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Hiding in plain sight: visual histories in Greece

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Photographs are seldom at the centre of Greek historical research, despite their frequent use as illustrations. Despite this neglect of photography, modern Greek history would seem unimaginable without photographs, highlighting photography's integral role in our thinking about the past. In this article I offer some theoretical reflections on the impact of photography on historical imagination. Thereafter I take a closer look at some examples that do consider photography's role in the practice of Greek history, showing how photographs have been both mistrusted and embraced in historical research.

Keywords: photography; visual history; historical imagination; historiography

Introduction

Photographs have never been at the centre of historical research on Greece. Yet it is difficult to imagine the (modern) Greek past without photographs. In this paper, I will argue for a serious engagement with photographs in the practice of Greek history to uncover what photographs did in the past and how these same photographs make us think about the past in the present. Greece is not unique in its neglect of photography's important role in imagining the past. There are, however, some auspicious coincidences that intertwine the modern histories of the Greek state and photography. Invented roughly at the same time in the 1830s, modern Greece and photography developed a symbiotic relationship. As John Stathatos notes, 'photography provided [Greek] society with a record, mirror and a model.'[1] From foreign travellers crafting visions of idealized Greek landscapes (indebted primarily to an ancient Greek *literary* past) to the gradual photographic capture of Greek life by elites and wider society, Modern Greek history was shaped under the sun of

1 J. Stathatos, 'The three-way mirror: photography as record, mirror and model of Greek national identity', in P. Carabott, Y. Hamilakis and E. Papargyriou (eds.), *Camera Graeca: photographs, narratives, materialities* (Farnham 2015) 25-52 (25).

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photographic representation. While Modern Greek history is not defined or set apart by any overt form of visuality, this history is unimaginable without photographs. I begin by discussing some theoretical reflections on the impact of photography on historical imagination. Thereafter I will take a closer look at some examples that do consider photography's role in the practice of Greek history, showing how photographs have been both mistrusted and embraced in historical research.

Disturbances

Historians have often stumbled when it comes to using photographs in their work. More often than not, photographs serve as illustrations or confirmations of arguments already made with other sources, rather than drawing on photographs to make an argument. This aversion to photographs in the practice of history leads at least in part back to an unfamiliarity with methods and theories for photography.[2] As Julia Adeney Thomas has remarked, photographs are flirtatious, hence their allure for historians. Yet despite the promise of an immediate access to the past, photographs can never deliver on this promise. 'Instead, the provokingly unsatisfactory knowledge gained through photographic images reveals, as perhaps textual evidence never could, the duality of our relationship to the past, a relationship that is both visceral and discursive, both instinctual and interpretive, both voluptuous and analytical.'[3] Concurrently privileged as historical sources yet dubious as to their evidentiary qualities, photography becomes 'the discipline of history's Other',[4] fetishized yet deemed inadequate.[5]

The uneasiness that photographs create, however, may encourage historians to pose important and critical questions about the nature of historical inquiry itself.[6] Working with and thinking through photographs necessitates an approach that from its outset problematizes the interpretation of photographs as sources of history as well as historical enquiry's larger framework of sources. As Jennifer Tucker argues, 'this is precisely the promise and ultimate potential of the historical study of photographs–that it pushes their interpreters to the limits of historical analysis.'[7]

Thomas makes an important separation between two contrasting modes of interaction with photography in historical research: recognition and excavation.

2 J. Tucker, 'Entwined practices: engagements with photography in historical inquiry', *History and Theory* 48.4 (2009) 1-8 (4). See also P. Burke, *Eyewitnessing : the uses of images as historical evidence* (London 2001).

3 J. A. Thomas, 'The evidence of sight', *History and Theory* 48:4 (2009) 151-168 (151).

4 E. Edwards, 'Photography and the business of doing History', in G. Pasternak (ed.) *The Handbook of Photography Studies* (Abingdon 2020) 170-86 (172).

5 Tucker, 'Entwined practices', 5.

6 Tucker, 'Entwined practices', 5.

7 Tucker, 'Entwined practices', 5. Elizabeth Edwards *Photographs and the Practice of History : a short primer* (London 2022) has recently provided a very useful overview of the many ways in which photographs disturb the practice of history. Although, as Edwards notes, this is not an exhaustive account, it offers pathways to develop 'fluid historiographical sensibilities' that, while photography-led, can inform a wider range of ways to do history.

