Reflections on the 1st October Commemoration of the Independence of Cyprus

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Abstract

This essay examines the politics of commemoration with reference to the celebration of the independence of Cyprus. The adventures of this 'historical date' reveal some of the key changes in the political orientations of the two major communities since 1960. This is a commemoration that was forgotten by all for many years; it was remembered by Greek Cypriots as late as in 1979 when it was first declared a public holiday; Turkish Cypriots now scorn this date, even if they are the ones who demonstrated more enthusiasm at the time.

Keywords: Commemoration, parades, independence, Cyprus

My first encounter with the commemoration of October 1st was a rather confusing experience. It was 1 October 1990 and I, a Greek Cypriot born in 1964, was ready to begin my research for my PhD in Cyprus. Since October was the month that university began in the UK where I was enrolled for my PhD, I thought this would be a good time to start. I was in the house I had rented in Nicosia, full of hope. At this time of day, the streets would be busy, so I hoped to be able to meet people living in that area and talk to them about their relations with Turkish Cypriots. I stepped outside. All quiet. No one was in the vicinity. I turned round, went back in, and closed the door behind me. I collapsed on a chair: So much for the triumphant beginning of my research. I turned on the radio. It was a national holiday, the anniversary of the independence of Cyprus in 1960. How could I possibly not have known this?

On reflection, I felt sure that when I was growing up in Cyprus, the anniversary did not exist. I left Cyprus when I was nineteen to study abroad. Now coming back, aged twenty-six, there it was on television, celebrated in all its glory with flags, parades, music and crowds. In my absence an anniversary had been born. The odd thing was that Cyprus actually began its independence on 16 August 1960. But today was the 1st October! So we were triumphantly celebrating our anniversary on the wrong date. Outside, the main roads were full of flags – not just our state flag, the flag of the Republic of Cyprus. The flag of another state, Greece, was hanging next to ours. Another national anthem was playing, the Greek one. Ours was nowhere to be heard. Come to think of it, that was because we did not even have one. And this was supposed to be the anniversary of the *independence* of Cyprus. So, we forgot the anniversary of our birth for many years, and then about 30 years later we remembered it. Why?

When I looked a bit deeper into it, I realised how problematic commemorations are. I provide two examples, one from Greece and one from Turkey. Ataturk came to claim that the 19th of May was his birthday. As no records were kept at the time of his birth, it was not possible to know. The choice of his birthday was made late in his life by Ataturk himself because the 19th May (1919) was the day when Ataturk and his forces landed in Samsun (Mango, 2000, p. 26). This date is commemorated in Turkey as the beginning of the War of Independence. This choice made his life appear as a higher act of destiny. The birth of the Father of the Turks (which is what Ataturk means) was made to coincide with the struggle for the birth of the Turkish nation-state. He would become for many Turks their only Creator due to his secularising reforms aiming to eradicate the worship of God. He also attempted to create a cult of worship around his own persona as the one and only true Father and Creator.

Did the 'Greek Revolution against the Turks', as it is usually called, start on the 25th of March? No, this date was chosen later (Koulouri, 1995), to make it coincide with the religious holiday of the Annunciation: when the Holy Mother miraculously conceived Christ while, of course, remaining Virgin Mary. By putting the two days together it was as if the beginning of the new state coincided with the beginning of the life of God on earth. Even the manner in which it is called is highly misleading, for at the time neither 'Greeks' nor 'Turks' existed (Skopetea, 1988). A better way to put it would be the revolution of the *Romioi* against the Ottoman authorities, since the Greek and Turkish national identities were forged later.

Greek Cypriots tried to go one-up on the Greeks. If the Greek day of Independence combined two meanings, they would try for three. According to Greek Cypriot historian Panteli (1985, p. 271), Makarios wanted the EOKA [National Organisation of Cypriot Fighters] movement to start on 25th March 1955 – the beginning of the Greek War of Independence, the beginning of the life of God on earth, and the beginning of the Struggle for Union with Greece, all in a single day: an admittedly hard to beat symbolic combination. Due to unforeseen events, it had to start a week later. A stroke of bad luck then, made this commemoration coincide, out of all days, with April 1st, a date famous worldwide for rather less glorious reasons.

