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“There is no Greek word for ‘patronizing’. Yet this is what I incurred as a young scholar in 1990 when I sat in the office of a Dodecanesian lawyer, who had just written the history of his island. It was a very large book that detailed the deeds of great men and the patriotic struggles of his island compatriots. I tried to explain my project was about how people experienced Italian rule, and that I was generating my information by conducting oral histories. He yelled – yelling was his natural mode of communication – that I was not doing history. He asserted that I was confused, badly trained, and that I should either reconsider my project or go home. A few weeks later, he concluded that what I was doing was sociology, but while he was kind enough to lend me useful materials, he continued to behave like the god-professor authority, which he was not. That experience encouraged me to think about class, about social inequality, and how local elites treated humble folk. I thought more about how that treatment might have influenced relations with the Italians, and how sometimes the national adversary was not necessarily the primary adversary.”

Nicholas Doumanis

Becoming Dodecanesian

The Italian Occupation and Local Greek Conceptions of Time

For Greek Rhodians and other Dodecanesians who experienced it, the Italian occupation (1912-1947) held a unique place in collective or social memory. Although Italy was under a fascist dictatorship for most of the occupation, and despite the oppressive measures inflicted on the islanders, including forced assimilation, the islanders often claimed ‘the Italians were good’ (οι Ιταλοί ήταν καλή).¹ Since Greek society deems it shameful to praise ‘conquerors’ (καταχτητές), the claim only came up in social gatherings and in everyday conversations. Moreover, ‘the Italians’ were the only foreign rulers that were discussed or seemed worth discussing.

The following pages offer reflections on an ethnographic history project conducted in the early 1990s with elderly Greek Dodecanesians in their 70s, 80s and 90s.² That project’s purpose was not to determine if the Italians *were* good, but to explain why interviewees *said* they were ‘good’. This chapter reflects more on why the Italians held a dominant place in social memory. Why privilege the Italians? Why such interest in their rule? And what did that choice mean? What did it say about Dodecanesian social thought, and about the past and its uses? Social memory or collectively accepted versions of the past, speak to issues that hold meaning for that collective, such as shared identity.³ The following pages consider social memory and show how Italian rule in a sense *created* ‘the Dodecanese’ and *made* ‘Dodecanesians’.

Living in History

More so than most Greek islands, Rhodes and Kos present the visitor with strikingly diverse historical legacies. Archaeologists have uncovered an extraordinary abundance of antiquities that can be seen in museums but more often in open public display. A large part of Kos’s main town is an archaeological park. The main centers of Rhodes and Kos, hereafter referred to as Rhodes Town and Kos Town, are dominated by medieval walls, bell towers and minarets, and feature Catholic cathedrals and synagogues. Many graveyards are filled with headstones inscribed with Arabic, Hebrew and Latin characters. Each day the inhabitants stroll, drive, cycle and sail past imposing Crusader fortresses. Almost as imposing are the Ottoman mosques, including Rhodes’s *Süleymaniye camii*, *Sultan Mustafa camii* and *Recep Pasa camii*, and Kos’s *Defterdar camii* and *Gazi Hassan camii*. The whole island group is saturated with medieval castles, most of which date from the rule of the Knights of St John, a military monastic order that seized the islands several years after the fall of the crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem in 1291.

1 See *Myth and Memory in the Mediterranean: Remembering Fascism’s Empire* (Macmillan and St Martins: Basingstoke, Hampshire [UK] and New York, NY, 1997) and the Italian translation with a foreword by leading historian of Italian colonialism, Nicola Labanca: *Una Faccia, Una Razza: le colonie italiane nell’Egeo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2003)

2 Aside from *Myth and Memory in the Mediterranean*, see also

3 James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (Blackwell: Oxford, 1990)

Recent academic literature and popular publications have rightly emphasized the cultural plurality of Rhodes Town and its environs, although the plurality largely disappeared during the 1940s.⁴ The local Jewry was all but exterminated during the Second World War, with the pitifully few survivors moving on to central Africa and South Africa, Italy, Israel, South America and the United States.⁵ Today there are several Jewish families in Rhodes and one functioning synagogue.⁶ Following the end of Italian administration in 1947, Italian colonists departed for Italy, as did indigenous Catholics, known locally as ‘Franco-Levantini’ (literally ‘Levantine Catholics’). And while many Turks still live in Rhodes and Kos, including the progeny of Muslim Cretan refugees, many have long since relocated to Turkey.

