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Politics of memory in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus

Summary: This article offers an insight into the present politics of memory practices in the internationally unrecognized Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. The article offers a historical introduction for the purpose to better understand the ethnical conflict and division which characterizes the second half of 20th century on Cyprus. The analysis then focuses on the politics of memory practices, some places of memory and the status of cultural heritage in the unrecognized Turkish entity.

Keywords: Cyprus, Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, politics of memory, cultural heritage

INTRODUCTION

Cyprus is a Mediterranean island which is mostly popular as a tourist destination, but also infamous for its longstanding ethnical conflict and division among Greek and Turkish Cypriots. Most of the visitors can't escape getting acquainted with this conflict, and sometimes being persuaded to sympathize with one side, be it the Greek or Turkish part of the island they visit. Traveling across the island makes an unusual modern-day experience since the southern Greek part, Republic of Cyprus, and the northern part, a self-declared political entity called *Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus* (further in text: TRNC), are divided by the UN's buffer zone – the Green line. A compromise solution on the Cyprus dispute has failed to be achieved for decades, leaving the island and its residents in a continuous status quo.

This article consists of a few major thematic areas. Firstly, a historical introduction presents the important facts which are necessary to understand how the present politics of memory, along with the usage of historical narrative by conflicted sides, gradually developed over time. Secondly, the practical aspects of the present politics of memory in the TRNC are analyzed, starting with nationalistic symbols, places which highlight these symbols, then describing all the relevant elements visible through military presence in the TRNC, and ending the analysis with a review of the cultural heritage's condition. Finally, the TRNC politics of memory is summarized in the conclusion.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Cyprus has been an attractive piece of land in the Mediterranean for centuries. This is still visible today in the island's division, since besides Greece and Turkey, Great Britain also never gave up her interest in the Eastern Mediterranean region by keeping two military bases on Cyprus for herself. In the past however, Cyprus was ruled by the Hittite Empire, Greek colonial settlers, Assyrians, Egyptians, Persians, Alexander the Great, the Roman Empire, the Arabs, Byzantines, French Lusignan dynasty, the Venetian Republic, and then by the Ottoman Empire. The name of the island itself (*Kypros* on Greek, leading to the Latin noun *cuprum*) explains why it was so attractive in the past: Cyprus was known for its big copper resources and trading settlements. The other reason is, of course, its geographically strategic location. The British Empire took advantage of a sensitive historical period when the Ottoman Empire became weak and decadent, to annex Cyprus during the Berlin congress in 1878. They needed the island, so they could easily supervise the Levant region. This historical point however, besides achieving certain Britain's strategic interests in this part of the world, also marks the moment in which the seed of animosities is planted among the Cypriot population.

When Cyprus became an Ottoman land possession in 1571, this was achieved in a rather traditional historical way, 'traditional' in means of a conquest, a siege, or warfare. Since history recording began, it was a common occurrence to witness pieces of land, or even whole regions and provinces being taken away by a foreign ruler's army and remaining as a part of another political entity. Even when a change like this caused dissatisfaction at first, if the land was ruled by a new political entity for long enough, the residents would adopt new cultures and languages, and consequently assimilate. In the past, people were used to gaining new neighbors by warfare, and this especially applies on a place like Cyprus, which faced constant changes of foreign rule in its long history. This explains why extreme animosities among Greek and Turkish Cypriots didn't begin right after the Ottoman conquest of the island, but after the concept of *nations and nationalism* had developed in the 19th century, and the British colonial rule was established (1878). Greek and Turkish Cypriots peacefully coexisted in mixed villages, distinguishing themselves by religion (Orthodox Christian or Islam) for three centuries. It is also important to note that whenever the Ottomans gained new territories through conquest, they would allow pre-

viously present religious communities to continue their practices on the condition they would pay taxes, what is known as their *millet* system. The communities would still often choose converting to Islam, since it would enable them to pay cheaper taxes and apply for state functions. Understanding this system offers an insight on how Greek and Turkish Cypriots managed to coexist in the described way.

