

Transcript of the episode of Privacy Studies Podcast: Bones of Disintegration: Albanian-Greek Tensions over the WWII Dead – Presentation by Dr. Klejd Këlliçi (University of Tirana, Albania)

Hello, my name is Felicia Fricke and I am Natacha Klein Käfer, and you are listening to the Privacy Studies Podcast.

This season of the Privacy Studies Podcast follows the discussions of the symposium *PRIVACY AND DEATH: Past and Present*, which took place at the University of Copenhagen and online between October 12th and 13th, 2023. This event aimed to bring to the fore the discussions of what kind of privacy, if any, we have given to our dead in different cultural and historical contexts. We will hear presentations by historians, archaeologists, sociologists, and other experts.

Transcriptions of the episodes can be found on the Centre for Privacy Studies' website.

In today's episode, we will hear the presentation 'Bones of Disintegration: Albanian-Greek Tensions over the World War 2 Dead' by Dr. Klejd Këlliçi, Faculty of Social Science, University of Tirana, Albania.

My talk will be about the role of the war dead and their remains in the relations between Greece and Albania after the Cold War period, even up to now, if we want to extend this presentation to today. And it's titled 'Bones of Disintegration. Albanian-Greek Tensions over the World War II dead.'

As many might know, Albania and Greece share a common border in the south, which was a theater of war during the 1940-41, when Italy, which had previously invaded Albania in 1939, attacked Greece in October 1940s. The war was fought mostly over the Albanian territory. It was an extremely bloody conflict and even a forgotten conflict within the frame of the Second World War, which caused thousands and thousands of deaths by both armies. While the Italians, which won the war with the help of the Nazi Germany, were able to recover their war debts and build a series of monumental cemeteries in the Albanian soil, the Greek government or Greece, which was an invaded country at the time, didn't have the possibility to commemorate its war debt, which were placed in makeshift cemeteries in the Albanian territory. After the Second World War, a communist regime was established in Albania, which wanted to build its own narrative of the war, a war of constant fight and liberation of the Albanians over the foreign occupants, which were the Italians or the Germans. The Greek-Italian conflict was completely forgotten as the war dead. The cemeteries of the Second World War, mostly Italian, these monumental cemeteries, were destroyed and any kind of sign of the former occupants as the Italians, they were completely destroyed. In fact, in 1947, the Albanian government asked the different Western countries, especially Western countries, to recover their war debt, which were from the First and the Second World War. To this appeal, only the Italian government replied, and in fact, in 1958 up to 1961, the Italians were able to recover their war debt. In fact, this was also the theme of a very important, or probably the most important Albanian novel written by Ismail Kadare 'The general of the dead army', which in fact provided also some kind of spark to do this research.

But returning to the war debt, during the Cold War period, Italy was able to recover its war debt, but other countries, like Britain or even Greece, they not only were unable to recover them, but also tried to convince the Albanian government to, at least the Greek counterpart, to build cemeteries and monuments of commemoration of the war dead, which in fact Albania rejected as, in the, let's say, tradition of the communist government, the idea was to maintain a monopoly over the memory and over the war debt. During the Cold War Albania and Greece also didn't have a diplomatic relation.

Going a little step back, Albania was somehow involved in the Greek Civil War, supporting the Communists, which were in fact defeated by the end of the 40s. From the 40s up to the 60s, both

countries didn't have any kind of relation. But in 1968 Albania and Greece tried to establish some kind of relation and this diplomatic relation also involved somehow the war debt. And in fact, Greece pretended from the Albanian government to recover and also to build monument commemorating the war dead, but the building of the monuments also raised some questions. Because in fact the Italian-Greek war was not only a war of aggression by the Italians, but in the Greek memory is considered also a war not simply of defense, which somehow was able to liberate and reconquer the southern part of Albania, which at the time, or by some Greek national circles, is considered to be part of the northern Epirus. So there were some kind of irredentist claims of southern Albania, which, of course, preoccupied the Albanian government. In the southern part of Albania, there is also a sizable Greek minority, and by building monuments, by commemorating the dead, the Albanian government, during the Cold War period, somehow felt that these monuments could lay some territorial claims over the southern part of Albania. So the whole project of building or rebuilding the cemeteries and the monuments of the Greek war dead of the Second World War was skipped and rejected. And this question remained an open question between the two countries. By one side, the Albanian communist government, which refused to build monuments or to give the permission of building monuments, and on the other, the Greek government, which didn't want to recover and repatriate its war dead because of the, also the protests of some nationalist circles in Greece, and also because of solid customs of post-conflict periods where dead are buried where they have fallen. Following the example of the building of war cemeteries of the First World War, even after the Second World War, many fighting countries built cemeteries of their war dead where they have fallen. And this kind of monuments have become some kind of conciliatory monuments where warring counterparts could find a moment of peace and reconciliation.

