



Everyday Public History

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Abstract

Public history is often viewed rather narrowly as something that ‘happens’ in familiar places at particular moments in time under the watchful eye of a ‘professional’. This is the public history of the impact and engagement statement: bounded, controlled, measurable. Conversely, I argue for a more ecumenical, diverse and anarchic understanding of public history. Drawing on observations from oral history, participant observation and digital ethnography, I present public history as something that suffuses the everyday lives of historians and non-historians alike as they continually construct their own histories through myriad sources and methodologies. This ‘everyday public history’ is diffuse, noisy, messy, often confusing, sometimes troubling; but never singular, straightforward, or authoritative. By studying this everyday public history, historians gain a fuller understanding of the power of the past in society, a greater capacity to comprehend and challenge problematic historical narratives, and a more productive entanglement between their work and people’s everyday lives.

I

In a scene from the film *Polítiki Kouzína* depicting a family dinner in a Greek household in Istanbul in 1959, a well-intentioned child sabotages his mother’s meatballs by furtively adding cinnamon to the mix, having overheard his grandfather suggest that this spice helps to open people up emotionally and to bring them closer together. Unfortunately, the opposite occurs. As the kitchen fills with the scent of cinnamon, an argument ensues between mother and father about the appropriate use of the spice. Initially, the mother maintains her innocence, but, as the disagreement escalates, she ends up arguing that cinnamon is a suitable choice, a claim she substantiates by suggesting that this is how the last emperor of Byzantium, Constantine XI Palaiologos, preferred to eat his meat. Her husband is unconvinced, arguing that as a graduate of one of Istanbul’s most prestigious schools he alone at the table has the right to pronounce on the dietary habits of the man who ruled the city 500 years previously.¹ This scene neatly captures how even the most mundane of everyday situations is often steeped in history.²

¹ Tassos Boulmetis, *Polítiki Kouzína*, 2003.

² Huw Halstead, *Greeks without Greece: Homelands, Belonging, and Memory amongst the Expatriated Greeks of Turkey* (Abingdon, 2019), p. 3.

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This may not be the most recognisable face of public history. Say ‘public history’ to someone – historian or otherwise – and it will most likely conjure up certain specific images: a museum exhibition, a heritage site, a public talk, a television historian. Something that ‘happens’ in familiar places at particular moments in time under the watchful eye of a ‘professional’. At worst, as this special issue identifies, public history may be seen as little more than fodder for impact and engagement statements: bounded, controlled, measurable. The public history of the dinner table dispute seems to have no place in this narrow conceptualisation of the field.

However, public history is – and, for many of its practitioners, has always been – far more ecumenical, diverse and anarchic. Public history beyond impact and engagement is something that suffuses everyday life as people continually construct histories meaningful to them through myriad sources and methodologies, often quite independently of professional historians. Drawing on observations from oral history, participant observation, and digital ethnography, I present this ‘everyday public history’ as diffuse, noisy, messy, often confusing, sometimes troubling; but never singular, straightforward or authoritative. The territory of everyday public history is anarchic: shifting, decentred, autonomous. This can be an asset to professional history, as it reflects a vibrant and active public engagement with the past that goes beyond recognisable sites of public history and those who seek them out. Everyone’s present is saturated with the past, whether they take a self-conscious interest in history or not. To realise the potential that this offers, however, historians must first take seriously the histories that non-professionals make for themselves.

II

The association between public history and particular venues where ‘professionals’ descend on ‘audiences’ to commit history in public³ underpins some definitions of the field. Jill Liddington, for instance, writes that public historians ‘provide refreshing, inspiring, and necessary expert mediation between the past and its publics. Purveyors of the past to popular audiences ignore historians at their peril’.⁴ More recently, Faye Sayer characterises public historians as ‘individuals, usually trained historians, who work in either a professional or academic capacity and who engage in the practice of communicating the past to the public ... a crucial part of a public historian’s role is decoding history’s underlying significance to people outside the profession’.⁵ Such statements reflect a very reasonable, and very real, suspicion that public understandings

³ The phrase ‘commit history in public’ is adapted from Edward Linenthal, ‘Committing history in public’, *The Journal of American History*, 81/3 (1994), pp. 986–91.

