


ROUNDTABLE

Contemporary History as an Intrusion into Personal Memory: Methodological Dilemmas, Public Presence and the Perils of Presentism

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In a brilliant 1972 cartoon, the creator of Snoopy, Charles M. Schulz, depicts the contemplative beagle going through a crisis of rage. Snoopy discovers that a six-storey parking garage has been built on the site of the Daisy Hill Puppy Farm, a place in which, we are led to understand, he had spent some of his happiest childhood moments. Snoopy cannot contain himself. ‘You stupid people’, he shouts; ‘You’re parking on my memories’.¹

Admittedly, when Marc Bloch was writing his classic work on methodology, he may not have had in mind exactly this, but it is effectively what the student of contemporary history does. The citizens’ identities have been shaped by memory, propaganda wars or public history. But many years later, a much younger person, who has not ‘lived through’ those events, comes and disputes facts and interpretations. Thus, the historian inevitably makes a direct intrusion into the personal memories of other people, even into their identity.

Then comes an inverse process, when later generations seek to impose their own value-oriented understanding of past epochs, sometimes in terms of an ideological witch-hunt, imposed by the short-lived assumptions of the present. This also leaves the historian in an uncomfortable position, since the effort to uphold historicity may be taken by others as a defence of past practices, now unacceptable.

This article will address two case studies from contemporary Greek history. It will then make some general observations about the historians’ role, responsibility, and limits in contemporary public debates about the past.

The Claim for the American Imposition of the 1967 Junta

A major challenge for the student of modern Greek history is the self-image of the Greeks as constant innocent victims of great-power interventions. The truth is that there has been foreign interference in Greek history, from the 1827 battle of Navarino to the 1947 Truman Doctrine. Still, this does not mean that all Greek history was decided by the ‘foreign factor’ as many Greeks assume. This passionately held belief emanates from a conspiracy theory that ‘discovers’ foreign causes in any evil that has befallen Greece. It forms an integral part of Greek populism, and one of the main obstacles for the mature evolution of Greek historical and political culture since it prevents society from taking a critical look at its past. Importantly, this theory always targets the Western powers, never others (for example Russia), since its main tenets focus on Greek anti-Westernism and anti-Americanism.

The most persistent manifestation of this theory is the conviction that the military dictatorship of 1967 was imposed by the Americans. This started as a general rumour, but was brought to prominence by the leading politician Andreas Papandreou. Papandreou was arrested by the junta and many feared

¹ https://peanuts.fandom.com/wiki/Daisy_Hill_Puppy_Farm, 24 Nov. 1972, accessed 4 May 2022.

that he was going to be executed. He was released early in 1968, and this experience radicalised him. He then published his book *Democracy at Gunpoint*. According to Papandreou, Greece was a country of the periphery, suffering successive interventions by the capitalist centre. Following the civil war of the 1940s, the country was ruled by a reactionary combination of the Palace, the Army and the Americans, and in 1967, at a time when democratic forces were about to gain power and question this state of affairs, the military, at the orders of the Americans, toppled Greek democracy and arrested the process. Thus, the only way for Greece to become democratic was to shake off dependence on foreign powers.² A leading historian, James Miller, has described how this narrative penetrated Greece's political culture, heavily contributing to the rise of Papandreou to power in 1981.³

It was not just Andreas Papandreou. During the junta other authors projected similar views.⁴ These people were genuinely angry with the junta; their books were political texts of resistance, and as such they must be respected. One of the reasons for their success was the fact that they were based on the deeply rooted stereotype of foreign intervention. However, in turn they gave credibility to the tendency always to blame others and never the Greeks themselves. After the restoration of democracy in 1974, these views became dominant. In this framing of reality, anti-Americanism runs riot. Thus, a major public rally in Athens usually ends its protest in front of the American Embassy. It is a kind of a local custom, and often the organisers lose balance: in February 2022, a demonstration by the Communist Party on the war in Ukraine ended, very amusingly, in the American Embassy, as if the Americans had invaded Ukraine!⁵

