One Step Towards Reconciliation in Cyprus: Perceptions of the 'Other' for the Families of Missing Persons

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Abstract

By the end of the inter-ethnic conflict in 1974, there were over 2000 people who were reported as missing in Cyprus. Since 2005, with the efforts of the Committee of Missing Persons (CMP), 870 remains of the missing persons have been discovered, exhumed and returned back to their families. Although there exist several studies focusing on disappearances during violent conflicts, there is a dearth of academic research that investigates the reconciliation at the grassroots level, particularly for the families of the missing persons. The aims of this paper are twofold. Utilizing twenty two in-depth interviews with the families of Greek and Turkish Cypriots who experienced 'ambiguous losses' in the 1963 and 1974 conflicts in Cyprus, the paper firstly aims at improving the understandings of how disappearances shape the perceptions of 'the other' group in a post-conflict society. Secondly, the paper also aims to investigate the potential role of CMP on trust building and reconciliation efforts in Cyprus. The paper reveals that there is a subtle step forward for reconciliation among the families of missing persons, which were clear in the narratives of the families who started showing empathy towards the other. While both Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots showed very little hatred towards each other and noted that there were no problems at the individual level, they continued to blame the politicians and radical groups for their losses. The opening of borders and the contributions of the Committee of Missing Persons (CMP) in reducing the pain of relatives and helping to bond relations in line with trust building and reconciliation efforts were also acknowledged by both sides.

Keywords: Cyprus, conflict, disappearance, missing persons, reconciliation

1. Introduction

Inter-ethnic violence all over the world has many social, economic and psychological consequences. Disappearances, as one of the consequences of violent conflicts, have long-term socio-psychological effects on the families of the missing persons.[1] Special attention must therefore be given to the families of the missing persons during reconciliation processes in post-conflict societies, as the missing persons issue can create inter-ethnic mistrust between the groups thereby halting the reconciliation efforts, while discovery and exhumation of a

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[1] Jodi Halpern and Harvey M Weinstein, "Rehumanizing the Other: Empathy and Reconciliation," *Human Rights Quarterly* (2004): 561–83; Mary Ellen Keough, Sara Kahn, and Andrej Andrejevi, "Disclosing the Truth: Informed Participation in the Ante Mortem Database Project for Survivors of Srebrenica," *Health and Human Rights* 5 (2000): 69–87.

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family member may increase trust in 'the other'.[2]

There has been remarkable development in Cyprus towards reconciliation with the opening of crossings across the Green Line in 2003, which allowed both communities to meet and communicate in their daily lives for the first time since the 1974 conflict. With the operationalization of the Committee on Missing Persons in Cyprus (CMP), which was established in 1981 but started activities in 2004, another concrete step was taken for reconciliation in Cyprus, as it began to allow families and friends of the missing persons to have some degree of closure. Through the efforts of the CMP, by the end of 2018, out of a total of 2,002 missing persons in Cyprus, 1,192 remains were discovered and 870 of these were identified and handed back to their families. This makes the contemporary times in Cyprus particularly significant for investigating the possible outcomes of these developments at the grassroots level, especially for the families of missing persons.

This paper, which centres on the socio-psychological status of the families in post-conflict situations, aims at investigating the perceptions of families who had/have a missing family member, towards 'the other'. While doing so, it also aims to explore perceptions of these families and politicians on the role of the CMP as part of the reconciliation process in Cyprus. What are the perceptions of both Turkish and Greek Cypriot families of missing persons about each other? How has closure through the discovery and exhumation of their family members influenced these perceptions? In light of these, what do they see as having been the role of the CMP on peace building through trust building and on the reconciliation process in Cyprus?

Through enhancing the understandings of reconciliation for the families of missing persons in a post-conflict country, the paper contributes to the literature on the impact of reconciliation interventions (such as Missing Persons Committees) at the grassroots level in particular, and on conflict and peace studies in general. The following two sections provide a sketch of the major studies on reconciliation's theoretical background and on the country context before moving on to the specifics of the methodology employed in this study. The findings are presented in the last section, in which the paper reflects on the subtle positive changes in the perceptions of the families of missing persons towards the other, and the role of the CMP.