⁴ Jill Liddington, ‘What is public history? Publics and their pasts, meanings and practices’, *Oral History*, 30/1 (2002), pp. 83–93, at p. 92.

⁵ Faye Sayer, *Public History: A Practical Guide* (London, 2015), p. 2.

of the past frequently come from non-professionals, be they politicians, journalists, filmmakers, polemicists, influencers, YouTubers, or bots and trolls. Thomas Cauvin, expressing these very concerns, argues that we must accordingly ‘re-assert the need for history – and historians. People should not forget that the past is reached through sources and interpretation’.⁶

Today, most public historians support the idea that asserting the need for historians and engaging public audiences in their research is best achieved by the former *sharing authority* with the latter and *letting go* of some of their control over the construction of history. ‘Public historians’, Cauvin writes, ‘must be ready to share authority. Debates no longer focus on the need to share authority, but rather on the extent to which it could be done’.⁷ The phrase ‘sharing authority’ comes from oral historian Michael Frisch, who maintains that ‘what is most compelling about oral and public history is a capacity to redefine and redistribute intellectual authority, so that this might be shared more broadly in historical research and communication rather than continuing to serve as an instrument of power and hierarchy’.⁸

Frisch, however, has proved a somewhat reluctant cheerleader for ‘sharing authority’. Analysing the legacy of his book, Frisch has sought to emphasise that ‘sharing authority’ constitutes an active choice that professional historians could – or should – make to ‘democratise’ history. By contrast, he had in fact called his book *A Shared Authority*, which, in his words, means that ‘the interpretive and meaning-making process [in oral and public history] is in fact shared *by definition* – it is inherent in the dialogic nature of an interview, and in how audiences receive and respond to exhibitions and public history interchanges in general’.⁹ From this point of view, historians may not in the first place have the authority to decide whether or not to share authority.

Public history as a shared authority, defined in this way, draws our attention beyond the purposeful efforts of professional historians to communicate or ‘decode’ the past for non-academic audiences and towards – or to include – the space of ‘popular historymaking’.¹⁰ Like it or not, historical narratives are continually crafted in ways and in places beyond the grasp of historians’ hands.¹¹ As David Thelen writes

⁶ Thomas Cauvin, *Public History: A Textbook of Practice* (Abingdon, 2016), p. 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁸ Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany, 1990), p. xx.

⁹ Michael Frisch, ‘From *A Shared Authority* to the digital kitchen, and back’, in Bill Adair et al. (eds), *Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World* (Abingdon, 2011), pp. 126–37, at p. 127. Emphasis in original.

¹⁰ Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York, 1998), p. 3.

¹¹ Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (London and New York, 2008), p. 6.

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compellingly, '[u]sing the past is as natural a part of life as eating or breathing'.¹² This is everyday public history.

In what follows, I want to consider how public history in these different guises – as top-down expertise as well as everyday shared authority – manifests in the personal narratives of those I have encountered through my oral history and ethnographic research on Mediterranean and particularly Greek and Cypriot history. In doing so, I will suggest that an awareness and appreciation of everyday public history is crucial to understanding the effects of more targeted public history work by historical professionals.

III

In the Greek novel *Blood on the Green Line*, a group of Greek veterans from the 1974 Cyprus conflict are sharing their memories of the fighting, when one of their number suggests that they instead invite a young historian in attendance to speak on their behalf. After all, the veteran reasons, it is the historian who is the expert who has been studying the documents, and it should be he who tells the veterans what happened, rather than vice versa.¹³

This is a scenario that will be familiar for many oral historians and anthropologists and which is often a source of considerable frustration. Prospective informants will frequently bemoan the inadequacy of their own personal experiences and memories as valuable historical evidence, and instead profess the need to defer to the expertise of professional historians, be it the person conducting the interview or other scholars whose work they have encountered. Anthropologist Anastasia Karakasidou describes this as a tendency for people to distinguish between 'history', which carries 'an aura of sacredness and grandeur', and personal and familial stories, which are 'mundane and profane' and stand outside the historical record.¹⁴

