

Een pantserschip in een zee van bittere tijden

Muziek en politiek in het Griekenland van de Twintigste Eeuw

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Abstract

An armoured ship in a sea of bitter times. Music and politics in 20th century Greece.

The first three quarters of the 20th century in Greece were turbulent times. Consequently, much has been written about them, from every possible angle. One question, however, has attracted relatively little attention: how did the man-in-the-street perceive politics, what was his view on decisions that were made high above his head but nonetheless had tremendous impact on his daily life? And related: how did he cope with all the horror, how did he conserve his mental sanity? Why didn't all the fuses blow?

The author argues that some insight can be gained from popular songs of the period. He scrutinizes the texts of several songs, more or less randomly sampled but all of them dealing with things political, and (almost) all of them created, played and listened to by common men. The songs cover the period from the Balkan Wars to the final days of the Junta and many of them are little known outside Greece (and maybe even inside, nowadays).

He demonstrates how, hidden in these songs, there is a wealth of information about the world in which they were conceived. Also, the message that jumps out of each song (enthusiasm, indignation, sadness, ...) concurs with what conventional textbooks have to say about the public opinion that prevailed during the corresponding period. Along the way, it is interesting to see how songwriters have adjusted to censorship as the years went by.

In conclusion, it is apparent that people have applied various defensive strategies in the face of threats, attackers and oppressors of all shapes and colors: patriotism on the one hand, to give meaning to sacrifice, and humour, satire and mockery on the other hand, in order to preserve their self-esteem. As the title - borrowed from two songlines and stitched together with some sense for bad metaphor - suggests: people clad themselves with different types of armour while trying to steer through a sea of bitter times without being shipwrecked.

Admittedly, these findings are not exactly earth-shattering, nor are they very surprising, but, well, there is always the songs ...