2. Theoretical Underpinnings: Peace Building, Transformations and Reconciliation

Peace building became a part of the international agenda in the 1990s, and since the 2000s there has been a shift in focus from international to local peace building models and interventions. The initial Western neo-liberal peace building models and interventions, which followed a top-down approach and could not be sustained by peace building missions in post-conflict societies, raised criticisms about the effectiveness of existing models and interventions, and called for major modifications in the theory and practice of peace building.[3] After the 2000s, critical emancipator theorists, calling for a more holistic approach to peace building, stated that without hearing the voices and addressing the needs of the local community leaders, civil society organizations and individuals in peace processes, mistrust and dissatisfaction between communities would persist, and endanger any peace process that was attempted in

[2] Janine Natalya Clark, "Missing Persons, Reconciliation and the View from Below: A Case Study of Bosnia-Hercegovina," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 10, no. 4 (2010): 425–42.

[3] Roger MacGinty, "Indigenous Peace-Making versus the Liberal Peace," *Cooperation and Conflict* 43, no. 2 (2008): 139–63.

post-conflict societies.[4] The emancipator approach, however, was itself criticised for being "romantic, relativist or particularistic, anti-democratic, anti-development … an affront to 'liberal peace'… and certainly a rejection of the 'natural' right of the North to intervene in the political formation of the South".[5] These developments gave birth to a more hybrid approach to peace building. Neoliberal peace building models were required to become more inclusive and started involving the local alongside the neo-liberal international interventions. The literature on peace and conflict studies, thus, has increasingly been highlighting the significance of the local level i.e. the local turn for enhancing the effects of international peace building interventions and promoting a legitimate peace.[6]

Building sustainable peace through repairing relations between conflicting groups, and providing closure, healing, and justice to victims of the conflict and their families is at the core of conflict transformation theory, which guides the main theoretical underpinnings of this paper. The theory relies more on the local for change than on neo-liberal peace building theories. Lederach believes that peace building is "a long-term process of systemic transformation from war to peace. Key dimensions of this process are changes in the personal, structural, relational and cultural aspects of conflict".[7] Since peace building is a long-term process, the theory focuses on the transformations rather than reconciliation, which generally connotes an end to the conflict. Lederach states that "peace building initiatives must be rooted in and be responsive to people's subjective realities, grievances, and needs in order to sustain holistic reconciliation and peace". [8] Therefore, for Lederach, reconciliation also plays the leading role in enabling a sustainable peace. The relationships destroyed by conflict can be rebuilt through transformations towards reconciliation, and thus strengthen the peace building potential in post-conflict societies.

Reconciliation can be defined as "a process of relationship building across divisions, as a transformation of existing relationships, as well as a creation of new relationships after the horrors of war".[9] Reconciliation is not an end itself, and connotes long-term transformations in relationships between the conflicted groups. It is a process that involves realisation of sufferings from both sides and willingness to rebuild the relations, and "moves towards a goal that will never fully be achieved, but a goal that serves as a model of social harmony".[10] It is also multi-layered and takes place at all levels from national to individual. "While social reconstruction occurs at the level of the state and communities, reconciliation involves the ability of one individual to regain empathy for another".[11] Understanding the interpersonal transformations at the grassroots level, therefore, is crucial to have meaningful reconciliation and peace processes in post-conflict societies as "[i]t is the interpersonal ruins, rather than

[4] Hanna Leonardsson and Gustav Rudd, "The 'Local Turn'in Peacebuilding: A Literature Review of Effective and Emancipatory Local Peacebuilding," *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 5 (2015): 825–39.

[5] Roger MacGinty and Oliver P. Richmond, "The Local Turn in Peace Building: A Critical Agenda for Peace," *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 5 (2013): 764.

[6] MacGinty and Richmond, "The Local Turn in Peace Building: A Critical Agenda for Peace"; Giulia Piccolino, "Local Peacebuilding in a Victor's Peace: Why Local Peace Fails without National Reconciliation," *International Peacekeeping* 26, no. 3 (2019): 354–79.

[7] As cited in Thania Paffenholz, "International Peacebuilding Goes Local: Analysing Lederach's Conflict Transformation Theory and Its Ambivalent Encounter with 20 Years of Practice," *Peacebuilding* 2, no. 1 (2014): 15.

[8] John Paul Lederach, *Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 1997): 24.

[9] Maria Ericson, "Reconciliation and the Search for a Shared Moral Landscape–An Exploration Based Upon a Study of Northern Ireland and South Africa," (PhD diss., Lund University, 2001), 27.

[10] Virginie Ladisch, "The Challenge of Peacebuilding" *The Cyprus Review* 19, no. 1 (2007): 95.

[11] Halpern and Weinstein, "Rehumanizing the Other: Empathy and Reconciliation," 567.

the ruined buildings and institutions that pose the greatest challenge for rebuilding society".[12] One of the ways of understanding interpersonal transformations is perhaps to focus on the groups that are most affected by the conflict, such as the families of the missing persons who have experienced ambiguous losses.