This may lead narrators to sideline their own experiences and memories in their testimonies in favour of an impersonal style based around key dates, the results of elections, the decisions and statements of leaders, the fortunes of states and armies, etc. Sometimes personal experiences become mere asides in life history narratives, functioning as anchoring points for – or colourful gloss on – a macro-level national or political tale. In a recent interview I conducted with a Greek man born in the early 1930s, I asked my interviewee if he could remember how people in his neighbourhood reacted when they heard the news in October 1940 that the Greek dictator Ioannis Metaxas had taken Greece to war by refusing

¹² Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*, p. 190.

¹³ Vasilis Gkourogiannis, *Blood on the Green Line* [Κόκκινο στην Πράσινη Γραμμή] (Athens, 2009), p. 131; Huw Halstead, "'The pawns that they moved here and there?': Microacts, room for manoeuvre, and everyday agency in the 1974 Cyprus conflict', *European History Quarterly*. In press.

¹⁴ Anastasia Karakasidou, *Fields of Wheat, Hills of Blood: Passages to Nationhood in Greek Macedonia, 1870–1990* (Chicago, 1997), p. 232.

an Italian request to allow Italian troops to occupy strategic points within the country. This has gone down in Greek history as Metaxas's heroic 'óhi' ('no'), commemorated annually on *Óhi* Day. 'Yes', he said, he remembers 'very well'. What followed was a vivid retelling of the moment Metaxas spoke his 'no' to the Italian ambassador in a private exchange at the former's house – and how his actual words were 'alors, c'est la guerre' (so, it's war) – delivered with great fidelity and immediacy as though the interviewee had himself been present at the meeting. It was only after some prodding on my part that he offered his own childhood memories of how the news spread through the neighbourhood and the apparent enthusiasm of his elders. In Karakasidou's terms, Metaxas's 'no' was history, and the neighbourhood enthusiasm just a story.

At worst, this sidelining of personal stories in favour of the perceived grandeur of 'history' prompts some people to come to interviews armed with academic or popular history books or printouts of web content such as Wikipedia articles; or, alternatively, to reassure interviewers that they have 'brushed up' on their historical knowledge through such sources beforehand. Instinctively, nothing makes the ethnographer's heart sink quite like an elderly informant, who knows things written down in no book, showing up to an interview with a textbook under their arm with the intention of reading aloud to fulfil the interviewer's historical curiosity.

However, following oral historian Alessandro Portelli's adage that personal testimonies may tell us 'less about *events* than about their *meaning*', even these incidents may sometimes be more enlightening than they first appear.¹⁵ In 2018, for instance, I met a nonagenarian named Charalampos in a village in central Greece to discuss a land reclamation project that occurred in the area in the 1960s/1970s. As we sat down to talk in his backyard, he produced from his pocket some folded-up photocopies of an unspecified Greek-language history book dealing with British involvement in the Greek Civil War (1946–9), from which he bade me to read aloud. This request – and his evident satisfaction in hearing me, a visiting British historian, read aloud what he considered authoritative proof of Churchill's culpability for the whole wretched affair – revealed a huge amount about his identity and his understandings of the past. Yet, it remains striking that this man, who under specific questioning would later detail vivid personal experiences of the Greek Civil War, felt, and repeated several times, that the 'revelations' in his second-hand photocopies were the most valuable contribution to historical research he had to offer.

