

Speech: Culture of Remembrance of World War II in Greece

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Greece entered World War II on October 28th, 1940 on the side of the Allied forces, fending off the attack of the Italian fascist troops from Albania. In April 1941, the German occupation followed. On October 12th, 1944, with the departure of the German occupation forces from Athens, The War came to its end for Greece.

In Greece, the official commemoration of World War II is somehow unconventional: while many countries commemorate the end of World War II, in Greece the official memory management policy celebrates the start of The War.

The memories – and thus also the associated celebrations – of World War II triggered a major political and ideological dispute between the right-wing and left-wing parties in Greece as early as the wake of the country's liberation from German Occupation.

Let's see briefly how the anniversary of October 28th, 1940 has been celebrated in the last 65 years:

The first commemoration took place on October 28th, 1941 in the forecourt of the University of Athens. In 1942, it was held at Syntagma Square (Constitution Square) by youth organisations. In 1943, the commemoration was actually a demonstration at Kotzia Square in Athens, which however was surrounded by the Germans. The latter forced the participants to stay with their hands up until the evening, while about twenty of the demonstrators were sent to concentration camps.

In 1944, the first official commemoration had the form of a parade before the Prime Minister Georgios Papandreou (the elder). The War had already ended for Greece, some days before on October 12th, 1944 when the Germans left Athens. The 1944 parade was performed in a climate of optimism, with 'National Independence', 'People's Rule' and 'Rebirth' as its characterising notions. About a month later, this optimism was reversed by the internal armed conflict between the left-wing and right-wing parties which ended in 1949 with the victory of the Right and the military defeat of the Left. Ever since, the Greek Civil War is the prism through which memory of The War's assessment is performed.

Ever since, the dominant national narrative pertains that the enemy of the Greek Nation is not only the World War II invaders but the communists as well with each and every commemoration ministering this new version of Greek history and mainstream ideology of the Greek State in the aftermath of the Civil War. From 1944 onwards, commemoration takes the form of a ceremonious military parade. For many years there was no room for any opposing versions to be expressed in public. This approach was restored and fervently supported by the 1967 military Junta (the Regime of the Colonels) in an attempt to have the notion of 'nationalism' confirmed.

In the first post-war anniversaries of October 28th, two opposing approaches concerning both commemoration and historical interpretation of the anniversary are evident. The Left-wing organises demonstrations, while the Right-wing exalts in the military aspect of the parade. The Left-wing underlines the antifascist dimension of war, while the bourgeois parties emphasise the national aspect of war avoiding any political connotations. In the commemorations of the years 1963-1966, crowds of citizens chanted slogans in favour of democracy, protesting against the adverse contemporary political situation. In 1979-1980, any efforts of the left-wing National Resistance organisations to deposit wreaths and participate in the parades resulted in conflict and arrests. It was a time when the Left-wing was claiming for its contribution to the National Resistance to be recognised.

The political climate changes in 1974 with the fall of the Junta; the anniversary now symbolises also the "OHI", the "NO", to the 1967 dictatorship. Commemoration acquires a new meaning and a new rite as well: poems by Yannis Ritsos, hymns of EAM/ELAS, Greek Resistance songs and the music of Mikis Theodorakis are heard in school festivities. All these

indicate a change in the ideological content of the anniversary.

Such 'varied spirit' of commemoration is also detected in the school textbooks after the rise of PASOK (Panhellenic Socialist Movement) to power, in 1981. It is the first time the term 'National Resistance' appears in Greek school textbooks.

Over time, however, within the climate of political stability commemoration seems rather 'worthless'. It is no more headline-grabbing, while it is anticipated just like any other social event.

According to a historian (Stathis, 2011) recently the main manifestation of this national anniversary has been the parade of students, troops and security corps, associations and unions in military formation before the State officials, raising a large crowd of spectators the bulk of which is made up of the middle and working classes.

In 2011, in Thessaloniki, the anniversary was accompanied by protests: jeers for politicians, anti-parade demonstrations, turning away from the officials, participants wearing black scarves, halting the parade until the departure of politicians, as well as some violent actions such as insulting gestures to politicians, yogurt throwing, attacks against the police for preventing groups of demonstrators to approach the officials, even individual and personal attacks against politicians. All these escalated to the cancellation of the parade in Thessaloniki which is traditionally performed before the President of the Hellenic Republic, as a measure against the bulk of the demonstrators.

Thus, in 2011 a three-dimensional reaction was expressed for the first time: i) disapproval of the political leadership and system in the context of the recent economic crisis; ii) effective questioning of the parading tradition often substituting it with protests; iii) questioning of the dominant public history by rejecting the mainstream perception of the relationship between the historical protagonists of the past and the current political system. It should be underlined that there was also a far-right part of the protest with manifestations of populism. Faced with such a popular protest, the political and social elite reacted first by taking authoritarian measures and then by indicting and denouncing such an attitude in an effort to suppress and morally delegitimise the protest (Stathis, 2011).

Now, let's go back to the question posed concerning the official commemoration of World War

II in Greece. As it has already been mentioned, while many countries celebrate the end of World War II (May 8th, 1945), in Greece the official memory management policy celebrates the start of The War – not even the end of The War for Greece, that is, the end of the occupation of Greece by the Axis Powers (October 12th, 1944). This is because collective historical memory management is associated with the so called ‘ideological use of history’: the historical past becomes ‘the practical past’ in the service of subsequent political stakes and it is linked with the legalisation of the political forces claiming power.

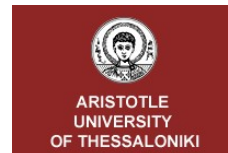
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