As the Greeks became more nationally conscious during the first half of the 19th century, they decided to gain their independence from the Ottoman Empire through war. The Greek War for Independence began in 1821 and ended in 1829. The Greeks received support from the British Empire in this process, partially because they were appreciated for being an antique civilization and the successors of the thousand-year lasting Byzantine Empire (opposing to the conquering Ottomans who symbolized backwardness and corruption), but the real reason laid in the British political interests in this region. These a decade long series of events make the origins of the friendly Greek-British relations and the Greek-Turkish animosity, which lead to hatred among the two neighboring nations during the Greek-Turkish War in the 1920ies. Beside wars, what really charged the Cypriot atmosphere were the methods which the British Crown used to prevent a possible act of rebellion in their important colony. Whenever signs of potential situations which could lead to Cypriot independence occurred, the British authorities would use one ethnic group against the other to transfer the focus from the bigger picture to the local ethnical conflict. For instance, if the Greek Cypriots decided to organize demonstrations, the authorities would send Turkish Cypriot police officers to confront the protesting crowd, and vice versa. If it happened that someone got killed in the protests, be it a Greek killed by a Turkish police officer, or a Turk killed by a Greek police officer, it would create a tense, revengeful atmosphere. By the time these incidents turned into regular occurrences, both Greek and Turkish Cypriots had evolved from coexisting and declaring themselves through religion, to identifying with their mainland nationalities and distancing from each other. Greek Cypriots were being supported by mainland Greeks, and Turkish Cypriots by mainland Turks – the newly founded modern Republic of Turkey led by the strong nationalistic ideology of the first president Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Hence whenever a local conflict on Cyprus would arise, it would part people more, and leave a new portion of mutual resentment. This would also affect raising new generations of children, since they were being taught that the opposite side was the bad side, and that their first neighbors were a cause of trouble. Even though the island itself is big, it became too small for both ethnicities to share.

In the middle of the 20th century it two opposing solution ideas for the Cyprus tensions occurred. The idea of uniting Cyprus with Greece was called *enosis* and it was based on the ideology known in historiography as the *Megali Idea*, which was irredentist and nationalist in its core and stated that all historically Greek areas and regions which belonged to Greece in the ancient period should be established as a Greek state. One of the most famous advocates of *enosis* on Cyprus was Makarios III., the Archbishop of the Cypriot Orthodox church from 1950 to 1977, and the first president of Cyprus. On the other side, the idea of parting the island to Greek

and Turkish portions which was named *taksim*, developed later in the fifties (1957) and was advocated by Fazil Küçük, a Turkish Cypriot leader and vice-president. Greek Cypriots often protested with the intention of achieving their *enosis*, which often caused a lot of violence and casualties. Not reaching much success, they began to use more radical solutions. When Cyprus gained independence from Britain in 1960, the violence continued, this time targeting Turkish Cypriots who were living in isolated enclaves and were exposed to abuse by Greeks. The reason for this abuse can be found in the purpose and hope of creating an ethnically homogenous Greek Cypriot community, which could then join their mother country through *enosis*, without the Turkish inhabitants *staining* it.

There were numerous unsuccessful attempts of calming down the national conflict through diplomacy and dialogue. However, looking at the bigger picture, the Cyprus dispute was a problem which occurred in the middle of the Cold War, and as much as both Greek and Turkish Cypriots wanted to gain more international attention for solving their ethnical conflict in favor of each side, the reality was that none of the big political forces had the will to solve the conflict. To them, the Cyprus conflict was just a small fish in the sea of entire world being threatened by the possibility of nuclear warfare. Even president Lyndon Johnson rudely responded to a Greek ambassador in 1964 telling him that *Greece is a fly, Cyprus is a fly, and if these two flies continue to bother the American elephant, they are not going to have a good time*. Having seen that nothing will solve their problems besides their own actions, in July 1974 the Greek Cypriots organized a military coup with the aim to unite with Greece, to which Turkey responded in just a matter of days by organizing an invasion in the north part of the island so they could protect their fellow Cypriots from further violence. Ethnical violence was repeated, causing many Greek and Turkish Cypriot refugees migrating through the island.

After the Turkish army took over the north part of Cyprus and ceasefire was negotiated, the UN's Buffer zone was established at the borderline which the Turkish forces reached during the invasion. This buffer zone, otherwise known as the Green Line, kept the same shape of the borderline from 1974 until today. The territory which remained under Turkish occupation became a unilaterally self-declared Turkish state in 1983 and continued to administer the northern part of the island as the *Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus*. Since then, four decades have passed in attempts of coming to a potential solution to the dispute. The self-proclaimed TRNC continued to develop in reliance to Turkey, but it is not considered an official state in the international community. Republic of Cyprus, which encompasses the southern two thirds of the island, joined the European Union in 2004, officially joining as the whole island even though EU administration can't apply on the northern part until the Cyprus dispute is finally solved. The brightest point of these decades is probably the 2004 Annan plan for Cyprus, however, it also turned out to be unsuccessful since the Greek Cypriots voted against it – opposing the Turkish Cypriots who voted positively for it, and Great Britain and the US who supported it. Cyprus residents still live divided and seem to accept the circumstances, not actively engaging into searching new peace proposals. They continue their conflict through harsh words, even

throughout social networks, internet, and tourism.

