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**Professor Nikolaos Louros, a concerned scientist  
in twentieth-century Athens**

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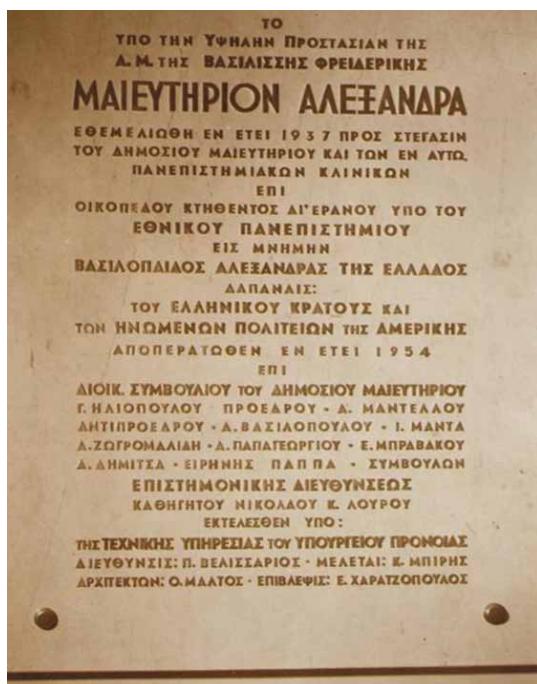
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# Professor Nikolaos Louros, a concerned scientist in twentieth-century Athens

Katerina Gardikas



**Figure 1.** Alexandra Maternity Hospital, Commemorative plaque, 1954. It is written on it that the Hospital was named after the late Greek Princess / Grand Duchess of Russia Alexandra, who died at the age 21 after a premature delivery. Also, that will function under the aegis of Queen Frederica and the Directorship of Professor Nikolaos Louros.

## Abstract

The personal papers of Nikolaos Louros present an invaluable source of information on Louros's place in the medical, social, cultural and political history of twentieth-century Greece. A royalist, liberal and keen observer of scientific and social developments, he participated actively in the shaping of the country's post-war progress in medical education, institutions and ideas.

**Key Words:** *Archival material, biography, medicine, politics*

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The seminar celebrates the legacy of Nikolaos Louros by presenting the descriptive catalogue of the

Louros private papers that was compiled thanks to the exemplary work of Christos Marinis and, above all, the care and expertise of Professor Diamandopoulos.

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The archival documents reflect a long and rich life in public service, intellectual and scientific investigation and social commitment. I was deeply honoured to have been asked to take a brief look at the Louros papers; so, I have chosen to reflect on Louros as a concerned scientist of his age and to suggest a small selection of lines of research, namely his commitment to medical history, to democratic values, environmental protection, and his approach to the fields of eugenics and social medicine.

### Medical history

I shall initially outline the life trajectory of Nikolaos Louros against the events that marked the broader historical context of the twentieth century. In fact, Nikolaos Louros died at the age of 88 in 1986, in other words, his life spanned the best part of the twentieth century.

He was the son of Konstantinos Louros, who had been a university professor and royal obstetrician, had been trained in the German medical tradition and was active in politics with a career in the royalist camp. Nikolaos was twenty-years old at the end of the First World War, received his doctorate from the university of Bern a year later and followed in his father's footsteps. His early academic career began in interwar Germany, where he matured as a medical researcher, but in 1929 he returned to Greece, a country split into two political camps. He continued his career in gynaecology in Greece and later became professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology. For the hardships, persecution and arrest that he experienced during the country's German occupation he had none other to thank but the other professor of Gynaecology, quisling prime minister and Nazi ideologue, Konstantinos Logothetopoulos<sup>2</sup>.

When Greece was again free in late 1944, Louros was 46 years old. As we shall see, his engagement with social and political issues, both theoretical and applied, began in earnest immediately thereafter. With the brief seven-year interval of the military dictatorship approximately at the time of his retirement, the rest of his long life unfolded in the context of Greece's restored political and social environment that was backed by its steady economic progress. In 1974, at the age of 76, he served as minister for education in the first Karamanlis cabinet that restored democracy after the fall of the dictatorship<sup>3</sup>.