How come then the commemoration of the Independence of Cyprus was moved from 16th August to 1st October? It was moved to a day within the school-calendar so that, like it or not, there would be a captive audience. Commemorations, despite their usual celebratory intentions, are often sad days for me. I find them sad due to the violence, in fact, several kinds of violence, that they entail, one being violence towards schoolchildren, a point I return to later. Another type of violence is violence towards history. Why celebrate this day, a day which for both Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots then spelled defeat – the defeat of *enosis* and *taksim*? It is only retrospectively in 1979 that one community chose to remember this day, after decades of trying to forget it, while for the other community this date is not commemorated and thus of no importance. This brings me to the second type of violence towards history, what I would like to call the violence of imposed forgetting. Any commemoration is not so much a call to remember as an effort to forget: To forget all other days which are deemed unimportant. To forget, in other words,

all other historical events which are destined for the rubbish bin of history. This is the problem with memory, and that is why remembering is always political. Memory is by definition selective as it is impossible to remember all, and what is chosen to be remembered is inevitably chosen for political reasons.

Memory may in fact reveal more about the future than the past. It is the Greek Cypriot desire for a future reunited independent Cyprus, that has made Greek Cypriots retrospectively decide to commemorate the independence of Cyprus, when it emerged as the 1960 unitary state. It is highly doubtful if at the time, there was any sense of glorious rejoicing about the granting of independence to Cyprus. Its symbol, the republic's flag that is now venerated was then scorned by Greek Cypriots who much preferred the flag of Greece. This is what prompted ex-President Clerides to allegedly remark that: 'Our flag in Cyprus could be the best in the world because no-one is prepared to die for it'.

Commemorations often entail violence towards the dead by distorting the meaning of their struggles. This is a quote from a Greek Cypriot politician who spoke on TV after the grand parade of 1st October 2009: 'Many people gave their lives so that we would live in an independent state (*Polloi anthropoi edosan ti zoi tous gia na zisoume se ena anexartito kratos*)'. This is a distortion of the aim of EOKA which was union with Greece, not independence. Nowadays one often hears of the struggle of EOKA being referred to as the struggle for the independence of Cyprus (*agonas gia tin anexartisia tis Kyprou*).

While on the issue of parades, I would also like to state in no uncertain terms that I always disliked parades. I disliked parades even before discovering that it was the dictator of Greece, Metaxas, who instituted the tradition of the military parade there, which Greek Cypriots later adopted. As far as I can remember, the student parades had boys in front, girls at the back. At the time, this did not bother me. I thought it was simply natural. Something else bothered me. I was not a particularly well-built boy, and in the parade it was always the well-built, tall, good-looking boys that had to be in the front. The shorties, the fatsoes, the weaklings, myself – the bodily-challenged, in short – were clearly a problem to our teachers. That we were clearly a problem was something our teachers made no effort to conceal from us. The solution, I remember, was to hide us somewhere towards the back and in the middle of the group. Do anything to make us disappear. Evidently, we were something shameful to be hidden. But there was some consolation. We were not the worst. Some were left out altogether. I remember how much we all used to laugh at the poor boys and girls who found it difficult to synchronise during marching. I remember how they were paraded again and again in front of us, each one alone, sweating, swinging wooden-like arms and legs from the tension and the stress of being publicly humiliated, before they were dismissed altogether. The affinities of these practices to certain notorious ideologies based on the worship of the healthy, athletic and coordinated body are clear. The European Court of Human Rights recognises the violence entailed by the obligatory participation of students and teachers in parades and has condemned this practice in various countries, including Greece (Gousetis, 2008, p. 31).

But when it came to the actual day of the parade, I found myself secretly envying the ones who would not parade. They had the day off, whereas we had to gather early, all spick and span, shoes, hair and teeth all brushed and shiny, and wait endlessly for our turn to come. These considerations explain the reasons for the change of date from 16th August to 1st October: the fear that no-one would bother with it given that it was right in the middle of the holiday period when the capital is totally empty. The sight of a military parade taking place on 16th August among empty streets in Nicosia would indeed be one to behold. The obvious advantage with that date would be that the authorities would not need to cordon off any street; they would be empty anyway. In my personal view, a public demand should be voiced for the anniversary of our birth as a state to be moved back to its true, authentic, historic date. It could be argued that it is disrespectful and historically inaccurate to commemorate this most important day on the wrong date. For how will students ever come to respect history and historical facts, if we cheat on the very anniversary of our own independence?

It is, in my view, both sad and fearful for any state to mark its most important historical day with a military parade. Is this the best it can do? Are guns what these people are most proud of? Do they have no other things to show for themselves? In parades, the nation appears synchronised, equal, united, strong, and of course male, all walking in the same direction, with the same rhythm towards the same future, blatantly worshiping its guns. Man and machine blend, with man having become the ultimate killing device. A common argument is that these are only meant for defence, but here in Cyprus one becomes well aware when looking at the guns of those on the other side, that they do not appear so innocently defensive.

