

Cyprus: A Rendezvous with History?

By Andrékos Varnáva
History Department
University of Melbourne

I am a CYPRIOT – unless other Cypriots begin to think this way, there will never be peace in Cyprus! Cyprus is our Homeland!

My Homeland is under occupation by a foreign intruder – Turkey. This foreign intruder imposed its ways and values on my unsuspecting Cypriot brothers – the Cypriot Muslim/Turkish Community. For years they were told that they were Turks. They were told to fight for partition. They were told and forced to leave their homes and form enclaves away from the ‘menacing Greeks’, where Turkish officers from the mainland trained them in combat. Then in 1974, their ‘brethren’ came and they were told that they were ‘liberated’. What they had been taught to desire had finally become a reality. But what happened after ‘liberation’? They found that they were not Turks after-all, but Cypriots. They rebelled against their ‘brethren’ after they encountered them. The liberation became an occupation by foreign intruders, which had different values, different customs, different traditions, and different ways. It made them realise that they are Cypriots. It made them realise that without us, the rest of the Cypriots, they are left with only a usurped identity, imposed upon them by foreigners.

But my community, the Cypriot Orthodox/Greek Community, is also under occupation – ideological occupation. The indoctrination began very soon after Britain occupied the island in 1878. For years, nationalists among them, but primarily foreigners (all non-Cypriots) told the Orthodox Cypriots that they were Greeks. They were told to love another country – a foreign country – simply because of religious ties and similarities in language, and to want to unite with this country. At first, it was a sentimental desire, but then it became an obsession – a very violent obsession. In the 1950s, these nationalist leaders uprooted the Cypriots from their peaceful world and started a guerrilla campaign against the British – not to establish an independent Cypriot state, but to unite the island to a foreign state. In other words, they wanted to replace one foreign master with another. Although this obsession failed in the 1950s, it was not totally abandoned after Cyprus became a republic in 1960. This is not the place to go into the sinister forces in Cyprus during the 1960s and 70s, which divided the Orthodox Cypriots in the name of this obsession. But for arguments sake, let us pretend that this obsession had become a reality instead of or in tandem with the Turkish Cypriot aim, as many diplomats proposed. How would we have coped with an influx of almost a million non-Cypriot Greek colonists to our Homeland? Would we, the Cypriot Orthodox/Greek Community, feel the same as the Cypriot Turks did since 1974?

In the event, when the Turkish army invaded my Homeland in 1974, the Turkish Government said that they had a right to do so – to save the Turks from the Greeks. It was Turks coming to save Turks – not Cypriots, but Turks. Who gave them that right, not legally, but morally to argue that point? Turkey and its people have always felt that Cyprus belonged to them. Greece and its people made their own claim. The latter claimed that their claim was ‘better’. They said that almost 80 percent of the population was consistently ‘Greek’ since the British arrived. They did not like the Turkish claims, but they did not stop to think whether Turkey would like theirs. Neither ‘mother’ country advised their ‘children’ to drop nationalist claims and to live as Cypriots.

When Greeks say that Cyprus belongs to them – when they refer to it as ‘our’ tragic Cyprus – we, the Orthodox Cypriots, say nothing. Why? Why are we so arrogant as to criticise the Turkish-Cypriot nationalists for considering Cyprus to be a Turkish island when many of us still consider Cyprus to be a Greek island? Why are we condescending enough to consider the opposition Cypriot Turks, who oppose the Turkish occupation and reject the Turkish identity imposed on them, as desiring a united Cyprus, when we continue to peddle the line that we are Greeks first and Cypriots second?

Sorry, but Cyprus belongs to us – the Cypriots. And yes, Cypriots have their own distinct cultural and historical identity – it has simply been suppressed by Greek and Turkish nationalists. The Orthodox Cypriot culture, although primarily influenced by Byzantine traditions, also has French, Italian, Arab and especially Turkish influences. As for the Muslim Cypriots, one poet/academic, Mehmet Yashin, has concluded that without the Orthodox Cypriots, the Muslim Cypriots have no identity.

