

The Myth of Sacrifice: The Basis of Greek National Identity



The statue of Leonidas at Thermopylae.

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Introduction

Every people has its own specific national identity, which is closely linked with its political culture. They are both the results of the historical experiences that this people lived throughout the centuries.

In order to identify the past events that originated the national identity and the political culture of a country, scholars employ a theoretical framework known as *Chosenness-Myths-Trauma complex* (CMT). "Chosenness" refers to the factors that explain why this people is "unique" and different from the others. "Myths" commemorate and celebrate the greatest achievements of this people, often offering an idealized image of a certain historical event. A "Trauma", on the contrary, is a tragic episode of the past that marked the national conscience.

Naturally, as all the peoples, the Greeks also have their Chosenness, Myths and Traumas. Here, I will focus on a specific "Myth" which constitutes the basis of Greek culture: the "Myth" of Sacrifice. This "Myth" consolidated itself thanks to various episodes throughout History, but there are three events that embody it the most, and that are characterized by the fact that Greeks had to face an invasion from a foreign power which attacked them with overwhelming forces and demanded them to surrender. The origin of the "Myth" is to be found in Ancient Greece, and more precisely in the Spartan warrior ethic.

Sparta's Legacy: The Battle of Thermopylae

Among the city-states of Ancient Greece, Sparta was famous for the valor of its warriors. The Spartan society and its institutions were conceived and optimized for warfare. Under the system of *agoge* (ἀγωγή), children started their military training when they were only seven. When they went to war for the first time, their mothers gave them the shield while saying "***either with it or upon it***" ("***ἢ τὰν ἢ ἐπὶ τᾶς***"): return victorious with your weapons or return dead, carried by your brothers-in-arms; but never return alive without your weapons after fleeing from the battlefield.

As History tells us, the principle of Sacrifice at war was deeply rooted in the mentality of the Spartans. The most well-known example is certainly that of King Leonidas at the Battle of Thermopylae. In 480 b.C., the Persians invaded Greece with a huge army. Xerxes, The Persian Emperor, had alongside him the former King of Sparta, Demaratus. Xerxes asked him if the Greeks would oppose resistance. Demaratus answered¹ that he was sure the Spartans would fight, because they only feared Sparta's laws, which obliged them to fight until death. And this is what Leonidas and his warriors did at Thermopylae. Before the battle started, Xerxes ordered them to surrender their weapons. Leonida's

¹ Herodotus, *Histories*, Book 7, Chapter 102.

answer is famous: ***“Μολών λαβέ”***, ***“come and take them”***. The Greeks kept on fighting for three days, and the battle ended only when the last men who had remained at Thermopylae all died fighting. Probably, this is the most famous sacrifice at war in History, and it would become a basic foundational “Myth” not only for Greece, but for the whole of Western Civilization.



Leonidas at Thermopylae. Painting by Jacques-Louis David.

