

University Seminar #703: Modern Greek Studies

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Speakers: Dimitris Papadimitriou and Argyris Mamarelis

Topic: "The Last Ottomans: Passivity and resistance within the Muslim community of Western Thrace during the 1940s"

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Summary of presentation:

Thrace in the 1940s, during the Bulgarian occupation of Northern Greece and the subsequent Greek Civil War, provided the perfect context for minority populations to get involved in surrounding conflict. The area changed hands on a number of occasions from the 1870s to 1923; by the early 1940s the Lausanne treaty had been signed only twenty years before. Western Thrace was an ethnic mosaic, with a Muslim minority that numbered over 100,000 people, as well as Armenian, Jewish, Pomak, and Roma populations. The geography of the Rodopi mountains meant that it would have been easy for a guerilla movement to develop there, while we see a pattern of other minority groups getting involved in conflict elsewhere in Greece. During World War Two Turkey did not really choose a camp, both sides were trying to entice it into the alliance. All these things suggest the possibility for a conflict in Western Thrace.

What you get, however, is passivity: the minority doesn't get involved in resistance but also doesn't take the side of the Bulgarian occupiers. Again, during the Civil War, it doesn't get involved on either side. This fact was very interesting to Papadimitriou and Mamarelis, who were faced with the problem that is normally very difficult to explain: why something didn't happen, rather than why things did happen. What they presented during their discussion was thus a number of questions, and their attempts at answering or expanding on some of them. At an international level, why didn't Turkey play the Thrace card in order to promote its strategic interest in the region? On the domestic level, why did Western Thrace not become a significant theater of resistance? Why was there not a significant Western Thracian front during the Civil War? At the local level, what accounts for the weakness of ELAS and the DSE in Western Thrace? Why did the minority remain neutral?

There are many accounts of the 1940s in Greece but very few about Western Thrace specifically, apart from a handful of memoirs by local guerillas and two books of scholarly work, though neither contains much on the minority populations. Papadimitriou and Mamarelis thus had to depend on other sources: they made use of over 24 national and local archives, including ones in the Greek Foreign Ministry and the Turkish Republican and Ottoman Archives, where access is very difficult to obtain. They also made some use of the Bulgarian state central archives; no one on the team spoke Bulgarian but they had assistance from local contacts who accessed and translated

material for them. They also looked at the US National Archives and the UK Public Records Office, as well as local newspapers and propaganda material, including Greek Communist propagandist material released in Turkish. They conducted nearly 100 interviews in both Greece and Turkey, of minority members as well as Greek resistance fighters. Their research was limited, they noted, by their not looking into the German archives, and not being able to conduct interviews with Bulgarian refugees.

Papadimitriou began outlining their material by setting up the differences between the groups of the day, including the Bulgarian-speaking Muslim Pomaks in the mountains and the Turkish-speaking Muslims who identified as Turks in the lowlands; the Roma community was fairly isolated, as its members were not considered equals by the other Muslim subgroups. These groups coexisted peacefully, and alongside the Jews as well; however, they lived separately, and tended not to intermarry. Another important cleavage to recognize is between the Islamic traditionalists and the Kemalist modernizers, between which there were conflicts over education, over the use of the Arabic alphabet, the wearing of the fez, and so on. By the late 1930s the Kemalists were on the rise, but not dominant, and the conflict between them remains in place. Papadimitriou noted another distinction between the mountain communities and the communities in the foothills and in the cities, and pointed out that at this time there is only very basic infrastructure in the region, which kept interaction between these communities at a minimum and thus impacted on the ability of the minority to develop a single identity. In terms of political orientation, historically the minority voted for pro-Venezelist candidates, and more moderate ones at that (although this pattern had changed by the mid 1930s).

