

## FOCUS: Excavating Nicosia's Buffer Zone

### DIVERGENT HISTORIES AND THE CYPRUS PROBLEM

The rationale for studying contested sites and histories through an investigation of place-based memories is connected to the nature of official historical narratives, where certain events, chronologies, and perspectives are remembered while others remain unregistered—officially relegated to the realm of the forgotten. The Cyprus Problem today remains unresolved and the fate of the Buffer Zone, which stretches for 180 kilometers through the island, remains suspended; but perhaps the most contested terrain of all in Cyprus today is that of history. Official Turkish-Cypriot and Greek-Cypriot historical narratives represent the contested past in starkly different ways.

Before describing the main points of this divergence, a general historical chronology must be laid out. Nicosia has a long history as a capital city, serving as the seat of power of the Lusignans, Venetians, Ottomans, and the British, and today it is concurrently the capital of two republics: the Republic of Cyprus (ROC) in the Greek-Cypriot south, and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). The city is known as Lefkosia (Greek) and Lefkoşa (Turkish, pronounced Lefkosha). Ottoman rule, established in 1571, was ceded to the British in 1878. Throughout the British period ethnic groups were administered separately, resulting in completely separate systems of education. The Greek education system stressed Hellenism, and nurtured the beginnings of a desire for *Enosis*, or union with Greece.<sup>1</sup> This was actively pursued in an anti-colonial

movement from 1955 to 1959 with Archbishop Makarios as the political figurehead of the movement and EOKA, the National Organization of Cypriot Fighters, its military force. The Turkish minority, then only 18% of the island's population, fearful of a future as Greek subjects, forwarded the option of *Taksim*, or partition of the island. Turkey provided support in terms of arms and training of the *Türk Mukavemet Teşkilatı*, the Turkish Resistance Organization (TMT). Instead, diplomatic negotiations led to the establishment of the united Republic of Cyprus in 1960, which lasted for only three years before dissolving into conflict and physical separation of the groups in 1963.<sup>2</sup>

The period from 1963 to 1974 was one of intercommunal strife and violence. During these years of insecurity most Turkish-Cypriots gathered together in enclaves, the largest one in Lefkoşa. A Greek-Cypriot imposed blockade limited the entry of food and supplies.<sup>3</sup> In 1974, Archbishop Makarios, the Republic's legal leader, was overthrown in a coup backed by the military junta in Greece. Nicos Sampson, who had a reputation for acts of violence against Turkish-Cypriots from the EOKA years,<sup>4</sup> was installed as the new president. In response, Turkish forces entered Cyprus in 1974, gaining control of 37% of the island.<sup>5</sup> Declared a sovereign republic in 1983, the TRNC has never been officially recognized by any country other than Turkey, which maintains a large military presence on the island. The borders remained closed, with few residents ever able to cross to the other side, until crossing points were opened in 2003.

Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot versions of history present these events quite differently, with historical narratives constructed using different key dates. Officially, Greek-Cypriots are commanded *not* to forget their homes in the north—the words “*Den Xebno*,” “I Don't Forget,” a constant instructive stream in the background, appearing on the nightly television news and in school textbooks.<sup>6</sup> The official stance of *rapprochement* influences Greek-Cypriots to refer back to an idealized past, a time of living together “like brothers” in one community. What is problematic about this is that periods of intercommunal violence are forgotten, especially the period of 1963–1974, which is not widely discussed or covered in history textbooks in the south. In the north however, history generally starts at this point.

In Greek-Cypriot history the war, the troubles, the notion of refugees begins with the Turkish “invasion” of 1974. For Turkish-Cypriots, however, this period began in 1963, when many of them became refugees,

leaving their villages to settle in several enclaves throughout the island. They do not officially remember previous years of peaceful coexistence. For a large part, official memory begins with the founding of their homeland in 1974—with the Turkish intervention officially referred to as the “happy peace operation.” “Officially Turkish-Cypriots had to forget their old homes in the south. Talk of a past life with Greek-Cypriots could only include the bad times. Now they lived in their homeland.”<sup>7</sup> Two kinds of forgetting were required to create this new state. Turkish-Cypriots had to forget their lives and homes before 1974 as well as the presence of Greek-Cypriots in the north; town and street names were changed to erase them from the land. Yiannis Papadakis’s comparative study of history textbooks in Cyprus reveals that in most Greek-Cypriot schoolbooks there is only brief description of the interethnic violence of the 1960s, which is represented mainly as aggression by “Turks” against “Greeks.” In the north, however, most of the emphasis of history textbooks falls on the enclave period of 1963–1974, which is described in great detail. Emphasis is placed on mass killings and displacements of Turkish-Cypriots, with no mention of Greek-Cypriot suffering; “this version of the history of Cyprus legitimated the partitionist aims of the Right through the argument that history proves that the two communities can never live together.”<sup>8</sup>