Disappearance, especially during conflicts, creates challenges of identity and meaning for the families of the missing. Women, for example, who do not know if they are wives or widows and desperately seek to construct positive meanings from their experiences.[13] These kinds of disappearances are defined as "ambiguous loss".[14] In other words ambiguous loss occurs when a family member is psychologically present, but physically absent.

Ambiguous loss erodes resilience.[15] From a psychological perspective, cognition is blocked by the ambiguity and lack of information, decisions are put on hold, and coping and grieving processes are frozen.[16] As Boss states "ambiguous loss is the most stressful loss because it defies resolution and creates confused perceptions about who is in or out of a particular family. With a clear-cut loss, there is more clarity—a death certificate, mourning rituals, and the opportunity to honour and dispose remains. With ambiguous loss, none of these markers exists".[17] As Kovras and Loizides state "[a]ll the missing persons' families have suffered regardless of their ethnic origins. They might be Turkish Cypriots, Greek Cypriots, or they might be Palestinians, Argentineans, or in Bosnia-Herzegovina they might be Serbs, Bosnians or any other ethnic origin. All families had similar fate and suffering dreams and nightmares. All these missing persons' families are in a way related".[18] Until the families receive the remains of their loved ones and place them into a grave to which they can go and pray, they feed their hostility against the guilty side, and the harm and sorrow remains. When they learn about the fate of their loved ones and put them in their place to rest; they start to heal their wounds, forgive the other side and reconcile. Therefore, if the involved parties want to achieve a sustainable peace through reconciliation between conflicting parties, they have to give great attention to the missing person's issue. Following the 1963 and 1974 conflicts there were more than 2,000 ambiguous losses in Cyprus, and it took 26 years before the first remains of one of these missing persons was returned to his family.

While at the national level the issue of missing persons of conflicting nations or societies may turn into a political instrument[19] and can be used as propaganda as it was in the Cyprus conflict,[20] understanding the interpersonal reconciliation of individuals who experienced

12 Halpern and Weinstein, "Rehumanizing the Other: Empathy and Reconciliation," 563.

13 Pauline G. Boss, "Ambiguous Loss Research, Theory, and Practice: Reflections after 9/11," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66, no. 3 (2004): 551–66; Pauline G. Boss, *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Malathi De Alwis, "'Disappearance 'and 'Displacement 'in Sri Lanka," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 22, no. 3 (2009): 378–91; Simon Robins, "Constructing Meaning from Disappearance: Local Memorialisation of the Missing in Nepal," *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* (IJCV) 8, no. 1 (2014): 104–18.

14 Pauline G.Boss, "Ambiguous Loss Research"; Pauline G. Boss, *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999)

15 Pauline G. Boss, "Ambiguous Loss: Working with Families of the Missing," *Family Process* 41, no. 1 (2002): 14-7.

16 Pauline G. Boss, *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999)

17 Pauline G. Boss, "Ambiguous Loss Research," 553.

18 Iosif Kovras and Neophytos Loizides, "Delaying Truth Recovery for Missing Persons," *Nations and Nationalism* 17, no. 3 (2011): 520.

19 Paul Sant Cassia, *Bodies of Evidence: Burial, Memory and the Recovery of Missing Persons in Cyprus,* vol. 20 (NY & Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005); Hubert Faustmann and Erol Kaymak, "Cyprus," *European Journal of Political Research* 47, no. 7–8 (2008): 939–46.

20 Bouris, *Complex Political Victims;* John D. Brewer, "Justice in the Context of Racial and Religious Conflict," *Logos* 41 (2004): 80–103; Stuart J. Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).

ambiguous losses becomes imperative, particularly at a time when concrete steps have been taken for reconciliation through the establishing of a functioning Committee of Missing Persons in Cyprus.

3. Country Context: A Short Political History of the Cyprus Conflict and Establishment of the CMP

Cyprus, being at the crossroads of three continents, Europe, Asia and Africa, faced multiple invasions in her history. In 1571 the Ottoman Empire conquered Cyprus and ruled for three centuries, which resulted in changes in the demographic structures of the island. In addition to 12,000 Turkish foot soldiers who fought against the Venetians and settled in Cyprus, 20,000 decommissioned soldiers and 2,000 cavalry were also sent to Cyprus with their families, and formed the core origins of Turkish Cypriots.[21] When the Ottoman governing of Cyprus came to an end in 1878, Britain took Cyprus as a protectorate and declared Cyprus as a crown colony in 1914.