The delivery of a testimony is often also marked by the perceived expertise of the interviewer. Transcripts of my interviews are peppered with statements from interviewees such as 'you'll know that very well, as a historian' or 'as you'll know better', warning signs that the interviewee may be intending to curtail a potentially interesting narrative, having decided that it is not sufficiently enlightening. Interviewees likewise

¹⁵ Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany, NY, 1991), p. 50. Emphasis in original.

frequently seek affirmation from me that they are telling their story in an appropriate manner, that they are providing the right sorts of details, and/or that their testimony is in line with what others have told me. As a Greek former policeman and I sat down over coffee to discuss the Greek Colonels' dictatorship (1967–74), and without me asking any questions, he immediately began to offer what he called an 'introduction' to our chosen topic. This turned out to be a lengthy historical narrative of politicians, elections, laws and major historical waypoints, with the occasional aside on where he was at given moments as this history was unfolding. Throughout this hour-long narrative, he took regular breaks to rest, compose himself and take a sip of coffee, using these interludes as opportunities to seek reassurances from me. The reassurance he desired was not on the historical accuracy of the events he described, of which he declared himself to be fully confident, but rather that he was delivering his introductory history in an appropriate manner and with the requisite level of background detail. In this case, my 'expertise' was seen to be not so much in facts and figures, but in 'history' as a narrative form.

Like the veterans in *Blood on the Green Line*, many of my informants have learned to think of their own experiences as something distinct from – and even inferior to – authoritative 'history'. Accordingly, they tend to conceive of the latter as something quite distant or aloof from their everyday lives.

IV

However, their frequent protestations to the contrary notwithstanding, in practice I find that people act much more like historians than they tend to imagine, deploying their own methodologies, drawing on diverse sources, and reworking history actively in line with their personal memories and their contemporary identities and needs.¹⁶ In other words, even as they bemoan their own lack of expertise, they do much of the 'decoding' of history's significance for themselves (for better or worse).

Cauvin makes the very reasonable point that '[c]ritical analysis and contextualization of sources distinguish history narratives from mere opinions'.¹⁷ Nevertheless, there is quite a distance between academically rigorous historical narratives, with all their methodological and theoretical frameworks and their apparatuses for enabling critical scrutiny, and 'mere opinions', as if the latter are simply plucked out of thin air or arrived at by chance.

People's understandings of the past, in my experience, tend to be idiosyncratic and patchwork creations, put together from diverse sources, including personal experiences, family memories, hearsay and neighbourhood gossip, education, media portrayals, academic or popular historical accounts and, knowingly or otherwise, fictionalised historical

¹⁶ Halstead, "The pawns that they moved here and there?".

¹⁷ Cauvin, *Public History*, p. 2.

narratives. Even on those occasions when interviewees attempt to read from specific ‘authoritative’ historical sources, they will typically inject verbal marginalia of their own, glossing the text with personal observations or information picked up from elsewhere, as indeed Charalampos did as I read aloud from his photocopies. This multiplicity and pervasiveness of historical meanings circulating in society is what Jerome de Groot calls ‘historiocopia’.¹⁸

Evidently, without the apparatus of footnotes, much of the source collation process in everyday public history is difficult to isolate. Nevertheless, it is striking how often informants do make efforts to ‘cite’ their sources, thus demonstrating – at the very least – an awareness that history narratives are arrived at through the interrogation of source materials, and that laying this process bare may make their testimonies more credible to the listener. During interviews, people will often produce documents and other sources that they have in their possession to substantiate and to illustrate their narratives. An expatriated Greek man from Istanbul living in Thessaloniki, in the midst of telling me about the difficulties he faced when the Turkish state cancelled his Turkish citizenship and he was unable for many years to acquire Greek citizenship, jumped up to search out his old *laissez passer* document. He feared that without such proof it would not be believed that the Greek state would have allowed him to become stateless.¹⁹ A Greek woman in her nineties similarly sought to provide tangible evidence of the efforts made by her late husband to save Jews from ghettos in Thessaloniki during the Second World War by producing a yellow patch apparently given to her husband by one of those he helped to save. In a recent remote video call interview about the Colonels’ dictatorship, another elderly interviewee – apparently misinterpreting a frown that appeared on my face due to a momentary connection issue as a sign of scepticism on my part – interrupted his story about state surveillance of his family to proclaim, ‘I have documents! I have them right here in a satchel!’ Even in acrimonious debates about history on Web 2.0 sites like YouTube and Reddit I found that users often make their sources explicit to their sparring partners through hyperlinks, sometimes even assigning each other ‘reading lists’ of links to historical images and footage, Wikipedia articles or open access academic texts.²⁰

