

GERMAN CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY, THREE GENERATIONS LATER

VICTIMS ON ONE SIDE, AGGRESSORS ON THE OTHER

SOME PSYCHOANALYTIC REFLECTIONS SPURRED ON BY THE MASSACRE AT DISTOMO

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Paul Walker

Very recently, on the last days of January, a large part of humanity paid tribute to the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp, 75 years on. Almost three generations. Auschwitz has become and remains the symbol of *the* crime against humanity, although it is but the most famous of the 42.500 “prisons”, ghettos, extermination camps, concentration and labour camps that were designed and executed by Nazi Germany in occupied Europe. A Germany in an identity crises with a psychotic dimension. This Germany – Germany has become responsible, not only for the death of tens of millions of human beings, but also for the traumatisation of an even greater number of people, for whom the death of one or more loved ones has upset their lives for ever... A mental representation of such a real event seems impossible to me. However, all this is not a nightmare but entirely real...

Zeta Papandreou, affected by the traumatic fate of victims in general, and of her compatriots’ specifically, and desiring a more appeased future for the generations to come, has dedicated many years (alongside her work as a professor) to approach and study this reality.

In this endless and unspeakable panorama of crimes and suffering, caused by the German aggressor of the Nazi period, she decided to focus on the massacre of Distomo of the 10th of June 1944. She researched not only the historical events, but also and mainly their

consequences for the victims and their descendants, the different forms of traumatic memory, as well as the possible ways of reconciliation with the aggressors, namely their heirs. Her book *Τραυματική μνήμη και Δημόσια Ιστορία: Δίστομο 1944-2018* displays this immense effort.

It would take too long to present a more detailed summary of this work, so I will only cite the contents of the chapters that comprise it.

The *first* chapter chronicles the massacre through the German military documents and the narrations of eyewitnesses.

In the *second* one the author studies the different testimonies, she comments on them through a psychological point of view and analyses the different forms of memorization, as well as the transgenerational and intergenerational phenomena. One of the most essential sources are the interviews of the local population conducted, between 1944 and 2010, by massacre survivor (as we will later-on see) Argyris Sfoundouris.

The *third* chapter is dedicated to the memory of the German occupation and its consequences.

In the *fourth* chapter the author describes the legal procedures undertaken by the victims, especially through the Court of Justice of the European Union and the European Court of Human Rights, in order to obtain material compensations.

The *fifth* chapter is dedicated to the description of examples of human rights' violations in other countries, like Rwanda, South Africa, Argentina and Chile. The author is especially interested here in the methods used in order for these countries to get over the effects of the violations, as well as in the path that will lead these countries to democracy.

In the *sixth* and final chapter the author analyses the relations between Greece and Germany, presents opinions and attitudes concerning Nazi crimes, and addresses questions about ethical compensation and forgiveness.

She insists, on the one hand, on the benefit of an international reconciliation, and on the other, on the importance of the concern for the "restoration of justice", using the life of Argyris Sfoundouris as well as my own, as examples.

Before I express some psychoanalytic reflections concerning these key themes, I would like to present these two persons.

Zeta Papandreou's research soon led her to Argyris Sfoundouris, an eyewitness. He was only 4 years old when the German SS crimes ripped his life in two: the one before and the one after. Permanently. He was no longer the same. He could not be.

Stefan Haupt's excellent 2006 film documentary *Ein Lied für Argyris* (A song for Argyris), German television interviews, and his 2015 book *Trauer um Deutschland. Reden und Aufsätze eines Überlebenden* (Cry for Germany. Interviews and publications of a survivor), as well as his biography *Ich bleibe immer der vierjährige Junge von damals* (I am still the 4 year-old boy of the past), written in 2016 by the German journalist Patric Seibel, all verify what he

suffered personally, his efforts to inform the German public of the suffering of the Greek people, and his fight with the official authorities for justice to be done for the victims.

Through his work, Mr. Sfoundouris allows us to deeply open up his soul and face his experiences, his efforts to live, and despite everything to “grow”.

That is why Zeta Papandreou was particularly motivated for a meeting with him. Because he did not let himself become trapped in the negative consequences of trauma (i.e. a “perpetual mourning”), but instead he tried to develop a good foundation for discussion and for accepting expressions of regret and demands for reconciliation from the descendants of the aggressors.

I MYSELF met Zeta Papandreou for the first time in Thessaloniki in 2015, for an interview. She found in my book *Ο τόπος του Εγκλήματος. Γερμανία, η ανοίκεια πατρίδα*, questions, concerns and analyses similar to her own. I had heard of the Distomo massacre as one of the hundreds of Greek villages, where the German army or the SS (supposedly as retaliation for “resistance actions”) slaughtered (frequently in an absolutely sadistic manner) almost all inhabitants, looted their properties and burned their homes down.

