



ROUNDTABLE

# The Adventures of an Oral History Archive in the Greek Public Domain

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## The Greek Debt Crisis and the Uses of the Past in the Public Sphere

In December 2021 a famous Greek TV and radio journalist and well-known anti-vaxxer, Yiorgos Tragkas, passed away due to Covid-19 complications. In the previous two decades, Tragkas had become a controversial figure, employing an anti-elite, pro-Russian and anti-Western narrative that fed into the country's underdog culture. His ethnocentric, populist, toxic tabloid journalism had been a popular genre in Greek political culture since the early 1980s. However, the debt and migration crises that shook Greece fuelled populist politics and a wave of misinformation.<sup>1</sup> Tragkas jumped on the bandwagon of this new era by whitewashing the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn Party on national TV and by live appearances dressed up as a Second World War Nazi officer, with photos of Adolf Hitler and Angela Merkel on his desk.

The troubled past of Greece has played a significant role in the rise of the Eurosceptic sentiment. At the beginning of the crisis, a part of the far left envisioned a possible new civil war; only this time the left was destined to deny attempts at any reconciliation between them and their class rivals.<sup>2</sup> Protesting against the EU included a heterogeneous group of the extreme right, neo-orthodox religious forces, nationalists, anti-capitalists and radical left. The public blame game on Greece's financial woes gave rise to conspiracy theories or simplistic, populist approaches to complex phenomena. Along with the political resistance against the austerity measures imposed by European institutions and the IMF (International Monetary Fund), new iconoclastic historical trends appeared, in the shape of intense protests during school and military parades celebrating the most significant moments of the Greek nation.

This mostly far-right rhetoric penetrated even radical far-left and social and political groups. The analogy of a new (financial) German Occupation and the Merkel-Hitler comparisons were landmarks in the recycling of history for temporary political gains. The youth movement, on the other hand, opted for analogies with the Greek dictatorship of 1967–74 to point to the lack of democratic functioning of the state during the crisis.

The strong condemnation of Germany was a novice movement destined to replace anti-American and anti-Western feelings that had long dominated Greek cultural identity. These sentiments were part and parcel of a subculture of eternal victimhood dating back to the eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> In a 2013 survey, 70 per cent of Greeks claimed that they had suffered 'worse Genocides' than the Jews. The question was replicated with Armenians, Bosnians and . . . Carthenians (a mock national control group),

<sup>1</sup> See Mannousos Marangudakis, *The Greek Crisis and Its Cultural Origins: A Study in the Theory of Multiple Modernities* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) and George Siakas and Panagiotis Paschalidis, 'Variants of the "Underdog Culture" in Greek Public Opinion: Soft and Hard-Core Russophilia', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 21, 1 (2021), 31–52.

<sup>2</sup> For example: *Not another Varkiza* was a popular graffiti post-2009, where *Varkiza* is a reference to the 1945 Varkiza Agreement that temporarily stopped the bloodbath between communist forces and British and Greek governmental forces during the aftermath of liberation. *Varkiza* has since then been considered a compromise and political suicide for the left, particularly its 'revolutionary' section.

<sup>3</sup> Zinovia Lialiouti, 'Αντιαμερικανισμός Και Ελληνική Δεξιότητα Στη Μεταψυχροπολεμική Εποχή' [Anti-Americanism and the Greek right in the post-Cold War era], *Ελληνική Επιθεώρηση Πολιτικής Επιστήμης* [*The Greek Review of Political Science*], 35 (2010), 89–129.

with similar results.<sup>4</sup> Alexis Tsipras, Greece's leftist prime minister from 2015 to 2019, repeatedly referred to the financial and social crisis as a 'social Holocaust', while some of his ministers compared the predicament of the Greeks under the crisis with the suffering of the Jews in Nazi Germany, an analogy used extensively and simultaneously by both the left and the right. Cartoonists and politicians still often compare Greece to Auschwitz, while the most common derogatory term to describe the supporters of the EU was that of 'collaborators'.

