Renegotiations of Twentieth-Century History Access to 'Sensitive' Government Records and Archives in Greece

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After a seven-year period of military dictatorship and following the reestablishment of parliamentary democracy in 1974, historical studies have been a continuously developing field in Greece. Similarly as in Spain and Portugal at much the same time, archives became accessible for academic historians. The general public's expectations about the establishment of historical 'truth' concerning the recent past were pressing.[1] It is against this backdrop that we propose to review the changing conditions of historical research and especially the challenges involved in gaining access to primary sources, in particular those related to 'national matters'. We will try to show the ways in which the particularities of the Greek case have to do with the history of civil rights in the country in the twentieth century, both during the interwar years and – more dramatically – during the Cold War period.

The archives considered 'sensitive' pertain to both external and internal conflicts of the last century: first, archives related to the long series of wars – the Balkan Wars (1912–1913), the First World War (1914–1918), the Greek-Turkish War (1922–1924), and the Second World War (1940–1945); second, archives related to internal conflicts, most important among them those concerning the surveillance of socialists and communists in the interwar years, the Civil War period (1946–1949), and its aftermath until 1974.

The wars and conflicts of the twentieth century are not only remembered as 'history'. They are a part of people's collective memory in that they have repeatedly led to illness, death, and the displacement of hundreds of thousands both across borders as well as from villages and small towns to the cities. They have disrupted family ties, trade, and agricultural and industrial activities, repeatedly ruining the economy and rendering the country dependent on external aid. Archival collections of documents concerning these conflicts and their social and economic consequences can be divided into several categories:

[1] For an insightful comparison of the Greek, Spanish, and Portuguese experiences in the post-1974 era, see Nikiforos Diamandouros, Cultural Dualism and Political Change in Postauthoritarian Greece (February 1994), URL: <http://www.march.es/ceacs/publicaciones/working/archivos/1994_50.pdf>. How the transition to democracy after 1974 was depicted in the Greek, Spanish and Portuguese historiography is shown by Ilaria Porciani/Lutz Raphael (eds), *Atlas of European Historiography. The Making of a Profession 1800–2005*, London 2010.

Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History 10 (2013), S. 131-139

ISSN 1612–6033

- First, archives related to Greek foreign policy and international relations: these are collections of the Service of Diplomatic and Historical Archives (Y.D.I.A.) of the Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, established since 1910. They contain documents from the interwar period related to the territorial expansion of the Greek state as well as sensitive archives concerning minority issues and international politics. They also include 'classified' documents from the Second World War, the Greek Civil War, the Cold War period, and Greek foreign policy until today.
- The second category includes archival collections related to defense policy and the organization of the army. These are kept in the history department of the armed forces and the archives of the Ministry of Defense.
- Documents concerning the surveillance of citizens (politicians, union leaders, activists, etc.) since the 1920s and until 1974 constitute the third category. They include reports and other documents compiled mostly by local police and security agents at different points in time and under various governments and regimes. This paper will discuss their constitution, use, and eventual destruction by the authorities after the passing of a law presented to the Greek parliament by the coalition government composed of left- and right-wing parties in August 1989. Let us note for the moment that these records, commonly known as 'The (Security) Files', have always remained outside both the jurisdiction and the monitoring of the General State Archives.

The inaccessibility of historical archives in Greece is best understood within the larger context of fragile democratic institutions, wars, and internal conflicts during large parts of the twentieth century. These crises led to shorter or longer periods of political instability, social unrest, and repressive legislation, including academic censorship – in short, unfavorable conditions for historical research. Censorship and restricted access to most sources limited the scope of historians' work until 1974. After the fall of the military regime, the urge to understand 'what went wrong' in the postwar years in Greece inspired a 'history boom': many students turned to history, especially to political and economic history, and were eager to undertake systematic research in archives.

In this paper we will address issues surrounding the accessibility of 'sensitive' archives in Greece during three different and successive periods of the twentieth century (1910–1974, 1974–1989, and 1990 to date). As we will show, in all these periods it has been difficult for historians to call into question the official narratives without provoking political and journalistic pressure, sometimes even outright aggression and persecution by state authorities. This is also true for the more recent years, despite the history boom mentioned above. The Macedonian crisis of 1991–1995[2] and the debate on history school textbooks during the last decade[3] are good examples of the limits of academic freedom in post-1989 Greek society. The combination of legal framework and political setting

determines the specific context in which *ethnika zitimata* ('national questions') have been considered taboo. Throughout the twentieth century, authorities have consistently claimed that these were issues to be dealt with exclusively by diplomats and government officials, issues that cannot be publicly debated and are not suitable for academic research. They concern a number of topics that have ranged from the minority question in Greece (relative to Greek international policy toward its neighboring countries) to the communist 'threat' during the Cold War period and Greek-Turkish relations.