I did not know Argyris Sfoundouris at all. I am thankful to Zeta for talking to me about him, and for introducing him to me in 2018. She found common points between us: Not only the concern for “restoration of justice”, the aspiration to explore our common experience in greater depth and to make it comprehensible to others, but also the desire to put ourselves in each other’s position.

However, fate had “placed” us in antagonising positions. One: a surviving victim, the other: descendant of the aggressors.

Yes, whether I want it or not, I am a descendant of the aggressors.

At the time of my *Cry Germany* lecture, my grandson had the exact same age as Argyris at the time of the disaster. Thus, I imagined a tell a tragedy entering my grandson’s life... I admit that, for an instant, I felt surprise at the automatic denial to pursue this fantasy that seemed unbearable... I had, therefore, noted the existence within me of this “defence reflex”, so there are some questions to be further discussed.

Every time that I plunge, even a little bit, into the experience of that child, or the experience of other witnesses, victims of Germany, I am invaded by an immense sorrow accompanied by a sense of shame and guilt. Shame for the German people and their murdering insanity, shame for their behaviour afterwards: the denial, the avoidance or the minimisation of the crimes committed, and shame for the absence or the lack of empathy for the victims and their descendants. Shame even for myself, for not being able to *really* measure the extent of the Nazi crimes and their impact, until my forties. -I had adopted, I think, the general attitude of the majority of Germans in the 80s. The expression of a desolation and a consternation were real though, and in the face of the physical discomfort threatening to overcome me, I quickly ate the fruit avoiding any real examination in greater depth. I was also comforted by the fact that I was born after 1945. However, that does not ease the weight of war, the fact that the shocking revelation had not come through my own construct, but through a very close being (a French) who put me on the track with a very

simple question: I had retrieved my grandparents' journals where they detailed their own suffering as refugees from the eastern lands of the German empire in January 1945. The question "Did your grandparents ever mention the suffering that their country inflicted on its victims...?" Suddenly, something that I had always avoided thinking of, had broken the barriers of suppression and had profoundly shaken my image for myself and for them: They had never done it!

From that moment on, it was impossible for me to continue reading their journals. The natural evidence in my way of thinking was shattered... and simultaneously my reading time became almost exclusively dedicated to the testimonies of our victims. Thus, I took a mental and physical path that led me, more than 15 years later, to document them in my book *The crime scene. Germany, the disturbingly strange homeland (Le lieu du crime. L'Allemagne, l'inquiétante étrange patrie)*, that first appeared in France in 2011, then in Greece in 2014 and finally in Germany in 2017.

Being a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst (with the experience of 8 years of didactic analyses at the time) I was, no doubt, capable of listening and of feeling empathy for my patients, so I allowed this self-protection from the suppression and avoidance to act in me, like a real identification with the victims of my delirious and murderous German country!

In the works of Mr. Sfoundouris and Mrs. Papandreou, there is not only the question of the initial traumatization from the crimes committed, but precisely that of a *second traumatization*, caused by this reflexive self-protection from the aggressors, their representatives and their descendants. The absence of consciousness regarding this reflex, demonstrates according to Mr. Sfoundouris an "ethical immaturity" and a "lack of moral education". I fully share his point of view.

This "ethical immaturity" surprises us especially when we observe it in people who are well brought-up and perfectly educated. My maternal grandparents (I have not met my paternal ones) and my mother were a part of that. During my 30 years of living in Germany, I was constantly confronted by this category of "respectable" individuals, especially among my teachers.

After having presented these concrete examples of the experiences of a victim on the one hand, and of a descendant of the aggressors on the other, I will now concentrate on some PSYCHOANALYTIC REFLECTIONS regarding key themes explored by Zeta Papandreou:

The theme of HISTORY and TRAUMATIC MEMORY

FROM THE VICTIM'S SIDE

Here there is no "prehistory" to the *history of trauma*, in neither the victim's personal life nor in that of his ascendants. It is an event from elsewhere, a "historical fact" in the context of war that causes immense injury as well as new causal chain. There is no personal or family responsibility. Thereafter, the *memory*, the "representation" of the traumatic event is not a matter of choice either. It is imposed. When daytime sometimes permits a distraction, at night-time, the event returns time and time again... impossible to escape from:

"I am always the 4 year-old child..." Mr. Sfoundouris clearly confesses more than 70 years afterwards.

