

Insular Destinies. Perspectives on the History and Politics of Cyprus

Paschalis Kitromilides

Routledge

London, 2021 (242 pp.)

ISBN: 9781032085296

Paschalis Kitromilides, himself an expatriate Cypriot, is a leading specialist in the intellectual and social history of modern Greek culture. This new volume brings together a diverse collection of 14 studies published by him over the years. The title of the book, *Insular Destinies*, reflects the theme which draws the studies together, the focus being on the interplay 'between the inside and the outside'. Here, the more immediate focus on domestic situations seeks to compensate for the tendency of recent political historiography to concentrate on the externality of the island's fate. The manner of external interventions cannot be truly understood without an insight into the long-term political and social currents *within* the island. This point is emphasised by the author. The publication, to use his own words 'hints' at ways in which the modern tendency to compartmentalise historiography can be countered.

The book is divided into three sections, the final one including a substantial bibliography. The first section focuses on the early modern period. Context is provided by a useful account of the island's chequered history from BC until 1959. The ensuing studies offer, among other things, penetrating access to the intellectual yearnings of expatriate Lusignan Cypriots for their island. An insightful analysis of the tax rebellions of the mid-19th century underlines the common needs and grievances of Muslims and Christians in a rural insular society. A study that slightly diverts from the main theme, but one which I found fascinating, is entitled 'The anonymity of a prominent woman in 18th century Cyprus', the prominent woman being the wife of the well-known Dragoman, Christophakis Constantinou. It indicates the extent to which even prominent and powerful women were resigned to remaining in the shadows in a deeply patriarchal society. In a later comment on the diachronistic nature of gender inequality and anonymity, Kitromilides points to an inscription unearthed during metro construction works in Athens, on a stele commemorating the death of a woman who is identified only as someone's wife.

The important study on Kyprianos, Archbishop of Cyprus from 1820 to 1821, re-

verts to the central theme of external influences and consequent domestic developments. The 20 years spent by the young Kyprianos in Moldavia at a time when fervour for the enlightenment and revolution was seeping eastwards from Europe, could not fail, as Kitromilides argues, to influence his thinking, his enlightened attitude to the founding of major schools in Nicosia and Limassol being a case in point. The Archbishop's description of Demetrios Themistocles, the director he brought over from the great philosophical school in Smyrna to direct the Limassol school, as 'a philhellene and a patriot' reflects that sense of being part of a broader community, a sense so vital to marginalised islanders. Nevertheless, Kyprianos' bearing in July 1821, the month of his execution, reflects his keen sense of pastoral responsibility, the need to protect his flock against the consequences of regional turmoil. He is shown to display an awareness of the context of power relations in the Ottoman empire and the ways these power relations affected the collective life of Cypriot society. The admiration and respect felt by the eminent Victorian traveller and writer John Carne, who had met the Archbishop in Nicosia that month, is captured in the final quote from his account of the meeting. 'If nothing but blood would satisfy the governor's cruelty, he was ready to shed his own rather than they should perish'.

In the following chapter, Kitromilides analyses a report by Antonio Vondiziano, representative of the Levant Company, on the situation in Cyprus, for 1821. Vondiziano clearly believed that the Ottoman governor of the island saw the uprising in Greece as an opportunity to decapitate the leaders of the Greek population. In doing so, he sought to subdue his main rivals for the control of the island's people and its resources, long since the main issue in Cypriot politics. By implicating them in an intention to participate in the broader revolution, he received sanction for his butchery. Kitromilides places the report in a vivid context of consular life in Larnaca and publishes it in full.

In the final chapter of part one, Kitromilides turns to poetry, 'unquestionably the most important form of literary expression' of the collective yearnings and aspirations in Cypriot culture. A brief survey of the end of the Ottoman period, when there was no printing press in the island, indicates sparse literary activity. Such activity as there is, is derived, he observes, from a few intellectuals, Cypriots by birth, who moved between the island and the great centres of Hellenism in the Eastern Mediterranean. He describes this as a period that founded 'the systematic study of the Hellenic character of Cypriot civilisation' They would convey to the island, the intellectual currents prevalent in these centres of modern Greek culture.