The legal framework concerning public archives in Greece dates back to the 1910s and was part of Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos's undertaking to modernize the country. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs was the first to establish an archive service in 1910 and proceeded to classify documents that were – theoretically at least – open to research. In practice, apart from the ministry's employees, permissions to access these documents were exceptional and granted only to specific scholars who applied to the ministry. For example, Prime Minister Venizelos personally granted permission to consult the archives to the French historians Edouard Driault and Michel Lhéritier, who published their five-volume Greek diplomatic history in 1925.

Also in 1910, the Greek army established the 'Office of Military Archives', a service under the command of the intelligence department. Its explicit purpose – in tune with the status and significance of national history in early twentieth-century Europe – was to provide material for the writing of the history of the army. Hence the service was renamed 'Department of History of the Army' in 1914 and has kept this name until today.[4]

In 1914, the General State Archives (GSA) were established. The law, inspired by two historians and presented to the parliament by Venizelos's government, defined the purpose of state archives as follows: 'the collection and supervision of public archives containing documents established more than fifty years before'. However, many archives of the central administration were not included in these collections, but have since remained in their respective institutions.[5] The 1914 law was a very general text; it remained vague on issues of organization and procedure, and many years passed until it was finally implemented effectively. Consequently, the GSA could not become the custodian

[2] See Athéna Skoulariki, La crise macédonienne (1991–1995) et la question des slavophones en Grèce, in: *Balkanologie* 7 (2003), pp. 147-158, and Erik Sjoeberg, *Battlefields of Memory. The Macedonian Conflict and Greek Historical Culture*, Umea 2011.

[3] See Antonis Liakos, History Wars – Notes from the Field, in: *Yearbook of the International Society of History Didactics* 5-6 (2008-09), pp. 57-74, and Stilianos Meselidis, Teachers, History Wars and Teaching History Grade 6 in Greece, in: Joseph Zajda (ed.), *Globalisation, Ideology and Education Policy Reforms*, Dordrecht 2010, pp. 39-48.

[4] <http://dis.army.gr/history_en.html>.

[5] It was only in 2005 that the General State Archives have finally received major government archives such as those of the prime minister's office and the government's general secretary.

of public or private archives. In other words, for many years the GSA were unable to fulfil the role of a central state archive open to academic historians and other scholars. In the context of fragile democratic institutions, citizens were still suspicious of the authorities and their archives. Thus, the fact that the GSA were a public institution managed by government authorities was problematic, especially for communists. Moreover, many important and 'sensitive' public sectors remained outside the jurisdiction of the GSA: foreign policy, defense, and public security.

Beginning in the 1920s, a new kind of 'sensitive' archives was created, closely connected with the practice of 'filing' ordinary citizens. This practice dates from the military regimes of the 1920s, namely Pangalos and Kondylis, when police surveillance of citizens suspected of anti-regime opinions became common practice. In 1929, a more repressive legal framework was established by Venizelos's government, directly aimed at the communist opposition. It severely restricted freedom of expression by criminalizing political activities and also the expression of political opinion, especially communist ideology. These new 'sensitive' archives contained detailed information about the political beliefs and actions of a large number of citizens, especially members and sympathizers of the communist party, but also practically everybody who opposed the conservative governments in power since the end of the German occupation and the Civil War that followed. The records also contained information about the personal lives, the religious beliefs, family ties and activities, and the work environment and social lives of those under surveillance. Authorities used a network of informers across the country to observe individual citizens and to collect, store, and update information.

The 1940s were an exceptionally turbulent decade in Greece. The Second World War, the German occupation, and the resistance as well as the ensuing Civil War left profound marks on Greek society. During the German occupation (1941–1944) all activities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were suspended, and access to the archives was strictly forbidden. After the liberation of Greece, the archives were in shambles, as collections had been partly ransacked and selectively destroyed by the occupation forces. Some of these documents returned to Greece in sacks sent by the American Army from Germany in 1945. In 1959, a royal decree defined the procedure by which private individuals and historians would be allowed access to the archives. The diplomatic documents should remain classified for a fifty-year period. In fact, the number of researchers until 1974 also remained rather limited.

During the Civil War, the Communist Party (KKE) was underground and the academic and research institutions adopted an explicitly anti-communist stance. Surveillance of ordinary citizens was reinforced by emergency laws during the Civil War, and 'loyalty certificates' were established: these were necessary for anyone applying for a job in the public service and also for ordinary

documents like a driving license or a passport.[6] Under these conditions, communists (or suspected communists) became second-class citizens and were excluded from large parts of the economy and of course from the even larger public sector. In 1967 a military regime assumed power in Greece, intensifying the practice of filing citizens – not only communists, but anyone who opposed the regime.

