

*Mussolini's Greek Island:
Fascism and the Italian Occupation of Syros in
World War II*

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Sheila LecoEUR's book explores the social and economic impact of the Italian occupation on the Greek island of Syros during the Second World War. The book constitutes an important contribution to the existing literature of wartime Greece since the bulk of secondary literature has so far focused on the German Nazi – rather than on the Italian fascist – mechanisms of occupation.

Italians found themselves responsible for the majority of Greek territory, including Cyclades, after Greece was overrun by the Axis powers in spring 1941. Indeed, on 5 May 1941 the Italian military occupation of Syros began. The author examines the mechanisms of the Italian administration in Syros connecting these with Mussolini's long-standing vision of a 'New Roman Empire' in the Mediterranean. It is in this context that the policy of *distacco* (detachment) is examined. As LecoEUR explains, the idea of *distacco* was based on the detachment of the Aegean islands from mainland Greece with the purpose of creating a *de facto* state of separation from the government in Athens. It was the Italian administered Dodecanese that was supposed to form the central connection with the Aegean islands – not Athens. Such policy, however, proved to be unrealistic and disastrous in its consequences. Any prospect of the detachment of the Aegean islands from the mainland was unthinkable for the Greeks. This was most notably reflected by a moving appeal sent by twenty-three notables from the island of Samos to the Italian authorities, against the disintegration of Greece. The *distacco* policy in the end proved to be a failure that led Syros in the midst of crisis.

Indeed, the severe famine experienced in Syros is seen by the author as one of *distacco's* catastrophic consequences. Syros – a relatively prosperous island before the occupation – was reduced to starvation in a period of just a few months. LecoEUR offers a detailed analysis of this terrible phenomenon which was particularly intense during the winter of 1941-1942. Memories of this acute experience are still vivid within the contemporary society of Syros. In 1984, the municipality of Ermoupoli erected a monument which commemorated the death of 8,000 famine victims. In reality, as the author shows, the actual figure of the victims was much lower – still the fact that Syros experienced a particularly intense period of famine remains undisputable.

Special emphasis is also given to the psychological impact of the famine on the society of Syros. Family bonds, social customs and human relationships in general were highly tested by the fight for survival. An interesting observation is that in Syros women showed higher rates of survival than men and such a phenomenon may have been influenced by certain cultural factors. As the author explains, in a traditional society where women's powers were vested solely on the domestic sphere, their lives were eventually entirely transformed when they had to become the primary decision makers and food producers for their households. Similarly, Lecoecur argues that the loss of status many men faced during the famine weakened their psychological resistance to starvation. A possible explanation for the higher survival rate of women in Syros, Lecoecur goes on to explain, may be traced in their active role during the famine which made their determination to survive more intense.

The existence of a significant Catholic community (dating its presence since the Venetian occupation of the island) makes the case of Syros even more interesting. As the author demonstrates, the relations between the Catholic and the Orthodox communities were considerably aggravated during the Italian occupation. The Catholics were often confronted with suspicion by the Orthodox people who believed that the former were recipients of a more favourable treatment from the Italian occupiers. Such suspicion was particularly evident in crucial matters such as in food distribution. Italians themselves were quick to grasp the mutual tension between Orthodox and Catholics, especially during the Greco-Italian war. The author also explores in depth the works of the public assistance service (*Assistenza Civile*) especially as far as the management of the food supply and the helping with medical assistance was concerned. Further important issues such as propaganda and control of information are also examined in detail. Lecoecur, therefore, makes sure her study examines the question of Italian occupation in Syros from a variety of angles including, when possible, the view of both the occupiers and the occupied.

Any parallels of the Syros experience with the case of Cyprus during the Second World War must be treated with caution. Cyprus was under British occupation during the war and – despite fears – the island was never invaded by the Axis powers. While the war came as a shock to all branches of Cypriot society the island did not experience the degree of economic catastrophe Syros did. What might be broadly observed is that – as in other parts of the globe – the war altered relations between the different religious communities in both islands. However, such observation should not be overemphasised as conditions surrounding Syros and Cyprus before, during and after the war differed.

Sheila Lecoecur makes apt use of a wide range of sources – both primary and secondary. Archival research was conducted in Greece, France and Britain. The primary material cited at the archive of Syros concerning the Italian occupation of the island is extremely important as it sheds light into the local dynamics of powers and reveals details of the occupiers' relations with the occupied society. The considerable number of interviews and personal accounts with local people

reveal the different views on the occupation experience making the study even more interesting.

All in all, 'Mussolini's Greek Island: Fascism and the Italian Occupation of Syros in World War II' is an important contribution to the existing bibliography and certainly adds to our knowledge on the Greek experience under Italian occupation at a local level. Lecocour's study – an original 'history from below' analysis – will certainly appeal to anyone interested in modern Greek history, fascism and the Second World War in general.

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