Elusive Wounds

A problematised snapshot of the *brava gente* myth: ‘good’ Italian and ‘bad’ German occupiers in Greece (1941-44)

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*Captain Corelli’s Mandolin; Mediterraneo:* these are the stereotypical representations of the international and often Greek impression of the Italian occupation of Greece between 1941 and 1943. And now, *A Song for Argyris* – the documentary about the 1944 German massacre at Distomo – can be found on the shelves of your local Athenian video club. The stereotype is publicly repeated again and again: the Italians were ‘good people’; the Germans, bad. Simple, straightforward; and complete nonsense, if what makes the Italians ‘good’ is that they only burnt to the ground 500 Greek villages compared to the German total of 1,000. It is therefore a welcome relief that the new movement within Italian historiography spearheaded by historians like Filippo Focardi, Davide Rodogno and Lidia Santarelli is gathering momentum and the full story of the Italian occupation and the war crimes committed in Greece, Yugoslavia and Ethiopia is surfacing once more. Hagen Fleischer’s latest and forthcoming publications on public memory and war crimes means that Greek historiography is catching up with these developments but the seminal works on the Occupation (all written during the 1980s and 1990s and gathering obsolescence) reproduce the myth of Italian moderation. It’s worthwhile stressing, therefore, that this wasn’t always the interpretation. In 1946, what the Italian Army had done to Greece was considered criminal. The National Hellenic Office for War Criminals condemned the Italian annexation of Greek territory, the resultant famine in the provinces and numerous acts of torture and massacres in villages such as Domeniko in northern Greece. The Office for War Criminals writes, in fact, that the:

‘destructive mania of the Italians...did not differ at all from the German hordes that succeeded them in September 1943. Domenico, in effect, was nothing but the curtain rise of a tragedy that would continue at an ever faster pace’. What the Italians did in Greece was barely less savage than German actions; the difference, if any, was quantity. There was no Greek attempt to exculpate the Italians from their crimes in 1946 when the Paris Peace Treaty (concluding the Second World War) was being drafted. And

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2. *A Song for Argyris*, dir. Stefan Haupt (Fontana Film, 2006).
yet these wounds inflicted on the collective body of Greece somehow disappeared from the mainstream narrative, whereas, even today, no one has forgotten the German massacre at Kalavryta in December 1943. And not just that, in addition to the film, plaintiffs from the town of Distomo, then fighting a 13-year-old legal suit for German reparations, took their case and won the support of Italian courts! Where are the elusive Italian wounds? In the limited time that I have I would like to explore some of the crucial issues surrounding this question and hopefully engage your own analytical powers in trying to find an answer.

If the Greek government clearly recognised Italian crimes, how did the myth of the brava gente come about? Well, its provenance wasn’t Greek; it was made in Italy, quite deliberately. From the summer of 1944, before the war was even over and following the rapes in Italy by the invading French Army (the so-called marocchine), the Italian Ministry for Foreign Affairs cunningly compiled a dossier of atrocities suffered by Italians that could be used in the future (and I quote):

‘when it will be necessary to respond concretely to the recurring accusations of violence committed by our soldiers or [to] eventual designations of war criminals’.6

As the Paris Peace Treaty was being drafted, Italy lambasted the ‘Italian Holocaust’: the displacement of some 350,000 Italians living in Istria and Dalmatia and the murder of 5,000-15,000 who were thrown into bottomless chasms (the Foibe).7 The fervently nationalistic political climate encouraged Italian generals, like Mario Roatta, to publish memoirs countering the accusations of war crimes:

‘Italians as war criminals? At most one can admit to soldiers stealing a few chickens (or pigs) during battle without the knowledge of their superiors’.8

A ridiculous claim, offensive to those who had endured poisoned gas in Africa or the string of concentration camps in the Balkans. The problem was that none of this equated to Auschwitz. Read Jonathan Steinberg’s work and you’ll be thrown into a well-documented – and quasi-Hollywood account – of the Italian occupation authorities ‘conspiring’ to rescue the Jews from the Germans.9 Davide Rodogno would argue that this Italian benevolence was really a defence of ‘Fascism’s imaginary domaine reservé’ and that the Jews were guarded as bargaining chips.10 Irrespectively, it was indisputable, even by the Office for War Criminals, that the Italians (I quote) ‘did not organise the systematic persecution of Israelites in Greece which only stigmatised the Germans’.11 The Italians did have some ground on which to claim that they were ‘good people’, and they abused it wholeheartedly; as did the Austrians who hid their active complicity in the Final Solution to the Jewish Question behind the 1938 German ‘invasion’ which supposedly made them ‘Hitler’s first victim’.12 Where the hollow brava gente myth was fabricated is now obvious, but why should it take hold in Greece?

