

**BOOK  
REVIEWS**



## ***Biographical Dictionary of Cypriots: 1800-1920, Vols I-II***

**ARISTIDES KOUDOUNARIS**

**7<sup>th</sup> edition, Nicosia: University of Nicosia, 2018**

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The 7<sup>th</sup> edition of the Biographical Dictionary of Cypriots of late Aristides Koudounaris (1936-2018) is, without a doubt, one of the most significant works ever published in Cyprus and the culmination of the life work of one of the most dedicated researchers of Cypriot history.

Wikipedia is a revolutionary idea; an encyclopedia available for anyone to read and constantly updated, which has no limits and can include information about virtually everything. No revolution is of course infallible. Wikipedia depends its scope by the will and interests of its users. The mere fact that someone wrote something in a blog might be included as a new critical perspective. This sometimes sacrifices knowledge, as in the age of digital information we digest the culture of simplicity.

Koudounaris' work is important, because it depends upon hard work and cross-checking of sources. Moreover, whereas, no person can achieve absolute objectivity, Koudounaris has been objective in determining who to include and why. The percentages of Greeks and Turks, of English and overseas Cypriots, of Armenians and Roman Catholics, included in his work, have been meticulously considered so as to truly represent a period covering a total of approximately 200 years. The dictionary covers personalities who were born from 1800 to 1920 and accordingly includes people who were active even during the new millennium (for instance, Glafcos Clerides, born in 1919, was President of the Republic until 2003). Koudounaris' life work refers to personalities who lived in the past, defined our present and remain essential for the understanding of how to build our future.

Seven editions in a period of thirty years, each of which has been a new revised and updated edition, so that the dictionary in its definitive and final version is a complete mosaic of personalities who defined Cypriot history, in the political, military, economic, societal or cultural sphere. I refer to the 'definitive and final'

version because of Koudounaris' passing just one month after the presentation of the Dictionary in a well-attended event at the University of Nicosia (there were two additional presentations, which took place in Limassol and Athens in October 2019, but this time without Aristides). However, the finality of this edition is due to another ground. In 1989 when the first edition was published, there were still several personalities included in the Dictionary still active; in 2019 there are none, with probably only former socialist leader Vasos Lyssarides remaining still alive.

A similar work would have typically been carried out by a large team of researchers and this makes Koudounaris' achievement even more impressive. Single-handedly, he reviewed newspaper articles, archives in both Cyprus and abroad and took several thousands of interviews, in order to complete his monumental work. The Dictionary enables us to approach the history of Cyprus without bias, through the lens of a humble researcher who deeply respected and passionately cared about the influence and contribution of personalities of Cypriot history. In each new edition, Koudounaris set new goals; after 2003, he carried out with zeal, primary research in the occupied areas in order to include Turkish Cypriot personalities to present the complete history of this turbulent island, without exclusions. Similarly, he proceeded to include overseas Cypriots, including Cypriots of Egypt, and even British officials who left their mark during the British rule era.

It could be argued that Aristides Koudounaris was an original version of a dying breed; a researcher who through his life work became a public intellectual. Academics, researchers, politicians, journalists, professionals, virtually anyone, could benefit from the multiple narratives included in the Dictionary; rather than merely being a study in utility, as encyclopedias and dictionaries typically are, Koudounaris' work is a study of ideals and personalities who lived and died with them. Current academics often tend to ignore the role of public intellectuals and refer to other academics in technical language, neglecting the importance of the educated public. Koudounaris, however, has contributed with his life work to the advancement of science and society by improving our knowledge for personalities who determined our existence; whether and how we shall use such knowledge is up to us.

One could read in the Dictionary about the advocate from Kyrenia Charilaos Demetriades, who, in his will, left his large estate for erecting a cultural foundation. One could also read about Dervis Vedat Bey, who refused to resign from office as the President of the District Court of Nicosia after 1963 despite threats by Denktash, and who sent a letter that Koudounaris found in the archives of the Supreme Court,

expressing his disagreement with the policy of the Turkish Cypriot leadership on the Cyprus Question. One could be surprised, when realizing that several important personalities of Cypriot history, had studied through distance learning in La Salle Extension University in Chicago, more than 100 years before Cypriot universities began investing in Distance Learning education.

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