The open issue of war reparations led to one of the most heated debates in the public sphere, partly due to the refusal of the German government to recognise or even discuss the suffering of Greeks and the looting of their wartime properties. A network of people in the so-called 'martyr' villages, mostly affected by German occupation, was central in challenging the German state as Greece's trustworthy ally, especially during commemorations of the Second World War. It exercised immense political pressure on Greek governments and criticised the German self-portrayal as an honest agent in the commemorative lessons of the Second World War. Reparations claims have a long and complex legal and political history. Almost twenty-five years ago, a group of resistance veterans and politicians formed a lobbying group, the National Council for claiming War Reparations, that actively put pressure on the Greek and German governments to act on the matter. Its visibility and reach, however, exponentially increased with the eruption of the country's debt crisis of 2009.<sup>5</sup> Since then, almost all Greek governments have renewed their calls for war reparations as an attempt to regain self-esteem and national pride at a time when Germany, as paymaster of Europe, imposed 'punishing' austerity measures. In the post-2009 era, Greece was a country that looked predominantly to the past to construct new identities since previous reference points have been eroded in the face of the debt crisis, globalisation and Europeanisation of institutions and politics, a phenomenon identified by some experts as ethno-populism.<sup>6</sup>

### The Politicisation of the 1940s and the Revisionist Debate in Greece

The redefinition of the memory politics of the 1940s in Greece had started long before the 2009 debt and subsequent identity crisis. An intense academic and public debate broke out in 2004 and popularised the history of the 1940s to unprecedented levels. It was this discussion that set the tone for the memory wars that followed and are examined in this essay. The debate started as an academic discussion in public but soon enough, as was the case of *Historikerstreit* in Germany, it grew rapidly and, quite often, beyond academic parameters.

The debate created a distinct category of 'revisionists' in terms of methodology, theory and political repercussions. The 'revisionists' implemented a quantitative approach to various issues of 1940s history, especially violence, and called for a de-sentimentalisation of this glorified historical period. The second important contribution of these views was the 'breaking' of various taboo issues, with the discussion of left-wing violence, the further focus on marginal social and ethnic groups and the rise of new, previously ignored but essential questions on the sociology of the conflict. A third priority of the new agenda was the indirect political implications of these approaches. The 'revisionists' considered that the question of the moral, as well as historical, responsibility of the left should be raised, especially on the atrocities front. It was time for the moral responsibility to be split in proportional if not equal parts between the left and the right. It was this indirect attempt to question the moral capital of the left that became the primary issue of debate, even if not openly discussed. The revisionists denounced their rivals for confusing their academic status with their personal ideological bias, their 'remembering of

<sup>4</sup> George Antoniou, Elias Dinas and Spyros Cosmidis, 'Collective Victimhood and Social Prejudice: A Post-Holocaust Theory of Anti-Semitism', *Political Psychology*, 41, 5 (2020), 861–86.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://esdodge.gr/>.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, 'Studying Populism in Comparative Perspective: Reflections on the Contemporary and Future Research Agenda', *Comparative Political Studies*, 51, 13 (2018), 1667–93. Andreas Pantazopoulos is the Greek expert on this phenomenon; see his book: *Εθνικολαικισμός και Νεωτερικότητα στην Ελλάδα* [*Ethnopolulism and Modernity in Greece*] (Athens: Epikentro, 2021).

the past' with their historical understanding of the past.<sup>7</sup> Beyond that, they re-introduced values of 'objectivity' and ideological 'neutrality' based on their 'from below' approach in the field, which favoured apolitical interpretations.

The accusations against these 'new trends' were very wide in scope. The general arguments were that revisionists deliberately ignored the historical context and favoured the 'deconstruction' and fragmentation of the research agenda; attempted to revive and legitimise the Cold War rhetoric in a novel way; questioned the moral primacy of the left and neutralised the motives of Axis collaborators; attempted to diminish the role of ideology in relation to issues such as partisanship and mobilisation; projected a hidden political and ideological agenda and motives against the Greek left and the social struggles of contemporary Greek society. This was usually accompanied by a strong personal attack against alleged motives of the individuals behind the revisionist arguments. Not surprisingly, almost the entirety of the accusations reappeared on the discussion of the Fund for the Future project.<sup>8</sup>

### The 'Greek-German Fund for the Future' Project

In March 2014 the president of West Germany, Joachim Gauck, visited Greece in an attempt to appease the anti-German feelings of the Greek people. Among other things, he paid tribute to the 'martyr' villages by visiting Lingiades in Epirus and the Greek Jewish communities at the Ioannina Romaniote Synagogue. In his speeches, he stressed the need to shed light on the unknown chapters of the Nazi Occupation in Greece and revisit the past as a tool to build bilateral trust and reconciliation. Germany was doubly guilty, said Gauck, because of what the Nazis had done but also because the perpetrators had not asked for forgiveness until now. This was his mission, he claimed. He also emphasised how German people should become better informed on what Nazism brought to Greece. Last, but not least, he acknowledged that Greek properties had been looted, and that Greece was forced to provide 'loans' to Nazi forces, loans that were never repaid.

