Reviews
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What is This?
Polymeris Voglis, *Becoming a Subject: Political Prisoners during the Greek Civil War*, New York/Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2002; 272 pp. + bibliography, index, 8 illustrations; 1571813098, £18.50 (pbk), 157181308X, £50.00 (hbk)

The topic of political prisoners in Greece during the Greek Civil War has occupied much space in historical discourse, especially in the 1970s following the 1974 political restoration in Greece. Despite the enormous number of books on the topic, the present study presents a fresh, innovative and theoretically informed argument. Through a careful examination of official documentation and records of the prisoners’ voices, Voglis constructs a compelling analysis of one of the most turbulent and controversial periods in modern Greek history.

The first section provides a contextual approach and understanding of practices of punishment between 1946 and 1949. These practices are related to the construction of the category of ‘political prisoners’ and their criminalization in state discourse. The second section devises an exploration of the political prisoners’ experience of internment, and the nature of their resistance to technologies of ‘subjection’ (recantation and social exclusion are discussed at length). Voglis’s contribution to the field of political and social history is situated in the arguments of both sections. Moving theoretically away from Michel Foucault’s presentation of the social subject as unitary and passive, he points out that there is a discrepancy between how the Greek right-wing state represented political prisoners and how they were constructed in discourses generated outside the state apparatus (in the confines of the Greek Communist Party, KKE). More importantly, he argues that political prisoners did not exist solely in state and communist representations, but they managed to preserve a sense of self-identity.

Nevertheless, Voglis arrives at this conclusion through a set of ideas that lead to problematic statements. He claims that he will not touch upon the question of identity; instead, he will focus on that of subjectivity. By choosing to discuss the former in the framework of the latter, he merely misrecognizes identity for subjectivity. This happens because the ways in which the prisoners defined themselves politically and socially is a question of self-identity, as opposed to definitions that originated in external agents, such as the prevailing right-wing power. As opposed to self-definitions, right-wing definitions relate us to the question of subjectivity. The construction of individual identity is a complex process which is affected but not solely defined by social and political agents. Voglis himself instinctively makes this distinction when he says that
political prisoners are one and a multiple subject at the same time: one because they share a past in the resistance during the occupation and the experience of prosecution and imprisonment . . . and multiple because imprisonment generates different attitudes, experiences and understandings according to the individual's past and the specific situation in prison. (12)

Much of this theoretical conundrum defines the work of Foucault, as Voglis acutely notes, but also that of Judith Butler and Gilles Deleuze on whom he also draws. This confusion seems to stay at the level of theory for the greatest part of the book, although it occasionally arises when Voglis discusses personal narratives of confinement.

Where Voglis excels is in defining and performing his historical task. He claims from the outset that the very category of the 'political prisoner' underwent changes in different historical moments and he sets out to show how in the first part of the book. Chapter one offers an excellent excursus on the phenomenon of political prisoners across Europe since the nineteenth century. In this chapter Voglis places the emergence of the concept of 'political prisoners' within the problématique of state-formation, and shows how it was discussed in different national contexts. Chapter two focuses on nineteenth and twentieth-century Greece, and analyses changing conceptions and practices of social exclusion, from the first laws on brigandage to those of the Ioannis Metaxas regime. Chapter three unravels the postwar Greek state’s reorganization in response to the challenge of the Left. New ideas were put into practice in the years 1946–50 when political exclusion of leftists was sealed by special legislation. Voglis demonstrates that because there was no clear-cut demarcation between political and common prisoners during the Greek Civil War, the former remained an elusive category. Chapter four moves on to discuss the nature of recantation, how it was mobilised by the right-wing regime as a practice of subjection, the response of KKE and the controversy the whole issue generated in public fora.

The second part of the book focuses on the institutions of the prison, exile and the camp and presents a poignant and revealing picture of political exclusion. Chapter five outlines the geography of these practices: where these prisoners were sent and what the conditions were in those places. Chapter six, one of the most challenging of the book, discusses the rationale of two forms of punishment: torture and solitary confinement. Voglis notes that torture did not aim at extracting confessions of crimes, but at obtaining declarations of repentance. Solitary confinement, a more rare form of punishment, aimed at classifying prisoners and promoting individualisation and competition in order to break up collectivity and solidarity. Both practices targeted the mind and the ‘soul’ of the prisoner, not his body. Chapter eight, deals with the detainees’ fear of dying. The
argument put forth is that confrontation with death (from disease, abuse or execution) enabled prisoners to present themselves in many different ways: as victims or heroes, depending on the circumstances.

Part three looks at the institution of the prison and the organization of social life in it. In chapter nine Voglis explains that the boundaries between prison and the free community were less rigid than we often think. He therefore looks into the informal organization of everyday life by prisoners, forms of conflict between them and the administration and the Communist Party mechanism inside the prison. Chapter ten recounts different forms of resistance in prisons, collective and individual, from hunger strikes to protests, pointing out that these were not necessarily the rule. It is argued that we have to dismiss the binarism resistance–subordination in the context of the prison. On what Voglis calls ‘the microlevel of everyday life’ (183) the historian often encounters prisoners’ acts which cannot be categorized as resistance or compliance to the rules and which ultimately pose the question of intentionality on the part of the prisoners. The last chapter explains that the very institution of the prison often assisted in the shaping of the prisoner’s political identity. The official discourse, which represented those who participated in the resistance as ‘either “communists” or “national-minded”’ (200) played a significant role in the polarization of the detainees and the creation of collective political identities. This process of polarization, the mechanisms of the Communist Party within the prison as well as practices of exclusion of ‘dissidents’ from the communist ideology, are closely investigated.

An epilogue places the whole problem in perspective by offering some reflections on the re-construction of the history of resistance and the concept of ‘political internment’ after the end of the Civil War. Voglis begins by questioning the very idea of the ‘end of the war’: when did the Civil War actually finish? This may be an allusion to the collective volume that Mark Mazower edited under the title After the War was Over: Reconstructing the Family, Nation and State in Greece, 1943-1960, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000) and to which Voglis contributed a chapter. Both After the War was Over and Becoming a Subject are major revisionist contributions in the field of postwar European history. Polymeris Voglis’s work is highly recommended not only to academics and students of the Greek Civil War, but also to those who work in twentieth-century political history and the phenomenon of civil war. It is an impartial and conceptually challenging study which opens up possibilities for different forms of history-writing.

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