

Cultural trauma as effect of the genocide of the Pontic Greeks and its transgenerational transmission

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Abstract

My ongoing thesis focuses on the cultural trauma experienced by the Pontic Greeks as a result of the genocide perpetrated by Mustafa Kemal and the Young Turks in the region of Black Sea between 1914 and 1923. The research examines how Pontic Greeks survivors of the genocide, who settled in Greece after 1922, processed this trauma and whether it has been transmitted to subsequent generations in Pontic Greek community. Specifically, it investigates the revival and reconstruction of cultural trauma through memory and mnemonic practices among descendants. The study relies on Jeffrey Alexander's theory of cultural trauma, responding to the void of research on Pontic Greeks within this context, despite the existence of extensive research on other ethnic or religious groups. Therefore, this research aims at contributing to the promotion of scientific knowledge, given that the cultural trauma of Pontic Greek refugees remains an underexplored sociological field. Through archival research, oral history analysis, and a literature review on the conceptualizations of "trauma", as well as on cultural trauma management and transgenerational transmission in other cases of genocide, the study aims to interpret Pontic Greeks cultural trauma. Later, using qualitative interviews with descendants, this thesis will illuminate how a traumatic historical event is internalized by a specific community, influencing the construction of its collective memory and identity. Ultimately, the research intends to depict the crucial role of narratives and cultural practices in fostering community cohesion.

Key words: cultural trauma, transgenerational transmission, Pontic Greeks

1. Introduction

In recent decades, there has been increasing scientific interest in examining the effects of *trauma* experienced by individuals and communities, while acknowledging that it is a complex concept open to multiple interpretations. Thus far, it has been the object of various sciences such as psychology, psychiatry and history. Concurrently, an increasingly greater scientific and research interest is noted, especially since the '90s, in studies pertaining to issues related to *genocide* and other forms of mass violence. Both dimensions, *trauma* and *genocide*, can be examined through the lens of *cultural trauma*, a theory emerged from the social sciences in the early 21st century. The present paper aims to shed light on the *cultural trauma* suffered by the Pontic Greeks in consequence of the *genocide* that Mustafa Kemal and the movement of Young Turks implemented against them in the region of Black Sea between 1914 and 1923, in order to create the Turkish, Muslim, national state they envisioned. More precisely, it investigates how a traumatic historical event is internalized by a specific community, influencing the construction of its

collective memory and identity, by adopting a sociological perspective—specifically, the theoretical framework of *cultural trauma* developed by Jeffrey Alexander (2004).

1.1 Theoretical Framework

A rigorous analysis of the topic requires clarification of the central concepts. In this context, the concept of *trauma* was initially understood in psychological and psychoanalytic terms (Demertzis & Roudomentof, 2011-2012) as an individual phenomenon. More recently, it has been explored from historical, cultural and sociological perspective. Specifically, representing the historical approach, LaCapra (2001) examines *trauma* not just as an event, but as an experience that disrupts the narrative and shapes historical depiction, whereas Hirsch (Hirsch, 2008), working within cultural studies, emphasizes, through her concept of postmemory, that *trauma* is passed down intergenerationally, even when the events have not been directly experienced, but are inherited through narrative transmission. In addition, Caruth (Caruth, 1996) focuses on its representation through memory and media. Sociology approaches *trauma* as a socially mediated process, examining the way in which experiences of suffering acquire a collective significance. In greater depth, Jeffrey Alexander's theory of *cultural trauma* refers to the perception of *trauma* - the outcome of a devastating event experienced by a collectivity - as a socially constructed process that reshapes both collective memory and collective identity of the group and is often transmitted across generations (Alexander, 2004).

Collective memory, especially that which emerges in the aftermath of mass and violent crimes, plays a pivotal role, as it constitutes one of the fundamental pillars upon which collective identity is founded and shaped. As Jacques Le Goff emphasizes "Memory constitutes an essential element of what we will henceforth refer to as individual or collective identity, the pursuit of which represents one of the fundamental activities of contemporary individuals and societies." (Le Goff, 1998). According to Halbwachs, collective memory is socially constructed through processes of social interaction and is continually reshaped and reinforced by shared narratives and mnemonic practices and rituals (Halbwachs, 1992). Furthermore, Melucci highlights the role of shared narratives in establishing a common narrative framework, adopted by group members, which strengthens their sense of belonging (Melucci, 1995). Expanding on this perspective, Connerton (1989) argues that societies remember through ritual practices, bodily gestures, and re-enactments of the past. From a cultural standpoint, Assmann (2011) posits that the main channels of cultural memory are rituals, monuments, and authoritative narratives, while artistic expressions, including music and visual arts, act as supportive media that help preserve and transmit memory across generations.

