defensive military base against the rising power of the Ottoman Empire, which had already captured Constantinople, the Byzantine capital, and much of mainland Greece. The Venetians' struggle to prevent the Turks from attacking the island forms the backdrop to Othello, one of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies. Cyprus was eventually conquered by the Ottomans in 1571 after the Venetian chief Marcantonio Bragadin was captured and flayed alive in the port city of Famagusta. Turkish rule would remain for about three centuries.

The Age of Sultans: Turkish influence under the Ottomans has had long-term repercussions to this day. The Ottomans got rid of the feudal system and engaged with the Christian Orthodox representatives of the island. But the era was also largely one of stagnation. In the early part of the 19th century, independence sentiment burning in Greece started inspiring the island's ethnic Greek majority. Reprisals against those accused of conspiring with the Greek rebels fed a growing desire for union with the expanding modern Greece.

The British: As the Ottoman Empire faced a raft of nationalist movements, the British saw their chance to gain a foothold in Cyprus. In 1878, the British took control of the island in exchange for military aid in the Ottoman fight with Russia. Britain then annexed Cyprus at the start of World War I when the Ottomans sided with Germany against Britain. It became a prized European asset for the British Empire, as the island helped defend England's crucial trade routes to India and safeguard its interests in the Middle East. Britain transformed Cyprus, introducing its legal code and driving development. But as the years went by, calls for union with Greece grew from the majority Greek population. A guerrilla campaign that included acts of terror eventually forced Britain out. Instead of becoming part of Greece, Cyprus was made independent in 1960 — and became a focus of Cold War politics.

Modern Greece and Turkey: Independence did not make things quieter. By 1963, the acrimony between Greek and Turkish Cypriots had turned to violence. The following year, the United Nations arrived to keep the peace. More than a half-century on they're still there, mainly patrolling the so-called "Green Line" buffer zone. Cyprus split into an internationally recognized, Greek-speaking south and a breakaway Turkish-speaking north in 1974 — when Turkey invaded after a coup by supporters of union with Greece. Tens of thousands became refugees after they were displaced from their homes. A series of attempts to reunify the island have all ended in failure, most notably in 2004 when Greek Cypriots voted in a referendum against a proposed peace deal.

Today's Spat: Cyprus' entry into the European Union in 2004 and adoption of the euro four years later were meant to put it on the path of stability and prosperity. Instead, the euro-zone debt crisis has upended Cyprus' dreams. The island's shadowy and outsized banking system and its over-reliance on Russian money have turned it into the latest country needing a bailout to avert collapse. In an unprecedented move, the EU said last weekend that depositors would have to cough up funds for the country's bailout — effectively amounting to a seizure of savings. That has infuriated Russia, which has billions deposited in Cypriot banks — much of the money believed to be laundered illegal gains. The EU's calls for depositors to effectively pay for a large chunk of Cyprus' bailout have not only raised fears of disastrous bank runs; they have also put Europe on a political collision course with an increasingly assertive Moscow. Cyprus has also recently discovered significant offshore gas deposits — that means it will likely remain in the gaze of big powers for decades to come.

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