Clearly, popular history-making is not the same as academic history, and its form, (ab)use of sources and conclusions may well frequently and justifiably frustrate professional historians, but nor is it merely an off-the-cuff mishmash of the pervasive *historiocopia*. There is agency, process and method – and sometimes, to varying degrees, creativity, curiosity and critical thought – in the ways in which people make histories for themselves.

¹⁸ Groot, *Consuming History*, p. 13.

¹⁹ Huw Halstead, ‘“Two homelands and none”: belonging, alienation, and everyday citizenship with the expatriated Greeks of Turkey’. Under review.

²⁰ Huw Halstead, ‘“Ask the Assyrians, Armenians, Kurds”: transcultural memory and nationalism in Greek historical discourse on Turkey’, *History and Memory*, 30/2 (2018), pp. 3–39, at p. 22.

Let us return to the example of the Cyprus conflict. In common with the veterans from *Blood on the Green Line*, Greek Cypriots who experienced the fighting as soldiers and/or civilians often begin their oral testimonies with apologetic disclaimers that their personal experiences were too fragmentary, confused or insignificant to be of relevance to history. Yet, this belies the active efforts at sense- and meaning-making evident in their testimonies. Interviewees cross-reference different sources and make sense of their own personal trajectories by placing them within broader historical and narrative frameworks in an effort to tell a story of what happened to them that is palatable, meaningful and communicable. They attempt to associate retrospectively the sights and sounds of battle – the shells that landed nearby, the bullets that whizzed over their heads, the roar of aeroplanes and the trundle of tanks, the shifting fortunes of national flags watched from afar, the desertions of soldiers or flight of civilians – with rumours and hearsay circulating at the time and with what they have heard and read since. They also frequently evaluate their sources, typically placing higher value on eyewitness accounts from people they perceive to be reputable characters and on information that correlates with and gives shape to their own first-hand observations. In turn, these diverse sources of information are often assimilated to broader narrative frameworks of foreign conspiracy or internal betrayal, turning fragments into coherent and meaningful histories.²¹

Consider the following extract from my interview with Greek Cypriot Spiros, who was a student in Thessaloniki in Greece at the time of the 1974 Cyprus conflict. Here he is describing his efforts to return to Cyprus to fight by boarding a boat heading to the island with a large contingent of Greek soldiers:

Now, I don't know what happened, but by the morning the ship, instead of heading east, was sailing west and going very slowly, so there was a lot of confusion on board. Now, the commanding officer on the ship was [Greek officer Dimitris] Papapostolou [...] In the midst of the confusion, they started setting up Browning anti-aircraft guns on the deck, as if they were ready to repel an aerial attack, but we were just passengers and so we weren't told what was going on, we were just trying to interpret the evidence. Meanwhile, the television was working on the boat, and it talked about the [Turkish] landings that were happening [on Cyprus], the fighting that was going on, the diplomatic activity that was going on [...] Papapostolou had been on Cyprus for many years as head of the commandos, and had been involved in a lot of things there. He gathered us together and said, 'the Americans have stopped us'. He said, 'if it was still night and if there was just one boat, we'd have had a naval battle, because they've stopped us to inspect who's on the boat and I couldn't let them do that because we have soldiers on board'. So, heroic talk, and then someone said, 'so who was it who stopped us then?' And he said, 'it was our friends the Americans' [...] But, as I found out later from talking to people, it wasn't so, that's not what happened. But anyway, they took us to Rhodes.

²¹ Halstead, "'The pawns that they moved here and there'?".