1.2 Historical Context: The Case of the Pontic Greeks

The rise of nationalism and the creation of nation-states at the beginning of the 20th century led to the dissolution of empires and conflicts caused by the presence of diverse ethnic and

religious groups. Nationalist ideology generated negative stereotypes towards minorities, who were perceived as threats to national cohesion. Specifically, in the Ottoman Empire, with the rise of the Young Turks movement, nationalist pressures and persecutions of Christian populations intensified. Mustafa Kemal, as the new leader, aimed to establish a nation-state based on ethnic and religious homogenization (Mazower, 2006). The creation of a Turkish, Muslim national state envisioned by the Young Turks meant the extermination or violent conversion/Islamization of Christian populations (Pontic Greeks, Armenians, Assyrians) living in the region. The cultural and economic superiority of these groups, along with their resistance to assimilation, were major causes for the resentment directed against them, a sentiment further fueled by Muslim religious fanaticism (Meichanetsidis, 2015). The Pontic Greeks, who had maintained a historical presence for millennia along the coastal and mountainous regions of the Black Sea, suffered severe blows between 1914 and 1923. They experienced mass expulsions, massacres, atrocities, forced labor battalions (*amele taburu* in Turkish), and death marches (Tsirkinidis, 2009). These practices mirrored those implemented during the Armenian Genocide (1915–1917), aiming at the eradication of the victims' religious and cultural memory (Meichanetsidis, 2015). Such systematic extermination practices, targeting the destruction of an entire ethno-religious community, fall within the definition of *genocide*, as later articulated by the international community (United Nations, 1948) and by Raphael Lemkin (1944). According to estimates, approximately 353,000 Pontic Greeks lost their lives.

Following the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) and the compulsory population exchange between Greece and Turkey based on religious affiliation, the surviving Pontic Greeks were violently uprooted from their ancestral homelands. They settled as refugees within Greek territory, mainly in Macedonia, struggling to survive under harsh conditions, to integrate into Greek society, and to cope with the rupture of their collective memory and identity. Their collective trauma was not limited to the generation that experienced it, but it seems to have been transmitted to subsequent generations, through memory, narratives and cultural symbols, profoundly shaping the identity of Pontic Hellenism to this day. Until today, Turkey maintains a position of denial regarding the genocide committed against the Pontic Greeks, just as it does in the case of the Armenians. As Akçam (2004) notes, "The denial of the genocide became a foundation of the Turkish state, shaping its official historiography and collective memory.". On the other hand, Pontic Greeks, through their demands for the recognition of the genocide, seek moral restoration and acknowledgment of the trauma inflicted upon them.

1.3 Research Questions and Objectives

At the core of this study is the cultural trauma of the Pontic Greeks and its transmission across generations. Assuming that the Pontic Greeks are situated within the context of intergenerational cultural trauma, the study of this case is crucial, as it aims to identify if and how the lasting impact of it continues to influence the way this community perceives itself today, while

contributing to its cohesion and collective identity. From an academic perspective, this research aspires to address a notable gap in the existing literature, as there is a paucity of relevant work on Pontic Greeks' case in the context of cultural trauma theory, although there are many studies about other ethnic or religious groups who have suffered similar traumatic experiences, such as the Armenians and the Jews.

Taking these considerations into account, also assuming that members of the Pontic Greek community are and have been impacted by the cultural trauma as a result of the genocide, the main research questions are as follows:

- How is the cultural trauma of the Pontic Greeks preserved, transmitted, and reinterpreted across generations?
- What rituals, mnemonic practices and cultural symbols have contributed to the preservation of cultural trauma and the shaping of collective memory and identity among Pontic Greeks?
- Is this trauma inherited, and if so, does it influence the contemporary identity of the community, particularly among younger generations?
- what role does historical recognition or denial play in this process?
- How is the cultural trauma of the Pontic Greeks addressed within broader Greek society?