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Thomas writes that '[w]hereas recognition embraces the image as providing historical evidence through its likeness to something in the past, excavation fingers the edges of the image, seeking to recover the historical matrix out of which it came.'[8] Excavation therefore attempts to reconstruct the complex discursive frameworks from which the photograph arose and gained meaning in the past. Recognition functions rather along the lines of substitution, with the photograph acting metonymically as a part and representation of a whole.[9]

Recognition also seems to offer a promise to bring us closer to the past and to its indexical trace without an interpretative filter. As Michael Roth puts it, photographs lure us into a 'desire for fullness or presence' that will never be satisfied.[10] Absence is always a given in our encounters with the photographic image, which in turn as an object reminds us of the unbridgeable distance between the past, the present, and the image. This ambivalence and 'tension between the indexical lure of presence and the representational reminders of absence intensifies the photograph's affective and cognitive value for the beholder'.[11] Historical distance is hence elided, which may be recovered through excavation. This counteracting dynamic has important implications for historical imagination.

Excavation in Thomas' understanding also holds out the possibility of counteracting a crucial aspect of photography: its seemingly open-ended capture of the contingent, the 'odd excision from the past'.[12] Photography's mechanical precision inflects what is deemed historically salient through the capture of the contingent. The fixing in place in a photograph of the accidental turns this contingency into an event with meaning. In turn, this event can be placed in a row of events that produces a meaningful structure. The result of this is a 'new dynamic of living with the past' that draws attention to the importance of photographs in gaining access to our histories.[13] Making sense of the contingent takes place by reconstructing the framework within which it was embedded. However, this past historical world exists at a significant historical distance from us. Photographs remind us – via the mode of excavation – of the absence of this historical world and the fundamental divide between the present and the past.[14]

Thomas argues that the use of photographs by historians is often indebted to a framework of recognition because it helps secure 'the similarity of past and present

8 Thomas, 'The evidence of sight', 153.

9 Thomas, 'The evidence of sight', 154, 156.

10 M. S. Roth, 'Photographic ambivalence and historical consciousness', *History and Theory* 48.4 (2009) 82-94 (89).

11 Roth, 'Photographic ambivalence', 91.

12 Thomas, 'The evidence of sight', 154. See also R. Kelsey, 'Of fish, birds, cats, mice, spiders, flies, pigs, and chimpanzees: how chance casts the historic action photograph into doubt', *History and Theory* 48.4 (2009) 59-76.

13 Roth, 'Photographic ambivalence and historical consciousness', 93.

14 Thomas, 'The evidence of sight', 154. See also S. Kracauer, *History: the last things before the last* (Princeton 2013) 5.

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experience'.[15] Through vision the historian relies on recognition to make sense of a photograph, drawing not on new knowledge but on the cognitive and visceral knowledge the historian already possesses. No new articulations of the past are set in motion: instead, desires to intuitively understand the past via a photograph are pursued.[16] The mode of excavation, however, while sensitive to the specifics of a photograph's social, political, cultural frameworks of production and consumption produces a blindness to the image itself. If we are to historicize how a photograph was seen, as in Thomas' research on post-war Japan, we need to look '*outwards* from the image' (emphasis in original) to recover all the complex ways in which the photograph was given meaning in the past.[17] Our own senses and experiences cannot be trusted as our present experiences have no traction in the past. Such a historicization of experience begets important questions about how and to what extent we are able access the past. Perhaps as Thomas has it, the modes of recognition and excavation are (mostly) irreconcilable. Nevertheless, this ambivalence is not going away. Indeed, it can be quite productive as it reminds us to rethink how our historical imagination is gained in photography and beyond.

Where are the photographs?

As Iro Katsaridou and Ioannis Motsianos have noted, 'historical' photographs have until recently in Greece been examined through a prism of realism.[18] Such an approach differs from Greek discourses regarding creative/artistic photography that took off in the 1980s and grant a greater role to photography's medium-specificity. A prism of realism has in most cases relegated 'historical' photography to an illustration of things past, a confirmation of events whose existence has been gleaned from other sources.