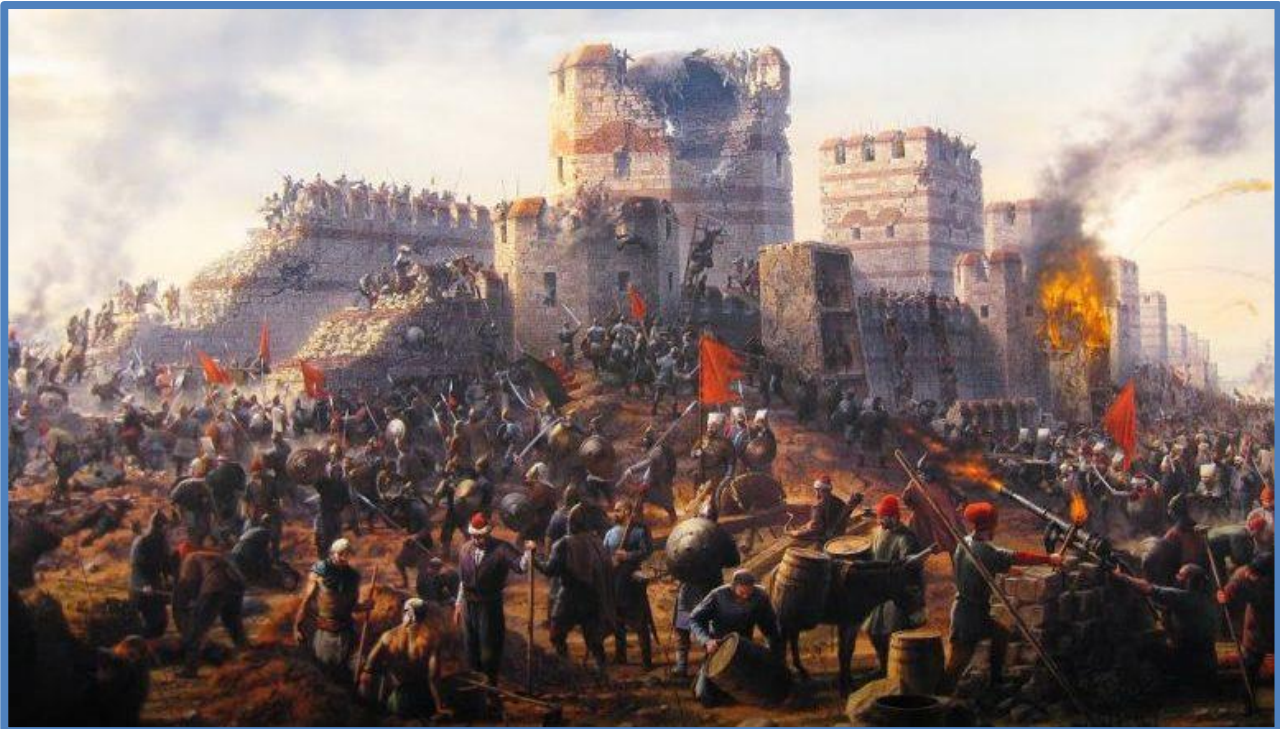
However, for the Greeks this event represents the origin of the °Myth° of heroic Sacrifice for the Motherland, that would strengthen throughout History and that still continues to exist in their national spirit. Every Greek knows the episode of Thermopylae, Leonida’s words and the motto “ἢ τὰν ἢ ἐπὶ τᾶς”. But the “Myth” of Sacrifice consolidated through the Middle Ages have with another heroic battle: the fall of Constantinople.

Constantinople and the Foundation of Modern Greece

Just like the battle of Thermopylae, the siege of Constantinople had a deep impact on the Greeks’ national mindset.

In 1453, the Ottoman army led by Mehmed II attacked the City, which was defended by a few Byzantine forces and their allies. In the context of an apocalyptic atmosphere, the capital of the Greek world was under threat. The Emperor Konstantinos XI led the last stand against the Turks. Mehmed II, just like Xerxes, asked the Byzantine Emperor to surrender. But, as Leonidas had done, Konstantinos refused to capitulate by answering him: ***“To surrender the city to you is beyond my authority or anyone else's who lives in it, for all of us, after taking the mutual decision, shall die***

of our own free will without trying to save our lives"², and died fighting when the Turks entered in Constantinople on 29th May 1453.



Artistic representation of the fall of Constantinople

Source: <https://www.realmofhistory.com/2016/12/29/animation-fall-of-constantinople-1453-ad/>

This episode (which also constitutes a “Trauma” in the Greek national conscience) marked the beginning of the *Turkokratia* (the period of Ottoman rule on Greece), and is also a very important event in the affirmation of the “Myth” of Sacrifice. Once more, the heroic defenders had lost their lives protecting the Motherland. The theme of Sacrifice was then re-discovered by the Greek patriots during the 19th century, who led the War of Independence started in 1821. For example, the phrase “ἢ τὰν ἢ ἐπὶ τᾶς” is found on some flags they used alongside “*Victory or Death*” (“νίκη ἢ θάνατος”); a similar example is “*Freedom or Death*” (“ελευθερία ἢ θάνατος”), which is still the national motto of Greece). All of them evoke the idea of Sacrifice. Again, the *Thourios* by Rigas Feraios (a popular patriotic song) celebrates the same theme: “*It is better one hour of free life,*

rather than forty years of slavery and prison” (“Κάλλιο εἶναι μίας ὥρας ελεύθερη ζωή, παρά σαράντα χρόνια σκλαβιά και φυλακή”). Also, the paintings that commemorate that



Flag used by the Maniots.



The death of M. Botsaris. Painting by Ludovico Lipparini.