As it is about to be shown, this also transfers into politics of memory on both sides of the island. The analysis in this article sets from Pierre Nora's theoretical stand on the functionality of dominating places of memory. Nora describes these as places of triumphs, imposing places which are mostly forced upon through a top-down approach from authorities and are often characterized as cold and official. The author of this article considers the politics of memory in the TRNC as a good example of using dominating places of memory for political purposes. The used methodology encompasses firstly collecting the photographic materials, experiences and impressions after direct contact with places of memory and cultural heritage in the northern part of Cyprus, and secondly, analyzing and reflecting on them, in hope of presenting the results in a neutral manner.

ANALYSIS OF THE PRESENT POLITICS OF MEMORY

Both Greek and Turkish conflict sides strongly politicize the historical narrative with the purpose of trying to solve the Cyprus dispute in favor of their mother countries. Strong usage of politics of history also transfers to memory culture, and results with strongly developed nationalism on both sides of the island. For a neutral observer, the two contradictory narratives make it very hard to determine who speaks the truth. The Cyprus case in fact shows two conflicted sides bending the truth with the aim of achieving their nationalistic goals, which can especially be noticed when studying their history textbooks. The interpretation of the second half of the 20th century is post-conflict: what the Turkish side views as heroic actions, the Greek side views as aggression, and vice versa. Viewing it like that, both sides rely on their mother countries for approving these interpretations, which are then presented in the international community, hence causing the prolongation of the Cyprus status-quo.

As noted before, the rise of Turkish national conscience began with Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's presidential rule. President Atatürk himself, even though creditable and remembered for transforming the Turks into a modern, western oriented nation, is not in fact an important person for the Cyprus dispute. He died 10th of November 1938, before the outbreak of World War II., decades ago before the Cyprus crisis culminated in the seventies. His portrait is the most common noticeable motive in whole Northern Cyprus. This occurrence mirrors from mainland Turkey where Atatürk's picture presence took the form of respectful tradition, appearing from institutions to common places. Atatürk's picture and bronze statues, along with the paired presence of a Turkish flag with a Northern Cyprus political entity flag, make the most common ethnic symbols present in the TRNC entity. Atatürk's persona and the paired flags are the most important instruments of identifying Turkish Cypriots with mainland Turks. If the self-declared TRNC entity was strong enough to politically represent itself alone, the needed usage of a Turkish flag next to their own probably wouldn't be so necessary. Since the international community and European Union don't recognize the TRNC as a country, in that way only

recognized by Turkey to which it is completely dependent for political and economic support, it is understandable why the paired use of flags is so emphasized. Some examples of this flag overusing include them being installed on streets, roundabouts, common parking lots, being sold as various souvenirs, or postcards. The most 'famous' flags are painted on the back slope of the Kyrenia mountain range, directly facing the divided city of Nicosia. Greek residents of Nicosia view it as a direct provocation, while the Turkish residents view it as a supporting sign. The flags are provocative because of their design and message: one is a red and white colored TRNC entity flag, while the other next to it proclaims a crescent moon with a short sentence in Turkish underneath: *Ne mutlu Türküm diyene* (meaning: *Happy is the one who declares himself a Turk*). A more detailed observation of this uncommon political instrument reveals that a lot of maintenance is needed to it, starting from controlling the vegetation growth so it doesn't cover the colors and renewing the paint, to illuminating it during night. From this observation and comparing it to the condition some older cultural goods in the northern part of Cyprus are found, it can possibly be concluded how the unrecognized entity dedicates more finances for ensuring the desired politics of memory and emphasizing national symbols, rather than investing in the better preservation and presentation of cultural heritage which could enable a better developed touristic strategy.