In terms of their findings with regard to international relations, during the 1930s the relations between Greece and Turkey were fairly good. The Greek government exiled some of the Islamic intellectuals who had settled in Thrace after 1923, which improved relations and strengthened the positions of the Kemalists in the area. During World War II Turkey adopted the policy of “active neutrality”; it didn’t want to alienate Russia and the Allies, but it also didn’t want to alienate the Axis, since it was worried about the Bulgarian front. This affected its ability to speak as the protector of the Muslim community in Thrace. During the Greek Civil War, Turkey didn’t want to see Greece fall under the Communist sphere of influence, so it supported the government in Athens. Only at the end of the 1940s when it becomes clear that the government is consolidating its power is there a more assertive discourse on minority rights on the part of Turkey.

During the Belomorje period of 1941-44, the main subjects of Bulgarian violence are the Pomaks, who speak Bulgarian but are committed Muslims. The Turkish community, however, is allowed to continue its education in Turkish. The Bulgarian regime during that time does not succeed in co-opting any of the minority groups in the region; it cannot find substantial local support. In terms of economic conditions, the Greeks in the lowlands suffered a lot; the Turks did not suffer quite as much, since many of them had possession of Turkish liras, and the lira was a hard currency during that time. The Pomaks were the only real victims of famine, because their trading patterns were disrupted.

In terms of resistance activity, we see little Muslim involvement. The Greek resistance was very weak in Xanthi and Komotini, and they do not try very hard to penetrate the minority, even though the resistance (and KKE before it) had talked a lot about the Slavic minority in Macedonia. In the case of the Muslim community, however, no significant policies were developed to back up whatever rhetoric was employed. During the course of the Bulgarian occupation a large percentage of the minority population try to cross over into Turkey, though Turkey preferred it to stay there so its claim on the region would be stronger. A great number of people died trying to cross the Evros river. We think about 10,000-12,000 Turks and Pomaks used this “exit strategy” during the period of 1941-44.

During the Civil War, patterns of territorial control become important: the highlands are under the control of the Democratic Army of Greece (DSE), while the villages and towns in the lowlands are controlled by the government. By the end of 1947, DSE officials envisaged the creation of an Ottoman Battalion with 500 Pomaks and Turks, recruited by Captain Kemal, who was brought from Bulgaria to lead this battalion. The results of his recruiting were very poor, until the DSE imposed compulsory recruitment which was done in villages controlled by the DSE, and also involved abductions from the villages and towns in the lowlands. However, the whole project eventually proved short-lived, and most of the recruited soldiers deserted.

If the minority did not relate very well with the communists, its relations with the Greek government were also unusual: the two shared an anti-communist agenda, but the minority didn't feel that the Greek Civil War was “their” war; there were widespread Muslim desertions from the Greek army, and many people tried to escape Thrace so they wouldn't have to go to the army. In the middle of the war the government decided to suspend conscription of Muslim men, while there were also very few court-martials of Muslims in the area. During the course of the Greek Civil War there are significant population shifts in the area: a large number of Pomaks leave the mountains and settle in the cities in the lowlands, such as Xanthi and Komotini. A substantial number also decide to leave, and flee to Turkey; Greek officials turn a blind eye to this exodus. Of the 18,000 who left, half or less than half returned.

In conclusion, Papadimitriou asserted that it makes more sense to talk about different communities than a single Muslim community, since there are many ethnic, geographical, religious, and class cleavages, which undermined single leadership and the articulation of a common interest between these groups. In terms of the relationship of the minority to the warring parties in Greece, their research found that the KKE didn't try very hard to penetrate the minority, which was rather puzzling considering its per-war rhetoric. There certainly was an attempt to disseminate communist propaganda, but it was written in modern Turkish, speaking against the class structures that were so important to the Ottoman and Muslim traditionalists they were trying to recruit. The government also found it difficult to relate to this minority, as discussed above.

Papadimitriou ended with talking about the relations between what was happening in the 1940s and what is happening today, where we have very different notions of self-identity.

For instance, the distinction between Pomaks and Turks was far more important than it is today. Given this peaceful coexistence of a diverse group of minority populations, he suggested that it was possible to call these groups the “last Ottomans,” which the presenters have used as the title of the book arising from this research.

Summary of discussion:

Q: I have two questions. One, it is wrong to say that this adds up to a simple statement that these communities were profoundly not integrated? Also, there’s a much larger population in Bulgaria; have you researched where they stood and how they behaved through this period?