Unfortunately, the Cyprus Government and many of the peoples of both Cypriot communities still do not understand this, continuing to allow the identity of the Cypriots to be invaded and mapped out by foreign nationalist ideologies. The Cyprus Government and the TRNC use the ‘Cyprus Problem’ to indoctrinate the youth with chauvinistic, militaristic and biased propaganda through the education system. Children in Cyprus are taught the nationalist historical narrative that absolves each side of guilt and attributes guilt to the other side. Cyprus has been characterized as bi-dialectal and even diglossic with standard Modern Greek/Modern Turkish as the formal code and the Cypriot dialects as the codes of everyday life. It is worse in schools here in Australia, as Orthodox Cypriots are forced to attend ‘Greek’ schools to learn the ‘civilised’ and ‘purified’ form of ‘their language’. Most parents hold similar views, especially those of the diaspora. The past has not been scrutinised, it has not been reinterpreted or revaluated. History is not only about how the events of the past happened, but about how these events are viewed in the present; after-all, historians can only write history from the prism of the present. Most Orthodox Cypriots have learned nothing from the past, because it does not suit them to learn, but only to remember. We must never forget the events; but if we do not learn from them, then all that has come to pass has happened for nothing. Cypriots have their own unique identity, language, ethics, and traditions, there are various cultural, and historical traditions that make Cypriots different from Greeks and Turks, and unite the two communities as Cypriots. The road to a real solution of the Cyprus problem passes through the elimination of all chauvinistic propaganda fed to the Cypriots and a revaluation of the past events.

In Cyprus, mass rallies on Eleftheria Square to mark the ‘black anniversaries’ of the coup and Turkish invasion were a thing of the past while in Australia they have become ‘traditional’ – even a ‘celebration’. By the 1990s, Cypriot society had matured and outgrown these depressing exhibitions of demagoguery, where politicians fed a diet of meaningless slogans and empty rhetoric to uncritical crowds. Private ceremonies in respect of those who lost their lives in the Athens backed coup and Turkish invasion had replaced rallies. This year, however, all the political parties, except DISY, decided that a rally was in order. It was a return to the era of the hollow words, the defiant posturing and the cynical playing to the gallery. Does this sound familiar? People, many of whom are foreigners, marching down the street holding foreign flags and then gathering to a lavish meal with the high and mighty of high of society! If rallies were such an effective diplomatic and political tool, we would not be holding one 29 years after the invasion to demonstrate our ‘desire for a solution’.

For 29 years this is all that has been expressed by Cypriots, the Cyprus Government and the foreigners – a “desire for a solution”. Few have realised the realities of the Cyprus Problem, and even fewer Cypriots have reevaluated the past and come to terms with the events in a mature way. From a leadership point of view, it has never been publicly explained, what form a solution to the Cyprus Problem would take. Thus, when the Anan plan was unveiled late last year, Orthodox Cypriots in Cyprus and abroad, were, for the most part, aghast at its provisions.

Firstly, few stopped to think that the plan was based on discussions between the Cyprus Government (in power for ten years) and the Turkish-Cypriot leadership. Successive Cyprus Governments are to blame for this, for talking about a ‘solution’ and not about a ‘new Cyprus’. Orthodox Cypriots are under the illusion that ‘things can be as they once were with the Turkish Cypriots, when we all lived in peace’. They do not stop to think that this was never a reality since independence in 1960 and that the events of 1974 has established, for nearly 30 years, a separation of the two communities.

Secondly, barring the provisions contravening international laws, essentially those relating to the return and resettlement of refugees to all parts of Cyprus, the plan was a realistic and fair blueprint for a united Cyprus.

Today we are further away from bringing peace and stability to Cyprus than a year or even six months ago, namely because we have two chauvinistic regimes in Cyprus. I need not go into an analysis of the Rauf Denktaş regime; all that needs to be said about him is that he is at least honest about his chauvinism and insincerity. Recently, President Papadopoulos said in an interview with Turkish journalist Mehmet Ali Birand that if there is no settlement before Cyprus’ accession to the EU next May, there is real danger that the partition of the island would become permanent. This prompted one Cypriot commentator to ask that the church bells be rung and for all Cypriots to celebrate his epiphany. But before the ink had dried on the journalists page, Papadopoulos declared that “accepting the Anan plan as is does not constitute an initiative. On the contrary: it means acceptance of the *fait accompli* of the invasion and occupation.”