Spiros manages to piece together a reasonably coherent and situated narrative out of his confusing and disorientating boat expedition. He does so by cross-referencing what he saw with his own eyes with what he thought he already knew about the key players, what the media were reporting as the events were unfolding, and what others told him at the time and since. He mistrusts the testimony of the commanding officer – ominously noting his infamy in Cyprus for involvement in certain ‘things’ – and prefers to take the word of his fellow passengers, who offer alternative explanations for the boat’s about-turn. Later in the interview he builds on this story by relaying other anecdotes from his time on the frontline when he finally made it to Cyprus, concluding that his country was most likely betrayed by high-ranking Greek officers aligned with the military dictatorship in Athens – men like Papapostolou – who sabotaged or botched the defence of the island. In this way, fragments become history.²²

The point here is not that non-historians necessarily get things right or deploy the kinds of critical thought and source contextualisation that would satisfy the standards of academic history. They often do not: examples abound in my ethnographic data of assertions, generalisations and selective use of evidence. Nor should it be imagined that agency in history-making in any way precludes the construction of regressive or canonical historical narratives. In a discussion of the everyday experience of nationhood, sociologist Jon Fox writes: ‘People are not always nationalist dupes. They are also thinking, sentient beings, capable of manipulating the nation in creative ways to suit their particular purposes. But sometimes they are dupes, on autopilot, with the nation supplying them with a pre-programmed cognitive map for negotiating a complex social world’.²³ He has a point. Yet, these two things are not necessarily always alternatives. Sometimes people are very *active* and *creative* in how they internalise and reproduce the pre-programmed narratives of power and privilege. It is, we might say, possible to be complicit in your own duping. I have elsewhere described what I call ‘versus’ videos on YouTube. These are short home-made clips targeting national others that are constructed by blending different times and places and meshing together diverse media. Images cribbed from search engines, historical footage and photography, cartoons and caricatures, music both traditional and modern, snippets from Hollywood film, popular memes and crudely edited maps are all melded together to stage fantasy battles between national protagonists and antagonists.²⁴ Even though the result is ultra-nationalistic and often extremely regressive and offensive, the historical work involved is active and sometimes quite creative.

²² Ibid.

²³ Jon Fox, ‘The edges of the nation’, *Nations and Nationalism*, 23/1 (2017), pp. 26–47, at p. 40.

²⁴ Huw Halstead, ‘“We did commit these crimes”: post-Ottoman solidarities, contested places, and Kurdish apology for the Armenian Genocide on Web 2.0’, *Memory Studies*, 14/3 (2021), pp. 634–49, at pp. 638–41, 645–6.

What I do want to suggest, therefore, is that people are often active agents in the construction of their histories and arrive at the versions of the past that they do for a reason. They have their own methodologies, however flawed these may sometimes be, and use their own sources, however partial or incompletely contextualised and analysed. This sense of method has consequences for how people respond to attempts to challenge or nuance the stories they tell. But, as the next section will show, there is more to it than this.

V

For professional historians, it may be seductive to imagine that if we can only get our rigorous academic histories out to people, these will displace or supplant the potentially misleading opinions about the past that people, lacking appropriate methodologies and sources, may currently hold. However, despite the reverence for professional history that my informants often express, in practice they are usually quite attached to the histories they have made for themselves. Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen talk about how people, in making their own histories, ‘build bridges between personal pasts and larger historical stories’ and accordingly ‘personalize the public past’.²⁵ As people suture their own experiences and memories to broader historical events and narrative frameworks, finding context, meaning and exegesis for their personal trials and tribulations, they invest abstract entities, events and ideas with personal resonance and attach to these their sense of self and belonging. I describe this as a process of first *excavating* and then *backfilling* the past.²⁶

I have already briefly mentioned the expatriated Greeks of Istanbul, who left their places of birth in Turkey in the years after 1955 as a result of persecution by the Turkish state. Prominent in their memories are the 6–7 September 1955 Istanbul Riots, a state-sponsored attack on the city’s non-Muslim populations that resulted in widespread damage, injury, sexual assault including rapes and several deaths. After arriving in Greece, many in the community felt that there was both popular ignorance of – and official indifference to – their plight. Accordingly, community groups representing the expatriates each year observe the anniversary of the attack in the style of a national holiday. But they also mark the anniversary of another, more distant historical event: the 1453 Fall of Constantinople, a hugely significant moment in Greek nationalism that is nevertheless, like the 1955 riots, absent from the official commemorative calendar of the Greek state.