Kitromilides focuses on the two major Cypriot poets of the early years of Brit-

ish rule, Vassilis Michaelides and Demetris Lipertis. He suggests that, through their work, which began in *katharevousa*, but evolved to composition in the Cypriot dialect, Cypriot culture attained self-consciousness. He emphasises the fact that 'there is nothing folk about their language'. It showed that what was considered a peripheral and, indeed, semi-barbaric Greek dialect possessed remarkable poetic powers and could provide a medium for great art.

But here is where the commonality of the two poets is shown to end. While Vassilis Michaelides is a great epic poet, his gifts as an epic poet comparable to those of any great craftsman of the genre, Lipertis is 'a great master of the art of genuine lyricism'.

Kitromilides observes the negligible English cultural influence during British rule, with Cypriot literature becoming one of the main vehicles of resistance to it in the 1950s.

Part two consists of studies on the Cyprus problem which, written mostly in the immediate post-1974 period, have an immediacy that has since been lost. Readers are confronted with the tragically radical impact of the Turkish invasion on the lives of individual Cypriots and on the long-established patterns of island life. 'As of this time of writing', Kitromilides observes in one study, 'the Cypriot refugees are spending their second winter under tents'. Nearly half a century later, the trauma and pain are dulled.

Continuing on the theme of the interaction between internal and external factors, pervading the studies in part one, Kitromilides' first study in part two, 'The dynamics of ethnic conflict in Cyprus', aims to convey 'a sense of the dialectic between endogenous and exogenous forces which constitutes the essence of every political situation'. He stresses that intervention and imperialism in their subtle contemporary forms are possible, to a considerable extent, because domestic conditions in the 'host' country 'provide the needed opportunities'. Citing Fernand Braudel's observation that events of history 'make use of' Mediterranean islands, he sets out to examine *how* outside forces have made use of the ethnic differences within the Cypriot society.

The ethnic geography of the island is described as 'the most eloquent testimony to the pattern of peaceful co-existence' founded on 'a shared folk piety and a common life style conditioned by the agricultural cycle of rural life'. Even the conversion of Christian Cypriots to Islam, motivated essentially by financial need, did not alter the character of traditional rural society. 'Religion became a pretext for conflict', Kitromilides observes, 'only whenever it was politically motivated to that end'.

This, as well as subsequent studies, analyse how the traditional island pattern of peaceful coexistence was eroded by modern politics, urbanisation and education. Kitro-

milides pinpoints the first stirrings of irredentist nationalism, which were codified in an appeal by the Cypriot prelates and lay notables to John Capodistrias, head of state, in newly liberated Greece in 1827, but observes that it began to manifest itself as a political force much later, accelerated by the social and economic modernisation that took place during the British rule. Meanwhile, nationalism as a political force was inevitably facilitated by the British utilisation of communal separatism in political institutions.

Kitromilides emphasises the importance of the sense of dignity and self-respect created within the Greek Cypriot community by the Enotist ideal. He stresses the significance of having a sense of 'identity with a cultural entity much broader than the Ottoman periphery or colonial parochialism in which the Cypriots were trapped'. Considering the relevance of nationalism in the case of Cyprus, Kitromilides underlines the significance of language.

In medieval Cyprus important surviving sources document a separate Greek Cypriot language that could provide a hypothetical basis for a distinct Cypriot 'nation'. This option was aborted by the Ottoman conquest of the island, which integrated the islanders into the broader Orthodox Greek-speaking society under Ottoman rule, the Rum millet. This development taught the Cypriots that they belonged to a wider ethnic community, a fact that was welcomed from the Balkans to Asia Minor because it brought the promise of modernisation and freedom. It supplied 'a cultural system for making sense of historical experience'. Kitromilides notes that it is a grave error to dismiss the Greek language as an artificial, externally imposed or concocted phenomenon within the island.

In the domestic political arena, allowed during British rule, Enotist nationalism was weaponised by the new political forces emerging from lower in the social strata, inducing a more impassioned response from the establishment. The growing demand for Enosis among the Greek Cypriot population could only invoke a greater consciousness of national identity in all communities. Nevertheless, Kitromilides argues, while inter-communal cooperation was encouraged in rural areas by a modern cooperative moment, disagreement over the future national status of the island remained academic during the period preceding the Second World War, which can therefore be described 'by the absence of ethnic conflict'.

