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Dimitris Matsalis and Individual Terrorism

The Liopetas-Agallopoulos case

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On 3 November 1896, in Patras, sandal-maker Dimitris Matsalis (or Matsanis, originated from Argos, a town of Eastern Peloponnese), who was attending the theatre play “William the Porter”, the latter being played in Patras at the time by an Italian troupe, and in which the power of wealth revealed outweighing any feeling of justice, attacked with a knife at Independence Avenue (today's Gerokostopoulos Street) against two renowned local figures. The banker Dionysis Frangopoulos immediately died after receiving the stabbings and the rising trader Andreas Kollas was seriously wounded.

Matsalis was immediately arrested and during the initial interrogation he explained his anarchist ideas, saying: “I would kill Collas or anyone else. I have nothing with him, as I have nothing with Frangopoulos. But I am against this society’s inequalities and whoever was in front of me would pay for this ...».

The first interrogation of Dimitris Matsalis lasted several hours. There, he defended his ideas, saying: “What I did

was for the sake of the idea. Nobody pushed me. I did it by myself. I didn't aim the particular people with this attack, but Capital itself. I am an anarchist, and anarchists are for violence. Christogiannopoulos¹ and the other socialists are ridiculous and nothing links me with those. They want to impose their ideas by persuasion, while I, as an anarchist, support the terrorist violence”.

On 6 November 1896, Dimitris Matsalis transferred to the prison in fortress of Patras. To the guards who accompanied him said: “I do not fear death. When I started to kill someone from this society, I knew that I would die at the end”.

Since his first moments into prison he started propaganda to his fellow prisoners telling them that this society is unacceptable, that there should be a true and absolute freedom and that the laws are unnecessary and powers of all kinds must be destroyed. He was also sharing his food with the others. He did not betray or gave the name of anyone.

The event got an immense and huge publicity. Everyone, everywhere, began to see conspiracies. The time chronicler of the Athenian newspaper “Empros” (“Forward”)² Yianis Kondylakis spoke ironically enough of the anarchist movement of Patras and the rural population of the region, while most journalists named the event “The tragedy of Independence Street”.

In 5 November 1896 in “Neologos” (“New Say”, a daily mainstream newspaper in Patras, published a small ‘interview’ of D. Matsalis, from which we forward here the following extract:

“Neologos: What is your impression by the way the press wrote about your case? Are you unhappy?”

¹ Athanassios Christogiannopoulos. A prominent christian socialist intellectual in Patras and leader of Armageddon grouping during the last years of 19th and first years of 20th century.

² “Empros”. We must not confuse this newspaper with a short lived anarchist publication by the same name circulated in Patras around 1895–1896.

Matsalis: No. The press could not write otherwise. They completed their task. If we had anarchist newspapers, then they'd have written differently!

Neologos: Will you not be dissatisfied by the outcome of the trial whatever will be?

Matsalis: I will be unsatisfied only if they will convict me to life imprisonment. I want to be convicted to death and this I will demand!

At the same time other mainstream newspapers such as “Paligennesia” (“New Birth”, “Efimeris” (“Newspaper”), “Nea Efimeris” (“New Newspaper”) — all from Patras — “Skrip” from Athens and others, published several other theories of the anarchist and socialist ideas, making them responsible for crimes “against the country and its moral ethics”.

Of course, the case reached newspapers in other countries, where Matsalis considered as an extremely violent person or insane.

On 8 November 1896. Dimitris Matsalis was locked inside an isolation confinement because of his propaganda to the other prisoners. According to some witnesses, the same day (according to others on 11 November) he committed suicide by biting a dynamite detonator, which is unknown who, how and when did he get it on his hands. So, if we considering this evidence as true his trial never occurred, although it was clear that D. Matsalis would be convicted to death. Other historical sources, however, argued that Matsalis was decapitated at the notorious, during those times, prison fortress Palamidi (in Nafplion).

However, Matsalis' act was the best motive the State could have in order to persecute wildly anarchists. Police arrested the most members and associates of the anarchist newspaper “Epi Ta Proso” (“Forward”), that is Yannis Magkanaras, Dimitris Karampiliias, Tsekouras, Andreas Soufas, Evangellos Markantonatos, Panagiotis Kotzias, socialists Mourikis, D. Zafeiriadis,

Vasilis Doudoumis, Tzoumerkas and others. The persecution extended to the christian socialist organisation “Armagedon” and had been arrested Athanassios Christogiannopoulos and Ioannis Arnellos as well. Dimitris Arnellos (brother of Ioannis) and some other anarchists fled away or passed to clandestinity. In Pyrgos, anarchist Panos Machairas was arrested (according newspapers “Neologos” and “Empros”, in 9 November 1896). Also, charges were addressed against prominent socialists of the time Stavros Kallergis and Plato Drakoulis. Overall, about 30 people were arrested. Of those all, Doudoumis and Tzoumerkas were freed without charges immediately.

Police also raided “Epi Ta Proso” offices and seized the press machine, several documents, correspondence and other materials, while the same was done at the home of Yannis Magkanaras, where among other things confiscated was an article directed against the police ready to be published in “Epi Ta Proso”, which police tried to connect it directly with Matsalis’ act. However this attempt was unsuccessful, because Magkanaras had written it when the police had accused him as an instigator of the strike of the sultana boxes manufacturers. Magkanaras was led twice to a trial, where he defended his ideas.

Meanwhile, from the newspapers, only “Peloponnese” stood in some kind of solidarity with those arrested, but was particularly critical against the christian socialist “Armageddon”, going so far as to accuse its members as instigators of the murder of Frangopoulos. Conversely, the athenian newspaper “Acropolis” defended the Christogiannopoulos’s movement while another athenian newspaper “Proia” stood against.

