

Z

Z, φανταστικό ντοκυμανταίρ ενός εγκλήματος (Z, phantastikó dokimantaír enós englímatos)

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“Z, a fictional documentary of a crime” is a Greek political novel published in 1966, three years after the 1963 assassination of the independent deputy Grigoris Lambrakis (1912–1963) by a right-wing parastate network in Thessaloniki. The narrative exposes the mechanisms behind a political crime in a provincial town during the post–Civil War period, denouncing the sociopolitical climate of the early 1960s, a time when Greece was gradually recovering from the Civil War (1946–1949) that had left a lasting rift in society. Within the broader Cold War context, Greece’s ruling regime, suffering from a serious democratic deficit, had a right-wing ideology and maintained a strong anti-communist climate marking its governance. The novel was published before the trial of those responsible for Lambrakis’ murder. Vassilikos later noted that when asked about the reason for writing the book he provocatively claimed that his intention was “to influence the members of the jury”, thus lending his work a degree of political agency.

On May 22, 196..., the “Friends of Peace” invited the left-wing parliamentary delegate and Balkan champion “Z” to speak at a gathering scheduled for that evening. The organization’s members, who share a leftist ideology, operate in the harsh conditions of the post–Civil War Greek state, characterized by constant policing, surveillance, and the looming threat of exile and torture. Their efforts to hold the event face multiple obstacles, including venue owners refusing to provide a hall and the authorities’ “inability” to intervene. Later that day, the organizers receive information about a planned assassination, yet the authorities show no interest in assisting.

The assembly proceeds amid violent disturbances at the intersection of Ermou and Venizelou streets in the center of “Neutral City”. A large group of “outraged citizens” (87), most of whom are, in fact, members of parastate organizations, attempts to disrupt the gathering. A stone strikes the speaker on his way from the hotel, however he begins his speech amid shouting and the exchange of slogans. Inside the hall, his supporters call out anti-American and pacifist slogans such as “Down with NATO!” (82), “Disarmament!”, and “No more Hiroshima!” (85), while, so-called “peaceable, nationalistic-minded individuals” (87) respond with threats, shouting “Z, you are going to die!” (81). In reality, this latter group consists of “the subproletariat from the poorest districts of the city” (87), labelled “the dregs of society” (142), who believe that their collaboration with the police aligns them with the government.

Readers then follow, almost minute by minute, the actions of those carrying out the murder, the sequence of subsequent events, and the local authorities’ decision to disguise the true story by

altering and concealing key facts. However, the unexpected intervention of a bystander overturns the official narrative. The dead man's body is transferred to Athens, where the government attempts to downplay the event's impact. Yet his funeral transforms him from an individual into both a symbol and an idea.

The young examining magistrate who eventually takes charge of the case concedes that "the entire city was involved in the crime" (312) and is determined to expose the real culprits. He acts like "a gardener who uproots the weeds from the garden" (384) and, despite enormous pressure, strives to fulfill his duty with integrity. Drawing on journalistic sources and confidential material such as the pre-trial proceedings, the author meticulously reconstructs the defendants' depositions and reveals the state's and police's attempts to portray the assassination as the result of an ordinary traffic accident. The narrative concludes by presenting the impact of the events on the lives of certain protagonists a year into the investigation and highlights the wife's hope that the trial will expose the real culprits.

The deputy's murder is presented through a polyphonic narrative. A wide cast of characters, ranging from random passersby, admirers of "Z" and his associates, journalists, police officers and collaborators in parastate organizations, collectively convey multiple viewpoints on this political assassination. By blending fictional and journalistic narrative techniques, the author develops an innovative mode of storytelling to depict the killing, the subsequent investigation, and the political and social conditions in 1960s Greece. Strongly influenced by Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, Vassilikos described his work as a "fictional documentary". In a later interview, he admitted that his use of this subtitle was also a self-protective device.

The novel exposes and denounces the characteristics of a post-Civil War state, where governance practices routinely endangered and gradually undermined democracy and justice:

1) The traumatic legacy of the Civil War that shaped the political climate in the years that followed. Within the international context of the Cold War, Greek political, social and cultural life revolved around a right-wing anticommunist ideology centered on fatherland, religion, and family, while demonizing the Opposition that supported left-wing ideals and promoted social justice, peace and international solidarity.

2) The clientelist system that molded the practices of governance. Many people, particularly those struggling to meet basic needs, claimed to have no interest in politics. For instance, Nikitas, one of the two witnesses capable of testifying to the nature of the crime, insisted in a tense moment: "He was not a leftist. Or a rightist. Or anything at all" (262). Fear led many to avoid taking an explicit political stance. However, even basic economic opportunities –such as operating a stall at Modiano Market (the town's central food market) (108) or owning a three-wheel pickup truck– required individuals to pledge their allegiance to the government.

3) The existence of a "shadow state" (a parastate), a "power network" made up of state organs and members of the underworld. An informal coalition formed among the police, right-wing groups (including former Nazi collaborators), and members of the lumpen proletariat, whose primary mission was to sabotage the proper functioning of democracy and suppress any form of left-wing activity. Even those who had supported the Communist Party during the war resisting against the Nazi occupation had to repudiate their political ties, if they wanted to remain out of custody and retain their civic rights.

Publishing a book that openly criticised the country's sociopolitical climate was a courageous political act. On a friend's recommendation, intended to protect him, the author used naming conventions for his characters; many have names that describe their function (e.g., General, Minister, Chief of Police) or names that ironically evoke dinosaurs and other animals (e.g.,

Autocratosaur, Mastodontosaur, baboons, flying lemurs), drawing associations with creatures considered intellectually inferior to humans. The title of the book “Z” (ze) means “he lives”. While “Z” is the name of the protagonist, it also served as the symbol of the Lambrakis Youth, a protest movement formed after Lambrakis’ murder. The title therefore affirmed that Lambrakis’ memory, core values, and ideas remained alive.

In the aftermath of its publication, the book was banned under the military dictatorship (1967–1974), and its author, Vassilis Vassilikos (1934–2023), was forced to spend the years of the military junta (1967–1974) in exile. It was widely translated into nearly 22 languages. In January 2009, the book appeared in The Guardian’s list of 1000 novels everyone must read under the ‘State of the nation’ category.

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This title was not censored before publishing

Storytelling

The Political Novel: A Palimpsest

By: Ivana Perica