By illuminating the ways in which subsequent generations experience, reproduce, and reconfigure trauma, there will hopefully be a clear depiction of the decisive role that narratives and cultural practices have played in fostering the unity of the Pontic community, shaping its collective memory and identity, and reconstructing its cultural trauma. It is presumed that the findings of the survey point in this direction, and it will be interesting to examine whether they are confirmed or challenged by differing perspectives.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theories of Trauma in Context: From Broader Perspectives to Alexander's Concept of Cultural Trauma

The concept of *trauma*, derived from the Greek word *τραῦμα* meaning "wound", initially referred to physical injury. However, in the late 19th century, the term was adopted by the fields of psychology and psychoanalysis, which began to investigate how repressed memories of painful experiences could lead to psychological distress in the individual, often manifesting as what is now known as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Freud, 1961). Building on Freud's foundational theories, Caruth (1996) develops a more philosophical and contemporary understanding of *trauma*. While Freud focuses on how trauma works within the psyche of the individual, Caruth is interested in its broader impact on language, history, and collective memory. For her, trauma is not only a clinical or psychological condition, but also something that resists direct articulation and continues to disrupt our ability to fully comprehend and represent it.

Another theoretical approach is that of Zygmunt Bauman (1989) that places trauma within modernity's larger structural settings; for him, it is not simply an experience of the past, but a dynamic social force that operates in ethical dimensions. According to Bauman trauma actively transforms collective identities and social relations, reinforcing the idea that its effects are ongoing and embedded in broader cultural and institutional processes. The concept of collective memory, as expressed by Maurice Halbwachs (1992), emphasizes the role of social frameworks in shaping memory and offers a useful foundation for understanding cultural forms of trauma processing. On the other hand, Marianne Hirsch's (2008) approaches trauma through the lens of postmemory, focusing on the intergenerational transmission of memory, primarily through narrative, images, and silences. Although the transmission is happening indirectly, this form of memory plays a significant role in shaping the collective identity of descendants. Whereas these theoretical approaches differ conceptually and methodologically, illuminating the psychological, literary and moral aspects of trauma, they may complement Alexander's theory of cultural trauma, contributing to a more multidimensional understanding of trauma as a socially constructed phenomenon, but also as one that is psychologically experienced, historically transmitted, and culturally encoded.

However, it is in the field of cultural sociology where trauma is most clearly and systematically theorized as a collective process. From the mid-20th century onwards, a growing interest in the study of trauma developed within sociology, closely linked to the broader scholarly focus on collective memory (Demertzis & Roudomentof, 2011-2012). Notably, cultural sociology, whose main founder and representative is Jeffrey Alexander, focuses on issues related to culture, conceived as autonomous from material structures. Within this framework, Alexander formulated the theory of cultural trauma, which has become a central analytical tool across numerous disciplines and on which the present study is based. According to this theory, "cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel that they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Alexander, 2004). What is particularly important in the theory mentioned above is the conception of trauma as a social construction. According to Alexander, it is not a psychological trauma, nor does it arise as a consequence of events. As he argues, a painful event that violently and abruptly disrupts the well-being of a group does not in itself constitute a cultural trauma. To be classified as such, it must be preceded by a process, a series of social mechanisms, through which the event is given meaning by society as a whole, or by a particular collectivity, allowing it acceptable to be recognized as a trauma at a broader social level. It should be noted that such an event does not represent the sum of individual painful experiences, but rather constitutes a socially constructed, holistic experience shared by a group.

