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**BYZANTINE**  
**AND**  
**MODERN GREEK STUDIES**

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Gonda Van Steen, *Adoption, Memory and Cold War Greece: Kid pro quo?*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2019, 350 pp., ISBN (Print) 978-0-472-13158-7.

## **Tribute to the Lost Children**

From mid-20th century onwards the children enter the historical scene as new historical subjects in addition to generals, politicians, and diplomats. During the Greek Civil War (1946-1949), which took place in the context of the Cold War, it is estimated that almost 400.000 children lost one or both of their parents. Social historians have conducted a thorough research about 50.000 to 60.000 children who were transported to the Soviet Bloc countries or the ‘paidoupoles’ [child towns] of Queen Frederica’s Royal Welfare Fund, because there are numerous archival sources on that issue, and historians are used to work on archives. In her book *Adoption, Memory and Cold War Greece: Kid pro quo?*, Gonda Van Steen discussed another related yet largely neglected topic: the 3.200 Greek children who were transported to the States, after the end of the civil conflict. She has examined all categories of children who were transported, including orphans, abandoned and “illegitimate” and, thus, unwanted children, that were selected for foreign adoption between 1950 and 1962.

Gonda Van Steen is a Belgian-American classical scholar and linguist, who specializes in ancient and modern Greek language and literature. Since 2018, she has been Koraes Professor of Modern Greek and Byzantine History, Language and Literature and Director of the Centre for Hellenic Studies at King’s College London. As she notes “After twenty-five years of applying myself to ancient Greek theater and reception studies”, she received a letter from Mike, an American, who proved to be the grandson of Elias Argyriadis, a Greek communist.

Elias Argyriadis and three others were found guilty of espionage by a military tribunal, sentenced to death and executed in Athens in 1952. The most famous among those executed was Nikos Beloyannis, the “Man with the Carnation”; Pablo Picasso made his portrait. A few months before the execution, Katerina Dalla, the wife of Elias Argyriadis, had committed suicide. In 1955, the authorities took custody of the

two girls of Elias and Katerina and arbitrarily arranged for their adoption by an American family without the possibility of contact with their siblings and their relatives in Greece. In 2013, Mike, the adult son of one of the two adopted women who grew up in America, persuaded his mother to tell him the little she could—or wished to—remember about her past. Mike wanted to know more; after an internet search he discovered Van Steen’s scholarly pursuits and special interests and he solicited her help in investigating his mother’s early years. From 1955 to 2013 it was more than half of a century. So, Part 1 of the book is entitled “The Past That Has Not Passed”.

Part 2, entitled “Nation of Orphans, Orphaned Nation” charts the institutional landscape and socioeconomic context that placed the Greek export of children for adoption on the fast track. Early instances of these postwar and Cold War adoptions may be called “political” adoptions. Children whose families were suspected of having supported the Communist Party of Greece were among the victims of virulent anticommunism. After approximately 1955, however, a new and larger wave of US-bound adoptions from Greece acquired different characteristics. The American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association (AHEPA) played an important if not unblemished role to find Greek children for America’s childless families; a network operated with little transparency and legal validity as an adoption body was established. Stephen S. Scopas, president of AHEPA, was later tried as the main mediator in the circuit of illegal adoptions but he was acquitted, because adoptions were made and completed in Greece.

Part 3 “Insights from Greek Adoption Cases” closes by returning to Mike’s story and that of the Argyriadis children in recent years. Thus, this study’s more psychologically oriented analysis of trauma, memory, and postmemory comes full circle. Van Steen ‘marries’ the personal with the political and the collective, the micro-stories with History and the (post)memories of the adopted today. For some -then- children, the experiences were traumatic and went on to create organizations and support networks that reinforce their sense of belonging.

The research of Van Steen’s took place both in Greece and the States. Her investigation focus is narrow and well defined. Her sources include

an impressive variety of published and unpublished archival material, legal records, and numerous interviews and recollections. The book includes also two precious Appendices. Appendix 1 presents a chronology of selected facts, juxtaposing family history with national, bilateral, and global history and adoption politics. Appendix 2 includes practical Information about Greek-born adoptees—pathways and paperwork.

Why should anyone care about overseas adoptions that happened more than half a century ago?

Because this book weaves the little-known but extensive Greek adoption movement into the broader narrative of political and social history of the Cold War, during which, in the Greek context, the heaviest burden of suffering fell on women and children. Reading the narratives and files (however scant) of the Greek adoption history means reading a history of despair, poverty, and violence. Many testimonies incorporated in this book must reassert the voices of the young, unnamed, uneducated, or powerless. These testimonies, each chosen for its psychological and analytical value, place private histories and national histories in a poignant dialectic relationship with each other, and together they spotlight the strange moral universe of the Cold War Greek adoption movement.

The deep Greek Civil War, like most civil wars, did not begin with the armed struggle, and it did not end with a decisive victory-versus-defeat scenario. The Civil War's depth reached far into the future, to affect how subsequent generations have interpreted it, ignored it, used it, exploited it, and so on.

On the American end, adoption policies and practices captured the ways in which the States wished to represent itself in the global theater of operations. Adoption became a metaphor for the national community.

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