After the interrogations, from those 30 arrested were finally imprisoned Magkanaras, Tsekouras, Soufas, Markantonatos, Mourikis and Dimitris Arnellos (who was still on run).

We must also note that any persecution against Panos Machairas, D. Zafeiriadis, Stavros Kallergis and Plato Drakoulis definitely ceased.

The views on when and how Dimitris Bantounas died are still today divided. "Neologos" wrote in 18 May 1899 that there was an armed conflict between Bantounas and Dimoulis brothers in Pyrgos and that one of them killed Bantounas after the latter smacked one of their relatives.

However, many newspapers continued to publish various scenarios and other stuff trying to certainly discover any link between all anarchists of Greece to individual terrorism.

We must also note that the State did not consider the Christian socialists less dangerous for the regime than the other socialists and anarchists. However, Yannis Magkanaras was in fact one of the most interesting figures as he was the most active political opponent of the regime, at least on a local level, and he was the only one who was refused to be released from jail.

Another aspect of the whole case we should consider was that during this time due to the anarchist terrorist attacks against kings, heads of State and others, most European governments (and their Greek counterpart) worked for the immediate suppression of any anarchist or socialist movement.

Apart from Matsalis' act it is historically confirmed that in Greece during this time there did not exist supporters of individual terrorism as happened until the first years of the 20th century in Europe. Most of the anarchists in Greece during 1890's, were basically supporters of the anarchist communism of Kropotkin, Jean Grave and others. It seems that the only "representative" of the trend of individual terrorism in Greece was D. Matsalis, although others may have wanted to follow the path of illegalism and expropriation. It is also proven that Matsalis had no connection with "Epi Ta Proso".

The Liopetas-Agallopoulos case

In early May 1899, the daily newspaper "Neologos" in Patras began informing the readers of what was associated with a series of thefts and robberies, beginning with the robbery against someone called Papandropoulos. The police started arrests and interrogations on the case and "Neologos" gave a wide publicity to them. The police arrested several people, while others were called to testify. Statements were also made by the then Prime Minister Theotokis.

Among those arrested was K. Tsirikas (or Dimitropoulos or Kostalas or Aivaliotis), from whom began to unfold a cloth

skeil that led to revelations and further arrests. K. Tsirikas was proven to be the leader of a gang of thieves with a multifaceted action, not only in Patras, but also in other cities.

Initially, among the various suspects and detainees whose names are paraded by the police was that of the anarchist Aristeidis Agalopoulos, a tailor by profession, who was from Constantinople. A. Agalopoulos was once a correspondent of the newspaper "Socialist" of Stavros Kallergis and later was among those ten anarchists who send an anti-electoral statement published in the anarchist newspaper of Pyrgos "Neon Fos" ("New Light") in its No 17, 31 January 1899 issue.

But as far as anarchists concerned, one of the first names of the suspects in this case was this of Nicholas Liopetas, who was a member of the gang and he was from whom that the "cloth skein" of the whole case began to unfold. Nicholas Liopetas, a carpenter by profession, was also one of the ten anarchists who signed the anti-electoral statement, published in the "Neon Fos". The arrest and discovery of the name of N. Liopetas as one of the main participants in this gang caused a great impression amongst the local society and also amongst anarchist and socialist groups and circles of Patras, because by many he was considered as a serious social activist. In Liopetas's possession a bulky notebook found describing in detail all thefts by the gang members and various stolen property, especially valuables.

After an investigation by us it appears that maybe Liopetas was fed up by the long chase against anarchists by the State. He was a carpenter with four children and could not afford a situation in which even the movement of ideas was illegal. After the second wave of repression against the anarchists in Patras (early 1898), he maybe decided connecting himself with the Tsirikas's gang. However, the surprise of the local community was great.

When firstly arrested, Liopetas attempted to commit suicide by drinking arsenic and transported to the hospital. He said

he regretted and will promise to testify everything, something he did. During his interrogation he declared that the gang had branches in Athens, Piraeus, Syros, Messolongi, Pyrgos, Corinth and elsewhere, even abroad in Istanbul and Izmir.

In the meantime, Arist. Agalopoulos was wondering why the police was accusing him saying that he had not any relationship with the gang. He said he was still a socialist or so but he was not either a thief or a thug.

Finally, in accordance with the relevant Decree eight people including Liopetas and Agalopoulos, had to be stood in trial, although by the same Decree Agalopoulos was not involved in the gang, rather simply he was a friend of some gang members to whom he offered protection and asylum from persecution by the police.

But, meanwhile, N. Liopetas, died in prison, without us knowing the circumstances of his death.

At the same time Tsirikas managed escaping from jail while Agalopoulos arrested again because (according to the press) was the last person with whom Tsirikas had spotted the fugitive in prison during visiting hours). Beyond this point we have not further elements to see how the whole case went.

However, we can say that Liopetas's participation and Agalopoulos's assistance in the gang used by the State and the pursuing mechanisms to discredit the socialist anarchist ideas. But by the historical data we have got there must not have been launched a massive crackdown against the already by this time weak anarchist group of Patras. But if we connect the morale blow with the assassination of Dimitris Bantounas – that took place during the arrests of the members of the gang – was the swan song of anarchist activity in Achaia and Ilia. Most of the participants of this significant ascent and descent of the anarchist wave of class struggle in Achaia and Ilia Prefectures migrated in Athens, others settle abroad, and some others simply disappear.