The physical imprint of Islamic, Jewish and Catholic nevertheless remains. There was no hurried destruction of Islamic buildings (mosques, madrassas, tekkes) or bulldozing of Turkish and Jewish cemeteries following unification. But local Greeks have been indifferent to these legacies. However much conquerors shaped their built environment, few Rhodians or Koans rarely, if ever, talk about them.

To be sure, Greek antiquities are placed in a special category both officially and in the public mind because they link the localities to Greek antiquity. Even if much of the unearthed archaeological riches date to the period following the Roman conquest, they nevertheless look very ‘Greek’. But few Dodecanesians today seem aware of the Knights of St John, the military monastic order that had been driven out of the Levant and occupied the islands for over two centuries (c.1310-1522). This Latin feudal ruling order was responsible for the island’s most striking monument, the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Old Town, with its impressive fortification complex and the Palace of the Grand Master. The Knights have virtually no purchase in Dodecanesian thought, despite their monumental legacies. Aside for the fact that they were Catholic foreigners, this indifference may relate to the fact they were Hospitallers, an international order that lacked an ethnic profile.

Ottoman legacies have been ignored for a different reason. Ruling for almost four hundred years (1522-1912), the Ottoman Turks hold a decidedly negative place in Greek social memory, whose rule has been associated with tyranny and backwardness, and considered anti-Christian and anti-Greek. The great mosques of Rhodes and Kos are centrally located and figure on numerous tourism advertisements and postcards, yet for Greek Dodecanesians they serve as a reminder of a past best forgotten. Overall, Rhodians and Koans subscribe to a caricatured nationalistic version of Ottoman rule which accords with official Greek representations found in school textbooks.⁷

In contrast, the Italian occupation was (and still may be) an object of fascination in the decades following unification. This was especially true for the inhabitants of Rhodes, Kos and Leros – the latter had served as Italy’s principal military base. The Italian colonial government committed to extensive

development projects on these three islands, from town planning to port and road construction. These islands were left with a striking architectural legacy that locals have regarded as a great source of pride.⁸ Other islanders, in turn, would often concede with envy how the Italians had done wonders for Rhodes, Kos and Leros, and not for them. Local identities were sometimes mediated by Italy’s development policies. People on Kalymnos, for example, often accused neighbouring Koans of ‘allowing’ a foreign power to leave such a profound material imprint, suggesting a failure of patriotism and lacking courage to obstruct the occupier’s projects. Kalymnians argued that they were the only Dodecanesians to actively resist Italian authority, which made them better Greek patriots – locals did indeed stage the only major protest against Italian authority in 1935. Yet ethnographic investigations have also noted, locals wished the Italian government *had* developed Kalymnos. Some Kalymnians explained that they were punishment for being Greek patriots, hence arguing that being denied Italian development was a patriotic sacrifice.⁹

Dodecanesian interest in the Italian past has not just been about development, however. ‘The Italians’ (Οι Ιταλοί) were invoked in conversations about tourism, foreign cultural influence, governance, authority, and many other issues of public interest. In these areas, interviewees claimed that high standards of practice were observed, which set benchmarks for the future. In other words, ‘The Italians’ were useful to think with. Locals could see if they were faring well or if standards (e.g. the policing of traffic rules, public order) were falling. Moreover, social memory was also important for identity formation. Reading between the lines, stories about, or reflections on, ‘The Italians’ said much about regional identity and where Dodecanesians placed themselves in the time. Italian rule introduced numerous regulations and pursued policies that were designed to culturally transform the population. The occupation administration had intentionally penetrated Greek Dodecanesian society to attain consent for Italian rule and to Italianize the population. These efforts failed, but as Dodecanesian society were being integrated into Greek society after 1947 they left deep impressions. As a distinctive collective experience, social memory of Italian rule helped Dodecanesians find their place in the nation.