The post-junta era after 1974 witnessed an 'explosion' of historiography that was reflected in the structures and expansion of the professional historical community.[7] This development was connected with the legalization of the KKE (1974) and the rise of the Socialist Party (PASOK) in the early 1980s. A significant number of Greek historians returned to Greece immediately after the fall of the dictatorial regime in 1974. Most of them worked at the universities or in the newly founded historical archives and research institutions of both private and public organizations. They were motivated by the questions 'what really happened' or 'how we got here'; in other words: what were the deeper, structural reasons that had led to the military dictatorship and the collapse of the state. The foundation of the Hellenic Literary and Historical Archive (ELIA), dedicated to nineteenth and twentieth-century Greek history, also contributed to historical research. In the 1980s, the General State Archives were restructured and assumed a more dynamic presence in their relationship with the administration and the public by enlarging their collections and making them more accessible. During the same period, the major Greek banks established archives and research centers (among others the Historical Archives of the Commercial, Agricultural and Alpha Banks, as well as the already established Historical Archive of the National Bank of Greece). They financed an important number of research projects in economic and industrial history and are still big actors within a more diversified landscape of private foundations financing research on modern Greek society, culture, and economy.

In the summer of 1989, the coalition government submitted to parliament a law on 'the abolition of the consequences of the Civil War'. It was meant to put an official end to state persecution of crimes committed during the Civil War and signaled a rejection of the Cold War vision of national history by taking into account the different collective memories and paving the way for new narratives of the Second World War and the Civil War. At the same time, the government decided not only to abolish the 'consequences' of the Civil War, but also to destroy all evidence of the suffering of millions of people, of 'half the country's population' according to one historian (Philippos Iliou) in four decades. Almost all political parties acclaimed the destruction of the police files – the historian's nightmare of archives going up in flames. A notable exception

[6] Polymeris Voglis, *Becoming a Subject. Political Prisoners during the Greek Civil War*, New York 2002.
[7] Vangelis Karamanolakis, Greece, in: Porciani/Raphael, *Atlas* (fn. 1), pp. 107-110.

was PASOK, Andreas Papandreou's socialist party, which most vociferously expressed its disagreement during the parliamentary debate in August 1989.

'The (Security) Files' had not been studied or catalogued: in 1989, just before their destruction, it was estimated that they amounted to a total of seventeen million 'files' kept in police stations across the country. This extraordinary number – for a country with a population of just over ten million – may be explained by the fact that they included records of dead citizens. There were also cases of citizens who had more than one 'record' because they were under surveillance in more than one place.

The act of burning the police files sparked an important debate among historians, politicians, and journalists about the desirability and advisability of preserving these types of documents. Government officials argued that national reconciliation and the *healing* of the traumas of the Civil War and the turbulent postwar political life could be symbolically achieved through the elimination of the records. However, many historians argued in favor of preserving the documents as indispensable sources for historical research.[8] Their main argument was that the burning was against the law on public archives. They suggested that access to these records should be prohibited for as long as this would be necessary. Public opinion, however, remained skeptical as to whether the records could be used only as a historical source and not, again, as a weapon against political opponents.

In the end, 'The (Security) Files' were consumed by fire. More than twenty years later, suspicions still linger: many people believe the 'records' have not been destroyed and 'copies' are hidden somewhere, ready to be used again. The fact is that a limited number (circa 2,000) of these files concerning well-known citizens (politicians and activists) were kept as they were considered to be of 'special historical interest'. The criteria for choosing these particular files were never explicated. The 'Files' are now part of the archives of the Ministry of the Interior, but remain inaccessible: neither the documents nor their catalogue are available to researchers. The administration decided that these records would only become accessible after twenty years, but recently the government announced that 'The (Security) Files' would remain inaccessible for another twenty years. The explanation given to scholars striving for access was that the private lives of individuals and their families (both citizens under surveillance and agents working for the government) should be protected.

Since the 1980s, a number of institutions and archives dedicated to important Greek politicians have been established, the most prominent being the Konstantinos G. Karamanlis Foundation (1983), the Andreas G. Papandreou Foundation (1996), the National Research Foundation Eleftherios K. Venizelos

[8] See Spyros Asdrachas et al., *Contemporary Archives, Files and Historical Research*, Athens 1991, and Philippos Iliou, *The Files*, Athens 1989 (both in Greek).