In much of this commemorative discourse – and particularly in that of the oldest expatriate organisation, the Constantinopolitan Society – the two historical events become palimpsestically linked, such that the events of 1955 come to be seen as a reliving or continuation of those of

²⁵ Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*, p. 13.

²⁶ Halstead, *Greeks without Greece*, pp. 233–5.

1453.²⁷ This restages the local experience of the Greeks of Istanbul as a Greek national tragedy, thereby not only making the events of 1955 more immediately recognisable and intelligible to a Greek domestic audience, but also enabling the expatriates themselves to give broader meaning and significance to raw personal experiences.

In the process, the distant history of 1453 is accorded contemporary resonance, not just because it is expedient packaging or a useful tool for thinking about more contemporary events, but because those concerned feel that they have in some sense relived the past. Personal memories of the Istanbul Riots are transposed onto, or superimposed over, the fall of Byzantium to the Ottoman empire in 1453, such that individuals might come to speak or even feel as though they have a personal connection to events from the distant past. At the Constantinopolitan Society's 1981 memorial day, for instance, Greek journalist and witness to the riots Giorgos Karagiorgas delivered a description of his personal experiences in 1955 that was steeped in remediated language and imagery derived from archetypal representations of the Fall of Constantinople:

[I have described] life as I tasted it in the streets of the city, in its alleys, when herds of breathless people ran hastily to avoid the slaughter, those hours of the second catastrophe of Hellenism after the Fall. And as then, the sun over Constantinople darkened, when the Queen of cities was delivered to the hands of the Turks, and I heard in those unspeakable hours a voice brought from THEN cry slowly and moan: 'sun shudder and earth groan, Constantinople has been overcome and the hour of our defence is over ...'²⁸

The events of 1453 are first *excavated* to serve as a hollowed-out vessel for memories of 1955, then subsequently *backfilled* with personal resonance such that those distant events come to take on a more personal meaning.²⁹ This has knock-on effects. In more recent years, a newer expatriate organisation has attempted to reconfigure the significance of the 1453 commemoration in expatriate discourse, seeking to break the association with 1955 and with Greek nationalism and to decode the true significance of the Fall in terms of the influence of Byzantium on Western civilisation. However, their efforts have encountered strong resistance from a segment of the community for whom the meaning of 1453 lies really in the events of 1955.³⁰

For another example of this process, we can return to Cyprus and those Greek Cypriots who turn personal fragmentary memories into

²⁷ I adopt the notion of the memory palimpsest from Max Silverman, *Palimpsestic Memory: The Holocaust and Colonialism in French and Francophone Fiction and Film* (New York, 2013).

²⁸ Giorgos Karagiorgas, Speech at the Constantinopolitan Society event for the 26th anniversary of the Istanbul Riots, Constantinopolitan Society Archive (1981). The quotation is most likely adapted from the *Chronicon Maius*, an account of the Fall of Constantinople authored by Makarios Melissenos in the sixteenth century.

²⁹ Halstead, *Greeks without Greece*, pp. 148–51.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 151–5.

meaningful histories by adopting frameworks of conspiracy and betrayal. It is beyond the scope of this piece to assess in detail the validity of these various claims. Suffice it to say here that allegations of foreign interference by players such as Britain and the United States and/or premeditated treachery by the Greek military junta and its far-right Greek Cypriot allies have proliferated on Cyprus since the 1974 conflict through politics, media and more informal everyday talk.