The *trauma* marks a stop in the life, all the more when it is associated with the termination of the life of the closest beings. The little boy, like his parents shares something like an eternity. He who continues living is a different person...

The trauma inflicted by the aggression of specific people, even if they act inside an ideological system of war, very naturally causes hate and an impulse for vengeance...

I recall, among other examples, that of a Parisian doctor, who was a survivor of the Shoah: He spontaneously confesses, during an interview, the desire of vengeance; that he would like to launch an atomic bomb on Germany...! Then, with a pensive smile, he adds that he would never do it... His words testify to the physical effort that we call mourning. A very painful and often very long effort.

In their books, Zeta Papandreou and Argyris Sfoundouris demonstrate how the success of such an effort depends on the attitude and the behaviour of the aggressor or his representatives.

FROM THE AGGRESSOR'S SIDE

The history: We can note that the more a subject's behaviour is perverted, excessive, or inadequate in relation to the situation that causes it, the more it is instigated by an unconscious motive, whose origin lies in the subject's traumatic prehistory.

The history of the Distomo massacre (used always as an example) probably contains, at least in part, a repetition, a transfer to the present of an intimate unconscious history of each aggressor. Some enjoyed inflicting atrocious tortures, some did not shoot, some shot at the sides, and some told children to hide... Despite the fact that collective action conducted under military orders, is a situation that reduces individual consciousness and facilitates the release of aggressive urges, the individual behaviours vary.

The tragedy of transferring a suppressed trauma to another innocent being ("*close*" beings in general, that are known, "*accessible*" and in a "*weak position*") is all the easier since the subject has no conscious memory of the traumatisation in his prehistory. "*Prehistory*", because only our body and psyche inscribe what happens to us; our mind suppresses... Without this we might not have survived... The prerequisite for not continuing to transfer our traumatisations is the recovery of their memory and consciousness.

When for the victim the memory of the traumatic event imposes itself on him, and pursues him, for the aggressor the spontaneous reflex is the refusal of memory, the suppression, the denial, the minimisation, the distancing; a variety of defences in order to continue living "*like before*". The aggressor's psyche has the tendency to refute every "*rupture*" in his life. The crimes committed are not counted among the voluntary actions, because according to the aggressor, they were executed "*on order*" and by "*duty of obedience*"...

To *conclude*, let's touch on the theme and question of the RECONCILIATION BETWEEN THE VICTIMS AND THE AGGRESSORS.

Zeta Papandreou is particularly preoccupied by this crucial question; she develops it in her work and examines the possible conditions.

The massacre at Distomo was not followed by a reconciliation between victims and aggressors for the generations concerned. On the contrary, as in a great number of other cases, the aggressors, those who were directly responsible and their representatives committed an additional crime: the denial, the refusal to recognise the crimes committed, the absence of legal proceedings for the criminals, the decades long absence of public expression of regret and compassion... Thus, inflicting a second trauma on the victims and their descendants.

It was only 70 years after the massacre (in 2014), that an official of the German State, president Gauck, visited Distomo (and the other Greek martyr villages), to ask for forgiveness on behalf of the German people.

... and still... When I read or hear a German "official" speaking out: "*Wir wollen die Versöhnung*" (we desire reconciliation), I hear: "we are not responsible, leave us in peace; let's be friends and let's close this annoying chapter..." Daring to speak and think like this, proves their lack of real empathy towards the victims and their inability to identify. The victims and their descendants cannot "close" their experience, cannot "close" the memory of their traumas. These are trans-generationally imposed on them against their will...

In my opinion it is not for the aggressor or his descendants to propose reconciliation, to "want to be friends" etc. The only path for the aggressor and his descendants towards the victims is identification with them. In other words, to permanently attempt to put themselves in their place, to listen to or read what they have experienced and what they want to say...The aggressors' descendants must learn to live with the suffering that this identification causes... In any case it is but a small fraction of that of their victims'...

In the end it is for the victim, and his descendants or representatives to decide...

Through these analyses, Zeta Papandreou clearly demonstrates that the essential condition for a potential "healing" of the victims, and for the beginning of a "healing" of the relations between the two camps (victims and aggressors) is the precise recognition of the crimes committed, as well as a genuine compassion for the victims and their descendants. We must also add that this recognition must absolutely include awareness of *this second crime* caused by any form of denial or avoidance after the fact, including the following generations.

Effectively I CONCLUDE that despite my feelings of shame and guilt, I cannot consider myself responsible for the first crime, but for the second I am, we are; my generation, those who follow it, and those who follow them...

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