In the aftermath of his visit, the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched an ambitious project of reconciliation between the two countries. It was called the 'Greek-German Fund for the Future'. The programme operated for the first eight years in Greece, ostensibly to help the communities that had borne the brunt of the Nazi Occupation, namely the 'martyr' villages and the Jewish communities. Scholars were invited to submit their proposals and arrange funding for projects related to historical memory.<sup>9</sup>

The initiative was initially met with strong opposition. Few of the martyr villages joined, since the majority considered the project a diplomatic ploy of the Germans to move the discussion away from reparations by providing an indirect, but mostly insignificant, compensation to those who would partake in the project. The Jewish communities, up until then extremely hesitant to work on any reconciliation projects with the Germans, decided to join. As a result, two years later the Minister of Foreign Affairs and soon to be the new president of West Germany, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, visited the renovated Monastirioton Synagogue in Thessaloniki. The synagogue was financed by the Greek-German Fund and Steinmeier became an honorary member of the Jewish community, a gesture unthinkable up until then. In general, the project invested in infrastructure and in academic projects of artistic and historical value.

<sup>7</sup> On the issue of personal and cultural bias see Behan MacCullagh, 'Bias in Historical Description, Interpretation and Explanation', *History and Theory*, 39, 1 (2000), 39–66. Carolyn Dean, 'History Writing, Numbness, and the Restoration of Dignity', *History of the Human Science*, 17, 2 (2004), 57–96, deals with the empathic identification of historians with victims in various historical narratives.

<sup>8</sup> Voglis Polymeris and Nioutsikos Ioannis, 'The Greek Historiography of the 1940s: A Reassessment', *Comparative Southeast European Studies*, 65, 2 (2017), 316–33. Also, Giorgos Antoniou, 'The Lost Atlantis of Objectivity: The Revisionist Struggles between the Academic and Public Spheres', *History and Theory*, 46, 4 (2007), 92–112. See <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4502286>.

<sup>9</sup> The visit was widely covered by the Greek press. See also <https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Berichte/EN/Joachim-Gauck/2014/140304-State-visit-Greece.html>.

By far the best known and most discussed project was the 'Memories of Occupation' project, a collection of oral history testimonies supported by the Fund, the EVZ institution in Germany (Erinnerung, Verantwortung, Zukunft) and the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, a highly valued philanthropic foundation that provided support to all sections of social life before and during the debt crisis.<sup>10</sup> The project was an idea of a Greek-German professor, Hagen Fleischer, a well-respected figure and advocate for German responsibility and the need to provide reparations. It was implemented by a German institution, the Freie University of Berlin, under the responsibility of (Greek) professor Apostolopoulos. It involved the video recording of over ninety oral interviews with members of the Resistance, Jewish community members and survivors of Germans reprisals and the death camps. Prominent members of political and intellectual life such as Manolis Glezos, a symbol of the Resistance, intellectuals such as the poet Titos Patrikios and many others participated. Glezos himself had dedicated a large part of his public activities to making the case for reparations a priority for the political parties in Greece and Germany.

The project included, beyond the interviews, a sophisticated and user-friendly online environment with plenty of pedagogical and educational activities; it attempted to get permission to be used in secondary and primary school classrooms but, thus far, this has not been possible, mostly due to the negative reactions by a wide range of individuals, institutions and political parties.

The expression of outrage against the project included the Communist Party of Greece, the Syriza Radical Left Party, the Socialist Party of Kinima Allagis, extreme right individuals and institutions, the Greek Federation of Secondary Education State School Teachers (OLME), the left-wing press and media personalities. Those memory agents and pressure groups built their narratives on shared ethno-populist values and, for them, the German funding and institutional involvement was a priori a suspicious element of the project. Highly motivated and highly biased critics of the project derailed the discussion from its historical, mnemonic and educational contribution to the perceived Machiavellian German motivations behind the project, namely challenging the unanimity on the imperative nature of Greek reparations.

Quite interestingly, political and methodological arguments were employed in the public domain by the project's critics. Many critics insisted that the foreign ministry of a country that denied the responsibility of paying reparations should not act as the funding institution on a historical memory project. Others interpreted the ambition to include this new educational toolbox in schools as a direct German intervention in how history is taught in secondary education. Most of the critics also expressed their concern that a new revisionist attempt at Nazi Occupation was underway. Since political dichotomy overshadowed other dimensions of the conflict's legacies, the revisionist discussion on the Resistance and Nazi destruction of the country was revived through the critique of this oral history archive.