How Italy ‘made’ the Dodecanese

In some senses, the Italian occupation created the Dodecanese. Historically, the islands had not been a well-defined unit, as were, say, the Cyclades. The term ‘Dodecanese’ (Δωδεκάνησα), which today refers to Astypalea, Halki, Kalymnos, Kasos, Kos, Lipsos, Nisyros, Patmos, Rhodes, Symi, Tilos and Kastellorizo, has been in use since Byzantine times, but did not always apply to the islands in question. It was not an Ottoman administrative unit. Nor did they form an organic unit. Kos and Kalymnos, for example, were tied more intimately with Bodrum, as was Kastellorizo with Kas and Demre and other nearby Anatolian towns. Karpathos and Kasos had perhaps more do with Crete than with Rhodes, and Patmos with Samos. The Athens press revived the term ‘Dodecanese’ around 1908 to cover the Young Turk regime’s abrogation of local privileges, which means it was not referring to Rhodes and Kos.¹⁰

4 Valerie McGuire *Italy’s Sea: Empire and Nation in the Mediterranean, 1895-1945* (Liverpool, UK: University of Liverpool Press, 2020); Andreas Guidi, *Generations of Empire: Youth from Ottoman to Italian Rule in the Mediterranean* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2024); Valerie McGuire and Aron Rodrigue (eds), *Italian Fascism in Rhodes and the Dodecanese Islands, 1922–44* (London and New York: Palgrave, 2024)

5 Anthony McElligott, *Last Transport: The Holocaust in the Eastern Aegean* (London: Bloomsbury 2024), 289

6 Kira Kaurinkoski, ‘The Muslim communities in Kos and Rhodes: reflections on social organization and collective identities in contemporary Greece’, in J. Lindstedt & M. Wahlström (eds.), *Balkan Encounters. Old and New Identities in South-Eastern Europe. Slavica Helsingiensia* 41. (Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 2012), p. 47-78.

7 Hercules Millas, ‘History Textbooks in Greece and Turkey’, *History Workshop Journal* 31 (1991), 21–33; Efi Avdela, ‘The Teaching of History in Greece’, *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 18.2 (2000), 239-53

8 Simona Martinoli and Eliana Perotti, *Architettura coloniale italiana nel Dodecaneso, 1912-1943* (Turin: Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, 1999); Aurelio Bruno, *Dodecaneso, cento anni dopo: Rodi (omaggio a Mario Lago)* (Rome: Aurelio Bruno, 2025)

9 See the work of David E. Sutton and his extensive studies on Kalymnian memory and food, particularly ‘Re-Scripting Women’s Collective Action: Nationalist Writing and the Politics of Gendered Memory’, *Identities*, 5.4. (1999), 469-500

10 J.L. Myres, *Dodecanese* (London: Admiralty. Naval Intelligence Division, 1943), 3-4

Some islands experienced Ottoman rule very differently. Blessed with ample arable land, Rhodes and Kos received substantial Muslim settlement, specifically in the arable areas near the main towns. The latter, in turn, were extensively ‘Ottomanized’ in terms of population and built environment, and Rhodes Town especially had a substantially military presence. Muslims historically occupied the walled precincts of both main towns, which were shared with Jews. Elsewhere the Ottoman imprint was minor, and was largely restricted to garrisoned fortresses, of which there were two in the Rhodian hinterland (Lindos and Feraklos), three near the Koan villages Pyli, Antimachea and Kefalos, and one each on Kalymnos and Leros.¹¹ Being largely autonomous, the rest of the island group had a very limited Ottoman imprint. Kastellorizo’s mosque is the only one outside of Rhodes and Kos that survives, which in late Ottoman times serviced a small number of government officials, their families and a tiny garrison.¹²