As photographs have ended up serving as illustrations rather than as points of departure for historical research on Greece, photographs are simultaneously invisible (since they are transparent) and ever-present. Unsurprisingly, photographs are seldom to be found in historical research. This holds for Greece and elsewhere. However, doing historical research in the era of photography – which quite neatly overlaps with the historical development of the modern Greek state – needs to consider the abundance of images in circulation.[19]

Most of the work of thinking with photographs in Greek history has fallen, perhaps unsurprisingly, to scholars of photography. Alexandra Moschovi has explored in depth

15 Thomas, 'The evidence of sight', 157.

16 Thomas, 'The evidence of sight', 158.

17 Thomas, 'The evidence of sight', 160.

18 I. Katsaridou and I. Motsianos, 'Αναπαραστάσεις της Κατοχής: μια εισαγωγή', in I. Katsaridou & I. Motsianos (eds.), *Αναπαραστάσεις της Κατοχής: φωτογραφία, ιστορία, μνήμη* (Thessaloniki 2016) 13-23 (18-19).

19 H. White, 'Historiography and historiophoty', *The American Historical Review* 93.5 (1998) 1193- 9.

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the shifts in photography's visualization of Greece throughout the twentieth century from 'the representation of politics to the politics of representation'.[20] A clear sense of photographs' participation in the historical imagination of Greece can be read in Moschovi's analysis, although it is not expressly articulated as such. Stathatos has likewise provided an account of Greek photography's historical participation in showing and reflecting back Greek identity to Greek society.[21] Refracted through photography's representational work, we are encouraged to reflect on the ways in which photography lures us into experiencing the past, viscerally and cognitively.

There is by now a growing body of literature that engages with Greek photography from a multitude of disciplines and perspectives. Much of this work touches upon photography's relationship to the past. In Greece's case, the cross-fertilizations between archaeology and photography are particularly rich as photographs of archaeological remains instantiated a body of visual knowledge and symbols that were central to Greek historical imaginaries. Historians of Greece are, however, largely absent from discussions of photography's role in the practice of history or looking critically beyond photographs' documentary potential. Eleni Kouki's research into the shifting uses of war photography in Greek public discourse provides an insightful case study of photographs' participation in Greek historical imagination. Kouki reveals that photographs' participation in public discourses about history were contingent and embedded within wider cultural processes. This highlights the need to examine how and why photographs were used in the past and how we perceive their historicity today. Furthermore, Kouki shows how private photo albums became key sources for the creation of a national 'photo album' at the Athens War Museum in the 1970s, identifying an important source for future historical research.[22]

Spyros Asdrachas is the historian who has written most about photography and its relationship to Greek history. Two of his texts are worth discussing at greater length here. Asdrachas' first text is an introduction to the book *Greece through Photography*, edited by Alexandra Moschovi and Aliki Tsirgialou.[23] The book sets out to illustrate Greece's history and to retell the development of photography in Greece. The richly illustrated book does not provide a linear visualization of Greek history, but rather an examination of social and cultural bonds in Greece as seen through photography, while tracking at the same time photography's historical development in Greece.

In their contributions to the book Moschovi and Tsirgialou draw on their expertise in photography and visual culture. Asdrachas, however, writes from the perspective of an (influential) historian, with no discernible research interest in photography. So where do

20 A. Moschovi, 'Από την αναπαράσταση της πολιτικής στην πολιτική της αναπαράστασης', in I. Papaioannou (ed.), *Η ελληνική φωτογραφία και η φωτογραφία στην Ελλάδα* (Athens 2013) 145-73.

21 Stathatos, 'The three-way mirror'.

22 E. Kouki, 'War photographs re-used: an approach to the photograph collection of the Memorial Museum of the Battle of Sarandaporo', in Carabott, Hamilakis, and Papargyriou, *Camera Graeca*, 257-74.

23 A. Moschovi and A. Tsirgialou (eds.), *Η Ελλάδα μέσα απο την φωτογραφία : 160 χρόνια οπτικές μαρτυρίες* (Athens 2007).