From the year 2000 a new generation of historians began to challenge the myth of 1967. Thousands of documents were released from the United States and other Western European countries, disproving American involvement in the imposition of the junta, whose origins should be sought in the huge failures of the Greek political system itself. Over the past two decades, there has not been a single work in the international bibliography – based on primary sources – that lends any credibility to the claim of America's role in imposing the dictatorship.⁶

Defending such a thesis, however, has not been an easy feat for historians in Greece. They have published books and collective volumes, have spoken in conferences or to the media, but have faced strong reactions. The discoveries from the archives offended many in the Left and the Right who had grown up with this certainty and were reluctant to have a courageous glance at their own failures. In 1999, when President Bill Clinton visited Greece, he criticised his country's readiness to cooperate with the junta *after its imposition*.⁷ And yet, even that statement was seen by a part of the Greek public as acceptance of American 'guilt' for the coming of the junta. When one is so determined to find something, then there is the danger that one may find it even if nothing is there. Because, at the end of the day, the conviction about the American-driven tanks is not a historical/scholarly thesis; it mirrors deeper psychological needs, such as the unquestioning certainties of

² Andreas G. Papandreou, *Democracy at Gunpoint: the Greek Front* (New York: Doubleday, 1970).

³ James E. Miller, *The United States and the Making of Modern Greece: History and Power, 1950–1974* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), x–xi, 142–6.

⁴ Constantine Tsoucalas, *The Greek Tragedy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969); John A. Katris, *Eyewitness in Greece: the Colonels Come to Power* (St. Louis: New Critics, 1971). Tsoucalas is a prominent Professor of Sociology; Katris subsequently became a leading journalist in Greece, becoming in the early 1980s director general of the news service of the state television.

⁵ 'War in the Ukraine: Anti-war Mobilization of the KKE and March towards the US Embassy' (Πόλεμος Ουκρανία: Αντιπολεμική Κινητοποίηση του ΚΚΕ και Πορεία προς την Πρεσβεία των ΗΠΑ), 25 Feb. 2022, in <https://www.cnn.gr/ellada/story/302905/polemos-oykrania-diadilosi-toy-kke-stin-rosiki-presveia>, accessed 4 June 2022.

⁶ See, among many others, Louis Klarevas, 'Were the Eagle and the Phoenix Birds of a Feather? The United States and the Greek Coup of 1967', *Diplomatic History*, 30, 3 (2006), 471–508; Konstantina Maragkou, 'The Foreign Factor and the Greek Colonels' Coming to Power on 21 Apr. 1967', *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 6, 4 (2006), 427–43; E. G. H. Pedaliu, 'Human Rights and Foreign Policy: Wilson and the Greek Dictators, 1967–1970', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 18, 1 (2007), 185–214; Miller, 124–35.

⁷ See the Clinton statement in Robert V. Keeley, *The Colonels' Coup and the American Embassy* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 205.

anti-Westernism and the need to blame others. Scholars who have disputed this thesis have sustained personal attacks as being pro-junta.⁸

When Does a Civil War Start? (and Why This is Politically Important)

As it happens with all civil wars, the Greek one was an immensely traumatic experience, and its effects persisted many years after its end. Part of the collateral damage was historical terminology and perceptions. Initially, until the fall of the junta in 1974, it was difficult to speak of a ‘civil war’. The hard-line anti-communists described the internal conflict as the ‘mutiny’ or the ‘bandit war’. Confronting them, liberal reformists, such as the centrist Georgios Papandreou, Panagiotis Kanellopoulos, the leader of the Greek Right in 1963–74, and prominent intellectuals, spoke of a long civil war which had started in 1943 and had ended in 1949. Honouring his dead opponent Georgios Papandreou, Kanellopoulos wrote in 1973, during the junta: ‘Yes, the civil war. It is time to throw away the hypocritical terms. A civil war was the first round [1943–4], the second [December 1944] and the third [1946–9].’⁹ The thesis of the long civil war was a tool of resistance against the junta which refused to acknowledge such a fratricidal conflict and saw the Greek communists as a ‘foreign’ force. Interestingly, initially the Communist Party also refused to refer to a civil war: it spoke about ‘the second guerilla’, implying a continuation of national resistance and a war against foreign occupation and its treacherous internal collaborators.