Ottoman rule was experienced very differently by the ‘privileged’ (προνομιούχα) islands. During the nineteenth century some island communities experienced a golden age, especially Kalymnos, Symi and Kastellorizo, which prospered from sponge fishing. Sponges fetched high prices in Europe’s industrial centres, and locals were masters of an exceedingly dangerous kind of deep-water fishing. Locals also prospered on cabotage and small-scale manufacturing, including sponge processing. Councils introduced tariffs to finance free community education and medical services. Consequently, the ports of Kalymnos, Symi and Kastellorizo drew many immigrants from their surrounding regions and became densely populated. Wealth was displayed by the construction of two-storied neo-classical homes and invested in land along the nearby Anatolian littoral. However, while these island communities today are aware that these halcyon days took place during the Ottoman period, they do not give the Ottomans any credit. Rather, in local memory the golden years had all to do with local enterprise and ingenuity, which they claim the Turks tried to suppress. Local historians make much of the fact that in the late Ottoman period the state tried to their rescind privileges and sometimes blockaded their ports to enforce new taxes.¹³

When an Italian force led by General Giovanni Ameglio occupied the islands in the Spring of 1912, it unwittingly created a territorial unit. Previously the islands hardly figured in Italian imperial ambitions. In fact, the 1912 seizure was a strategic afterthought. The previous September, the Italians had invaded Libya but were pinned to the coast by Ottoman and local tribal groups. To force a capitulation, Italy threatened Ottoman heartlands. An Italian naval squadron bombarded Beirut on 25 February, and then the Dardanelles on 18 April. The latter attack caused a greater stir in diplomatic circles but did not have their desired effect. The decision was then taken to occupy Astypalea on the 26 April, which seemed a tentative move given its diminutive size and isolation.¹⁴ The Italians then seized a set of contiguous islands along the southwestern Anatolian coast. Not included was any island north of Patmos or Kastellorizo. The latter was excluded because, as Ameglio explained to Kastellorizian leaders

at the time, it was too remote and difficult to secure.¹⁵ The only island claimed of significant size was Rhodes. On 16 May Ameglio claimed it with minimal resistance. Everywhere Greek leaders and crowds greeted the invaders as liberators. In Rhodes Town there was a parade and a feast, in which the Ottoman governor and his soldiers participated, but who were then shipped off to Italy.¹⁶

These were the circumstances in which the Italian Dodecanese came into being, but Italy’s prolonged presence was to give the Dodecanese a solidity it hitherto lacked. In 1912, Italy’s actions raised strong concerns in diplomatic circles regarding regional stability and trade, but the Italian public celebrated as a glorious conquest, with the press making grandiloquent claims that Italians were finally revealing their innate martial values and civilizing potential.¹⁷ Even so, foreign minister Antonino Di San Giuliano reassured his European counterparts that the occupation was temporary. Yet from the outset, occupation regime behaved more like a permanent administration, with much energy channelled into education, archaeological research, infrastructure and other projects that held long term benefits.¹⁸ After all, Italy, as indeed most European states, was an imperial state. For decades, the Italian political class and the Italian public regarded imperial expansion as the nation’s primary calling, but this goal was frustrated by the nation’s limited economic and military wherewithal. Italy’s miserable imperial record to date was deemed its greatest failure. The islands hardly counted as significant conquests, but they seemed strategically well-placed for more substantial gains in the eastern Mediterranean.¹⁹