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photographs fit into the understanding of history for Asdrachas? The title of the text 'Photography, reflection [απείκασμα] of history' offers some important clues. Photographs offer an image of history, providing testimony of societies' 'avatars'. Hence, for Asdrachas photographs have evidentiary value for an ethnographic approach to history. It is this evidentiary value that makes photography a historical document, a source for history.[24]

Asdrachas argues, further, that photographs are historical documents, regardless of their use in historiography. Photographs may be used to reconstruct historical events or to shed light on the general 'mood' of certain periods. All done with a critical eye towards photography's subjective constraints, be they the images' use as propaganda and/or art. The crucial issue is that photographs do not depict the whole picture. However, this does not necessarily preclude the use of photographs in historiography: the historian can use the absences and silences found in photography as its own form of historical document.[25]

Asdrachas makes sound arguments about photographs as historical documents. Yet, he is not completely convinced of photography's place in the practice of history. In his assessment, the book is a book with a historical intent whose images reflect history but do not narrate it. The photographs are watermarked by history, but in order for it to be *history*, other (more important) sources would need to be drawn on, diminishing photography's role as object of analysis.[26] This argument clearly places photography quite low in the hierarchy of historical sources without substantively explaining *why* photography comes up short. Any history is reliant on multiple sources, which might or might not be complete–so why is photography so different?[27] Perhaps what is troubling to historians like Asdrachas is that photographs are messy as well as affective, and if they are used for the writing of history, we might be made more acutely aware that the writing of history itself is messy. The uneasiness of photographs, however, should prod historians to pose important and critical questions about the nature of historical inquiry.[28]

Asdrachas' main argument, on my reading, is that photography is at best evidentiary. Nowhere is it considered that photography might also be constitutive of our historical imagination. For example, Asdrachas notes that the book is interested in the pre-industrial world that is disappearing and can be seen in the images.[29] As mentioned earlier, he is primarily interested in photography as an ethnographic tool to capture what seems to amount to static and clearly defined traditions and practices. This is a fundamentally nostalgic outlook on the past. Photography as an industrial

24 S. Asdrachas, 'Η φωτογραφία, απείκασμα της ιστορίας', in Moschovi and Tsirgialou, *Η Ελλάδα μέσα απο την φωτογραφία*, 13-28 (16-17).

25 Asdrachas, 'Η φωτογραφία, απείκασμα της ιστορίας', 18-19.

26 Asdrachas, 'Η φωτογραφία, απείκασμα της ιστορίας', 20. Photographs are 'both enticing and dangerous and must therefore be controlled by other sources.': Edwards, 'Photography and the business of doing History', 174.

27 Tucker, 'Entwined practices', 5.

28 Tucker, 'Entwined practices', 4-5.

29 S. Asdrachas, 'Η φωτογραφία, απείκασμα της Ιστορίας', 19.

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medium of science and art is what *facilitates* this nostalgic capture and immersion. Yet, this paradox is not examined, nor are the tensions between the pre-industrial with modernity as mediated by photography examined. Without photography this pre-industrial world would be lost, or better yet, without photography the possibility to conjure up this pre-industrial world would not be possible. Hence there is a compelling case to be made that photography's role in historical imagination should be seriously considered by historians of Greece. To return to the question I started off with: how would this pre-industrial world be imaginable without photography? While we cannot answer this with any certainty, the question compels us to think of what photography does to our relationship to the (photographic) past.

Asdrachas comments on photographs within historical practice in a short prologue to another book, Tasoula Vervenioti's *Αναπαραστάσεις της ιστορίας : η δεκαετία του 1940 μέσα από τα αρχεία του Διεθνούς Ερυθρού Σταυρού*.[30] Asdrachas repeats many of the same arguments he made in his earlier text: photography is partial, photographs are documentary evidence of the past, photography is well suited for an ethnography of the past. Additionally, Asdrachas draws out the affective capacities of photography. In his reading/looking, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) images from Greece not only depict but offer up a representation of hunger, devastation, and death in the tumultuous decade of the 1940s. This ties into the book's own interest in the ICRC photographs as representations of history. Asdrachas makes it clear in the end of his prologue that Vervenioti's research brought to light important photographic evidence that 'illustrates the textual approach and expands it'.[31] The prologue ends by saying that the book is aimed at the mind and the soul, where the soul is stirred by the representations that photography makes.[32]

Vervenioti's book is drawn in two different directions with regard to photography. On the one hand, the book is driven by the ICRC photographic collections. The structure of the book and the topics are considered–e.g. humanitarian help, prisoner camps, political exiles, children–stem from the ICRC archives and its images. The lives of ordinary civilians and soldiers caught in the brutality of war and civil war are placed at the centre. Photographs provide fertile ground for such histories-from-below, as does oral history, on which Vervenioti is an expert. On the other hand, the many rich images that Vervenioti has drawn on remain in essence illustrative rather than active participants in the historical analysis. Throughout the book the text interprets, and the photographs show, what has been gleaned from the ICRC documents and other sources.

