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Review of Zeta Papandreou, Τραυματική μνήμη και δημόσια ιστορία: Δίστομο 1944–2018 [Traumatic memory and public history: Distomo, 1944–2018]

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Zeta Papandreou,
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Zeta Papandreou

Τραυματική μνήμη και δημόσια ιστορία: Δίστομο 1944–2018

[Traumatic memory and public history: Distomo, 1944–2018]

Athens: Taxideftis, 2018, 488 pp.

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In 2020, a new controversy over history erupted in Greece between reputable historians and memory groups, in particular the National Council for Claiming German Debt. The public controversy was aired in a large number of publications in the print and electronic media and took on the characteristics of a political controversy. The controversy concerned the Memories of the Occupation in Greece (MOG) memory project of the Free University of Berlin. Critics said the researchers involved in the project used it to project their “left” ideology and air a political discourse in the public sphere that went beyond their historical knowledge.

In the process, these critics sharply criticised prominent and internationally renowned historians, even to the point of adopting conspiracy theories from the internet. The historical traumatic events of martyred cities and villages of Greece, such as Distomo in Viotia prefecture, were once again at the centre of public debate. Seeking justification through the Greek compensation claim for German reparations, which is a process of recognition, the memory groups accused the historians involved in the MOG project of “historical revisionism” and of being deliberately selective. It is clear that the negotiation of the relationship between history and justice, which is a key issue of historical literacy, has become an ideological and political issue¹ in light of new “wars of memory”.

Zeta Papandreou’s book *Traumatic Memory and Public History: Distomo, 1944–2018* is a substantial response to this recent public condemnation of Greek historians. The book approaches the traumatic and conflicting historical event of the Distomo Massacre, in which the Germans killed 223 civilians, including 54 infants and children, in a retaliation on 10 June 1944. Papandreou studies extensively the historical context of the events of the massacre, as well as the public representation of its “negative heritage”, in order to show how the memory of the atrocity, which shaped the survivors’ identities after the war, was transferred through “intergenerational transmission” of the trauma to the second generation of Distomo residents and then to the following generations through the construction of their

identity policies. A central element of the book is the critical elaboration of the “task of memory” and the formation of the identity of the victims and their descendants.

The contribution of the personal testimony of Argyris Sfountouris,² a survivor of the massacre and an eyewitness to the executions, is a key part of Papandreou’s study. Sfountouris’ traumatic experiences and memories highlight the importance of oral history as a historical source for the examination of the events of the massacre. For Sfountouris, who experienced the personal loss of both his family and his family house and accidentally survived with his three sisters, the historical truth is a prerequisite for justice.

The meaning and elaboration of “trauma”³ features prominently throughout the book. A main axis of the study involves taking a public history approach to the cultural trauma of the massacre,⁴ as it plays a decisive role in shaping the historical culture and consciousness. Papandreou examines the relationship that the modern society of Distomo maintains with its traumatic past. The public history of the massacre is linked with the historical trauma, the divided and traumatic memory of the inhabitants of Distomo and, at the same time, it is related to nostalgia, melancholy and hope, constituting an unknown aspect of modern history in which the expression of emotions plays an important role. Papandreou shows that the traumatic and painful experience of the massacre is subject to a process of selective interpretation, public representation and transmission from generation to generation. The collective trauma continues to hurt social memory, making it even more traumatic and controversial. Papandreou, therefore, deliberately chose the issue of mnemonic rituals and performances related to the events of the massacre as a focal point of her study. Furthermore, she also looks at memory anniversary management as a key factor to approach traumatic historical memory and historical trauma management. Papandreou very aptly chooses to investigate the historical consciousness of the local community in Distomo with regard to the conflicting historical event of the massacre, revealing in the process how the victims’ descendants are required to face their traumatic past.

From the outset, the reader is confronted with the difficult concepts of memory, mourning, ritual and martyrdom through Sfountouris’ narration. Sfountouris is a typical case of a victim who manages his personal trauma through “exemplary memory”. Tzvetan Todorov refers to two types of traumatic or controversial memory, namely “exemplary” memory and “literal” memory. Literal memory is that which one cannot and does not want to detach from the specific traumatic event; rather, one constantly ruminates it, thus renewing the trauma. Literal memory is ultimately dangerous, as it may give birth to new fanaticism. On the contrary, starting from the specific event, exemplary memory can be reduced to more general lessons and be used to understand critical or other events. It allows us to use the past for the present, to learn the lessons of injustice we have suffered, to fight the injustices that are witnessed today. As a result, exemplary memory is liberating for

individuals and societies, as fertilising the wounds of the past may perhaps motivate action in present situations. At the same time, it is the only way for them to be interested in the issue and to feel that they are concerned about individuals and societies who at first did not think they had a reason to be touched by this issue or who may have been negatively disposed towards it. From all the above, it can be deduced that, in order for memory to be fruitful, that is, not to weaken and fade away, but to make sense in the distant future and to concern as many people and societies as possible, it cannot shrink in the sense of the mourning of a single people. Memory must be reduced to symbolic memory against all forms of prejudice, xenophobia and racism.