The junta de-legitimised anti-communism. After its fall in 1974, left-wing discourse became so dominant that a prominent scholar referred to the ‘*revanche* of the vanquished’.¹⁰ Nowadays, ‘civil war’ has become a common and accepted term, but this did not end the controversy. The Left reacted against the thesis of a long civil war starting in 1943. There was a reason for this: if the civil war had erupted in October 1943, when the communist resistance organisation attacked all the other resistance groups, then the communists had started the conflict. This would dispute the Left’s self-image as the oppressed or the underdogs of Greek history. According to the Left, only the period 1946–9 (or even 1947–9) should be termed as the period of civil war.

This pushback did not start with banning or bullying. In the 1970s and 1980s, the book by Dominique Eudes, *Oi Kapetanioi [The (guerilla) Captains]*, quickly became a bestseller, proving crucial in shaping public history in favour of the Left. However, the original title as published in French was *Les kapetanios: la guerre civile greque, 1943–1949 [The Captains: The Greek Civil War, 1943–1949]*. Thus, it accepted the thesis of the long civil war, from 1943 until 1949.¹¹

However, a strange phenomenon was progressively becoming apparent. In 1972 the US-based Professor John Iatrides wrote a pivotal book about the December 1944 battle of Athens between the communist forces on the one side and the British and the pro-Western Greek forces on the other. The title was *Revolt in Athens: the Greek Communist ‘Second Round’, 1944–1945*. It referred to a ‘second round’, clearly accepting the thesis of the long civil war. However, the Greek edition of 1973 did not have the ‘disturbing’ sub-title on the cover (the subtitle was retained, but in the *internal* title page). Even more interesting is that even in the reprint of the book, in 2013, the original subtitle

⁸ See among others, Tassos Costopoulos, ‘A Junta, but Which Junta?’ (‘Μια Χούντα, μα Ποια Χούντα?’), *Efimerida ton Syntakton*, 26 July 2015, https://www.efsyn.gr/stiles/arheio/o-ios/34997_mia-hoynta-ma-poia-hoynta, and Tassos Costopoulos, ‘From the Battalions [Security Battalions, Nazi collaborators, 1943–44] to the Colonels’ (‘Από τα Τάγματα στους Συνταγματάρχες’), *Efimerida ton Syntakton*, 25 June 2017, https://www.efsyn.gr/arheio/fantasma-tis-istorias/114965_apo-ta-tagmata-stoys-syntagmatarhes, accessed 4 June 2022; Dimitris Psaras, *A Career: the Political Course of Kyriakos Mitsotakis* (Μια Καριέρα: η Πολιτική Διαδρομή του Κυριάκου Μητσοτάκη) (Athens: Nissos, 2022), 236–8.

⁹ Panagiotis Kanellopoulos, ‘Georgios Papandreou: When We Were Marching Together on the Road of History’ (‘Γεώργιος Παπανδρέου, Όταν Βαδίζαμε Μαζί στο Δρόμο της Ιστορίας’), *Politika Themata*, 5 Nov. 1973.

¹⁰ G. Th. Mavrogordatos, ‘The Revanche of the Vanquished’ (‘Η Ρεβάνς των Ηττημένων’), *To Vima*, 17 Oct. 1999.

¹¹ Dominique Eudes, *Les kapetanios: la guerre civile greque, 1943–1949* (Paris: Fayard, 1970).

had been replaced with another: ‘the events that shook Greece in December 1944’.¹² This trend did not necessarily start as an imposition but tended to establish itself over the years.