30 Athens 2009.

31 S. Asdrachas, 'Αντί προλόγου : Η παγίωση της Ιστορίας στη φωτογραφική παράσταση', in Vervenioti, *Αναπαραστάσεις της Ιστορίας*, 10-11.

32 Asdrachas, 'Αντί προλόγου', 10-11.

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Old images, new perspectives

Let us now look at a couple of cases that consider how photography participates in the making of the past. The following is more suggestive than prescriptive of the ways in which photography can be used in historical research. As Ludmilla Jordanova notes, a historical approach to photography casts a wide net that considers culture, politics, economics, and society altogether while also steering clear of photographic aesthetic hierarchies. Within such a 'generous context',[33] there are many fruitful paths that lead to historical knowledge and the practice of history through photography.

Kalliopi Amygdalou's research into a series of images taken during the burning of Smyrna in September 1922 is a good example of thinking with and through photographs in Greek history. Adopting a 'micro-historical approach',[34] Amygdalou explores the *déjà vu* of the iconic quayside photographs with their throngs of people at the archives of the Centre for Asia Minor Studies in Athens (CAMS) and the Ahmet Piriştina City Archive and Museum in Izmir (APIKAM). This forced a reckoning with the instability of the images and a critical engagement with the repetition of images as a constitutive agent in 'unfolding the multiple meanings and histories inherent in the material [. . .] What if such re-encounters should be coveted rather than ignored?'[35] Predictably, the CAMS and the APIKAM present divergent interpretations of the events in Smyrna in 1922, tracking broader national narratives. The CAMS describes the events in Smyrna in terms of a biblical Exodus, in contrast to the APIKAM's more neutral description as an escape and a fire. Moreover, while the events in 1922 are watersheds for both Greece and Turkey, the CAMS portrays these events as the end of an era, while the APIKAM describes this as the tragic and dramatic beginning of a new era. Amygdalou shows how the archives' interpretation of the fire structure the hermeneutic and archival practices of the archives. The historical images are central to these practices and 'testify to how historical consciousness can be formed through the photograph as an image.'[36] For both archives, the images of Smyrna burning are paradoxical as they are both sources for history and history itself. The photographs are of themselves mute yet are shown to be important agents in shaping historical thinking about the events of 1922.

Looking beyond the archives' participation in the practice of history, Amygdalou points to the importance of repeat viewings–*déjà vus*–across various settings for the creation of new questions, interpretations, and knowledge. Drawing on Ariella Azoulay's thinking on the role of the spectator of photography, Amygdalou calls on us to be 'participants in the photographic act or as the fourth element in the encounter

33 L. Jordanova, 'Photography and Greece – a historian's perspective', in Carabott, Hamilakis, and Papargyriou, *Camera Graeca*, 361-6 (366).

34 K. Amygdalou, 'Déjà vu at the archive: photography, national narratives, and the multiple histories of the Smyrna fire', *International Journal of Islamic Architecture* 9.2 (2020) 315-36 (319).

35 Amygdalou, 'Déjà vu at the Archive', 318.

36 Amygdalou, 'Déjà vu at the Archive', 322.

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between photographer, photographed, camera, and spectator'.[37] As spectators we can explore the potential for new meanings in old images by facilitating the return of the photographic subject(s)'s voice–which in this case are the people on the Smyrna quay.[38] Lastly, Amygdalou incorporates a final element into her analysis of the Smyrna fire images: their conditions of production.

