

Introduction

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The papers in this special issue were part of a conference, held in the Nicosia buffer zone in November 2008, which aimed at turning a historiographical lens onto the divisions of Cyprus' history. The conference was entitled, 'One Island, Many Histories: Rethinking the Politics of the Past in Cyprus,' and it was sponsored by the Peace Research Institute Oslo Cyprus Centre with the financial support of the Chrest Foundation. As the title suggests, the conference was based on the premise that the dominance of two main narratives of Cyprus – narratives that have been labelled Greek and Turkish – has itself been divisive. We know that those differing narrative strands have often come into conflict, fuel prejudice and nationalist sentiments, and have constituted one of the major impediments to reconciliation. Indeed, many Cypriots consider history to be an important part of the ongoing struggle, and as a result, it remains resistant to examination and debate. This includes not only the history narrated in textbooks, but even the language that academic historians and social scientists are able to use in order to make their work acceptable to local audiences. At the same time, the dominance of these nationalist narratives has led to the exclusion of other groups, of other histories, and of other narrative possibilities.

The conference aimed to investigate how divisive historical narratives have emerged in Cyprus, how they are reproduced, and what questions we might ask about the production of those narratives that would help us reorient history writing from a form of division to a form of dialogue. With this aim in mind, the conference was organised around a set of methodological and historiographical questions that probed the context and workings of the historian's craft in Cyprus. Participants were asked to respond to a set of questions concerning the construction of 'official' histories; the relation between 'official' and 'unofficial' histories; and the relations between history and memory and history and trauma, among other themes. Because the questions that historians ask construct the results that they find, the conference proposed that new questions are important for a new orientation. Through this historiographical approach, the conference sought to investigate the ways in which history is and has been written in the island, as well as what new ways of thinking about the past may be productive for the future.

The conference assumed, then, that history is not only, or perhaps not even, about what may or may not have happened in the past but is moulded by and in turn influences the political present. Historians and social scientists working on Cyprus are not and cannot be neutral actors, because whatever subject they choose, whatever method they use, there are always political implications of their work that affect both its writing and its reception. While this raises important methodological questions, it does not necessarily constitute a hindrance to producing 'objective'

history but rather may be seen as an intrinsic part of the historian's craft. Indeed, as many philosophers of the subject have noted, subjectivity is unavoidable in the writing of history, because the historian picks and chooses events and interprets their meaning.

The historian, in other words, writes an *istoria*, a history that is also a story – though this does not mean that every story is as good as any other. In an older essay on objectivity and subjectivity in history, Paul Ricoeur observes that 'we have a feeling that there is good and bad subjectivity and we expect the very exercise of the historian's craft to decide between them' (Ricoeur, 1965, p. 22). Ricoeur continues by noting, 'we must say that the historian's craft *educates* his subjectivity. History makes the historian as much as the historian makes history' (*ibid.*, p. 31). What Ricoeur wishes to say is that not only does the historian give shape to history; in the process of learning, investigating, and interpreting, the historian's capacities for empathy, understanding, and reflection are themselves changed. Or at least they should be. It is this changed and constantly changing subjectivity that constitutes what we recognise as a 'good subjectivity', the subjectivity that is part and parcel of the historian's craft.

This seems an important methodological point to consider in thinking about history in Cyprus. Clearly, the writing of Cyprus' history has been stymied by what Ricoeur would call a 'bad subjectivity', or the kind that is not constantly influenced by learning and reflection but which has been moulded instead by popular perceptions, by political leanings, and in many cases by what we already claim to know. But there are other aspects of the writing of Cyprus' history that are equally stifling but less explicitly acknowledged. For instance, the language of history in Cyprus is inhibited by the necessity of using particular formulations that may not express what the researcher actually understands or believes but which place his/her work in the framework of the politically acceptable. There is a compartmentalisation of history in Cyprus, between Ottoman and British, pre-modern and modern, colonial and postcolonial, histories in the Greek language and those in Turkish. These are only some of the many other divides of Cyprus' history, divides that in turn etch the parameters and limits of the discipline, indeed of the permissible, or even the possible.

The 2008 conference, then, aimed at something more radical than a simple discussion of 'the facts'. It aimed at something more radical than attempting to unite scholars over a common history that in the end still would include some and exclude others. Rather, we aimed to investigate the conditions under which histories have been written and received in Cyprus in order to understand the conditions under which the 'good subjectivity' that is an intrinsic part of the historian's craft may flourish or be subverted. This is why all the themes that were the focus of the conference, such as the relationship between history and memory, were at the intersection of objectivity and subjectivity, asking us constantly to investigate our own methods of interpretation and to understand history not as something that happened in the past but as something that is in a constant process of becoming in the present.

The papers that constitute this special issue all investigate the discourses that framed the encounter between British colonial administrators and their Cypriot subjects during the British colonial period in the island, as well as the lingering effects of such discourses in the postcolonial period. While Roger Heacock examines the ways in which a racialised framing of Cypriot subjects fashioned policies towards the peoples that colonial officers administered, Alexis Rappas finds inconsistencies in those same discourses as ‘natives’ were incorporated into the colonial service. Both Eleni Bouleti and Altay Nevzat show the effects of a discursive framing of ‘Turks’ on policies with regard to Cypriot Muslim subjects, Nevzat also demonstrating the inability of colonial administrators fully to account for those ‘Turks’ who resisted this mould. The final two papers by Demetris Assos and Jan Asmussen both address the role of conspiracy theories in framing the ways that Cypriots have interpreted the decolonisation period and its postcolonial consequences. They investigate the ways that such theories have seeped into public consciousness and discursively frame how Cypriots themselves perceive the ‘truth’ about history. Both conclude that conspiracy theories are ‘comfortable’ ways of deflecting blame and interrogate the resistance, on the part of both local historians and the public, to evidence that would erode these theories.

All of these papers, then, ask us to consider new ‘frames’ for thinking about a period of Cyprus’ history about which much has been written but about which much remains contested. They show us, then, how historiography may be used to think beyond entrenched historical divisions in order to pose new questions for the future.

Ricoeur, P. (1965) *History and Truth*. Translated, with an Introduction, by Charles A. Kelbley. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.