In greater detail, members of a social group, perceiving their collective identity to be under threat, seek to ascribe meaning to the past by adopting a shared position, which they then attempt to project into the public sphere in pursuit of broader recognition. In this way, cultural trauma,

functioning as an integral component of a group's existence and self-definition, is transformed into a central narrative that shapes collective memory, identity, and consciousness. Within the framework of the social construction of cultural trauma, group members articulate symbolic representations of the painful event, speaking not only about the social reality, but also addressing its causes and assigning responsibility. In doing so, they redefine moral accountability and reshape the terrain of political action. The starting point of this cultural construction is the claim that fundamental harm has been inflicted—specifically, the violation of a sacred value, the narration of a painful event that had detrimental effects on the group and left indelible marks—along with a demand for emotional, institutional, and symbolic redress. This process is undertaken by a group of “carriers”, who may emerge from various levels of the social structure. Their aim is first to persuade the group's own members that they have experienced trauma, and subsequently to appeal to the broader society in order to gain public recognition of their claims. The acceptance of a cultural trauma leads, on the one hand, to the emergence of new forms of social integration and, on the other, to the expansion of social understanding and compassion. Consequently, it enhances the empathy of the broader audience. The emotions provoked from a cultural trauma concern not only the members of the affected group, but also the wider public, as they encourage identification with the victims of the trauma (Nikolaidou, 2023).

A key role in this process is played by the construction of a narrative, the effectiveness of which depends on how convincingly it addresses key questions regarding the nature of the suffering, the identity of the victim, the relationship between the victim and the broader audience, and the identification of the perpetrator. These processes take place within institutional arenas of contestation, such as religion, aesthetics, law, the media, academia, and others. As previously mentioned, cultural trauma influences the formation of both collective memory and identity. The shared recognition of an event as traumatic shapes collective memory not only in relation to the collective past, but also affects the way individuals perceive themselves in the present. Simultaneously, through dominant narratives and ritual practices adopted by the collectivity, solidarity and trust among its members are reinforced, aiming at the reconstructing and consolidation of collective identity. The construction of collective identities is a fundamental process for nations. Through the interplay of memory and forgetting—through which groups and institutions shape narratives and form their collective self- understanding—a sense of historical continuity is produced, contributing to the preservation of social cohesion (Nikolaidou, 2023).

2.2 Empirical Studies on Cultural Trauma and Intergenerational Transmission: The Case of Jews and Armenians

Empirical research on cultural trauma has focused on societies that have experienced genocide, displacement, persecution or collective violence. The Jewish and Armenian communities are among the most extensively studied cases of collective trauma. Both suffered historically traumatic events during the 20th century — the Holocaust and the Armenian Genocide

— which continue to shape their collective memory and identity. Still, they have created elaborate memorial practices and rituals through which they preserve, transmit and reinterpret their traumatic past for future generations. Studies on narrative and other cultural activities show how traumatic events are transmitted to the next generations who have not directly experienced them. The study and comparison of these two cases reveal both common mechanisms of trauma transmission and distinct cultural and historical characteristics unique to each community.

2.2.1 The Jewish Case

The Holocaust is perhaps the most studied example of cultural trauma. Its intergenerational transmission has been the subject of extensive scientific study, especially in relation to second and third generation descendants of survivors. Eva Fogelman (1986) and Vivian Rakoff (1972) were among the first to highlight the psychological burden on the second generation. Dan Bar-On (1995) based on interviews with descendants of both survivors and victims, highlighted the effects of silence and narrative absence on family and ethnic identity. Yael Danieli (2017) studied the psychological disorders in Holocaust survivors' children (especially PTSD). Volkan (2001) introduced the concept of "chosen trauma", which is embedded in ethnic identity. In the case of the Holocaust, studies have shown how survivors' testimonies, commemorative practices, and institutional memorialization (Hirsch, 2008) emphasize the role of visual culture and narrative transmission in postmemory formation, mainly among second and third generations. These practices enable younger generations to engage in an effective and symbolic way with events they did not directly experience, sustaining a shared historical consciousness.

Moreover, annual rituals, such as Holocaust Remembrance Day, have been highly significant in reinforcing Jewish cultural trauma. Literature, cinema, and family storytelling also play a crucial role, providing spaces for both mourning and the reaffirmation of group identity. Jeffrey Alexander (2004) argues that the Holocaust has become a "symbolic anchor" for modern Jewish identity, especially within Western contexts, framing not only the narrative of victimhood and resilience, but also shaping moral and political discourses about justice, memory, and human rights. In addition, Holocaust education has played a central role in institutionalizing memory, especially through curricula in Jewish schools and broader public education systems in countries with large Jewish populations. Organizations have been instrumental in creating global networks of remembrance. Through these mechanisms, memory is not just preserved but also modified to fit modern political and cultural settings so that constant reinterpretation and involvement may take place.