Nikolaos Louros, who dedicated his estate to the study of medical history, was himself a keen medical historian. Many of his publications are full of refer-

ences to the history of his field, both ancient and modern. For instance, in one of his papers he singled out a contribution to modern medicine thanks to two Greek physicians, namely the eighteenth-century Greek doctors Emmanouil Timonis from the Ottoman-held island of Chios and Iakovos Pylarinou from Venetian-held Cephalonia, both trained in Padua. In 1714 the two doctors saw their findings on the effect of inoculation against smallpox as practiced by traditional medics in the Ottoman Empire, appear in the *Transactions of the London Royal Society*. Effectively, the two doctors had bridged the cultural divide between eastern folk medicine and western scientific medicine. Just three years later, Lady Montagu, the wife of the British ambassador to Constantinople, had her son inoculated for smallpox by the "old woman" expert in local popular medicine; then, on Lady Montagu's return to London, she introduced the practice to the British aristocracy, the scientific and political establishment and ensured her own international fame<sup>4</sup>.

This instance of European medical and cultural history drew the attention of the medical historian in Nikolaos Louros, who wished to challenge the received wisdom of his time. Furthermore, late in life, Louros went on to found the Greek Society for the History of Medicine and became its first President.

### Political values

As noted, Louros was born into the court social environment and remained loyal to the palace. He was a member of the royal household as physician to the royal family and, understandably, his worldview was largely affected by that environment. His personal papers include a photograph of his official pass to the royal palace that was issued in April 1954 as proof of identity (Figure 2).

Aside from the palace's political meddling and violation of the constitution, there were issues in which it played a constructive role that can often be seen to align with Louros's medical priorities and social sensibilities.

For one, the Greek court embraced, if not a tradition, at least a distinct partiality for literary demoticism, as explained by Agamemnon Tsikas. The royal family were also patrons of charitable institutions, most notably hospitals. Furthermore, in the 1950s and 1960s the royal family, specifically queen Frederika, was a staunch supporter of scientific research and was instrumental in promoting the US-backed projects to establish the country's principal scientific research



**Figure 2.** Nikolaos Louros's official court pass, April 1954. Louros personal papers.

institutions, i.e. the National (Royal, at the time) Hellenic Research Foundation and the National Centre for Scientific Research “Democritos”<sup>5</sup>. Thanks to his role as royal obstetrician, Louros was therefore perfectly placed to draw on royal support for his plan to set up a modern Maternity Hospital, a national priority for well over a century (Figure 3). Besides, from early on in his career Louros had focused his research on major causes of women’s mortality, most notably cervical cancer. He now translated his scientific knowledge and access to power and patronage into social and administrative action.

Thus, in 1954 the Alexandra Maternity Hospital was completed with US funding and the court’s support and patronage thanks to Louros — at long last, after more than sixty years of frustrated efforts — and named after a Greek princess and Russian grand duchess, who had died in childbirth in 1891. A plaque celebrated this achievement and honoured the major contributing parties<sup>6</sup> (Figure 1).

As becomes clear from the documents in the archive, Louros’s pro-democracy liberalism and his participation in the group of liberals for the restoration of democracy in 1973, after six years of military dictatorship, was to some degree motivated by his desire to see a liberal regime of constitutional monarchy restored in Greece. A Declaration of the Coordinating Committee for the Restoration of Democratic Legitimacy ahead of the sham referendum of 1973, dated 29 June 1979, of which Louros was a member along with other academics as well as former diplomats and state functionaries, reflects his serious engagement with the major political causes of his time<sup>7</sup>.

## Environmental protection

Nikolaos Louros was equally sensitive to the emerging environmental hazards associated with the industrialisation of Greece in the early 1970s. The threat to the town and countryside around Pylos in southwestern Peloponnese, an area that the Karamanlis government allocated to shipping interests with plans to have a shipyard and other industrial plants built in 1975, produced an international outcry, given the historical, archaeological and wider cultural significance of the location. Louros supported the protest, which eventually proved effective, and Pylos was saved<sup>8</sup>. In fact, the incident coincides with the rise of an incipient environmentalist movement in Greece in the early and mid-1970s.

## Eugenics

In the aftermath of the Second World War and in the early Cold War years, most western societies experienced anxieties about their future, particularly regarding the future of postwar Europe. Demography and health were at the centre of these anxieties. A new field of population studies emerged that gave a fresh impetus to eugenics and imbued it with a demographic and a renewed public health perspective. Influenced by British and US eugenicists, a Hellenic Eugenics Society was created in 1953 with Nikolaos Louros serving as its second president and most influential member (Figure 4).