This divergence in historical chronologies is not confined to school texts alone, but also extends to academic historical studies. One Greek-Cypriot author writes that there was no danger during this period for Turkish-Cypriots. Rather, “the Turks fortified themselves in their own area...to further their partitioning aims they forced several thousand innocent and contented Turkish peasants to abandon their farms and animals and move into their overcrowded quarter of Nicosia.”<sup>9</sup> In contrast, a Turkish author states that “during the intercommunal violence of 1963–1964, Turkish-Cypriots abandoned ninety-eight of their 233 settlements and fled to the Turkish controlled enclaves.”<sup>10</sup> These contested discourses have the power to generate understandings of history in younger generations, and play a large role in the perpetuation of division.

Recent important work on Cyprus has attempted to make sense of these divergent histories. Two excellent anthropological studies by Yiannis Papadakis and Rebecca Bryant provide insight into place and memory in divided Cyprus. They have managed the difficult task of working with both communities. Papadakis’s 2005 study, *Echoes from the Dead Zone*, is organized around the stories of individuals living in several

Nicosia neighborhoods. This study was the first to examine memories and attitudes towards history as they are inscribed in the city, from both sides of the divide. Ultimately, Papadakis provides an overview of social memory in divided Cyprus, and most importantly elaborates upon the divergent historical narratives and their impact on official renderings of pre-division Nicosia. *The Past in Pieces: Belonging in the New Cyprus*, Bryant's 2010 study of the village of Lapithos, now named Lapta, also examines divergent memories and histories related to this formerly mixed village now located in the TRNC. She highlights important changes in the relationship to the past following the opening of the crossing points in 2003. Other ethnographic work has explored Greek-Cypriot<sup>11</sup> or Turkish-Cypriot<sup>12</sup> communities in specific sites and villages.

Although the development of Nicosia has been well researched and documented up to the end of the colonial period and independence in 1960,<sup>13</sup> there is little scholarship that deals with the post-independence and divided city.<sup>14</sup> Some information about these complicated years of political strife in the city from 1955 to 1974 is available, but not in a comprehensive study. To understand these years it is necessary to look at accounts of the changing political situation as it was unfolding in the city. For instance, Charles Foley's account of his years in Nicosia in the 1950s as editor of the *Times of Cyprus* newspaper,<sup>15</sup> and the memoir of Brigadier Michael Harbottle, Chief of Staff of UNFICYP<sup>16</sup> from 1966–1968,<sup>17</sup> are quite illuminating as to important changes taking root in the city—changes that would later influence its current form. This form remains connected to patterns of remembering and forgetting.

## NOTES

1. Bryant (2004), Papadakis (2008).
2. Joseph (1997).
3. Borowiec (2000, p. 63).
4. Bolukbasi (1988, p. 185).
5. It has been difficult for historians to come to agreement regarding the events of 1974, and some feel that the Turkish reaction could have been avoided through diplomatic channels left unutilized. Criticism has been levelled at the USA for not discouraging the Greek Junta, or forestalling Turkish military action by a clear refusal to recognize the Sampson regime, suggesting that statements from the USA and the UK could have limited the scope of the military intervention (Borowiec 2000, p. 96). See also Bolukbasi (1988).

6. Papadakis (2005, p. 61).
7. Papadakis (2005, p. 149).
8. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
9. Pantelli (1990, p. 198).
10. Bolukbasi (1988, p. 69).
11. Loizos (1977, 1982).
12. Bryant and Hatay (2008), Navaro-Yashin (2006, 2010).
13. Demi (1997), Keshishian (1978), Leventis (2005), Maratheftis (1997).
14. Attilades (1981), Hocknell (2001).
15. Foley (1964).
16. UNFICYP refers to the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus.
17. Harbottle (1970).