

History, Time, and Economic Crisis in Central Greece / Mussolini's Greek Island: Fascism and the Italian Occupation of Syros in World War II

Review Number: 1962

Publish date: Thursday, 21 July, 2016

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ISBN: 9781137501486

Date of Publication: 2015

Price: £65.00

Pages: 272pp.

Publisher: Palgrave Macmillan

Publisher url: <http://www.palgrave.com/us/book/9781137501486>

Place of Publication: New York, NY

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ISBN: 9781780769899

Date of Publication: 2014

Price: £25.00

Pages: 272pp.

Publisher: I. B. Tauris

Publisher url: <http://www.ibtauris.com/Books/Humanities/History/General%20%20world%20history/Mussolinis%20C0BA-4928-ACC4-415188DCDEE8%7D>

Place of Publication: London

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There were times during the resurgence of the economic crisis in 2015 when it seemed as if ‘Greek-bashing’ had become a pan-European pastime. Indeed, Northern European disdain for perceived Greek irresponsibility and profligacy even led in some cases to unpleasantly vilificatory and misohellenic tendencies in certain political and media circles.⁽¹⁾ In this fraught international context, Daniel Knight’s first monograph – an in-depth study of the experiences of the inhabitants of a small town named Trikala in rural Thessaly, which chronicles Greek reactions at a point when almost three decades of prosperity gave way to poverty and, in some cases, destitution – provides a salutary reminder of the human consequences of austerity. Knight’s portrayal of the Trikalians’ endurance of these stations of the cross on the road to an economic Calvary offers a moving (yet never partisan) portrait of the impact of European economic policy on ordinary Greek citizens, as well as providing a powerful platform for the voices of some of the dispossessed.

Yet Knight also succeeds in achieving far more than this – for he demonstrates convincingly that, in order to find meaning during a time of severe suffering, if not actual pauperisation, Greeks habitually have recourse to ‘culturally proximate’ events – in particular, the Great Famine, which occurred during Axis occupation in the early 1940s; prior crises are embedded within his informants’ historicised understanding of their present woes. Following theories of time adumbrated by the French philosopher Michael Serres, Knight reveals the

ways in which the 'crisis' brings distant events closer in the minds of his informants (whilst placing others at a greater distance), even in the case of members of later generations who never experienced war, occupation or starvation at first hand.

In order to carry out his research, Knight spent a substantial period of time, split over several years (both pre- and post-credit crunch) in Trikala – living with a local family, entering into their joys and sorrows, and cultivating a network of native informants of all ages and occupations. On one less than fortunate occasion, this led to his being stuck in snow on a coach trip with local senior citizens, '[listening] to piped *klarino* music over a poor quality radio for 18 hours while some senior ladies refused to leave the bus for fear of bears' (p. 39).

The first part of the book concentrates on the various historical events which resonate most with Trikalians' perceptions of the current 'crisis'. There is a tendency to equate the economic dictates of the Troika (i.e. the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund) with those of Ottoman or rapacious Greek landlords who ruled over rural landed estates in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Precise links are often made with historic systems of governance, land tenure and taxation, such that the word 'haratsi', the term for taxes on the male non-Muslim population of Greece during Turkish rule, which were seen as indicative of the exploitative nature of Ottoman imperialism, is now applied to the new austerity taxes which the Greek government has been impelled to impose at the Troika's behest.

Often, the two occupations of Greece – Ottoman and Axis – are conflated; favourite themes in Trikala include the dubious collaboration of corrupt Greek politicians with oppressive foreign powers, and widespread feelings of colonisation, exploitation and dispossession, which are particularly apparent in the context of German-backed diversification initiatives that encourage farmers to turn over their land to 'photovoltaic farms' through the installation of solar panels on formerly arable land. As one of Knight's informants put it, 'The Germans have returned to take our land, to rape us of our resources. With their technology they take our sun, with their austerity they cripple our nation' (p. 53). The Germans are merely seen as a new manifestation of the *Tsiflikades*, those oppressive landlords who always made rural Greeks' lives a misery.

