

The bloody May of 1936 in Thessaloniki, Greece



A general strike of the tobacco workers and other unions on May 8th 1936 led to the bloody events of May 9th. The police confronted the massive strike by opening fire on the protesters. 12 dead and hundreds of wounded in one of the most important days in greek working class history.

On May 8, 1936, a major strike and demonstration by tobacco workers was organized in Thessaloniki. The response of the gendarmerie was immediate and brutal.

The next day the strike spread to other professions, and a new demonstration took place.

This time the response of the gendarmerie, aided by the army, which sent in an equestrian force and a motorized unit, was not only brutal but lethal, leaving twelve dead and thirty-two seriously wounded, all of them demonstrators.

The photograph of the mother of Tasos Tousis (pictured above), one of those killed by the gendarmes, leaning over the body of her dead child as it lay stretched out on a makeshift stretcher that his co-workers had put together, has become emblematic of the brutality of the time.

The poet Yiannis Ritsos, whose poem Epitaphios is a lament alongside the lament of that mother, has noted how deeply shocked he was by that image, which brought to mind the lament of the Virgin over Christ. He wrote Epitaphios in ten days.

On the same day, the army took over the policing of the city, but a number of soldiers joined the strikers. The Communist Party, much as it tried, did not manage to take advantage of this chaotic (and absolutely revolutionary) moment, but the strike galvanized the labor movement in prewar Greece.

The brutality of the police during the strike has remained legendary and has informed expectations concerning police action, especially since it revealed, again, the means that the liberal state is willing to use in order to remain in power.

The strike was over on May 11, after all the demands of the strikers were satisfied—mainly, the establishment of an eight-hour work day and a state system of pensions and medical coverage. Although both measures had been in the works for some time, Metaxas came to be credited with them.

The political fallout from the strike was long-lasting, and it precipitated Metaxas's ascent to political power and his determination to produce a pliable and compliant body politic.

This event is one of the revenants of history. In 1958, Ritsos sent Epitaphios to Mikis Theodorakis, then a young composer. As a musical setting for the poem, Theodorakis followed Ritsos's lead and blended folk themes into his learned endeavor. In 1960, he finished the composition Epitaphios, using folk instruments, such as the bouzouki, and untrained musicians and singers (Grigoris Bithikotsis) to produce a haunting lament.

Like all of Theodorakis's work Epitaphios was banned from being publicly performed on and off until 1974, but the music circulated clandestinely, thus helping further the mystique and romanticization of the Left and of antiestablishment culture, producing topoi where the rift between those who were “with us” and those who were “against us” could crystallize.

Below, a small part of Epitaphios poem by Giannis Ritsos, translated in English.

*On a day in May you left me, on that May day I lost you,
in springtime you loved so well, my son, when you went upstairs,
To the sun-drenched roof and looked out and your eyes never had
their fill of drinking in the light of the whole wide world at large.
With your manly voice so sweet and so warm, you recounted
as many things as all the pebbles strewn along the seashore.
My son, you told me that all these wonderful things will be ours,
but now your light has died out, our brightness and fire are gone.*

By welcometospace

Source: <http://dangerouscitizens.columbia.edu/1936-1944/epitaphios/1>