Papandreou then turns to the psychoanalytic, interpretive and therapeutic strategy adopted by Paul Ricoeur for overcoming the so-called “pathology of memory”, whose forms are the revitalisation of the past and the devaluation of the historical method, as well as the fixation of memory on an idealised past, whether in historical or structural trauma, or in identity policies that are exclusive and aggressive towards otherness. According to Ricoeur, the historian aims to complete the process of mourning that overcomes melancholy, but without displacing the traumatic event from the consciousness of the subject, since the work of mourning can never be completed. What Ricoeur proposes is the “policy of fair memory”, which is the critical and reflective memory that does not completely identify with the experiential experiences of its bearer. It is the memory that brings to the surface and processes the repressed, yet active collective traumas, so that they lose their negative charge and become the starting points for historical awareness. The goal of this policy is the historical “truth” and the universal significance of a historical event. Ricoeur aims to balance conflicting historical interpretations or experiential experiences, recognising mutual sufferings and historical traumas, adopting practices of peaceful coexistence, creating common ground and a common horizon that will lead to social cohesion, avoiding the destruction of historical meaning.

At the same time, Papandreou approaches the concept of “restorative justice” in the opposite of the present and the “duty of memory”, both scientifically, from the historical point of view, and experientially, presenting the life and work of the eyewitness-victim Sfountouris. In this, her approach resembles that of Titus Milech, a German of the first post-war generation, as well as psychiatrist-psychoanalyst and author, who in his work analyses the issue of the collective guilt of the German people for Nazi crimes. The victim and the offspring of the perpetrators are transformed into active subjects who seek “cathartic reconciliation”⁵ with the perpetrators. Their goal is for the perpetrators to express remorse and the painful recognition of individual guilt and collective responsibility.

Regarding the issue of the Greek claim for compensation for the Nazi massacre in Distomo, an extensive chapter analyses the legal basis for reparation claims as well as the actions taken by Distomo residents in the Greek courts to claim damages. Breaking away from the local axis, Papandreou manages to connect the historical-cultural trauma of the massacre with the management of the memory of Nazism in post-war Germany. She

approaches the formulation of German state policy on reparations for the victims of Nazi atrocities on the basis of historical criteria and without political overtones.

Papandreou then presents three more historical examples of human right abuses by domestic political forces in South Africa, Argentina and Chile. In these cases, the unique traumatic event has been elaborated in “truth and reconciliation commissions”, with these procedures ultimately leading to a conciliation with the traumatic past and indeed moral law. In conclusion, it should be noted that an important historical reference is the addition of a special subsection on the issue of German compensation for the Jews for the Holocaust, an historical event that has only recently begun to be studied by Greek historians. Papandreou’s book is a significant contribution to the literature on Nazi atrocities in Greece and the study of public history in Greece.

¹ Giorgos Kokkinos, Panayotis Kimourtzis and Markos Karasarinis, eds., *Ιστορία και δικαιοσύνη* [History and justice] (Athens: Asini, 2020).

² See the award-winning documentary *A Song for Argyris* (2006). “In 1944, four-year-old Argyris Sfountouris survived a Nazi massacre of over 200 people, including his parents, in the small Greek farming village of Distomo. As a war orphan, he was sent to the Pestalozzi Children’s Village in Switzerland. He later obtained a PhD in mathematics and physics at the ETH Zurich, and made a new life for himself in exile,” IMDB, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0936485/plotsummary>).

³ Giorgos Kokkinos, Elli Lemonidou and Vlasis Agtzidis, *Το τραύμα, τα συγκρουσιακά θέματα και οι ερμηνευτικές διαμάχες στην ιστορική εκπαίδευση* [Trauma and memory politics: Indicative views of symbolic wars on history and memory] (Athens: Taxideftis, 2019). See also Giorgos Kokkinos, *Η σκουριά και το πυρ: Προσεγγίζοντας τη σχέση ιστορίας, τραύματος και μνήμης* [The rust and the fire: Approaching the relation between history, trauma, memory] (Athens: Gutenberg, 2010).

⁴ Giorgos Kokkinos, Panayotis Kimourtzis, Eleni Stefanou, Panagiotis Gatsotis and Zeta Papandreou, “Greek Society’s Confrontation with Traumas caused by National Socialism: The case of the Distomo Massacre (June 10th 1944). History Text Books and Memory Politics of the Local Community,” in *Identity, Trauma, Sensitive and Controversial Issues in the Teaching of History*, ed. Hillary Cooper and Jon Nichol (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2015), 294–327.

⁵ Argyris Sfountouris, *Πενθώ για τη Γερμανία: Το παράδειγμα του Διστόμου* [Mourn for Germany: The example of Distomo] (Athens: Vergina, 2015).