Therefore, once securely in hand, the Dodecanese Islands were difficult to give up. Even when the Libyan issue was settled on 18 October 1912 (the Treaty of Ouchy), in which Ottoman sovereignty was recognized Ottoman, Italy found it near impossible to relinquish them. It could argue that ongoing indigenous resistance, which Italian forces did not overcome until the 1920s, meant the Ottomans had not withdrawn their forces and had not yet fulfilled their treaty obligations.²⁰ Regional instability also helped. The First Balkan War (1912-1913) had already started (12 October 1912), and in the ensuing months the Ottomans lost their remaining Aegean possessions, including Crete, Lesbos, Chios and Samos. Their determination to reclaim their Aegean islands was frustrated by Greek navy dominance, which was to be addressed with the delivery of two Dreadnoughts ordered from British firms Armstrong and Vickers. But time was on Italy’s (and Greece’s) side. The First World War break out before the ships were delivered, and by October Britain and the Ottomans were at war. Within a year, Italy and the Ottomans were fighting on opposite sides.²¹

15 See Doumanis, Italokratia and the “Privileged” Islands: Factions and Social Protest on Kastellorizo’, in Valerie McGuire and Aron Rodrigue (ed), *Italian Fascism in Rhodes and the Dodecanese Islands, 1923-44* (Routledge 2024), 143. Kastellorizians had revolted against Ottoman authority and its leaders invited the Italians to occupy their homeland as well. Once the First World War had broken out, France stepped in and administered Kastellorizo until 1921, after which it was conceded to Italy. See Nicholas G. Pappas, *Near Eastern Dreams: The French Occupation of Castellorizo, 1915-1921* (Sydney: Halstead, 2022)

16 Carabott, ‘The Temporary Italian Occupation of the Dodecanese, 290-91

17 Luca Cottini, ‘The Italian Occupation in the Dodecanese (1912-1923)’, *Italica* 98.1 (2021), 82

18 For a full account, see Luca Pignataro, *Il dodecaneso italiano 1912-1947*, vol. I, *L’occupazione iniziale: 1912-1922* (Solfanelli, Chieti, 2011)

19 The classic statement on the contradiction of Italy’s great imperial ambitions and domestic weaknesses is R.J.B. Bosworth, *Italy, the Least of the Great Powers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979)

20 R.J.B. Bosworth, ‘The Great Powers and the end of the Ottoman Empire’, in Marian Kent (ed), *The Great Powers and the End of the Ottoman Empire* (Frank Cass: London, 1996), 61

21 Mustafa Aksakal, *The Ottoman Road to War in 1914: The Ottoman Empire and the First World War* (Cambridge 2008), 42-3

11 Elias Kolovos, ‘The Fortress and the Town of Rhodes According to the Ottoman Survey After the Siege of 1522’, in Simon David Phillips (ed), *The 1522 Siege of Rhodes Causes, Course and Consequences* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 140

12 N.G. Pappas, *Kastellorizo: An Illustrated History of the Island and its Conquerors* (Sydney: Halstead, 1994)

13 Numerous articles can be found in such local journals as *Ta Kalymniaka*.

14 Philip Carabott, ‘The Temporary Italian Occupation of the Dodecanese: A Prelude to Permanency’, *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 4.2. (1993), 289

In a secret treaty signed in London in 1915, Italy was promised major territorial spoils and sovereignty over the islands in return for joining the war against the Central Powers, which included the Ottoman Empire. At the post-war peace conferences, however, Italy came away virtually empty-handed. Sovereignty over the Dodecanese seemed like a consolation prize, to which Kastellorizo was added. (Kastellorizo had rebelled against Ottoman authority in 1912, clung onto its autonomy until the First World War, during which time it was occupied by France. In 1921, the French agreed to cede it to Italy.)²² Italian possession of the Dodecanese was confirmed by the Treaty of Lausanne, Article 15.