2.2.2 The Armenian Case

Armenians Genocide, although it historically preceded the Holocaust, it remained either marginalized or silenced at both the international and communal levels, for decades. As with the case of the Jews, the Armenians' cultural trauma has significantly shaped collective identity,

particularly within the diaspora, which has been the primary focus of empirical studies. Diasporic communities have played a critical role in preserving and institutionalizing the memory of the genocide, especially in countries like the United States and France. Since the events of 1915, the trauma of mass killings and forced displacement has been transmitted across generations through key tools like oral histories (Derderian, 2005), commemorative rituals, and symbolic cultural practices that capture the long-lasting legacy of loss and memory but also act as emblems of resilience and continuity. The official day of remembrance, April 24th, functions as a central ritual of mourning and resistance, reinforcing a shared narrative of survival and historical injustice. Scholars, such as Marianne Hirsch (2008), have illuminate the importance of literature, film, and arts in constructed Armenian postmemory. Visual culture, like genocide memorials and public performances, creates a space where younger generations can engage with the past through affective and symbolic identification, sustaining a collective sense of belonging. However, Kalayjian (1996) identified elevated levels of anxiety, depressive symptoms, and a sense of historical injustice among the second and third generation, while Papazian (2009) analyzes the contribution of education to the shaping of collective memory.

Turkey's refusal of recognition has also caused Armenian populations to accept commemoration as a means of opposition and cultural affirmation. State denialist policies further deepen the anguish and displacement caused by this never-ending battle, therefore shaping the Armenian identity (Holslag, 2018). Richard Hovannisian (1992) and Anny Bakalian (1993) have observed how the traumatic events of 1915 have become irrevocably entwined with the social fabric and political consciousness of Armenian diasporic communities. Global advocacy for recognition, educational projects, and commemorative marches help not only to preserve historical memory but also to advance a wider dialogue on justice, denial, and human rights. In this regard, cultural trauma becomes a mobilizing force for identity and intergenerational cohesion.

Together with Jewish experience of the Holocaust, the Armenian case shows how traumatized groups by collective violence evolve to preserve and transmit trauma through parallel cultural, institutional, and emotional means. Though both cases show common processes—such as narrative transmission, ritual commemoration, and the use of visual and symbolic culture, each is shaped by its unique historical trajectory and political background. Although the Holocaust is well-known and formally commemorated around the world, the Armenian Genocide continues to be politically rejected by its perpetrators. This difference influences significantly not only the form and content of memory traditions, but also the role of trauma in shaping diasporic identity. Still, in both situations, cultural trauma is the basis of group memory, connecting past pain to present identity and future expectations for justice and recognition.

2.2.3 The Pontic Greeks case

Although there is a substantial body of research on cultural trauma about other ethnic or religious groups, the case of the cultural trauma of the Pontic Greeks refugees still constitutes an

unexplored sociological field. The history and culture of Pontic Hellenism have extensively been studied, and during recent decades there has been an increase in research of genocide. However, the dimension of cultural trauma and how it contributes to the construction of the collective memory and identity of the specific community, as well as its intergenerational transmission, have not been approached on the basis of cultural trauma theory.

One of the few references that have been made regarding the case of the Pontic Greeks, concerns the role that Pontic associations played in the management of trauma during the Interwar period. According to it, after their arrival in Greece, the Pontic Greek refugees focused on their resettlement and survival, pushing aside the traumatic experience of the genocide they had suffered as a Christian population from 1914 to 1923. Due to the severity and adversity of the conditions, their trauma did not immediately transform into a cultural one, nor was it projected into the public sphere. A symbolic representation—commonly accepted by the group as a whole, and a necessary component of cultural trauma—did not exist. Despite its indelible impact on them, the trauma remained repressed and strictly individual for many decades. Contributing to this was the stance of the Greek state, which avoided addressing the issue; it preferred to remain silent and focus instead on the assimilation and integration of the Pontic population into Greek society. As a result, the broader Greek society, which had not experienced this painful event, did not identify with the trauma of the Pontic Greeks—at least not until many years later. However, the formation of associations during the Interwar period constituted a cultural practice that contributed to the shaping of their collective memory and identity. It could be said that, although their activities bypassed the dimension of cultural trauma, these associations functioned, in a way, as bearers of Pontic heritage. Their foundation rested on another element of cultural affinity—locality. Locality, as a dynamic factor, adapted to the circumstances and acquired new meaning. As a result of this process, locality led to the creation of new refugee identities, as individuals unified their refugee memory and shaped its symbolic construction in public discourse and space (Nikolaidou, 2023).

