The Parthenon Marbles in Russia: Referred Pain from a Colonial Past and Present

https://www.e-ir.info/2015/02/11/the-parthenon-marbles-in-russia-referred-pain-from-a-colonial-past-and-present/

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER, FEB 11 2015

The Greek river god Ilissos was smuggled out of the British Museum on December 5, 2014 in utter secrecy and surfaced in St. Petersburg, Russia. Officially 'on loan,' the marble statue's appearance in Russia was a both an assertion and a provocation in the geopolitical contest between Britain and Greece over ownership and possession of displaced statues from the Greek Parthenon. Behind the somewhat sensational headlines, woven into the decades-long debate over the artwork extracted from the Parthenon are the frayed threads of British violence in post WWII Greece, the punishing experience of externally imposed austerity and matters of national identity and pride. The recently elected anti-austerity party Syriza is likely to pursue their return with vigor, given their rhetoric of ending austerity and the humiliation of Greece.

Announcing the loan, Museum's Director Neil MacGregor claimed, "The British Museum is a museum of the world, and nothing demonstrates this more than the loan of a Parthenon sculpture to the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg to celebrate its 250th anniversary." Greek Prime Minister Antonis Samaras characterized it differently, as an affront to the Greek people. "We Greeks are one with our history and civilization, which cannot be broken up, loaned out, or conceded." By transporting Illisos outside of Britain, the museum performed a physical and speech act that asserted authority over the objects and, by proclamation, representation of western civilization itself. In the language of Aristotle's Poetics [1], might Illasos' appearance in The Hermitage signify the 'epitasis', the middle of the drama in which tension builds as the protagonist faces trials and tribulations? Or is the initiation of the 'catastrophe', in which the plot unravels and brings the narrative to closure?

These are not mere 'stones,' though they are made of stone. They are segments of friezes and whole statues cleaved from the Parthenon on the Acropolis; a structure commissioned by Pericles in 4C BC, composed of Parian marble in testimony to Athenian power. Athens' landscape without reference to the Parthenon has been unthinkable for thousands of years. Their absence reflects a diminishment of Greece's position in the world, and thus can be invoked to mobilize contemporary Greek national sentiment through the provocation of absence.

At a 2006 UNESCO hearing, Greece's representative said their absence "…rips out the nation's heart and obliterates its past… That the sculptures are in the hands of the British is acutely problematic."

'The Museum is a unique resource for the world: the breadth and depth of its collection allows a world-wide public to re-examine cultural identities and explore the complex network of interconnected human cultures…The Parthenon Sculptures are a vital element in this interconnected world collection. They are a part of the world's shared heritage and transcend political boundaries.' –British Museum Statement

The political and cultural agency of the Parthenon Marbles are literally ingested into an institutional body which anoints itself as curator of world heritage, a position which obfuscates a far less benign history of British imperial violence in Greece at the end of WWII, and a variation on the 'colonial present'. In commenting on Derek Gregory's book *The Colonial Present,* Anjali Kamat neatly describes it as the 'contrapuntal relationship between past and ongoing colonial misadventures'.

Recently accessed documents from War Cabinet papers reveal that Churchill ordered the British military to play a leading role in the imprisonment, torture and murder of Greek leftists in the immediate aftermath of World War II. They opened fire on student demonstrators, killing 28 young people. "The stated purpose of this [British] intervention was the preservation of the empire." Sir Charles Wickham, the former first Inspector General of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, from 1922 to 1945, was assigned by Churchill to command the "British Police Mission" to Greece – to build and oversee the new Greek security forces by recruiting Nazi collaborators. Anthropologist Neni Panourgia describes Wickham as "one of the persons who traversed the empire establishing the infrastructure needed for its survival," and credits him with the establishment of one of the most vicious concentration camps.

At the battle's peak, says survivor Manos Glezos, the British set up sniper nests on the Acropolis. "Not even the Germans did that. They were firing down on EAM (Greek leftist targets, but we didn't fire back, so as not [to harm] the monument." British tanks cleared whole neighborhoods in Athens. By the time the Dekemvriana [2] was over, thousands of Greeks had been executed, usually in public, their severed heads or hanging bodies routinely displayed in public squares. In a striking echo of Said's Orientalism, 'His Majesty's embassy in Athens commented that the exhibition of severed heads "is a regular custom in this country which cannot be judged by western European standards."

Panougrai described torture by stone on the island of Makrónisos as an exercise in a nationalist history lesson: make replicas of ancient structures, build and sculpt as if you were ancient Greeks. The segments of the camp where repentant soldiers stayed, those who had signed the deloseis (declarations), became an open-air exhibit of small-scale replicas of the Parthenon and other classical buildings. There has never been a reckoning with that crime, and much of what is happening in Greece now is the result of not coming to terms with the past," says Gerolymatos. "The 1944 December uprising and 1946-49 civil war period infuses the present."

Seventy years later, Athens was the scene of a student demonstration against the excesses of the government. 15-year-old Alexis Grigoropoulos was shot and killed by a policeman who was later charged with premeditated homicide, escalting the scope and intensity of the protests. In 2009 Guardian reporters Ed Vulliamy and Helena Smith spoke with 'Marina' in the Athens quarter of Exarcheia, "I come from a family that has been detained and tortured for two generations before me: my grandfather after the Second World War, my father under the Junta of the colonels – and now it could be me, any day now. We are the grandchildren of the andartes, and our enemies are Churchill's Greek grandchildren."

Antipathy towards Germany as austerity enforcer runs similarly deep. The first public act performed by newly elected Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras was to lay flowers at the National Resistance Memorial at Kaisariani, a suburb in Athens where Nazis executed hundreds of communist national resistance fighters on 1 May 1944. The sculptures, in absentia, are not just material missing from the Parthenon. They join the distant past to the devastating civil war that featured British brutality with the current crises of austerity and legitimacy. Greek experience in the 20th century disputes the claim by Britain as 'defender of western civilization.' Perhaps what Greece seeks through the marbles return is a kind of restorative justice, reified in marble.

Notes

[1] In his *Poetics*, the Greek philosopher Aristotle a beginning, middle, and end – technically, the protasis, epitasis, and catastrophe

[2] RAF Spitfires and Beaufighters were strafing leftist strongholds as the Battle of Athens – known in Greece as the Dekemvriana (December events) – began, fought not between the British and the Nazis, but the British alongside supporters of the Nazis against Greek partisans. This same term was used to describe the protests of 2008.

About the author:

Elizabeth Alexander is a PhD student in Political Geography at Royal Holloway University of London, with particular interests in materiality, identity and place.