

Modern Greek History: Preservation, Presentation, Interpretation

Project Summary

With the generous support of the Stavros S. Niarchos Foundation, I spent over three weeks in Greece this summer visiting Greek historical and cultural museums and exploring their efforts to present historical periods from the fall of Byzantium until today; investigating the role that history and nationalism plays in the daily life of Greeks; and supplementing my field research at the Gennadeios Library. As I discovered new complexities and contradictions in Greek public history and the Greek historical consciousness, my research expanded in numerous unexpected directions. I have come away with a fuller understanding not only of Greek history, but of Greek cultural identity as well.

Project Description

On forming the proposal for this research project, I expected to spend three weeks in Athens searching for relics of the Ottoman period in the Greek public sphere. Once I began work on the research project itself, I began to realize how difficult this would be; remains of the Ottoman period are difficult to find or too well absorbed into the Greek cultural fabric to distinguish easily. Instead, I chose to investigate the major museums of Athens and Thessaloniki. How do they present objects and events from areas no longer within the borders of Greece? What are the most common ways in which Greek history is presented to a large and varied audience of Greeks and foreigners? How pervasive are Greek nationalist symbols in public spaces? In total, I visited twelve museums and exhibitions, taking careful notes on the layout, material, and the accompanying information. Due to scheduling difficulties, I was only able to meet

with the director of the Museum of the City of Athens; however, I feel that I succeeded in meeting my research goals using my own observations.

While in Athens, I was able to compliment my field research with work at the Gennadeios Library. I visited the Library almost every day, following up on observations that I had made at the museums, seeking background knowledge on both broad themes (such as the Macedonia issue) and specific details (for example, the location of mosques in Ottoman-period Athens.) My work with the Library's extensive collections helped to expand my project and to smooth out its rough edges, and also gave me valuable experience working with a specialized archive. While I enjoyed studying the museums, ultimately it was my research at the Gennadeios that confirmed my passion for modern Greek history.

After completing the formal research component of my project, I decided to spend some time in a village one hour north of Thessaloniki. In this rural setting, removed from the commotion of city life, I could closely observe the Greek nationalist motifs interwoven with daily life and religion. I learned folk songs about reclaiming Hagia Sophia, and listened as compulsory military service was enthusiastically (if only partly seriously) presented to a young boy as an avenue for fighting the Turks. Religious symbolism was explained to me in terms of the *Tourkokratia*. Ironically, it was here – and not in Athens or Thessaloniki – where I discovered the most compelling remnants of the Ottoman period in Greece.

Needless to say, my experiences in Greece this summer were immensely valuable and rewarding. I expanded my knowledge of Greek history and national identity, and dramatically improved my language skills. I also found a base of friends and acquaintances to visit when I return. Their advice, assistance, and hospitality, along with the generous support of the Stavros S. Niarchos Foundation, greatly contributed to the success of my project; and I would sincerely like to express my gratitude to all.