The memorialization of Pontus (Black Sea) as a place that remained unchanged in memory in the form it had before its abandonment, and as a single space, functioned as a point of reference for the subjects and their collective memory. The collective memory, acting as a unifier, promoted the common cultural elements, creating the conditions for the acceptance of a common way of perceiving the past. The memory of the past was at the center of the production and reproduction of the subjects, while constituting at the same time the basis of the existence of the associations. Their need to be defined by their ancestors and the past, due to their violent separation from their homes, was intense. This idea of “belonging” to a specific place recalls the idea of loyalty to this place, while especially in the case of refugees, the past is mythologized. The subjects possessed by the need to refer to their ancestors and by giving a mythical dimension to the past, shaped their identity. Pontus, their place of origin, acquired new symbolism in the collective Pontic imaginary (Nikolaidou, 2023).

In the case of the Pontic Greeks, the way they managed their Pontian identity and memory required the setting aside of cultural diversity, their local specificities and their traumatic experiences. A practice of cultural homogenization was followed, which projected a single refugee identity, using a single discourse about the Pontic Greeks' past and projecting positive stereotypes. The projection of their "Greekness" and their contribution to Greek society was expressed through the discourse they used in various processes of collectivity, administrative and cultural; a discourse that functioned as a unifier for the members, contributing to their empowerment. The projection of a positive refugee identity also functioned as a means of self-defense, against an environment dominated by the suspicion of the natives and the difficulty of the Greek state to directly manage the problems that arose.

The reality is that since the 1980s, the memory that was formed "from below" began to question the dominant narratives that had prevailed. Subsequently, Pontian organizations expressed disagreements about the dominant ideologies and the demand for selective forgetting and requested the recognition of the Genocide that the Pontic Greeks suffered in the period 1914-1923. The descendants of the first generation rallied around this demand for the recognition of a forbidden memory, which dominated and became a common ideological element of the Pontic Greek community. The goal was now to highlight the historical experience and its integration into the collective historical memory. The unanimous recognition of the Genocide by the Greek Parliament in 1994 and the designation of May 19 as a Day of Remembrance constitute a pivotal point for their case. It can be considered that at that time the definitive transformation of the trauma, which had been transmitted through memory to subsequent generations, into a cultural trauma took place; it marked the completion of the process of social meaning-making, by which the trauma became widely accepted. It was then that constituted a common position, influencing the systems of reference of the Pontic Greek community and led to the formulation of common narratives in the public sphere. The next goal was the wider acceptance of cultural trauma by the rest of society. At the same time, there is also an expansion of research activity and an increase in research interest around issues related to Pontus, genocide and refugees (Nikolaidou, 2023).

From the discussion above, it is clear that although much academic study has been done on the traumatic history of groups, including Jews and Armenians, the cultural trauma of Pontic Greeks remains relatively unexamined. The present study aims to bridge this empirical gap by applying the insights of contemporary literature to the specific historical and cultural context of the Pontic Greek experience. This helps to provide a more comprehensive picture of how many ethnic groups react to and change their terrible history over the course of decades.