A: On the first point, absolutely. The interesting question here is, if they were isolated and had accumulated frustrations since Lausanne and so on, why didn’t they try to do something else? Why didn’t they try to leave, for instance, or pressure Turkey more to speak for them?

Q: Isolated is different than unintegrated.

A: So you’re talking about what resources they might have had to do something else?

Q: But they might not have needed to engage.

Q: This is the fundamental characteristic of minorities, they don’t fight the wars of the hegemonic power. The Macedonians were not a minority, these are very different paradigms. The Chams were not a minority ever, they just found themselves there. Whereas the Turkish and Pomak minority is a very special case.

A: It’s also worth recording that in the 1940s there would still be people alive who would remember the minority being a majority, since it was a mere 20 years earlier. These people were a clear majority in the area and within 30 years they saw a lot of things changing around them. It is plausible to say they would be pretty angry, they suffered discrimination, property loss. And yet they don’t do much. And perhaps they couldn’t do a lot without some kind of external help, someone taking up their cause. But this still doesn’t explain why they didn’t try to resist either the communists or the government or the Bulgarians in their local community. People could micro-resist in their areas, but they don’t do that. That’s as much as I can think of here—it’s part of the answer but not the whole one. On the issue of the Pomaks and the Turks in Bulgaria, we haven’t done a very good job there. From what we found we didn’t find much migration to the north, most Pomak migration in the 1940s is to the south, to the lowlands or to Turkey. We asked locals if there was interaction between the communities on either side of the border; we expected the border to be very porous, but we were told it was not. I’m not sure I fully believe this, I think there are still things to find out. The two Pomak communities did interact in the 1880s, and the idea that that border became impenetrable is a bit problematic, though the Metaxas dictatorship did create a major fortification in the area that could have stopped this interaction.

Q: Two years ago we had some visiting academics who showed a documentary on the Pomaks and we saw their locals claiming that there was no penetration during the war.

Q: Willie Snow Ethridge came in 1947 and went through the Pomak villages into Bulgaria and he says the Pomaks were telling her that they felt trapped, that they could not cross over to Bulgaria.

A: We don't know what the Pomaks of Bulgaria did during that time, they were probably conscripted into the Bulgarian army.

Q: But you've already given us a possible answer, that the Bulgarians saw the Pomaks as lapsed Bulgarians, so they might not have felt wanted there.

Q: In my research, the Orthodox community in Istanbul and the Armenians also called themselves the "last Ottomans," so I guess you could say those minorities on both sides are the last Ottomans. I was also interested in how you looked at ethnic variation within the communities, but don't you think this is also the state of the demographic variety of the time? Maybe it was in fact the Lausanne regime that invented all Greeks as Orthodox and all Turks as Muslims. Also, in the 1940s and 50s there were members of Parliament in Turkey who were members of the Rum Orthodox community; I wonder if there were members of Parliament who were from the minority community.

A: Part of the reason the minority community doesn't opt for more radical strategies is precisely because the Lausanne regime has given them a voice, as a recognized minority. And they did have members of parliament. In some elections, the minority was given a set number of MPs and there were Muslim-only lists that contested that election, whose political makeup had very little relevance to national politics. In others, they are integrated, and there is some sort of basic affiliation with national parties, but they never become fully integrated. Normally the minority would vote for the candidate most likely to win, since they wanted to have a good relationship with the party in power. On the issue of their being the last Ottomans, the difference between the Muslims in Thrace and the Muslims in Bosnia is that the Bosnian Muslims intermarried with other communities, whereas in Thrace you don't get that. In Thrace marriage happens exclusively within one's religious group and even in the immediate locality. The fact that they don't intermarry—does that make them more Ottomans or less?

Q: It depends how you define Ottomans. There was a lot of local variation. But when I hear that term I think of the last of the elite, as a foil to the national reality.

Q: Or Ottoman as anti-national.

