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Learn the Truth The Greek Colonels' Misappropriation of Ancient History and the Defense of Drama

When the Greek military dictators took power in the coup of 21 April 1967, they were in need of moral and cultural as well as political prestige. In their constant search for legitimacy, they mined the treasure house of Greek history much in the way in which Mussolini had boosted his Italian fascist regime with references to Roman antiquity. My paper will show how the Colonels adopted certain patterns of appropriating ancient through modern Greek history, patterns which theater circles tried to undermine by staging oppositional revival productions of ancient drama.

The Colonels commemorated events and celebrated grand historical festivals, which originated in public initiatives taken by the prewar Greek dictator Ioannes Metaxas, who had himself been inspired by both Hitler and Mussolini. I argue that the Colonels expanded upon the known fascist agendas of historical propaganda in ways that were distinctly Greek. The oppositions reaction to the blatant fascist rewriting of Greek history and, in particular, to the regimes dramatizations or histrionics of history was distinctly Greek as well: the opposition employed revivals of ancient Greek drama to stress the need for free speech and to raise anew questions of doubt and criticism in the face of the juntas monolithic, totalitarian readings of Greek history.

In the Colonels eyes, Greek history equaled Greek continuity, blessed Greek destiny, and patriotic Greek identity. Their annual celebrations of the Festival of the Polemic Virtue of the Greeks projected a streamlined ethnic history: an overbearing, authoritative sequence of Greek military victories, in which aggressive armies and actions prevail and powerful military leaders take center-stage. In all of the enacted episodes, the enemy, whether Persian, rival Roman, Crusader, Turk, Bulgarian, Italian, or Greek leftist, is depicted as the emblematic bad guy, who is appropriately defeated on the Colonels huge stage of the Olympic stadium arena in downtown Athens. Alexander the Great appears as Greek and Greek only and Byzantium is an all-Greek club. The Colonels historical parade of Greek military victories begins with the Greeks seizing Troy and ends with the political Rights victory over the leftists and communists in the Greek Civil War (1949). The crowning extension of this Civil War victory is the military regimes supposedly life-saving intervention to prevent a 1967 communist take-over of Greece. Centuries of subjugation are conveniently forgotten, as are historical debts owed to foreigners, to women, and to more moderate or resistance forces in Greek society.

Ancient Greek drama, too, was not safe in the hands of the Colonels. If plays could not be altered or owned, they could always be censored. I devote special attention to revival productions of ancient drama because of their unique, double-edged role under the junta. On the one hand, some tragedies such as the *Oresteia* trilogy, were harnessed (by the state-sponsored National Theater, for instance) to serve the junta. Nazi Germany, too, had been able to bring forth a 1936 fascist *Oresteia*. The dictators saw their cultural agenda and ethical-didactic rehabilitation program well served by possible fascist exploitations of the grand, heroic trilogy of international repute, its visionary representation of order-in-

the-making, and its aitiological validation of law and order in the Areopagus (an institution for which a modern Greek equivalent by the same name exists). In other words, the regimes *Oresteia* would represent on stage an unquestioned historical victory, much like the state-orchestrated commemorative celebrations. The Greek Left, on the other hand, turned the *Oresteia* into an opposition trilogy, which was to enact the dynamics of ideological questioning and of cultural and historical criticism rather than to affirm monolithic certainty and static authority. Based on the modern Greek oppositions use of the *Oresteia*, I conclude that revivals of ancient tragedy became a visible, critical answer-in-kind to the juntas authoritative, no less theatrical representations of ancient Greek history.