Similarly, the Great Famine, which claimed so many lives during the German occupation in the Second World War (though its force was somewhat less fatal in Thessaly than in other areas of mainland Greece), is both feared and felt as a tangible present-day reality. Those who experienced famine at first hand believe that time is literally regressing: 'The crisis has ripped us up and thrown us back in time to a previous era' (p. 69).⁽²⁾ Thus, there exists a general tendency to stockpile food against the evil day when true famine may return, and some households are even amassing quantities of olive oil to use as currency, for fear that the economy should fail completely. That such fears are fully intergenerational in scope is a testament to the extent to which national narratives peddled by the state, in schools, and in popular culture, and those derived from the suffering of one's own kin, have become inextricably entwined; hunger has become both an iconic symbol, and a national idiom for expressing sentiments of oppression and fear for the future.

In this context, the famine narrative is also entangled with narratives concerning other periods of social or economic pessimism, such as the aftermath of the 1990s stock market crash, whose effects left many unwise or ignorant private speculators exceedingly financially vulnerable, bankrupt, or even destitute. Interestingly, however, Trikalians do *not* use memories or vignettes of the Greek Civil War to interpret their present suffering, whereas, a little distance away in the Pindos mountains, this is one of the key historical events used to interpret and unlock the meaning of the crisis – a fascinating proof of the contention that, in these regions, historical consciousness can vary from one valley to the next.⁽³⁾

The book's second half focuses for the most part on present reactions to Greece's perceived victimhood. Here, the idea of the 'right to food' is incredibly powerful, informing not only slogans ⁽⁴⁾, but even motivations to suicide, in cases where breadwinners have felt a fatal shame at being unable to provide for their families any longer. Indeed, this has not been an uncommon phenomenon; suicide rates in 2011

apparently rose 40 per cent on the previous year.

Popular parlance is also saturated with food-related terms, such as ‘money-eating’, a notoriously prevalent concept denoting politicians’ greed and corruption – hence the incredulous chagrin at Deputy Prime Minister Theodoros Pangalos’ attempt to shift blame onto the populace at large with his infamous soundbite from 2010, ‘Together we ate it’ («???? ?? ?????»). Even the humble cucumber has become symbolic of hardship under austerity – not only due to its simplicity *qua* vegetable, but also due to its phallic connotations of sodomisation by austerity – as evidenced by the following two quotations from Knight’s informants: ‘Our government and “Europe” were our friends. But we got complacent and they crept up on us brandishing a giant cucumber’ (p. 105), and ‘Ancient Greeks had huge cucumbers ... We only have to deal with Germans!’ (p. 108).

Despite the perception - prevalent not only among foreigners, but also among diaspora Greeks – that mainland Greeks cannot be that badly off if they still manage to maintain certain levels of consumption, such as eating out, habitually going to bars and cafes, or travelling on holiday, Trikalians feel quite differently. For them, there is an inherent social value to such activities, rather than a purely monetary one, which is intrinsically bound up with deeply-rooted cultural aspirations to honour and status. Appearance in public and shared commensality are seen not only as a necessary release from the stress felt constantly within the home, or as a welcome opportunity to share despairing sentiments with the likeminded, but also as a way of sticking two fingers up at the Troika and the other external architects of Greece’s economic destruction, proving that her inhabitants are far from beaten (even if they are spending far less than they used to). In the wake of the catastrophic collapse of both aspects of Greece’s dual economy – that based on favours and that based on global capitalism – such forms of escapism are the only solace that remains.

Perhaps it is appropriate, then, that a new edition of Sheila Lecoœur’s monograph on the Fascist occupation of Syros, *Mussolini’s Greek Island* (2009), has also recently been issued in paperback, specifically in light of the Greek crisis. Though differing from Knight’s work in that it is focused on the past rather than the present, and on the historical rather than the anthropological, Lecoœur’s book is especially illuminating in this context. As the author contends in her new foreword:

‘The memories of World War II recorded here have renewed relevance today as survivors and successive generations are reminded of the hunger and insecurity of the Axis occupation. The “occupation syndrome”, as the fear of not having enough to eat was known long after the war, has resurfaced in social memory. Fears, real or unsubstantiated, are still affecting how people perceive poverty today’ (p. xi).