A post-war political atmosphere encouraged promotion of the principal of self-determination, which the British government refused to consider. This accelerated extreme nationalism, spiked by fierce competition between left and right on the island. The outbreak of a violent campaign for union with Greece was bound to raise inter-communal tension, although the Greek Cypriots' target remained the British.

Post Second World War, the Turkish Cypriots, increasingly within a Turkish embrace, leaned towards separatism and partition for the first time.

Kitromilides describes this entrenchment of extremism among the Turkish Cypriots—something, he suggests, that the extremist fringes of EOKA, despite repeated attempts, failed to achieve on the Greek Cypriot side— as one of the most exacerbating elements in the ethnic conflict in the twenty years from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s, because it provided one of the major domestic conduits of outside intervention and the distortion of ethnic relations.

The resulting ethnic conflict was not resolved, but frozen by the 1959 settlement. Kitromilides stresses that the constitutional framework of the Republic of Cyprus was designed to accommodate ethnic differences. In subsequent years, any possibility that economic prosperity would result in any form of ‘integrative revolution’ was effectively blocked by the institutionalisation of ethnic dualism in the 1960 Constitution. The author observes that the strong external linkages make domestic politics very vulnerable to foreign influences and international instability. The presence of fully fledged and autonomous social structures in each group may have been responsible for the crystallisation of ethnic polarisation.

Unusually, the author focuses on leadership failures as a major reason for the inability to control the intensity of intercommunal crises in Cyprus. He argues that, especially in the 1956–1958 and 1963–1964 phases, a motivation to control it was absent and the political leaders concerned opted to press for the full achievement of their objectives rather than accept compromise. ‘Nationalism’, he observes, ‘should be guided and instructed, rather than flattered and extended’. He stresses that ‘this suggestion is put forward here as a point of discussion to be resolved by further research’, but adds that ‘the evidence, so far, seems to support this view’.

Moving on to external interference, which he describes as ‘the most catastrophic and exacerbating source of conflict’, Kitromilides stresses the need to understand that it could only be effective by making use of the developing social and political trends within the island. In the case of Cyprus, he pinpoints the very close relationship between the two Cypriot communities and Greece and Turkey respectively as a key factor, because it fortified the intransigence of the communities on the island.

The author describes Cyprus as a classic case of two articulate ethnic communities, a demographic majority and a substantial minority (in a ratio of approximately 4 to 1) having to coexist in a state, with the easy solution of separation precluded from among their choices by the facts of geography, ethnic demography and economic vi-

ability, yet failing to achieve political community and consequently shouldering the appalling costs of conflict, foreign invasion and violence on a large scale.

Kitromilides describes his diagnosis as 'much more a criticism of the past'. Racial discrimination became, in a way, the price of the minority's agreement to participate in the bicomunal partnership of the republic. He highlights the fact that, because it officially preserved traditional ethnic identities, the republic could not capture the emotional allegiances of its subjects and failed to nurture a shared loyalty for the common homeland. The two communities' aspirations, he stresses, continued in conflicting directions.

The respective nationalist legacies of the majority and minority communities which remained intact in the new political structure constituted a powerful ideological factor which pushed the republic in a direction opposite to that of an 'integrative revolution'.

Not surprisingly then, since the 1960s, what the author famously terms as 'the dialectic of intolerance' which divided the two communities, has tended to silence timid voices against communal isolation and antagonism. I should like to conclude with Kitromilides' salient observation that the motivation of political leadership makes all the difference in the achievement of compromise and that this was precisely what the island lacked. The Greeks felt they had sacrificed too much. The Turks feared they had too much to lose. The major channel through which foreign conspiracies were made operational was the lack of motivation on the part of local leadership groups to make the republic work, however difficult this might have been. External interference has been a major factor, but the author makes the important, yet probably unpopular observation that it is dangerous to use it as a scapegoat. Majorities indeed have to respect minorities' sensibilities and act with good will towards them, as the author stresses, but majorities also have their rights.

Kitromilides attributes part of the reason for the failure to resolve this chronologically thorny issue to 'cognitive inadequacies'. He therefore urges all those who aspire to judge and act in the Cyprus Question to educate themselves. He describes his book as 'no more than a chart for the apprentice navigators in a sea with many reefs and shallows'. I would urge all such apprentices and their masters to make use of it.

Diana Markides