The decision was hotly disputed in Greece, where the term ‘Dodecanese’ became a useful descriptor for what had become a well-defined territory. The hard borders inserted in 1912, and which were legitimized geopolitically by the Treaty of Lausanne, had also turned the island communities inwards. Interaction with the Anatolian coast were restricted. Cut-off from Kas and other nearby Anatolian coastal towns since 1912, Kastellorizo lost its chief source of income and most of its population. Local ties with Rhodes, however, were strengthened. A large proportion of Kastellorizians migrated to Rhodes Town. Meanwhile, island communities as far apart as Kastellorizo, Patmos and Kasos found they were now part of a territory governed from Rhodes and subjected to a regime that was exceptionally intrusive. The official newspaper, *The Messagero di Rodi*, routinely published the names of numerous people who had been fined or incarcerated for legal transgressions. Italian authority seemed omnipresent. Small island communities as far apart as Kasos, Agathonisi and Astypalea were made acutely aware that they now belonged to a specifically Dodecanesian territory and subject to the dictates of a Dodecanesian administration.

Dodecanesian Periodization

To convey why the occupation was meaningful, the Dodecanesians I interviewed in the late 1980s and early 1990s divided it into phases. Few could remember the earliest phase, namely 1912-1922, when future ownership of the islands was uncertain, and during which unification with Greece was a genuine possibility. Of greatest significance to them was the period 1922-1936, the governorship of Mario Lago. It was his civil administration that implemented extensive development projects that included extensive urban development in Rhodes Town and Kos Town, the renovation of historical buildings and structures, including the walls of Rhodes’s Old Town and the Palace of the Grand Magister, and the modernization of economic infrastructures, including airports and electricity grids, road building and the modernization of agricultural practices. His governorship also tried to Italianize the islands through compulsory Italian classes in schools, by promoting archaeological research into Roman and Venetian remains, and by exposing locals to Italian film, music and theatre.²³

The governorship of Mario Lago was commonly remembered as the high period of Italian rule. It was associated with progress and modernity, as well as a time of high employment. Locals treasured the buildings produced by the regime because they gave the islands a distinctive style that was both aesthetically pleasing and evoked modernity. Such massive buildings as the suitably named *Grande Albergo delle Rose* were sources of immense local pride. Those who worked on the urban re-

development of Kos following the earthquake of 1933 appreciated the functionality of the streetscapes, which could accommodate motor vehicle traffic, and the housing, which had modern internal features and gardens. Interviewees also claimed the regime treated Greek Dodecanesians in a civil manner. They made much of Lago’s character, who was remembered as having a warm smile, and who was said to engage with locals in an affable manner. Lago was regarded as the personification of Italian civility.

Indeed, the fact that Dodecanese lacked the kind of authoritarian tone during this period owed much to Lago himself, a Piedmontese liberal monarchist who believed in Italy’s civilizing potential could be fulfilled more through soft power than coercion. Lago had enough discretionary power to operate in his own manner, seeing no need for the coercive and violent practices on display in Italy’s African territories, namely Libya, Somalia and later, Ethiopia.²⁴ His approach to Italianization was through consent rather than forced assimilation. He left local government intact, respected the specific rights of the three principal confessional groups, and maintained the teaching of local languages in schools. Dodecanesians remembered with some fondness the benefits of Italian schooling, claiming only good could come from learning another language. Youths also liked such cultural influences as modern Italian music, opera, theatre and organized sports.

Un-Italian Italian rule

Lago’s replacement created a very different environment. Cesare Maria de Vecchi (1936-1941) had already earned notoriety as one of Mussolini’s more brutish henchmen, including a blood-stained record as governor of Italian Somaliland in the 1920s. In the Dodecanese he wanted to make his mark as a Fascist and imperialist: *Ho trovato terreno pressoché vergine per il mio fascismo inter oche non si contaminerà mai finché io viva*.²⁵ He disapproved of his predecessor’s approach, claiming ‘imperial’ means would bring much quicker and effective results.²⁶ His administration, which locals described as ‘fascist’ rather than ‘Italian’, was noteworthy for the banning of Greek lessons in schools and for the more brutish treatment of the local population. Interviewees remember officials were often more officious, less courteous and sometimes prepared to humiliate locals publicly – some described it as a time of ‘face slapping’, χαστούκια.

