

BOOK REVIEW

Cyprus – across the cultures

Reviewed by Isabelle Ioannides¹

Echoes from the Dead Zone Across the Cyprus Divide

Yannis Papadakis. London/ New York: I. B. Tauris, 2005

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Who is to blame for the conflict? This is the question that Yiannis Papadakis, Greek-Cypriot Assistant Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Cyprus, tries to answer in his latest book *Echoes from the Dead Zone: Across the Cyprus Divide*. It is a question that cuts across cultures, regions and time – and rings familiar to many brought up or having lived in conflict-torn societies. In the last fifty years, Cyprus has faced an anti-colonial struggle, post-colonial chaos, internecine fighting and hatred, civil war, invasion, occupation, population displacements and physical partition. The so-called Green Line and the United Nations buffer zone, also known as the ‘Dead Zone’, constitute the physical expression of the divide between the Greek- and Turkish-Cypriot communities. Given the territorial realities and the consequent absence of direct contact between the two communities for an entire generation, the narrative of Cyprus’ recent history has created intolerance, attitudes and prejudices against ‘the other’, which run deep and distort the way ‘the other’ is understood.

Most books on the Cyprus conflict have addressed the diplomatic imbroglio and examined ‘big power’ conspiracy theories. For the first time, Yiannis Papadakis, firmly rooted in the Greek-Cypriot community, sets out to discover ‘the other’, the much maligned Turks, on a human level. Through narratives collected during fieldwork in Istanbul, Turkey, on both sides of Cyprus and in Pyla/ Pile – a mixed village inside the ‘Dead Zone’ – where he lived with the ‘other side’ for lengthy periods of time, Papadakis recounts his journey to self-discovery in an effort to know himself beyond prejudices. The author delves into the two communities, locked in their mutually contemptuous embrace, to explore their common humanity, shine a light on the mistakes made by both sides, and understand what has divided them. He talks to ordinary Cypriots about the heartache and horror through which they have been over the last 50 years. He is not afraid to question his own preconceived ideas and those of his compatriots from both sides in an effort to bridge the cultural and political divides of competing Turkish- and Greek-Cypriot discourses, aspirations and expectations. The book contains numerous

first-hand accounts of conversations with nationalists from both sides, and but also with people in both communities who see themselves first and foremost as Cypriot.

Papadakis first describes his travels to Constantinople to learn the language of those living on the ‘other side’ of his separated island. His romantic idea of Constantinople is replaced by the reality of Istanbul, when he discovers that Turkey is not the place of his once imagined demonology. Apart from the official discourse justifying the mistakes of history, he also observes, to his surprise, the humanity of Turkish people. Armed with new insights, he returns to Cyprus to focus on a particular area of Nicosia, where the people who used to live together in one neighbourhood found themselves separated by a ‘Dead Zone’, two armies and a United Nations force. He explores the views and misunderstandings of his own community before deciding to explore the discourses of ‘the other’ and moving to Nicosia on the other side of the ‘Dead Zone’. He is quickly confronted to the official Turkish-Cypriot discourse, its efforts to rationalise violence, but also uncovers the oppressed ‘murmurs’ resisting the demonisation of the Greek-Cypriots. His stay in Pyla/ Pile, a mixed village in Cyprus within the ‘Dead Zone’ that constitutes a (contested) experiment of the co-existence of the two communities, was the only way for the author to continue this research on the Turkish-Cypriot community, given the rejection of his request to renew his stay in the Turkish-Cypriot side. Papadakis is the only scholar to have conducted in-depth research on this unique village, the dynamics of co-existence and the perception of the two communities on this project.

The author’s journey to the various sides of the ‘Dead Zone’ also constitutes voyages to the various zones of the dead, the realms of memory, and history. Papadakis forces himself to listen to the perspectives of Turkish-Cypriots and mainland Turks, and he finds himself in a dead zone of identities as he is slowly distrusted by his own community—at least by those who identify more with their ‘Greekness’ than their ‘Cypriotness’. In the end, the author recognises that it is impossible to answer the question ‘who is to blame’

since there is not only one version of history or one identity, especially in societies where the past is filled with violence and counter-violence. But as Papadakis explains, “The problem was not the presence of many histories and identities, but that they were so divided by Dead Zones, with little possibility of dialogue between them.” (p 234) The author comes to an obvious, yet much disregarded by political elites, conclusion: compromise can really only come from Cypriots themselves. If they have the courage and political will to see the other side as human beings and not merely as ciphers and caricatures then there is still hope for bringing the two communities together.

This book is much needed in Cyprus where prejudices are still to a great extent prevalent. But it is also a must-read for scholars and students of nationalism and ethnic conflict, who are interested in the application of Benedict Anderson’s seminal work *Imagined Communities*² and Ernest Gellner’s *Nations and Nationalism*³. Furthermore, the depth of empirical evidence and fieldwork provides an example of the difficulties faced by researchers and students conducting dangerous fieldwork in their own conflict-torn societies. For the general public and the politically-aware reader, this book constitutes a guide to self-knowledge, tolerance and humanism.

Maps of Nicosia, Takhtakallas, the ‘Dead Zone’, and Pyla/ Pile would have provided the reader with a visual image of the physical divide of the communities and rendered the book stronger. Perhaps the weakest point is the Postscript, where Papadakis understandingly feels the necessity to comment on the recent events on the island, namely the results of the referendum on the proposed solution to the Cyprus issue – the so-called Anan Plan – and the recent integration of the Republic of Cyprus into the European Union. This is the only time when the author seems to drift into the trap of high politics

² Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

³ Gellner, Ernest, *Nations and Nationalism* (London: Blackwell, 1983).

and lose the human and narrative approach to his story-telling. Despite these few weaknesses, this book is moving, sometimes humorous and always a fascinating account of a journey across the 'Dead Zone'. ■