Perhaps the Greeks simply forgot what the Italians had done? That’s one possibility which emanates from Ioanna Tsatsou’s diary entry of 25 September 1943 (a few weeks after the Italian capitulation). She writes that:

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10 Rodogno, Fascism’s European Empire, p.363-4.
12 Φλάισερ, Πόλεμοι της Μνήμης, p.58.
‘the Greeks forgot their Italian ordeals; they opened their doors to them, hid them, took care of them. Now the common, primary enemy are the Germans’. Indeed, for the last year of the Occupation, from September 1943 to October 1944, the Germans were the visible face of occupation. What Tsatsou and her fellow Athenians endured might have been enough to bury memories of Italians under the more recent German ordeal. Athens didn’t suffer from the Italians in the same way that Domeniko did. 115 men from Domeniko were executed and the whole village was looted and burnt to the ground. Comparable round-ups in Athens were perpetrated by the Germans and with smaller loss of life. But there are memorials in Domeniko’s town square, so clearly its inhabitants haven’t forgotten about Italian war crimes; their memory is set in stone in the physical landscape.

Perhaps the Greeks didn’t actually forget Italian war crimes but managed to put them behind them – they forgave them – so Italian wounds would have healed whilst German wounds festered. But why would there have been a selective forgiveness when we know that there was great similarity between Italian and German actions? A hypothesis arises from the diary entries of Giorgos Theotokas:

‘Even though, for two years now, the whole populace was plotting against the Italians and threatening that once they left they would sort them out, suddenly, as soon as they saw them fallen, they felt sorry for them. No one was harmed; in fact [the Italians] have been helped in every way. It’s as if, once weapons were laid down and the belligerent atmosphere between them and us dissipated, there rose to the surface some hidden solidarity with the “people who resemble us”’. Theotokas suggests that there was an instinctive forgiveness for the Italians born of cultural proximity. Some weeks later – still September 1943 – he expands on this idea. His ‘conclusion on the double occupation’ was the now clichéd dichotomy that the harshness of the Germans was the product of their cold, mechanical nature; whereas the Italians could exhibit greater humanity and warmth towards individual Greeks. Even the Office for War Criminals had discerned two distinctly different natures in their occupiers:

‘if the Italians, by way of their exuberant Mediterranean nature, were capable of a very great individual cruelty in the heat of the moment…they possessed to a lesser degree than the Germans this science of organised barbarity: the methodically-perpetrated crime with imperturbable apathy in cold blood...The Italians remained less organised, less diligent, more frivolous and more superficial than their Teutonic allies when it came to their policy of subjugation’.

There was something less fearsome, more approachable in the Italians. Whatever their differences though, the Office concluded, they were ‘both...criminals. Without doubt’. Would the Italian humanity, however, make others, not charged with the prosecution of war criminals, more prone to forgive? Intuitively, the problem with the forgiveness hypothesis if based on cultural proximity is how foreigners could be forgiven so easily when forgiveness for the war behaviour of fellow compatriots proved so hard during Greece’s Civil War in the late 1940s and

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14 ONHCG, Atrocités des Quatre Envahisseurs, p.106-7.
15 Eg. 1 May 1944, Καποδιστριά, Αθήνα: 200 hostages; 7 August 1944, Βόρονας, Αθήνα: 14 executed, 300 sent to Germany; 17 August 1944, Κοκκινιά, Αθήνα: 90 executed.
17 Ibid.
18 ONHCG, Atrocités des Quatre Envahisseurs, p.82-3, n.1.
19 Ibid.
even the former Yugoslavia’s in the early 1990s.20 If we believe in the human capacity to forgive, we shouldn’t underestimate the longevity of hatred. Theory aside, if the Italians had been forgiven in 1943, why was the state attempting to prosecute them in 1946? And if the British Foreign Office is to be believed, then in Athens, at the end of 1948, a ‘Greco-German honeymoon [was] in full swing’ too.21