2.3. Critical Assessment of Literature

While the existing literature on cultural trauma has made a significant contribution to understanding how collective suffering is remembered and passed on, there are some limitations. To date, much of the theoretical work on trauma has focused on contexts such as the Holocaust

or the Armenian Genocide. While such studies are valuable, they may not adequately respond to the particular socio-cultural and historical dynamics of less studied communities such as the Pontic Greeks. The premise of a universal model of trauma may overlook local memory and identity-making processes. Furthermore, much of the empirical literature marginalizes remembrance and narrative in favor of embodied and ritualized forms of memory transmission. Although researchers recognize the intergenerational nature of trauma, few studies explore how young people today interact with inherited trauma in their everyday lives—not only as symbolic inheritors, but also as active agents who may reinterpret, contest, or even renounce this legacy. Finally, the Pontic Greeks' case is significantly understudied in academic literature. Despite the intense historical trauma caused by genocide, forced displacement, and loss of homeland in the early 20th century, relatively little systematic research exists on how these events have informed the group's collective memory, identity, or social solidarity. This critical review thus identifies a stark gap in the literature that this research seeks to address: the lack of empirically grounded, culturally centered research on underrepresented groups who continue to bear the legacy of historical trauma across generations.

3. Methodology

Research Design

The present study is based on a multi-level qualitative stance rooted in interpretivist epistemology. It combines literature review, archival research, semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observation, aiming to understand how individuals and communities make sense of traumatic pasts in accordance with cultural, symbolic, and family practices. As there is limited literature regarding the cultural trauma of Pontic Greeks, a comparative approach is employed, in order to draw insights from other studies on the Holocaust and Armenian Genocide. The Armenian case is particularly pertinent, as it occurred within the same historical timeframe and region and involved the same perpetrator employing similar methods of extermination. The comparative approach makes possible more illumination of collective memory and intergenerational trauma in the Pontic Greek community.

Data Selection

Data were collected through a literature review conducted in reputable scientific databases, as well as through university libraries and specialized archives such as the Historical Archive of Refugee Hellenism. The literature review was conducted using keywords like: *cultural trauma*, *collective memory*, *collective identity*, and *genocide*. The inclusion criteria were as follows:

- Published in English or Greek,
- Relevance to the research question.

Regarding the testimonies, they were collected through archival research conducted at the Historical Archive of Refugee Hellenism (IAPE) in Kalamaria, Thessaloniki. They offer direct

narratives of violence, displacement and survival. They constitute a key interpretive body, through which recurring patterns, silences and ways of commemorating traumatic events emerge. The current study relies on both oral testimony and written materials. These records offer a large qualitative data set for cultural and historical study.

Ethnographic participatory observation within the community is ongoing, which includes informal conversations, observation of memorial ceremonies and everyday cultural practices. These observations allow for an understanding of collective memory as a lived experience, through rituals, symbols and gendered or intergenerational expressions.

Data analysis

All the data selected, including oral testimonies and interviews, will be thematically analyzed. This requires identification, analysis and report data patterns. The process includes the following familiarization with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and labeling themes and final reporting. This method will enable an in-depth exploration of the manners in which cultural trauma is experienced and narrated across generations within the Pontic Greek community.

Ethical considerations

The nature of the research, which focuses on traumatic experiences and memories, requires increased ethical sensitivity. Any possibility of participants feeling uncomfortable or experiencing discomfort will be avoided. The peace and well-being of the participants will be protected in the best possible way. The participants' agreement will be acquired after providing full information on the purposes of the research, the right to withdraw at any time, and ensuring anonymity and confidentiality of information. Special caution will be exercised to avoid re-traumatization, with provision for skipping questions or early closure of the interview.

Limitations and Reflexivity

As the research is ongoing, the findings so far are preliminary. There is a limitation regarding the lack of prior literature on the cultural trauma of the Pontic Greeks', but this will be addressed in comparison to the cases of the Holocaust and the Armenian Genocide.

Due to her Pontic Greek heritage, the researcher has personally witnessed cases of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as well as listened to countless narratives and memories of the "lost homelands"—a term often used by Pontic Greeks to describe the ancestral territories from which they were violently uprooted. Being a descendant of both survivors and non-survivors of the Pontic Greek Genocide, and an active member of the organized Pontic community, provides a unique vantage point. It enriches the research with deep cultural insight, intergenerational memory, and access to oral testimonies that may not be readily available to outsiders. At the same time, this dual role requires a higher degree of reflexivity, as emotional and cultural

proximity to the matter in question may impact the interpretation of findings. The researcher remains critically aware of this process at all times, trying to bridge empathetic understanding and academic objectivity. Her embedded position allows for a more differentiated analysis of identity, memory, and trauma, but also demands rigorous self-reflection and ethical sensitivity.