This is evident in an interview I conducted with a man named Sofronios who joined the general mobilisation after the fighting broke out on 20 July 1974. Sofronios sought to account for his personal experiences of military chaos, disorganisation and defeat through a conspiracy narrative alleging that the Greek dictatorship had pre-planned the division of the island in conjunction with Britain, Turkey and the United States:

In those first few days, people had a great will to fight the Turks, but then that evaporated when they saw that everything was betrayed, it was all organised beforehand to work out that way, it was a conspiracy [...] From the development of illegality in Cyprus, it was apparent that the Greek junta had close connections with the American CIA, with Britain, and with Turkey, and that they'd agreed to divide Cyprus. We believe that the junta had close ties with America and Britain, and had secret agreements maybe with Turkey, and that the invasion was a plan of all of them to solve the Cypriot problem by division.

As our conversation continued at some length, I, playing the role of Portelli's 'dissenting interviewer', gently challenged these narratives by presenting evidence from those historians who see the events on Cyprus in 1974 more in terms of international realpolitik and/or sheer incompetence on the part of the Greek dictatorship rather than in terms of conspiracy.³¹ If you like, to borrow Sayer's terms mentioned above, I played the role of the professional historian 'decoding history's underlying significance' (or at least one interpretation of it) to someone outside the profession. Sofronios conceded that I had made valid points and that much of his narrative was based on whispers in the media and from his contemporaries rather than smoking-gun documentation. Here and there he nuanced the contours of his narrative by joining up pieces from what I said with fragments of personal experience or information acquired elsewhere. Yet, tellingly, he was reluctant to abandon his version of history, ultimately drawing a line under our discussion by stating, 'but Cyprus feels that it was betrayed'.

Why this reluctance to abandon a narrative that he had admitted he lacked compelling evidence to support? One could suggest that it is born of stubborn intransigence on Sofronios's part or, equally, that it simply reflects the limits of my argumentative skills. However, there are also

³¹ Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison, WI, 1997), p. 12.

affective autobiographical reasons for Sofronios to be quite attached to his own decoding of the history of Cyprus in 1974. Through his chosen narrative framework, the explanatory gaps in his vivid and quite painful experiences of chaos, confusion and helplessness have been backfilled with stories of betrayal, thereby giving his fragmentary memories greater shape and meaning. Like Spiros above, Sofronios's version of history was not merely arrived at unthinkingly or simplistically but was rather an active and composite construction. It is a narrative, honed over the years since 1974 by talking with others and imbibing the broader historiocopia circulating around the Cyprus affair, that involved a complex interweaving of truncated personal experience, public rumour, and some perfectly sound historical knowledge such as the fact that the CIA has a history of being implicated in the toppling of regimes abroad. While he was quite prepared to debate the fine points of the historiography or the deficiencies of the available sources, he was unwilling to abandon an expedient and comfortable container for his personal experiences simply because of the intervention of a professional historian. However much his laconic closing remark, 'but Cyprus feels that it was betrayed', may sound like a casual assertion or a 'mere opinion', it is not experienced as such by the narrator.

VI

Public history is something that is happening all the time, all around us. Historians are far from irrelevant in this process. Their work is a prominent node within the historiocopia network, and informants I have worked with often profess reverence for the work of historians, if sometimes also mixed with distrust of 'expertise'. However, people also often behave like their own historians. They craft histories that are complex, textured and personalised. This has significant implications for public history work conducted by professional historians.

In order to influence public discourses on history through our interactions with other history-makers, it is a prerequisite that we recognise and study, firstly, the agency of people in excavating the past for their own purposes and with their own methods; secondly, how in the process people backfill the public past with personal resonance (and vice versa backfill the personal past with public meanings); and, thirdly, how they therefore typically already have a keen sense of what they consider history's significance to be before any direct intervention by a professional historian. Accordingly, we should take people's everyday history-making seriously, particularly when we encounter narratives that we consider to be misleading, flawed, or troubling. After all, understanding how these narratives have been arrived at, and why, through a process of excavation and backfilling, they become significant to the narrator, will be critical to any successful attempt to challenge them. By studying this everyday public history, historians gain a fuller understanding of the power of the past

in society, a greater capacity to comprehend and challenge problematic historical narratives, and a more productive entanglement between their work and people's everyday lives.

PEER REVIEW

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