The hypothesis which Lecoœur here puts forward – that memories of hunger and the struggle to survive the world war still have long-term consequences – is borne out most readily in Knight’s own work. However, it is as a study of the local impact of occupation and famine that Lecoœur’s book triumphs – and, as such, it highlights precisely *why* memories of such events could not help but have had such a traumatic impact on the Greek collective psyche.

Syros, as the capital of the Cyclades archipelago in the Western Aegean, was the centre of Italian occupation in the region, and it was also the only island to suffer devastation through famine on the same scale as the mainland cities. In the aftermath of Axis occupation, more than a quarter of the island’s population had died of starvation or related illnesses. The island, though prosperous during the 19th century, had always been vulnerable economically, and suffered disproportionately from the failed Fascist initiative of ‘distacco’, which was intended to sever the islands utterly from the Greek mainland (including all financial dependence upon Athens), and to form a uniquely Italian sphere of influence, *Superegeo*, which would play a crucial role in Mussolini’s Mediterranean *mare nostrum* blueprint for imperial expansion. Wrongheaded currency controls and wanton economic interference, as well as crippling requisitions and demands for occupation costs, meant that, by 1941, the head of the Italian camp hospital was forced to liken the island to ‘a doomed

ship which was trapped out at sea and which had finished its last reserves of food' (p. 47). Increased dependency on Italian welfare provision – which was, in its own way, effective – meant that by 1943 the occupation authorities' programme of *Assistenza Civile* (public assistance) provided the only means of survival for a third of the island's population, especially children.

Although black-marketeering and profiteering swiftly became rife – as evidenced by jokes about those farmers who suddenly acquired conspicuously bourgeois trappings, such as pianos, which they erroneously assumed to be electrically powered – once the famine truly began to hit home, even wealth could not procure one an adequate diet. The social impact of occupation was such that access to food became the one paramount, all-consuming concern, often at the expense of all other affective bonds. Mother might be set against child, or brother against brother, and corpses would even be kept indoors, and grief hidden, so that the relations of the deceased could still claim their rations at the soup kitchen. Even the Italian soldiers on the island began to feel the pinch of starvation, as well as the keen ache of homesickness (due to their extended isolation from their families back home). By the time of the Italian armistice in 1943, even its strongest adherents had to admit that the Fascist New Order on Syros had palpably and abjectly failed. Small wonder, then, that many islanders were still suffering from the effects of starvation in 1946 – or that '*katohi* syndrome' (occupation syndrome) should have become part and parcel of their vocabulary.

While Lecoer has made use of a vast selection of documents in Italian, Greek and French, many of which had survived on Syros untouched for many decades, as well as oral history interviews with surviving islanders, to recover the 'hidden history of occupation' in one microhistorical sphere, Knight uses his experiences and informants in Trikala to illuminate the ways in which that 'hidden history' can still make itself felt in another local context, this time on the mainland. Both studies leave our understanding inestimably the richer - whilst also going some way towards precluding facile foreign derogation of current Greek attitudes to the past.

Notes

1. cf. Helen Roche, 'A love-hate relationship? The impact of historical Philhellenism on Germany's view of the "Greek Crisis"', unpublished paper, presented at the University of Oxford as part of a workshop entitled 'Renegotiating History in Light of the Greek Crisis', 16 March 2016 (recording available at <<http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/series/renegotiations-history-light-greek-crisis> [3]> [accessed 23 May 2016]).
[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Other informants stressed the feeling that they had been transported back to the Balkans, or back to the 1960s – for those unable to afford petrol, bicycles have once again become a staple form of transport, and some families have even resorted to burning furniture because they can no longer afford petroleum for their modern central-heating systems (p. 17).
[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. cf. Keith Brown, *The Past in Question: Modern Macedonia and the Uncertainties of Nation* (Princeton, NJ, 2003); *Macedonia: The Politics of Identity and Difference*, ed. Jane Cowan (London, 2000).
[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Such as the slogan of the 1973 Athens Polytechnic uprising against the Greek military dictatorship: 'Bread, Education, Freedom!', which is now used to damn the Troika 'occupation'.
[Back to \(4\)](#)

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