A: Under the umbrella of Lausanne they followed specific patterns of political socialization: they learned to give their battles through parliament, the local MP, and were not used to revolutionary means. It's important that they were represented in that manner.

Q: According to Hidioglou, the last Islamicizations of villages took place in the 1908 or so. I wonder if these late Islamicizations affected some of the locals, and contributed to the weakness of ethnic alliances. The question also is, again, why didn't Turkey play the Thrace card, especially when we recently have seen them playing the Mytilini card in talks with Britain.

A: I don't have an answer to that first question. For the second, it is possibly that Turkey's political elites regarded Western Thrace as a bastion of traditionalists, and thus it was more trouble than it was worth to destabilize Greek authority there, since it might also have benefitted Bulgaria, and that might not have been better for Turkey than the status quo. Also the border by the Evros was occupied not by the Bulgarians but by the Germans. Oddly, none of the Roma people there were persecuted, and we have no idea why not, though a look into the German archives might help.

Q: What I really appreciated about how you presented this material was that you gave us a sense of a four-year journey in your research, from beginning to end, with the questions or doubts you began with and the conclusions you reached. You got to the end when you came up with this title, but it's a different place than where you began. My question is, at some level you asked why did they not do this, but when you get to the end, you're saying that *not* doing something is actually doing something, it's being the last Ottomans. And yet the language you use is of passivity, and that seems like you're not doing adequate justice to the ending, which raises issues of neutrality, rather than passivity.

A: I have two answers to this. First of all, when we applied for funding, the title was *The Enemy that Never Was*, because we thought that this would probably describe the situation better. Subsequently, we thought perhaps that was too loaded, using the word enemy there. Having gone through the evidence, we thought the term "Ottoman" says a lot about how some of these people would have felt and points to the impossibility of managing a premodern self-identification with three very aggressive nationalist paradigms, and a situation where perhaps the most reasonable thing to do is to freeze and become passive. I don't like the term neutral, because it seems to indicate that they had it good and remained neutral in order to stay out. This somehow implies they were more strategic than they were. The truth is that these people suffer but they were unable to react.

Q: I'm wondering about class, and how an economic approach might answer some of your unanswered questions. I would like to know at least what kind of work the Muslims in the lowlands did, many possibly worked in tobacco fields?

A: Not in the lowlands. Much of the tobacco growing took place in the foot of the mountains, with predominantly Turkish workers and in some cases Greek. If you go further up people get involved in subsistence farming or logging. In the plains normally the big plots would be owned by rich Turkish owners, who might have lost some of that land during the population exchange but still retained quite a bit. Many left for Turkey during the occupation or the Civil War: those who could exit respectably did. There is

local evidence that a lot of people were selling out cheaply and the Greek government was encouraging 'reliable Greeks' to buy these plots.

Q: The tobacco fields in Macedonia were heavily unionized, through the KKE. Is that the case also in Thrace, and if so why did that not translate into them being involved in ELAS during the war?

A: There is extremely limited contact between the KKE and local Muslims.

Q: But there was a Pomak on Makronisos.

A: Not just one, there are many cases. However, before the war there is no evidence of significant Communist infiltration in the Muslim population. Remember that the unionized jobs in the tobacco industry were in processing, not cultivation. The agricultural workers in the fields were not unionized. Unions were strong mainly in the towns.

Q: I had a question about the personal interviews you did. You said it was hard to find people who weren't suspicious of you. Can you talk about who those 100 people were?

A: We did as many interviews with Greek resistance fighters as we could. However, there were not very large resistance organizations in the area. We talked to about 10 or 15 resistance fighters. We also did interviews with Pomaks and Turks and Roma. Astonishingly, in a Roma camp outside Komotini we found old women of 102 or 105 years old, in an area where life expectancy is below 60. We also had the chance to interview Captain Kemal himself. After we had become more familiar with the area we did interviews in coffee shops, such as in Ehinis, which is now considered the stronghold of Turkish nationalism. We did interviews with people who fought in the army, also with people in Turkey who had fled Greece and settled there during the war. As we said, there was a gap in our approach to Bulgarian refugees: they're an important part of the story which is not as well represented in the book. For that side of the story we relied more heavily on archival material.