² “Τό δέ τήν πόλιν σοι δοῦναι οὐκ ἐμόν ἐστίν οὔτ’ ἄλλου τῶν κατοικούντων ἐνταύθα, κοινή γάρ γνῶμη πάντες αυτοπροαιρέτως ἀποθανοῦμεν μὴ φειδόμενοι τῆς ζωῆς ἡμῶν”.

period often embody such idea of dying for the Motherland. So, the “Myth” of Sacrifice inspired the struggle against the Ottomans as well as Greek irredentism; and became a basic element of the Greek identity.

The “No” of 1940 and the Battle of Rupel

The previous analysis shows that the “Myth” of Sacrifice was essential for the creation of the national spirit of contemporary Greece. The 20th century is at the same time demonstration of its importance and the continuation of its consolidation. In particular, the episode of the “No” in 1940 is the third event that constitutes the “Myth” in its current form.

In October 1940, Mussolini's Italy sent an ultimatum to the Greek Prime Minister I. Metaxas, demanding him to leave the Italian army to enter in Greece. With his famous “**No**”, Metaxas did not accept the Italian requests. The Italian forces attacked Greece, but the Greek army stopped the invasion. Later, its counter-attack pushed back the Italians; and the Greek soldiers entered in southern Albania, then under Italian occupation.

However, Hitler's Germany came to save its Italian ally. The most known episode of the German invasion is the battle at Fort Rupel in 1941, where the German army attacked the defending Greek forces. These fought with valor, and it is said that they did not flee even under the bombs dropped by the German *Stukas*. On this occasion as well, the invader demanded the Greeks to surrender. And again, it received the same answer: the Greek commander told them that “**Forts are not to be surrendered, they must be conquered**”³. As such, the battle continued. The remaining Greek soldiers only stopped fighting when they discovered that the Germans were already marching on Athens and that Greece had lost the war. Then they abandoned Rupel, receiving the military honors from the Germans.

But the Greek resistance did not end. Just before the Germans entered in the capital, Radio Athens incited the people to resist: “**Our war continues, and it will continue until the ultimate victory. Long live the Greek Nation!**”⁴.



Coat of Arms with the words “Forts are not to be surrendered, they must be conquered» at Rupel.
Credits: A. Gagaridis

³ “Τα οχυρά δεν παραδίδονται, καταλαμβάνονται”

⁴ “Ο πόλεμός μας συνεχίζεται, και θα συνεχισθεί μέχρι τις τελικής νίκης. Ζήτω το έθνος των Ελλήνων!”

These events dating back to WWII marked the national spirit of the Greeks. The anniversary of the “No” (28th October) is still a national holiday in Greece, thus showing the episode’s importance. Metaxa’s answer, the battle at Rupel and the resistance against the Germans are therefore an integral part of the “Myth” of Sacrifice; but they are not its last manifestations.

Conclusion: the importance of the “Myth” today

The “Myth” of Sacrifice still continues having a central importance in the national identity of the Greeks. But it is not simply an ideal, it is something that actually unites and inspires the Greeks during periods of difficulties. Here are two of the most recent examples:

- The resistance of the “Sparta” battalion at Outpost *Haros* in 1953 during the Korean War, when it (and other American units) pushed back a largely superior force of about 13,000 attacking Chinese.
- The struggle of the ELDYK (the Greek Forces in Cyprus) against the Turkish invasion in 1974. This is likely the most significant recent expression of the “Myth”, as the commander of the ELDYK declared: “***We are Greek Soldiers, here is Greece and we are obliged to fight until the end***”⁵.



Reenactor in front of Leonidas' statue in Sparta.

<https://notospress.gr/article.php?id=27898>

Source:

This rapid analysis shows the importance of the “Myth” in contemporary Greece. The “Myth” of Sacrifice has its origin in the warrior ethic of ancient Sparta, and has accompanied the Greeks throughout History. Today, it remains a fundamental component of the national identity and the political culture of Greece. And this

is the reason why, as a famous Greek march says, “***Greece never dies***”; “*Η Ελλάδα ποτέ δεν πεθαίνει*”.

⁵ “Είμαστε Έλληνες Στρατιώτες, εδώ είναι Ελλάδα και είμαστε υποχρεωμένοι να πέσουμε μέχρι ενός”.