Recently, Alexandra Barmpouti, a Greek medical historian, was given access to the Louros papers, and produced a fine book titled *Post-War Eugenics, Reproductive Choices and Population Policies in Greece*,



**Figure 3.** Queen Frederika's visit to Alexandra Maternity Hospital, 1954. Louros personal papers.

1950s–1980s, which explores the history of the Greek eugenics movement and Louros's role in it. The Hellenic Eugenics Society is at the centre of her story. Among other issues, she highlights how Louros drove the debates on eugenics, overpopulation, birth control and reproduction management out of an exclusively medical discourse and brought it to a broader audience in articles in the press and in public lectures, how he challenged entrenched, conservative attitudes to reproduction and, furthermore, how he made his own hospital, the Alexandra Maternity Hospital, the focal point of reference on these matters<sup>9</sup>.

One of the primary concerns of Nikolaos Louros in the postwar years was the demographic development of Greece. He observed that, while the rest of the world was threatened by overpopulation, the national figures in Greece indicated a demographic decline which was contrary to the global trend. Louros singled out abortion as the primary cause of this trend. He therefore campaigned to educate families on adopting contraceptive methods to plan the size of their families and favoured legalising the use of contraceptive pills. He conducted his campaign despite the legal prohibition against all forms of women's contraceptive methods and the ideology and social forces underpinning these prohibitions. Also, for Louros, the high rate of neonatal mortality in Greece was a contributing factor to the

negative population trends; reversing this required public health care measures.

The broader global issue of overpopulation, however, called for an international campaign for birth control but also generated a sense of alarm for the future of Europe and its place in the world. This sense of alarm was couched in the unmistakably racist and colonial terms that ran through much of the language of population studies at the time. They also left Louros ambivalent on the issue of birth control, when addressing the issue of global overpopulation. In one of his papers delivered in 1962, Louros warned:

*Irrespective of whether the limitation of births is feasible from a scientific and social perspective or advisable, if they are successful, the measures currently implemented primarily by the Anglosaxon countries and their intensive promotion will lead to the restriction and suicide of the white race, if the coloured races that multiply so profusely do not follow the same measures. Given that their implementation among the underdeveloped populations meets with unsurmountable social and religious difficulties, it should be considered certain that, without a global commitment to apply birth control, the coloured races are destined to flood the globe and sidetrack the white race, if the latter goes ahead with birth control<sup>10</sup>.*

Π Ι Κ Α Σ				
'Ιερυτικῶν μελῶν τοῦ ιδρυτικοῦ Σωματείου ὑπό τὴν ἐπωνυμίαν				
ΒΑΣΙΚΗ ΣΤΑ ΙΡΙΑ ΕΥΤΟΝΙΚΗ				
1. Αλιβεζάτος Γεράσιμος	Καθηγητής Ιαν/ου	Αθήνας	Αχαρνῶν 168α	
2. Αντωνόπουλος Δημήτριος	"	"	Α. Αλεξανδρεας 4	
3. Βαλαώρας Βασιλείος	"	"	Ασκληπειού 14	
4. Διανόπαλος Σύμγελος	"	"	Βερυντέρου 47	
5. Δοξιδής Επαντίων	Ιατρός	"	Ωμήρου 50	
6. Ηγουμενόποιος Πεύργιος	"	"	Γραβιές 9	
7. Καμιλόπετρος Ιωάννης	"	"	Α. Μεταξά 17	
8. Καναβαριάτος Ηλία	οικονομός	Γλυφάδα	Μάραθος I	
9. Κατσαρής Κων/νος	Ιατρός	Αθήνας	Εύδαλα 6	
10. Κατακουζηνός Σύμγελος	Καθηγητής Ιαν/ου	"	Βινδέρου 7	
11. Κωνσταντινίδης Κων/νος	"	"	Ετούρνέρα 57	
12. Καλιλάσης Σενούρων	Ιατρός	"	Κίτης II	
13. Καντέλλος Ασανάστος	"	"	Φακίλινος Κέντρο 9	
14. Καυτούδης Κων/νος	Καθηγητής Ιαν/ου	"	Πεντέρου 5	
15. Καύσιδης Κωνσταντίνης	Ιατρός	"	Κένουν 3	
16. Παναγιώτου Παναγιώτης	Καθηγητής Ιαν/ου	"	Α. Αμαλίας 44	
17. Παπαδάκης Αντώνιος	Ιατρός	"	Μαυροκορδάτου II	
18. Πουρνάρας Ανέρεας	Δημοσιογράφος	"	Πανεπιστημίου 46	
19. Πουρναρόπουλος Γεώργιος	Ιατρός	"	Πατησίων 79	
20. Καλιγάδηρου Πασιθέα	"	"	Βύρικεδου II	
21. Σαρδήλους Κων/νος	"	"	Πατησίουν 74	
22. Σπηλιώτου Παναγιώτα	"	"	Σατωρίδηνδου 22	
23. Ετεφάνου Δημήτριος	"	Καλλιθέα	Εργ. Φορνέζη ΙΙΙ	
24. Τραυλής Διονύσιος	Καθηγητής Ιαν/ου	Αθήνας	Ωμήρου 21	
25. Τσαμπόδης Νικόλαος	"	"	Σαΐμη II	
26. Θυλακτόπουλος Πεύργιος	Καθηγητής Κολλεγίου Υγεικού Υγεικό			