Apart from political and public concerns, criticism was extended to the pitfalls of using oral history as a historical method, claiming that the experience and memory of the Axis Occupation would be overshadowed by the narratives of these elderly people with limited knowledge of the overall context. Consequently, the archive deliberately ignored the historical context and favoured the 'deconstruction' and fragmentation of the period. That meant an attempt to neutralise the motives of Axis collaborators and Occupation forces, diminish the role of the Resistance and thus undermine the demand for reparations. Overall, it concealed a political and ideological agenda against the Greek left and the Greek people in general. Among them, professional historians who served as members of parliament or members of the Communist Party claimed that the project falsified proper history and whitewashed Nazism. The topic was debated in the Greek Parliament, with the Communist Party, Syriza and the Socialists posing questions to the Minister of Education and demanding the removal of the project as a possible addition to the curriculum of the schools.<sup>11</sup> Having learned their lesson during the

<sup>10</sup> See <https://www.occupation-memories.org/>.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, [https://www.efsyn.gr/politiki/boyli/296616\\_sobara-erotimata-gia-programma-mog-xekathari-i-yfypoyrgos-paideias](https://www.efsyn.gr/politiki/boyli/296616_sobara-erotimata-gia-programma-mog-xekathari-i-yfypoyrgos-paideias).

revisionist memory war, few professional historians participated in the Fund for the Future debate, leaving the ground open to collective memory activists imposing their narrow framework of interpretation on the past. A notable exception, Antonis Liakos, published an op-ed in the left newspaper *Efimerida Syntakton* (where a large part of criticism against the project was published), resisting the conspirator tone of criticism against the project and asking for a debate based upon evidence and epistemological criticism. A scholarly network of oral history (EPI) also joined the discussion in the same newspaper, exercising serious criticism against the pedagogical dimension of the project.

### Conclusions

What connects the story of historical revisionism and the German Fund for the Future is the common ground of historical politics through contemporary identity redefinitions. The foundational moment of contemporary Greek politics, the *Metapolitefsi* period that followed the military dictatorship, was a common denominator hidden in both debates' agenda, creating a complex web of tangled political and social elements. During the post-2009 debt crisis this post-1974 democratisation period was attacked by the intellectuals preaching for a quick and deep modernisation process of Greek society. The long process of democratisation was criticised as a period during which populism, especially after 1981, prevailed over rational political thinking, a period where overspending in state finance led to the 2009 crisis. It is not hard to see why those who opposed those views and defended this post-1974 heritage were against a pro-German project that carried the connotations and weight of a German-driven radical state reform during the debt crisis. At the same time the post-1974 period had created an archetypical version of the history of the 1940s, that of an idealised resistance movement that glorified and provided political capital to contemporary left parties, including the socialists. Again, the unravelling of those myths was met with vicious reactions by the same social groups that fought against the German memory project.

In conclusion, the tone and arguments of the debate about the Fund for the Future project was the outcome of two almost parallel but equally significant processes. On the one hand, the investment of certain stakeholders in the past as an instrument of political struggle and the exposure of historians in the public sphere during the revisionist debate proved to be an overall positive process, familiarising the public with professional interpretations of the past and especially the Axis Occupation period. However, this process was given a whole new meaning during the post-2009 financial crisis. Within the new financial and cultural crisis, public stakeholders failed to understand that the study of politics, history and ideology in this era was a much more complex process; what the Memory of Occupation project showed is that the study of politics of memories and remembrance is a legitimate as well as necessary educational, disciplinary and public domain exercise of self-awareness, even when funded by German money.

The recent debates in Greece verified the established perception of the historical discipline as a field of implementing and reflecting political views. Nevertheless, the disciplinary transformations, the generational gap and the bottom-up reinterpretation of history by memory activists and the social media create a new, pluralist environment in which research is born and developed. The crucial issue of the debate was, beyond any doubt, the public image of the 1940s rather than its historiographical representation. The hegemonic power over the means of collective commemoration and the public image of the past was a central bone of contention. Therefore, questioning the basic parameters of the 1940s public conceptualisation became a political and not a historical stake. The history of the 1940s had to remain unaltered, not for historical reasons but for 'political' ones. The oxymoron was that it became the role of the historians to guard this heritage.