(2000), and the Konstantinos K. Mitsotakis Foundation (2001). In all of these institutions, some documents can be characterized as 'sensitive' archives, and access to them is subject to each institution's regulations. The archives of the Communist Party are a good example. After the split of the Greek Communist Party into two separate entities in 1968, the 'KKE' and the 'KKE (interior)', a part of this archive covering the years 1945 to 1968 was divided into two collections. Today, one collection belongs to the KKE, which allows some (albeit controlled) access to scholars; the other part has been incorporated into the archival collections of the Contemporary Social History Archives (ASKI), a historical society that almost exclusively works on the history of social movements in Greece during the twentieth century. Historians and political activists related to the communist left founded ASKI in 1992 and established a policy of 'open archives' by making documents and collections concerning the history of the communist left in Greece accessible. According to the founders, open archives are a fundamental civil right: 'citizens have a right to know their past'.[9] Nevertheless, open access does not apply to all documents of the ASKI archive. Exceptions concern 'personal' files of party members, which are protected by the Greek legislation on personal data.

In 2000 the General State Archives acquired a new legal framework. The aim was to preserve documents and grant more access to citizens. But according to the new legislation, 'sensitive' archives concerning foreign policy and defense still remain outside the unified system. These archives constitute separate units and different rules apply to them, including accessibility and development, while they are kept under the direct supervision of government. From time to time, the rules change: the administration or special commissions may decide to extend the thirty-year rule for reasons of national security, or make some of these collections available for study. At other times, entire collections are published – both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the army's history department have published whole series from their archives.

In short, a national policy on accessibility issues remains to be defined and implemented. The pertaining legislation has not yet been harmonized, while the institutions that keep these 'sensitive' archives are not obliged to give explanations when they, as happened in some cases, extend the thirty-year period. Possibly, if there were an independent authority, this authority could be responsible for the declassification of public records.[10]

Both the archival and the historical research landscapes are fragmented and dispersed. On the one hand, historians are members of numerous associations, societies, and academic institutions, but there is no national professional asso-

[9] Philippos Iliou, Open Archives, in: *Arheiotaxio* 1 (1999), pp. 4-6 (in Greek).

[10] Amalia Pappa, Archives and Legal Issues, in: Katomeris Procopios/Strakantouna Vassiliki/Synodinos Zisimos (eds), *Archives, Libraries and Law in the Information Society*, Athens 2008, pp. 109-120.

ciation to represent them. Archives, on the other hand, are also dispersed into scores of private foundations, societies, and public institutions – but archivists themselves are organized. The Society of Greek Archivists, founded in 1990, is an active body that organizes seminars, conferences, and protests concerning issues of accessibility, ethics, and legislation. This society also compiled the only existing guide of Greek private archives.

Research is bound to slow down in the present context of economic crisis: the administration is both unwilling and unable to support the organization of archival collections or to sustain historical research. In the recent past, important innovations in the archival institutions, mainly digitalization and their subsequent opening to both researchers and the public, were implemented through funding that came from European research programs. This is how many collections became accessible to the wider public, including those with more or less 'sensitive' archives, which are now open to all – often thanks to private initiatives. Indeed, the digitalization of archives outside any legal framework is a delicate problem that has not been sufficiently debated among professionals. One of the many issues that have to be seriously examined and discussed is the reproduction and circulation through the web of isolated documents out of context, often used to 'prove' who was right and who was wrong in a specific situation or historical event. Another issue is the criteria for obtaining private and/or public funding for historical research.

On the bright side, it is clear that the perceptions about history and the work of historians have changed considerably in the last twenty years. It has become common knowledge – shared by people beyond the strictly academic world – that the study of documents in archives is a prerequisite for historical research and that therefore free access to state archives should be considered a normal and legitimate demand. The debate about ethics, open archives, and free access to them thus involves a larger community than professional historians, especially since more and more private persons and families have handed over archives to research institutions in recent years. One such example is the archive of Andreas Papandreou, the former prime minister of Greece, which is kept in more than one institution. Again, access to its separate parts varies according to each institution's regulations.

The new digital environment enhances competition among institutions for more or even bulk digitalization, prompting an increased demand from the public. Most libraries and archives now offer documents online, which can then be used and reproduced for more or less explicit political ends. It is crucial to address questions related to these information wars: what are the criteria behind decisions to give online access to certain documents or categories of documents to certain portal(s)? On the other hand, the availability of massive amounts of archival documents online should not hide the fact that in too many cases, government archives are not becoming public archives and are being kept in-

determinately out of the reach of scholars. Some historians have repeatedly criticized the unwillingness of the administration of the Service of Diplomatic and Historical Archives of the Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs to grant them access to their collections.

Issues concerning access to 'sensitive' archives in countries like Greece are thus part of a larger issue involving civil rights, freedom of speech, and the dysfunction of democratic institutions throughout the twentieth century. Greek historians and archivists face problems that have to do with a long history of mutual suspicion between administration officials and potential archive users – both academics and 'ordinary citizens'. In the digitalized and globalized world, where private institutions, both domestic and international, compete for making available online their selection of 'hot' or 'cold' historical material, the question of access is part of the new 'civil wars' for information.

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