

**A post-Tripolitsa
siege portrait
of freedom fighter
Panayiotis Kefalas by
German painter Peter
von Hess**



Watching the school theatre play in *The Other Town*, Turks appear to have considered Greeks quite the menace, which I found rather surprising considering that it was the Greeks who were under Ottoman rule for 400 years. I expected a certain air of superiority in their festivities.

If you ask someone on a street in Turkey if they're afraid of Greeks, they'll naturally tell you they're not, but each nation experiences threat differently. We feel fear at the possibility of having, for example, an island taken away by a stronger country, where in Turkey's case there's a sense of insecurity at inhabiting a land that historically belonged to others, which accounts for a certain warped sense of history. Greeks, on the other hand, have been here [in Greece] for 3,000 years and are well aware of the fact.

Do you think history books are responsible for reproducing stereotypes?

I've been studying schoolbooks for the past 25 years and I've noticed a radical change. Twenty years ago Turks in Greece were considered no better than barbarians, while Greeks in Turkey were the kind of people who slaughtered babies in their cribs [he refers to the Tripolitsa massacre]. These images have been eradicated, and while there are still defects, I don't really feel that books are the cause. I rather look on them as the result. There's a certain mentality of avoiding things we don't want to hear. I was reading an article in the *Kathimerini* newspaper, where different people were asked a very crucial question: how much history can we really take? We have a very cynical view of the past and everything, from politics to movies and schoolbooks, is a byproduct of that.

Is there a remedy?

It will take a long time for perceptions to shift but a documentary series like *1821* [broadcast on Skai TV], which I've awaited eagerly for a long time, is definitely a good sign. It's the first time a contemporary retelling of history has reached so many people. It's also the first time that Greeks were openly told of their own atrocities and that the Ottoman Empire was made out to be what it really was: an empire, just like any other! Sure it was oppressive and exploitative and no doubt capable of violence, but it was no hell on earth. These people didn't just land from Mars! Make no mistake - none of the things revealed in *1821* or our own documentary are new. It's been common knowledge among historians and intellectuals alike, but it had never been so widely disseminated before.

So why did you leave Turkey in the first place?

The truth is that things were hard for Greeks in Istanbul. Everything you heard was true, the wealth tax on property in 1942 [the notorious *varlik vergisi*], the riot of September 1955, the mass expulsions ... I've lived through it all. I've

been in exile and worse, especially as I was more politically active than other people. It came to the point where I couldn't find work anymore, so I had to leave.

Do you feel more Turkish or Greek?

I've been asked this question on the record about 20 times before and I was very surprised to realise I've given 20 different answers! Not because I consider myself opportunistic but because national identity, as Benedict Anderson, [the famous author on the main causes of nationalism], rightly put it, is an imagined community. It's a matter of faith, and in that respect identity is fictional. And then there's another thing: we say we're all Greeks, but I'm so different to some of them that I couldn't

I first took an interest in the subject when my children went to elementary school all those years ago and would come home from history class saying things that had neither rhyme nor reason,

possibly identify with them all. We all perceive our "Greekness" differently. I mean, the dictator Papadopoulos was Greek too, but I'd like to believe that I'm a very different kind of Greek than he is! So when I hear people saying "Oh, come on we're all Greeks here!" I sometimes have to fight the urge to say that if I had to be anything like them, then I'd honestly rather I wasn't! I don't consider this

a very good question because it's never entirely clear what it is you're being asked ...

Did you get involved in this film to make a certain point?

Not really. We didn't really know where it was going to go, although we did have a vague idea. This has nothing to do with bringing out quaint similarities, such as our taste for syrupy sweets, Turkish/Greek coffee and backgammon! What we ended up saying is that the stereotypes reproduced in both Greece and Turkey are harmful to some extent and render us incapable of dealing with certain problems. As I've lived in both countries, feel intricately entwined with both societies and speak both languages, I feel the need to speak out. I think it's the least I can do in the face of prejudice. Whether people will choose to accept or reject what I have to say, that's a completely different story. To be honest, I was very surprised the film won the audience award at the Thessaloniki Documentary Festival. It will soon be screened in Turkey as well and if the reaction is equally favourable, it might be a sign that people - at least some of them - on both sides of the fence are ready for a new interpretation of history.

You're history!

IF YOU'VE had the pleasure of a Greek upbringing, there's one thing you've all had in common and you don't even know it: a post-Tripolitsa siege portrait of freedom fighter Panayiotis Kefalas by German painter Peter von Hess that hangs in elementary schools all around the country. But there's one little detail that seems to have gone noticed by all and sundry: the background. At first sight, it looks like your standard victory portrait, but a closer look reveals a disturbing detail. Lying behind Kefalas is a pile of corpses, including one of a child.

"It's the Turks that did it. They killed women too" was the confident retort of a local student at a Dimitsana elementary school where the mid-length documentary *The Other Town* was shot.

Tackling different interpretations of a common past as experienced by Greeks and Turks alike, the film was a sleeper hit at the recent Thessaloniki Documentary Festival, walking away with the audience award on March 19.

"I really didn't expect to win," says filmmaker Nefin Dinc. "And I sure didn't expect people to laugh at themselves at the screening either. It was a big surprise!"

What she can't have possibly known is that *The Other Town* has arrived at a time when history has taken the stand, at least history as we've known it. In fact, the smash-hit documentary series *1821*, recently screened on Skai, took issue with a lot of it, causing controversy on a weekly basis and forcing *Kathimerini* newspaper, among others, to question how much history we can really take.

The documentary's Turkish director Nefin Dinc, whose family originated in the mountains of Circassia, in the Caucasus, had always been enough of an outsider to have a different perspective on Greek-Turkish relations and curious enough to want to make a film about it.

Don't get me wrong, nobody's saying age-old animosities still hang in the air in a major way. In fact, one visit to Turkey and you'll realise you're more welcome than you think, but warped interpretations of past events still inform certain behaviours on both sides of the Mediterranean.

The Other Town, scripted by political scientist Hercules Millas, born in Istanbul and currently living in Athens, is also torn between two towns, Dimitsana in Greece and Birgi in Turkey, and not for nothing: Dimitsana played a leading role in the Greek Revolution against the Ottoman Empire in 1821, while nearly 100 years later the Greek army invaded Birgi and occupied it for three years - which basically means that both countries have at some point oppressed and fought each other for national independence, annually celebrated in both towns without fail. And the weirdest thing about it is the festivities are eerily similar - school plays, tear-jerking poems etc.

"It first dawned on me we had these uncanny similarities while I was studying at Ankara University and the State Opera Chorus came to visit our school and sang some Byzantine hymns followed by Ottoman classical music. They were almost the same, which got me to thinking," said Dinc.

As a postgraduate student in England at a time when Greeks were flooding British universities, Dinc said this impression only grew stronger. "I'd chat to all these Greeks and sooner or later they would all repeat the same lines, as

if they had memorised them, stuff they had gotten from the media, the educational system or their families - and, of course, it was happening on the other side too!"

With the help of Millas, who boasts an impressive body of work on Greek-Turkish relations and has even taught conflict resolution at university level, she took on the shady corners of our joint past and came out a winner. Now all that's left to see is if our neighbours will feel the same way, as *The Other Town* is set to screen at the Istanbul International Film Festival on April 16.

Despina Pavlaki



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Nefin Dinc