Another important characteristic of the TRNC entity is military presence. The Turkish military troops which are stationed in North Cyprus number around 40,000 soldiers. Considering that just one third of the island makes up the TRNC, this number may seem large at first, but when the amount of closed military areas and training grounds is counted in, this number doesn't surprise. Foreign visitors can feel the military presence in Northern Cyprus by noticing the barbed wire on fences along the roads, *no camera use* or *no trespassing* warnings on the city streets, *restricted area* panels, occasionally seeing soldiers and military vehicles driving in tows, and notice guardhouses where policemen are on duty in neighborhoods. Turkish locals seem to feel indifferent and used to this aspect of military presence. One of the consequences of this presence is the very low crime rate, reaching only 17% of the European average, which is why Cyprus in general is rated as one of the safer places in the world. Even though that might be considered positive, military presence mostly has negative traits. The example of *Varosha*, a large abandoned neighborhood in Famagusta, shows how some areas are being kept. During the 1974 invasion, the Greek residents of *Varosha* had to flee from their homes, barely taking possessions, and thinking they would return fast, but they haven't returned since. The entrances to this neighborhood are guarded by soldiers, and it still stands in Famagusta completely abandoned for more than four decades. In contradiction to this, a different impression of the Turkish troops is offered at the Naval Martyrs monument in Kyrenia harbor. The neatly furnished monument park displays a panel, whose text praises the fallen soldiers and naval personnel of the 1974 invasion as martyrs and interprets the invasion as the Cyprus Peace Operation. Greek Cypriots consider the same soldiers as aggressors. Considering the two views on this historical event, the impression of too long military presence in the Turkish part for a 'peace operation'

seems hard to avoid.

The matter of cultural goods – their status, preservation, and presentation, is much affected by the events of the past, by nationalism, and by military presence. The TRNC entity offers and uses some bigger cultural goods like castles and ancient sites to promote its tourism, but most of them nevertheless require better care. The Orthodox Christian churches suffered the most. While there are some rare exceptions of well preserved churches in the north, for example the *Agios Mamas* church in Morphou which is now a museum, most of these churches and monasteries lived the fate of becoming abandoned, devastated, vandalized, and time took its toll on them. Some of these are the *Panagia Absinthiostissa* monastery located north of Nicosia, and the early Christian church *Panagia tis Kyras* which is situated in an abandoned field near the village Sazlikoy in Karpas peninsula, Livadia district. The valuable small 12th century church is possibly one of the oldest preserved churches on the island, but it lies in a field closed with a fence, completely forgotten and left to decay. However, one of the most devastated churches and monasteries which can be seen in the whole TRNC are located near the small village of Zyamet on Karpas peninsula, and in Famagusta's old town. The condition of most Orthodox churches and monasteries represents the entity's attitude towards treating old heritage for being of Greek origin, whereas compared to the western standards, the ones with important historical significance would likely be at least basically maintained. Some of the mentioned sacral objects are situated in the proximity of well-maintained mosques. An additional observation on the state of these religious places, along with some former Greek properties and homes, shows that the buildings were left to the influence of time, but were never completely torn down, probably for the purpose to remind of past events and the division. Hopefully the matters of neglected cultural heritage in the north parts of Cyprus will receive more attention when a solid solution to the Cyprus dispute gets achieved.

CONCLUSION

An insight into the politics of memory in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, especially in cases of direct contact like the author experienced, leads to the impression that a strong feeling of national proudness is beyond doubt emphasized through strong ethno-symbolism. For the Turkish Cypriots, it is very important to show the world how they are *Turkish*. They show it the way they chose, through flags, Atatürk, and military presence. The method is possibly such because of the unrecognized status of the TRNC political entity. Nationalism also reveals what this entity perceives as important to collectively remember. That would be the 1974 Cyprus Peace Operation to which the Naval Martyr's monument in Kyrenia is dedicated to, the self-proclamation of the TRNC in 1983, in short, the happenings of the recent past. What is interesting about this choice of collective remembrance is the fact that the Turkish side of the conflict didn't emphasize the whole Turkish history on the island starting from 1571, thus not opting for the same primordial strategy as the Greek side which constantly highlights the antique

colonization. In authors opinion, the present-day politics of memory in the TRNC relies heavily on the 20th century events, and less on the older past. As for the cultural heritage status, many improvements could be made if the politics of memory wouldn't focus so much on nationalism and provocation, as well as on politics of forgetfulness and ignorance in the case of devastated Greek Orthodox heritage. Overall, the author is certain that the experience a visitor could come across in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus is unique and historically interesting.

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