There were also fewer jobs during the De Vecchi period, as public investment and development projects dried up. The loss of gainful employment overshadowed any of the other benefits that the islanders still might have enjoyed in these difficult times. As Italy itself drew closer to Nazi Germany and seemed bent on preparing for a European war, the new governor’s approach was to achieve its domestic aims coercively. In practice, De Vecchi’s approach had the opposite effect. It galvanized Greek nationalist sentiment and made those who might have been indifferent to Greek nationalism much more receptive. It also launched forms of passive resistance, which ranged from jokes to the secret school movement, which saw children having to meet in secret locations, often at night, to take Greek language classes.

22 Nicholas G. Pappas, *Kastellorizo: An Ill. History of the Island and its Conquerors* (Halstead: Sydney, 1994).
23 Pignataro’s second volume is the best research work on the Lago period: *Il Dodecaneso italiano 1912-1947*. Vol; II., *Il governo di Mario Lago. 1923-1936* (Solfanelli, Chieti, 2013)

24 Luca Pignataro, ‘L’amministrazione italiana del Dodecaneso’, *Res Publica – A proposito del Dodecaneso italiano* 8 (2014), 15: https://www.laeggepertutti.it/prodotto/res-publica-82014-a-proposito-del-dodecaneso-italiano#google_vignette (cited 30 January 2025).
25 Excerpt from a message to a friend, quoted in Pignataro, *Il Dodecaneso Italiano, 1912-1947*, Vol. III *De Vecchi, Guerra e Dopoguerra, 1936-1947/50* (Solfanelli, Chieti, 2024), 96.
26 Pignataro, *L’amministrazione italiana del Dodecaneso*, 18.

Subsequent short-lived governorships (Ettore Bastico, Inigo Campioni) were forgotten, by which time Italy was at war. Italy occupied much of Greece between the end of 1941 and the summer of 1943, including most of the mainland and Greek islands. These were times of extreme scarcity and dearth, and Italian personnel, military and civilian, suffered almost as much as the subject population.²⁷ The years 1943 to 1945 proved to be much traumatic. When Mussolini's replacement, General Pietro Badoglio, announced in early September 1943 that an armistice had been signed with the Allies, German troops moved quickly into the Dodecanese and repulsed a British invasion. For the first time, Dodecanesians witnessed wartime violence at close quarters. Although an Italian civil administration was retained, the Dodecanese were effectively under German authority, and locals remembered it as the 'German occupation' or simply as 'the war' (ο πόλεμος). Many recalled 'near-death' experiences, as some interviewees tried to assist the Allies by passing on information or feeding Allied personnel trapped in nearby hills. Most locals remembered that period primarily as a one of hunger. Food shortages were severe on the less fertile islands, which in peacetime normally relied on food imports. To survive, many families risked the crossing to Turkey, from where they were sent to refugee camps in British Palestine.

German troops were withdrawn from the mainland on 12 October 1944, but those stationed in the Dodecanese were not evacuated and were effectively marooned until May 1945. The British military occupied the islands, dismissed the Italian civil administration but retained many Italian personnel.²⁸ The official objective was to secure the islands before their future was determined. Social memory does not cast the British in a positive light. Although Britain was an ally, many interviewees and some local historians regarded the British as 'occupiers' because they treated Dodecanesians as if they were colonial subjects.

Greek rule

The most difficult topic to address was the period following unification (ενσωμάτωση) in 1947. The historiography is virtually silent. Each island has had its history written by dedicated amateur historians, who learn foreign languages, read mountains of primary documents, and publish books and learned articles. Over the years, their scholarly books and articles have appeared in journals produced by local cultural and educational associations. It is noteworthy, however, that almost nothing has been written on the period following unification.