Q: Do you have any sense of what the treatment of the minority was by the Bulgarians during the war? Since there are Pomaks in both places, how were the Pomaks treated in Bulgaria?

A: There is an interesting difference between what the Bulgarians did in Thrace in late 1910s (when Bulgaria was in control of the area and during which time there was a lot of brutality against the Pomaks) and during World War Two. In the 1940s there is a different approach, it is part of a wider strategy, not to antagonize them but to modernize them. We found documents of the Bulgarian education ministry which instructs teachers to befriend local girls and try to get them to be more active; there's a paternalistic strategy that sees the minority as needing modernization. We have a very sketchy picture about educational provision during that period, in some cases schools closed, in other

cases they didn't. A lot of the schools in Western Thrace had just a few students, and it was a big effort to get the locals to send their kids to school.

Q: Do you have any information about the relation between the Pomak and Turkish minority and the Asia Minor refugees?

A: I don't think we have anything specific. The Turkish-speaking Pontians who settled in Drama seemed to relate quite well with the minority (some Muslims joined EAO). It is also worth remembering that the majority of Greek-speaking refugees who arrived in Western Thrace in 1920s came from Eastern Thrace. During that period there is no major outburst of violence between the minority and the refugees. That said, the expropriation of Muslim property by the Greek authorities caused many difficulties locally.

Q: Though there is a large contingent of left-wing Asia Minor refugees in the area.

Q: In trying to place the term passivity in a relative context, if we had this attitude toward the forces of occupation in Epirus or the Peloponnese or Crete then I would understand it as something very striking, since there you have very strong resistance. But how strong is the Greek resistance in Thrace? I think we need that as a baseline, so we can understand how striking the difference is or is not between the minority and the Greeks.

A: In Evros, resistance activity was very strong, in Komotini it was not. The communist officials were arrested (or killed ) at a very early stage (Doxato), so much of the early resistance activity later died out..

Q: But the Greeks who don't collaborate leave, they go to eastern Macedonia. The leadership is expelled, particularly the church leadership, and then some fled. In the effort to Bulgarianize the population in 1941, they viewed the church leadership as a potential threat to this effort.

A: The fact that the Orthodox Greeks did not resist that much, does not necessarily mean that the Muslims could not have resisted either. First of all, they knew far more about the territory than the Greeks ever did. They had this resource that they could have exploited. Also, they suffered much more than the Greeks. To assume that they could only become active if the Greeks were active, would be wrong.

Q: What about inaction? You're making it sound like it was a choice on their part, but then you're calling it passivity.

A: To my mind the term passivity sounds better. I don't think that passivity implies a choice. It is perhaps the most accurate description of their reaction

Q: You entertain the possibility of local resistance, but it's hard to image in what that would amount to in such cut-off populations.

A: When Greek resistance groups came to their area, the local Muslim population gave them supplies but told them not to take action against the Bulgarians near their villages so they wouldn't suffer retaliation later on. Some did protect their villages in militias, but they did not want to join anything that would force them to move outside of the village itself. Many local Muslim fighters wanted to return to their homes at night. Many also did not wear uniforms.

Q: Which is an interesting example of *activity* on their part: they were protecting.

Q: In doing this study and in working in Western Thrace and among the minority, how have you become conscious of the field or of the nature of scholarship generally concerning the minority?

A: I think that there are many interesting conclusions one can draw from the study. The first is not to assume that this community was always some sort of fifth column for Greece. One of the reasons I was so interested in this was to show that when they had their best chance to harm Greece they didn't do it. If you want to see why these people became so disenfranchised from the Greek government you have to see this. Also I wanted to reflect on what point did they become an enemy for the Greek government. I think that the identification of the minority as enemy within is a by-product of the tension over Cyprus in the mid 1950s. We also need to remember that Greece sees them as a threat through a nationalist prism, Turkey sees them as brothers through a nationalist prism, but the story is actually of a community that is really uncomfortable with these modern identities.