But returning to our talk, the problem of the war dead reemerged after the, after the Cold, or by the end of the, the Cold War and the post-Cold War, especially in east-west relations, was open to different political claims out of which Albania as a country was not an exception. And these claims re-emerged and they implied war cemetery, more cemeteries, minority rights of the Greek minority in Albania. They were somehow accompanied by also aggressive policies of the Greek government toward somehow politicizing the Greek minority in Albania. As we all know, war cemeteries form a natural environment for clashes and reconciliation. In the Albanian case, they formed a natural environment for clashes. During the post-Cold War period, the Greek government tried to impose some kind of... to try to impose on the Albanian government building of monuments, which the Albanian government was unable to accept, also because of international pressure.

But other sectors or other actors interfered in this process. As I already explained, not only there is a Greek minority in Albania, but there is also a sizable part of the Albanian population, which is Orthodox and belongs to the Orthodox Church. And the post-Cold War period coincided also with the re-establishment of religious institutions in Albania, banned during the Cold War. With the establishment of these religious institutions, they are seen, especially by a large part of the nationalist, let's say, segment of society in Albania, as agents of foreign interference. And in this context, for example, the Orthodox Church has always been seen as a potential ally or as a potential fifth column in the Albanian territory. And by, let's say, having a Greek minority, which was very vocal politically, with Albania being in a very poor position economically, but also politically, the question of the war dead, let's say, remained a big problem in between the two countries.

In 2005, for example, a scandal re-emerged in the Albanian press. A person, which worked in a small cemetery in the southern part of Albania, reported that a local priest commanded him to dig the local cemetery and to exhumate hundreds of human remains, skeletons, which were put in small boxes and shelved in a monastery built in Këlcyrë. Këlcyrë is a small, is a tiny center in the southern part of

Albania. And it's built in a long valley, which is crossed by the Vjosa River. And this valley was a battleground during the Greek-Italian war, and thousands of Greek and Italian soldiers died. The first Greek soldiers tried to conquer their way up to the southern part of Albania, while the Italians tried to defend their position. In 2005, a monastery emerged in the Këlcyrë Gorge. It was an Orthodox monastery, built irregularly without any building permission, in an area which was inhabited not by an Orthodox community, but mostly by a Muslim community, Albanian Muslim community. And this monastery hosted this bone which was excavated in a local cemetery not far from there. The police seized these human remains and in a spectacular examination process, it was found, filmed by national TV, it was found that these bones which were put in the cemetery in this monastery and pretended to be the bones of Greek soldiers, it was found out that they belonged to various persons of ages which didn't coincide with those of the soldiers. They were bones of children, women, elderly. And this sparked a huge scandal, not only in the Albanian press, but also in the Albanian political opinion. And this... And this sparks also tensions among the two countries. In between 2006 and 2010, other particulars emerged from the process. For example, there was a Wikileaks cable which emerged by which the American embassy in Albania transmitted to their Department of State a telegram or a mail assessing that, for example, Greece was menacing Albania over EU integration and it's illegally financing the church to exhume the dead bodies of the soldiers. But it was only 2010 that both Albania and Greece reached some kind of agreement over the war dead. In 2010, the agreement stated that the Albanian government and the Greek government would facilitate the exhumation process. And this exhumation process would lead to building of cemeteries, of war cemeteries. But despite that, the Albanian political opinion protested vividly. The presence of monuments of war dead, especially monuments, which didn't somehow respect or attain the conditions of conciliation. For example, the 28th of October, which is the festivity, which is the commemoration of the Italian-Greek war, various Greek associations organize trips in Albania to commemorate the war dead. These kind of trips are also accompanied by strong nationalist claims, which in some cases have led also to conflicts. For example, in 2018, the 28th of October, when many Greeks organized in groups came to southern Albania in different locations to commemorate their war dead, one member of the Albanian Greek minority confronted the Albanian police. And this person was wearing Greek army uniform. And he was shot by the police. And his death sparked a lot of tensions between both government and the Albanian minority, the Greek minority and the Albanian government.

By concluding in my talk, I can come to some kind of conclusion regarding the way the war dead are commemorated and how the type of commemoration or the building of monuments can either spark tension or lead to some kind of reconciliation. The commemoration of the Greek war dead in Albania is a process, which has a lot of question marks. For example, every year, as I have mentioned before, there are people, there are different groups which come to commemorate their war dead and these meetings are often accompanied with a lot of nationalist claims, which led to the death of this young person in 2018. And my idea is that cemeteries can either reconciliation or lead to further exacerbation of ethnic strives. And by this, I would like to conclude my talk. Thank you very much.

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Thank you so much for listening.