As tempting as the cultural proximity hypothesis might appear, it has problems, especially because, whatever the cultural similarities Greeks could spot, even before the construction of the brava gente myth, Greece and Italy had been at loggerheads for decades. The Office for War Criminals itself stated that the Greeks were predisposed to hostility towards the Italians.22 We all know about the 1940-41 Greco-Italian war in Albania and how it was preceded by the sinking of the Elli on 15 August 1940 which the Office declared showed more ‘sacrilegious perfidy’ than Pearl Harbour.23 But what about the 1935 war that never was? Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia led to panic within the Greek military in October 1935. Cognizant of the role that Italy had played in their Asia Minor catastrophe in 1922 and Mussolini’s gunboat policy in Corfu in 1923, they foresaw a war with Italy and agreed to a 6.1 billion drachma rearmament plan.24 The war materiel would come from Germany with whom Greece had close cultural links, a flourishing tobacco trade and, at that time, a large credit surplus. So it is very strange that in 1953, King Paul proclaimed to a forum in New York that with Italy ‘a sister Mediterranean nation, our former bonds of friendship have been restored, and this is a source of joy to us’.25 This must have been pure rhetoric because friendship with Italy was skin-deep in the 1930s; and yet, Paul did not mention any friendship with Germany at all, despite the fact that prime ministers Alexandros Papagos and Konrad Adenauer would be making state visits to Bonn and Athens, respectively, within a few months of his speech. By 1953, there is a clear reversal in Greece’s relationship with Italy and Germany.

So (to recap), we know that the Italian-made brava gente myth took hold in Greece even though the Italians were regarded with hostility before the Second World War and they perpetrated crimes during it, crimes that were remembered by the victims and the government afterwards. Nevertheless, there seems to have been a reconciliation with the Italians on the part of Athens at some point before 1953, something that hadn’t happened with the Germans yet, even just officially, even just rhetorically. How come? I can only speculate, but, instead of a conclusion, I’d like to advance a hypothesis for what might have happened.

As Greece entered the Cold War era, the geopolitical references changed, and so did the definition of the national enemy from ‘Italians’ and ‘Germans’ to ‘communists’, and

21 As quoted by Fleischer, Πολεμοι της Μνήμης, p.510.
22 ONHCG, Atrocités des Quatre Envahisseurs, p.79.
23 Ibid.
communists became the courts’ target more than war criminals (domestic or foreign). That might explain Greece’s post-war rapprochement with both Italy and Germany; but it doesn’t explain why the Italians became ‘good’ occupiers and the Germans ‘bad’. That answer probably lies in something that happened in the late 1940s with Italy which didn’t happen with Germany. That must be the peace treaty. By the end of 1947, Greece had gained the Dodecanese and reparations in kind worth $105,000,000 from Italy. This meant that Greece would make her peace with Italy – quite literally – before Germany even began to regain her sovereignty (1949); but since these reparations totalled barely 0.6% of the $17.8 billion initially requested by the Greek government, it also meant that Germany had to be pressurised into paying the difference.\footnote{Dimitrios K. Apostolopoulos, ‘Greece and Germany in Postwar Europe: The Way towards Reconciliation’ in \textit{Journal of Modern Greek Studies}, vol.21 (2003), p.228.} The \textit{brava gente} myth, concocted by the Italians to minimise their liabilities could now be used quite deliberately by the Greek government to pressurise Germany into plugging Greece’s economic hole notwithstanding the 1953 London Treaty which postponed reparations until a ‘final settlement’ (interpreted as Germany’s reunification).\footnote{Ibid.} The adoption of the myth by Athens might have been a shrewd piece of diplomacy, if a callous dismissal of all that the Italians’ victims had suffered. But then moral satisfaction was pretty much irrelevant to government policy, as shown by the release of infamous war criminal Maximilien Merten in 1959 after a brief incarceration. At the risk of upsetting the new Cold War alliance, it must have seemed more worthwhile to exculpate Italy’s war criminals in order to press Germany with greater comparative guilt into paying reparations, in the same way that German war criminals were swapped with loans, increased trade, international support and even a trickle of small reparations or aid in lieu.\footnote{Reparations of DM 115 million were received in 1960 which at a rate of DM 4.2: $1 translated into $27.4 million.} The \textit{brava gente} myth, I think, was never revised because German reparations were never finalised. Alongside the hope of money, the myth just lingered for decades as the dominant narrative, long enough to seep into the heritage of those who had no counter-memories. Thus we keep hearing the refrain of \textit{Captain Corelli's Mandolin} whilst a village called Domeniko lives silently with its memories.

And so we return to where we started: perhaps without an answer but hopefully with something to think about.