This man is supposed to be ‘our’ President. The dreadful loathing at the possibility of a solution inside this ‘Jekyll and Hyde’ personality is now in the open. Last April, Papadopoulos went to The Hague and stated before the UN Secretary-General that he accepted his plan, and that he would not raise any issue concerning its basic provisions. On his return to Cyprus he began backtracking and asking for fresh negotiations on the basic provisions, especially the one concerning the federal council. It is a clear provision that gives the best solution to the rotating presidency problem and it does not contravene UN or EU laws. Only those who allow misguided national pride to interfere in the best interests of the Cypriot people would object to the central government system proposed by the UN. Papadopoulos has effectively accused the UN Secretary-General of wanting to make the invasion and occupation permanent. What an insult!

This arrogance and condescending attitude is illustrated by the practical ‘application’ of the measures to bring about internal trade with the Cypriot Turks. The well-known Cypriot hotel-owner, Constantinos Lordos, personally tested the internal trade measures but got nowhere. “I tried bringing across 10 boxes of tomatoes... I called the Commerce Ministry to inspect them at the checkpoint but they refused, saying they needed access to the fields where they originated. When I asked them to go to the fields, they refused

citing that it was an illegal state.” What a sick joke! Nothing illustrates the government’s self-negating policies towards the Cypriot Turks better than the much-trumpeted decision to promote internal trade. This is what the government policy towards the Turkish Cypriots is about – announcing measures and then finding legal obstacles for not enforcing them. The government is following a foolish and rather anachronistic policy. It is going out of its way to annihilate its integrity and confirm Turkish Cypriot suspicions that it is insincere in its dealings with them. This conclusion is exemplified by the decision taken by Ali Erel, President of the Turkish Cypriot Chamber of Commerce, to not work with the authorities, as he promised to do, in the development of internal trade between the two sides. But why should he when the Greek Cypriot leadership, through its actions and declarations, is openly flaunting its condescending attitude towards the Cypriot Muslims? All this leadership is doing is pushing the Cypriot Turkish opposition into the clutches of Denktash instead of its own. The Greek Cypriot leadership’s measures for the Turkish Cypriots and responses to the 23 April ‘opening of the border’ were made with a cold heart.

Actually how many of these measures have been implemented? Very few. The main initiative, the establishment of an office of Turkish Cypriot affairs and the creation of a committee to oversee its functioning has, three months after it was announced, failed to materialise.

What all this all means is that Rauf Denktash must be pleased with himself. Everybody thought he was finished, but he has come out on top after the daring move of 23 April. His decision to ‘open the borders’ has been considered by commentators as a desperate act and a money-making scheme. While most Greek Cypriots and the Cyprus Government wax lyrical about his motives, as usual they have failed to take the initiative. The 23 April bombshell presented the opportunity for the Cypriots to show that they can live together, in the future in a genuinely independent and united homeland enjoying all basic freedoms and rights, through the principles outlined in the UN charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the EHRC. But it seems that once again Cyprus will be unlucky; it again risks missing its rendezvous with history. This time the Cypriots find themselves led by two anachronistic and fanatical chauvinists, neither of whom desires to bring the Cypriots together.

The time has come to stop speaking of nationalisms and to recognise that the most significant denominator in a state’s identity is its people’s homeland.

The past is theirs the future is ours – those of us who love Cyprus.

Cyprus is full of graves marked with cross and crescent. The time has come for the Cypriots together to honour those that died, to take flowers to their resting places. The time has come to stop making heroic speeches over their graves, but to ask for their forgiveness.

What a joy it is to say I am a Cypriot!

avarnava@pgrad.unimelb.edu.au



Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

Author/s:

Varnava, Andrekos

Title:

Cyprus: a rendezvous with history?

Date:

2003-08

Citation:

Varnava, A. Cyprus: A rendezvous with history? (2003, August). Neos Kosmos English Edition.

Publication Status:

Published

Persistent Link:

<http://hdl.handle.net/11343/34267>