Two reasons can be surmised. The first is that 1947 represented the 'end of History': 'History' being the studying of the Greek nation, the deeds of patriots and the misdeeds of the nation's enemies. Local historians have focused on patriotic struggle and how they endured foreign rule. Other historical subject matter is deemed trivial in comparison. According to this logic, therefore, history ends in 1947. Once liberty was achieved, the Dodecanese Islands ceased to matter as an historical subject. The second reason has to do with the lack of events that are conventionally interesting to historians. Local municipal politics is not considered sufficiently interesting to the historians or indeed readers. To paraphrase the historian of Italian unification Charles Delzell, the poetry of the struggle for unification with Greece gave way to the prose of the post-unification period.²⁹

For ordinary Dodecanesians, however, Greek rule brought with it a new phase of authoritarian rule. Sometimes they would talk of 'the coming of the Greeks', as if they were another invader: "Όταν ήρθανε οι Έλληνες, ...". To be sure, Dodecanesians support the commonplace Greek view that all foreign regimes, including the Italians, were illegitimate. Only Greek rule is deemed legitimate, yet for Dodecanesians there were aspects of the post-liberation era that were deeply disappointing.

Most painful was their exposure to the extremely divisive nature of Greek political life. Until 1947 Dodecanese had been spared the two political crises that had cut deeply into Greek society since before the First World War, namely the Venizelos-Royalist schism and the ideological chasm that had emerged during the Axis occupation. Unification took place at the height of the Greek Civil War, in while the fighting was contained to Greece's mainland, the persecution of leftists, real or imagined, extended to all parts of the country. 'When the Greeks came', said many interviewees, the Dodecanese became politicized. Greek authorities were determined to find Communists, even though the Communist movement barely existed in the Dodecanese. The Athens government extended patronage to locals who seemed supportive of far-Right politics, giving them public jobs and licenses. Significant numbers of Dodecanesians were to emigrate to Australia, the United States and Canada in these postwar years for economic reasons, but many of them were also happy to leave behind the new politics that was dividing their communities. One émigré recalled how his father was often harassed for being a self-professed 'democrat', with police incessantly inspecting his carpentry workshop to check if he had committed a regulatory or legal infraction.³⁰

In later years, Dodecanesians could use the Italian period, specifically the governorship of Mario Lago (1922-1936), as a standard against which Greek rule could be measured. 'The Italians' were recalled whenever locals believed they had cause for complaint about maladministration, public service and employment opportunities. For such reasons, people who recalled Italian rule frequently idealized it and made it look too rosy. Some interviewees felt a need to correct this common tendency. One noted that it was Greek administration that brought electricity to the villages and built most of the road networks, not, as some irresponsibly claimed, the Italians.

Becoming Dodecanesian

One might describe Dodecanesian as a 'weak' identity. Not many use it to describe themselves. People of smaller islands that are obscure even to most Greeks, such as Tilos, Halki or Lipsos, might find it useful. But most will identify with their island. Rhodians will always say they are Rhodians. Even for Rhodians, however the term is not devoid of meaning. The difficulties that Greek rule presented the islanders in the post-unification years and perhaps through to the end of the military dictatorship (1967-1974), made the Italian period important in social memory. It did much to 'make' the Dodecanese and give Dodecanesians a common identity. The governorship of Mario Lago provided them with an Italian version of modernity, which helped them make sense of unification and its challenges. Within the context of the Greek nation, these island communities had experienced something that was not shared by the rest of Greece.

27 Cf. Shelia Lecoeur, *Mussolini's Aegean Island Mussolini's Greek Island: Fascism and the Italian Occupation of Syros in World War II* (I.B. Tauris: London, 2009).

28 Pignataro, *Il Dodecaneso Italiano, 1912-1947*, Vol. III *De Vecchi, Guerra e Dopoguerra, 1936-1947/50*, 318.

29 C. F. Delzell (ed), *The Unification of Italy, 1859–61: Cavour, Mazzini or Garibaldi?* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston: New York, 1965), 1.

30 Testimony of Emmanuel Dimitriadis, Greek Australian Archive collection, State Library of NSW.