Future Research Plan

As the current study is ongoing, the next step in this study is to conduct semi-structured interviews with second, third, and fourth-generation Pontic Greeks in order to ascertain familial backgrounds and connections relating to cultural trauma. Participants will be selected based on their familial ties to survivors or their exposure to narratives about the Pontic Greek Genocide through various media. The sample will include male and female participants from a broad age range, along with a variety of educational and socio-economic backgrounds. This purposive sampling is aimed at securing a wide range of perspectives and experiences, and thus providing depth and richness to data obtained from the interviews. The interviews will explore identification with family memory, knowledge or repression of traumatic events, and how descendants work through or rebuild their cultural identity. All interviews will be conducted with participants' informed consent, recorded, transcribed, and analyzed thematically. This approach will enable the connection of historical documentation with contemporary experiences in order to establish patterns of intergenerational memory and identity formation.

In parallel, the archival research at the Historical Archive of Refugee Hellenism in Kalamaria, Thessaloniki, is ongoing. Second and third-generation offspring of Pontic Greek refugees continue to have their testimonies processed and analyzed by the study. These stories offer important perspectives on the changing group memory inside the community and the intergenerational transmission. Together with the future interviews, these archival resources will help to deepen our knowledge of how cultural trauma is understood and experienced over several generations.

4. Research Findings

At this stage, the findings are preliminary due to the ongoing nature of the research. So far, the analysis of both the literature and oral testimonies, in combination with ethnographic observation, reveals notable parallels between the Pontic Greek and Armenian communities in terms of memory practices, cultural preservation, and post-genocide identity reconstruction. Both groups have developed rich mnemonic cultures, characterized by commemorative rituals, memorial days, monuments, and the preservation of traditions that recount the trauma of forced displacement and genocide. Also, a pervasive sense of injustice and historical grievance is evident, particularly regarding the lack of international recognition of their genocides and the persistent denial by the Turkish state. This denial not only deepens the collective trauma but also reinforces the community's commitment to remembrance and cultural preservation.

Up to this point, it is clear that the collective memory of Pontic Greeks is shaped not only by inherited trauma but also by a profound sense of responsibility to safeguard their cultural heritage. As a consequence of the atrocities they endured, and the urgent need they feel as a moral obligation to preserve their customs, language, and traditions, Pontic Greeks continue to transmit their identity across generations. Despite the extremely difficult conditions they encountered upon resettlement in Greece, their primary concern was to ensure that their Greek identity should never be questioned, undermined or forgotten.

In their case, traditional dances, songs, and Pontic Greek dialect serve not only as cultural expressions, but also as significant elements of collective memory, often referring to the "lost homelands" of Black Sea. Numerous Pontic cultural associations actively work to preserve and transmit these traditions across generations. These organizations also function as carriers of historical continuity, community resilience, and political advocacy, particularly around the quest for official recognition of the Pontic Greek Genocide. Similarly to the early period after their arrival in Greece, they still play a central role in the construction of collective identity and memory of the Pontic Greek community.

Testimonies from the first generation clearly reveal a profound sense of loss and pain. These findings highlight the ongoing transmission of trauma and identity. Through interaction and conversation with younger generations, it becomes evident that despite the temporally distant they have from the original events and the fact that they have not directly experienced the trauma, they express a strong sense of inherited memory and moral responsibility. The burden of loss and the demand for justice are not only remembered, but also actively re-enacted and revitalized through cultural participation and public discourse.

5. Expected outcomes

It is believed that the final findings will demonstrate that cultural trauma is transmitted intergenerationally, shaping collective identity and memory over generations. The descendants of survivors actively preserve traditions, reconstruct their identity in response to contemporary conditions, and engage in cultural practices that reflect both continuity and the cohesion of their community.

6. Conclusion

The cultural trauma of the Pontic Greeks represents a particularly compelling case that has not been sufficiently explored through the lens of cultural trauma theory. The fact that it remains largely unexamined within this theoretical framework highlights a significant gap in literature. This study therefore aims to shed light on this underexplored aspect, contributing to a deeper understanding of how collective memory, identity, and trauma are shaped and transmitted across generations.

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