Figure 4. Greek Eugenics Society, List of founding members, December 1953. Louros personal papers.

## National health system

In 1945, Louros published a proposal for a national health service scheme for Greece that would address the country's specific health care gridlock: namely its fragmented system of medical care, a major source and product of social injustice, and deal with the commercialisation of medical services; indeed, it would drastically overhaul the entire antiquated system. In his words:

It is time to realize that, however great our gratitude up to now towards private charitable enterprise, Medical Relief must cease to be a question of voluntary philanthropy or of privately financed individual enterprise and must come to be regarded as a right of the citizen and an obligation for the State.

*Thus, Public Health and medical relief will be the exclusive function of the State, financed by the Health Fund<sup>11</sup>.*

Louros laid out a system that would be funded by taxation, would be compulsory for all citizens and

would be served by a full-time medical staff. It was designed to replace the prewar fragmented landscape of public and private healthcare and lift Greek society out of its postwar state of poverty and devastation. It was, in fact, clearly inspired by the contemporary ideas on social medicine and health as a basic human right that underpinned the foundation of the WHO, and were included in its charter, and of the National Health Service in Britain a few years later. For sure, in his thinking, Louros was undeniably informed by the ideas of his era and possessed an acute sense of social priorities.

What debates and tensions did Louros's bold approach to social medicine generate in Greece? Did it affect the endless, protracted developments toward the Greek National Health System that eventually came about almost forty years later? Louros never lost interest in the national health system. The title of his last publication shortly before his death in 1986, is titled *To εγώ καὶ το ΕΣΥ*: which could be paraphrased as *The self and the thou*, or, not to miss the Greek pun: *The self and the NHS*.

## Conclusion

To conclude: Nikolaos Louros was no socialist; quite the contrary, but it seems to me that he would have subscribed to Rudolf Virchow's form of social awareness and to his famous utterance, that

*Medicine is a social science and politics is nothing else but medicine on a large scale. Medicine as a social science, as the science of human beings, has the obligation to point out problems and to attempt their theoretical solution; the politician, the practical anthropologist, must find the means for their actual solution<sup>12</sup>.*

In light of the above, given that he shared Virchow's liberalism, it would be interesting to explore, on the basis of his own writings and the archival material now at hand, whether this was indeed how Nikolaos Louros saw his own role in politics.

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## ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

### Ο Καθηγητής Νικόλαος Λούρος, ένας προβληματιζόμενος επιστήμονας στην Αθήνα του 20ου αιώνα

Κατερίνα Γαρδίκα

Το αρχείο του Νικόλαου Λούρου αποτελεί ανεκτίμητη πηγή πληροφοριών για τη θέση του Λούρου στην ιατρική, κοινωνική, πνευματική και πολιτική ιστορία της Ελλάδας του εικοστού αιώνα. Βασιλικός, φιλελεύθερος και οξυδερκής παρατηρητής των επιστημονικών και κοινωνικών εξελίξεων, συμμετείχε ενεργά στη διαμόρφωση της μεταπολεμικής προόδου της χώρας στην ιατρική εκπαίδευση, τους θεσμούς και τις επιστημονικές ιδέες.

**Λέξεις Κλειδιά:** Αρχειακό υλικό, βιογραφία, ιατρική, πολιτική

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