During the inevitable public broadcast of the parade, the commentators on television and radio constantly remind the people of what the parade demonstrates. If we are to believe them, the parade demonstrates the high level of readiness of our army and the high fighting spirit of our soldiers, as though they are just brought to parade one day out of the blue, and they have not been practicing for this for weeks on end; as if they were there out of their own free will.

The serious atmosphere that surrounds these days is indicative of yet another kind of violence. There is something almost holy in the seriousness with which these days are treated. Durkheim described ritual as society worshipping itself, through the worship of its totem. In our case, we do not even need the totem, we are perfectly happy to directly worship ourselves. But this has to be done with serious religious-like reverence and any attempt to perhaps also laugh a bit at ourselves seems like an act of sacrilege. Politicians may use grand, glorious and grave words to mark the day, but for most people its meaning lies in the happy occasion to miss work or school.

What are we to make then of this day? – A day with meaning on one side, without meaning on the other: A day whose interpretation has changed on both sides. As Attalides (1979, pp. 50-51), a Greek Cypriot sociologist, suggests, independence was received as a defeat by Greek Cypriots but as a victory for Turkish Cypriots (even if this was not their primary aim). Yet, it is Greek Cypriots who commemorate and celebrate it after having ignored it for decades, while it is Turkish Cypriots who totally ignore it. Greek Cypriots started to commemorate the 1960 independence of Cyprus

only in 1979, as part of a more general effort that began after 1974 to symbolically emphasise the presence of the Republic of Cyprus due to the threat placed by the (non-recognised) Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.[1] This was why the independence of the Republic of Cyprus started to be commemorated, and its flag – that was drawn by a Turkish Cypriot – while previously scorned, now came to be used more widely. Related to this was the Greek Cypriot policy of preventing the participation of Turkish Cypriots (under the auspices of the TRNC) in any international forum. This entailed use of the flag of the Republic of Cyprus as representing the only legitimate state in Cyprus, while before 1974 Greek Cypriots were often happy to relinquish their statehood in favour of appearing as part of Greece. During the Olympic Games, for example, the Greek Cypriot athletes appeared as part of the team of Greece. These general considerations provide ample ground for reflection both on commemorations and on historical interpretation.

The same religious-like reverence I previously described, often accompanies the teaching of history. History is presented as a holy truth whose questioning is an act of sacrilege. I have demonstrated already that in history there can be different perspectives related to the meaning of the same historical date, and that social agents may later even change their own minds about them. We endlessly debate in Cyprus on whose history is correct, ours or theirs, the Left's or the Right's, and what we miss in all this, is the most obvious. That history is and can only be an open and continuing debate among informed perspectives. This does not mean that anything goes for this should be dialogue among *informed* perspectives and what the rules of history as an academic discipline try to determine is what will count as *informed*. I take it that the role of history educators should be to provide students with the tools to reach such informed perspectives, not to tell them what to believe. I often feel that the problem in Cyprus is the outright dismissal of all other perspectives apart from one's own: In other words, the lack of true dialogue among various perspectives.

On rereading this, I noticed that I have used a 'we' that is often problematic. This is the 'we' that Greek Cypriots use, when they talk of themselves as Cypriots, which inadvertently excludes Turkish Cypriots from the category of 'Cypriots'. Yet, it is in use daily both in ordinary conversations as well as in politicians' public discourse.

Cyprus, 'the reluctant republic' (as a book title goes), has also been compared to a child that no-one wanted. Its birth was contingent, in the sense that no-one had actually planned for an independent Cyprus to emerge, and clearly the two larger communities were not aiming for this. Our own lives too are the greatest contingency. We have nothing to do with being alive. We did not will our birth. Our very existence has not been an act of our own will. Yet, we celebrate our birthdays. Celebration alone, however, may not be the appropriate manner to engage with a commemoration like this. Commemorations are days of historical reflection *par excellence*, and

1 Although the northern part of the island is referred to as the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) in this essay, it is acknowledged that the TRNC is not recognised by the international community except Turkey.

this commemoration provides ample grounds for historical reflection, including reflections on its own history, which starkly expose the predicaments of commemorating. One of which, as the street artist suggests is that it may be simply too late: το πουλλίν επέτασεν (the bird has flown). This commemoration harks to the past in order to celebrate the emergence of a unified state, while it also espouses the creation of a unified Cyprus in the future. Yet, given the successive failures of diplomatic efforts, it is uncertain if this will ever be achieved. The Turkish expression 'bayramdan sonra' (after the celebration), which now only some elderly Greek Cypriots may understand, also means 'it is too late' aptly joining the two notions – celebration and belatedness – together.

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