In the 2000s, Stathis Kalyvas, then professor at Yale University, and Nikos Marantzidis, professor at the University of Macedonia in Thessaloniki, embarked on research that would upset these assumptions. They turned to history from ‘below’: through oral testimonies that they collected, they noted that on the social level, the conflict started in 1943, and never ceased. They did not speak about ‘three rounds’ but about an *ongoing civil war* which started in 1943 and ended in 1949.¹³

The emergence of this thesis provoked the violent response of the proponents of the entrenched interpretations. Kalyvas and Marantzidis were accused as pro-Nazi, ‘members of the brown youth’ and as vindicators of the Axis collaborators of the occupation period. Those who reacted would not tolerate the expression of the view that the civil war had started in 1943 (thus, when the communists attacked the pro-Western resistance organisations); they also put forward the strange claim that, for 1943–4, it was permissible to speak of ‘civil conflict’, but not about a civil war, and effectively demanded the right to define what was permissible through personal attacks against anyone who disagreed. Notably, the accusations against Kalyvas and Marantzidis were not voiced by politicians but by academics and journalists.¹⁴ Similar attacks were made against other leading intellectuals, such as Thanassis Valtinos, for his ground-breaking novel on the civil war during the occupation.¹⁵

There was an additional problem for those who reacted: Law 1863 of 1989, ‘on the overcoming of the consequences of the civil war’, defines the period of the civil war as the years from 1944 (after Liberation) until 1949; this law had been voted even by the Left. Evidently, until the end of the Cold War, the Left did not feel comfortable with the thesis of the long civil war, but at least officially could accept its expression. However, after the end of the Cold War, when large parts of the Greek Left arguably went through a process of ideological retrenchment and re-Stalinisation, it sought to prohibit others from projecting it.

In principle, one must be able to at least discuss the beginnings of a civil war. The case of Kalyvas and Marantzidis, however proves the opposite. Those who react claim a right to denounce as ‘fascist’ all those who disagree with them. They bullied or deterred, especially young scholars, from speaking about a long civil war. Thus, moderate intellectuals or scholars always had a problem: in 1949–74, the die-hard anti-communists would denounce them as pro-communist if they spoke of a civil war for the whole period 1943–9; after that, the Left denounced them as fascists if they dare speak about a civil war starting in 1943. Projecting sober interpretations was, and still is, an uphill struggle.

Resisting Impositions

The Greek experience from these two case studies raises some interesting points. The tensions of the public domain, however painful for historians, cannot be allowed to determine their agenda. Historians must do their job both in research and speaking to the media or in public events. In doing so, they must calmly but firmly reject demands that violate the methodology of the discipline. They cannot stay outside public debates on history. This would turn them into innocent bystanders, and historians cannot be socially irrelevant. The solution is to claim the role of the experts, not of combatants. Thus, it is crucial for historians to show that they genuinely respect emotions, but they cannot allow them to dictate their conclusions. This always takes the heat off the process and allows for a calmer debate. Moreover, it helps win over the large (in fact, larger) parts of the public who seek

¹² John O. Iatrides, *Revolt in Athens: the Greek Communist ‘Second Round’, 1944–1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

¹³ Of their numerous relevant works, see Stathis N. Kalyvas and Nikos Marantzidis, *Civil Passions* (Εμφύλια Πόθη) (Athens: Metahmio, 2015); Stathis Kalyvas, ‘Red Terror: Leftist Violence during the Occupation’, in Mark Mazower, ed., *After the War was Over: Reconstructing the Family, Nation, and State in Greece, 1943–1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 142–83.

¹⁴ See, among many others, *Dialogue on History* (Διάλογος για την Ιστορία), *Ta Nea/Bibliodromio*, Dec. 2004.

¹⁵ Thanassis Valtinos, *Orthokosta* (Athens: Agra, 1994).

calm, accurate and honest analysis. Last, but not least, the Greek experience shows that one should not expect quick results or miracles. The historical culture of a society evolves slowly. Thus, in the case of Greece, there has been a significant maturing of public debates on history in the past decades (aided by the greater availability of sources and the country's EU membership), although a painful backtracking was recorded during the economic crisis of the 2010s, when the myths of foreign imposition resurfaced, this time with the EU as the oppressor, trying to bleed dry the innocent Greeks. Clearly, it is going to be a long process, and it will not be linear.