This crucial information is absent from both the CAMS and the APIKAM archives, allowing the archives to place these images in their respective national histories. Amygdalou's image-led analysis led her to an album that had belonged to Thomas C. Kinkaid, a US naval officer who travelled with his wife to Istanbul in 1922. The Smyrna fire is part of this album and is captioned by Kinkaid, yet the images were not taken by Kinkaid himself. As Amygdalou reveals, the photographs were taken by either US journalists or sailors stationed on the US destroyers moored off the Smyrna quay. The conditions of the images' production leads to new knowledge of the passivity of US and European powers in the face of the ongoing desperation and plight of the people on the Smyrna waterfront. The counterpoint to the passive witnessing by the photographer(s) is the possibility for today's spectators to salvage the voices of the people trapped on the quay.[39]

The notion of the spectator as an agent of reinterpretation is also central to another illustrative example of photographs participating in Greek historical consciousness. In 1996 Fani Konstantinou, the photographic archivist of the Benaki Museum, had invited an elderly man, Miltiadis Sechos, to have a look at a series of images that the photographer Voula Papaioannou had taken in January 1945. The photographic series–pasted unto cardboard pages–entitled 'Hostages, January 1945' (original in English) depicted men who were being cared for at a UNRRA refugee reception center in downtown Athens. Amongst the few notes attached to the series, Sechos' name came up as one of the men depicted.[40] Konstantinou's initial interpretation of this hostage series was that the tired, ragged men that Papaioannou photographed were members of the EAM/ELAS forces captured by the Greek army during the *Dekemvriana*, the fighting that took place in Athens during December 1944. As Konstantinou admits, this was an instinctive interpretation that was not based on any historical research or greater afterthought. Papaioannou's images confirmed the conventional postwar depiction of the 'defeated leftist' in contrast to the 'victorious

37 Amygdalou, 'Déjà vu at the Archive', 323.

38 The potential of photographs to offer up new knowledge of the past has also been explored by Ulrich Baer, who sees photographs offering up spectral haunted evidence of the past which cannot be gained otherwise: *Spectral Evidence : the photography of trauma* (Cambridge MA 2002).

39 Amygdalou, 'Déjà Vu at the Archive', 328-9.

40 Sechos came to the Benaki to deposit some materials at the Historical Archive; he was not invited to the photographic archive as a result of any particular research into this series of Papaioannou's photographs. This encounter came about by pure chance. F. Konstantinou, 'Οι διαφορετικές αναγνώσεις της φωτογραφικής εικόνας με αφορμή τη σειρά *Όμηροι, Ιανουάριος 1945* από το αρχείο της Βούλας Παπαϊωάννου' in I. Papaioannou (ed.), *Η ελληνική φωτογραφία και η φωτογραφία στην Ελλάδα* (Athens 2013) 82-93.

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rightist'. However, when Sechos assumed his role as both witness to the depicted events and present-day spectator, the interpretation of the images was flipped on its head. These hostages were not leftists, but former prisoners of ELAS which had either escaped or been released.

Sechos' intervention in the meaning-making processes of Papaioannou's images could simply be seen as setting the record straight. However, his role as spectator and witness engendered a critical response from Konstantinou, reshuffling her established frames of reference for what the two sides of the Civil War looked like. In this way, the idea of photographs as a way to think through history is given increased salience. Konstantinou's text does not dwell explicitly on photography's role in thinking through history. Her interest is clearer in line with a history of (Greek) photography, yet the Sechos incident and Konstantinou's testimony of this incident provides an illustrative case of photographs' complex interactions with shaping historical consciousness. The inherent muteness of Papaioannou's photographs is transformed within the institutional meaning-making processes of the Benaki's photographic archive, both in the direction of a conventional reading or a revisionist reading. While the messiness of photographs may seem like a cautionary note as to their usefulness for the practice of history, Sechos example shows us how the role of the spectator can salvage not only new histories but a renewed awareness of photographs' importance to our sense of history. Photography's messy nature should be seen as an opportunity to see more, rather than less.

Carl Mauzy is a researcher and a lecturer at the University of Amsterdam. His research focuses on visual approaches to Greek and European history, with a particular interest in the participation of photography in historical imagination. He has held numerous research fellowships, such as the Marilena Laskaridis Visiting Research Fellowship at the University of Amsterdam and a research fellowship at the Swedish Institute at Athens. He is currently working on a monograph on the photographic visualization of collective identities in twentieth-century Greece.

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