It may be useful to carefully attempt some further generalisations. Evidently, the challenges of ahistorical/ideological viewpoints or the dangers of parochialism are much greater in smaller societies and intellectual communities, where it is easier to impose a uniformity of 'proper' views. History wars can erupt also in larger societies or internationally; but it is easier to secure pluralism in large academic communities, especially international ones. The real problem will start when uniformity in historical narratives will be imposed also in international circles; this will effectively end academic debate.

In his celebrated novel *I Claudius*, Robert Graves narrates a fictional dialogue between the young Claudius and his great-grandmother, the infamous Livia, in which the former asks questions about murders in the imperial family. And when Livia wonders if he intends to avenge the murder of his loved ones, he explains: 'I am a professional historian and the one thing that really interests me is to find out how things happen and why'.¹⁶

This view deserves a closer look. Historians seek reliable interpretations. They are not compulsory revisionists: when research leads them to revision, they do it. But when research does not substantiate radically new conclusions, historians should not try to invent new ones just for the sake of it. The historian's task is, in William H. McNeill's words, 'the pursuit of truth', even if this is never fully captured.¹⁷ Objectivity remains an ideal, but clearly is an elusive or even impossible task. The important thing for historians is to remain 'fair' towards phenomena of the past: to put it simply, I do not mind if younger colleagues say that I made a mistake, as long as they understand that I have made it by mistake. And, lastly, in their effort to be fair, historians must be factually accurate, and rely on responsible research, namely, on the sources. Accuracy is pivotal: on the morning of Austerlitz there was a fog, and during the night before Waterloo it was raining; these were important features in deciding the outcomes. In history the focus is on the particular, and 'for all its political applications, History is a discipline peculiarly impervious to high theoretical speculation: the more Theory intrudes, the farther History recedes'.¹⁸ Thus, multi-archival research and factual accuracy is a precondition for the rest.

It is also important to remember what historians should not do. They are not members of the jury who decide who is guilty; they are not judges who pass the sentence. Moreover, for some years now (increasingly after the end of the Cold War), there is an assumption, not always unspoken, that intellectuals can 'construct' societies. In this context, the political use of history appears as a means to bring about the desired social results. However, elites and intellectuals are not social engineers, and societies (at least, democratic societies) grow; they are not made from above. Many people during the twentieth century had illusions of grandeur and the ambition to become social engineers, but their experiments did not end well. If we give in to presentism, it is impossible to 'historicise' phenomena. There is a fundamental, unsolvable contradiction between the two.

In the coming years, given the problem of cultural oversimplification evident in our societies, historians will be increasingly called upon to delineate and defend the space of the discipline. We now accept that no historian can be detached from society and the epoch; no work, and even no archive, could ever be ideologically 'neutral'. We are part of the procession, and it is liberating to accept it. But, as older colleagues used to say, there is nothing wrong if the present poses the questions we ask about the past; the problem starts when the present also gives the answers. In other words, much will depend

¹⁶ Robert Graves, *I Claudius* (New York: The Modern Library, 1934), 311.

¹⁷ William H. McNeill, *The Pursuit of Truth: a Historian's Memoir* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005).

¹⁸ Tony Judt, *Postwar: a History of Europe since 1945* (London: Penguin, 2005), 399.

on the attitude and resolve of the community of historians. E.H. Carr was eager to stress the notion of progress in history. Yet, in his classic work on methodology, he warned that history might ‘reapse into theology – that is to say, a study not of human achievement, but of the divine purpose – or into literature – that is to say, a telling of stories and legends without purpose or significance. But this will not be history in the sense in which we have known it in the last two hundred years’.¹⁹ He did not really believe in such a danger, but we, now, may be dealing exactly with this challenge.

¹⁹ Edward Hallett Carr, *What is History?* (New York: A. Knopf, 1961), 165–6.

Cite this article: Hatzivassiliou E (2023). Contemporary History as an Intrusion into Personal Memory: Methodological Dilemmas, Public Presence and the Perils of Presentism. *Contemporary European History* 32, 9–14. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777322000509>