In 1923, the Republic of Turkey was established. The Treaty of Lausanne was a cornerstone for the new Republic's foreign policy, which recognised Cyprus officially as a British Colony with Article 21. There were two main issues on Cyprus which created problems for the British during their ruling period. One of them was the aspiration of Greek Cypriots for unification with Greece (ENOSIS) and the second one involved the difficulties of keeping the two communities stable, as Turkish Cypriots started to want division as a way of preventing ENOSIS.

After World War II, aggression and the desire for ENOSIS started to increase. While the international community put pressure on Britain to give independence to the island, Greek Cypriots established a terrorist organization called Ethniki Organosis Kyprion Agoniston (EOKA) and Turkish Cypriots established an underground organization called the Turk Mukavemet Teşkilatı/Turkish Resistance Movement[22] (TMT) in order to prevent ENOSIS. When Britain faced the Suez failure; it accepted to have bases in Cyprus and decided to solve the problem of Cyprus with Greece and Turkey. When Turkish Cypriots announced their will for "*Taksim"* (division) of the island between Turkey and Greece, the violence between the two communities flared and the situation became more complex.

In 1959 Turkey, Greece and Britain signed an agreement in London to organize Zurich and London Agreements for the constitution of Cyprus. Archbishop Makarios, as the leader of the Greek Cypriots, and Dr. Fazıl Kucuk as the leader of Turkish Cypriots, signed all the treaties. In Zurich, a constitution and two more treaties were outlined with the consent of all parties, and on August 16 1960, Cyprus became an independent republic state. With this constitution the republic was granting equal political rights to both communities. The Greek Cypriots, however, wanted to end this partnership with the Turkish Cypriots and gradually unify Cyprus with Greece. This desire intensified the inter-ethnic rivalry. Archbishop Makarios joined the Non-aligned Movement[23] to use these countries to help him achieve the union with Greece,

21 "Kıbrıs'ın sosyal, ekonomik ve siyasi tarihi," TRNC Foreign Ministry Information Department, accessed October 22, 2018, https://pio.mfa.gov.ct.tr/kibrisin-sosyal-ekonomik-ve-siyasi-tarihi/.

22 Turkish Resistant Movement (TMT): It was an underground organization established by Rauf R. Denktaş and an military officer from Turkey as to resist against EOKA and EOKA-B

23 Non-aligned Movement: After WWII during decolonization at the 1955 Bandung Conference (Asian-African) the member countries decided to call for "abstention from the use of arrangements of collective defence to serve the particular interests of any of the big powers." They agreed to join together to support national self-determination during the Cold War.

which was a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).[24] Greek Cypriots considered the 1960 Constitution as favouring the Turkish Cypriots, and therefore formed a plan called the 'Akritas Plan,'[25] which was aimed at ending the Republic by suppressing the rights of Turkish Cypriots. According to Moran, Cyprus was not a correctly constituted independent country.[26] The plan aimed to force constitutional changes before any guarantor power could interfere. Thirteen amendments to the constitution[27] were proposed to the Turkish Cypriots by their Greek counterparts, all of which were rejected by Turkish Cypriots and Turkey. This fuelled inter-ethnic violence. On 21 December 1963, Greek Cypriots shot and killed a Turkish Cypriot couple, leading to the outbreak of war. In 1964 the United Nations decided to send in a peacekeeping force (the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus -- UNFICYP). In the wake of the conflict, Turkish Cypriots became virtually isolated from the world.

A military government came to power in Greece by coup d'état in 1967, following which the Cyprus conflict began mounting again. Between the two communities, negotiations started in May 1968, under the umbrella of the Good Offices of the United Nations Secretary General. Between 1968 and 1970 the leaders had three rounds of unsuccessful talks, with the Secretary General holding both sides responsible for the failure to achieve progress. Another National Organization of Cyprus Struggle (EOKA-B) was established with the aim of achieving Cyprus' unification with Greece. As Makarios did not support these aggressive ideas the rebels decided to remove Makarios from power.[28] EOKA-B, which was under the control of Athens, tried to force Makarios to resign and leave the country. As a response, Makarios prohibited EOKA-B and asked them to hand their weapons over to the police. He ordered the police to arrest some members of EOKA-B, and wrote a letter to the president of Greece to withdraw all their officers from the island.[29] After receiving this letter, the Junta in Greece decided to organize a coup-d'état and remove Makarios. On 15 July 1974, after an attack on the presidential palace, the British helped Makarios leave the country, and nationalist-irredentist Nikos Sampson, who was known as being against Turkish Cypriots, took power. Sampson's goal was to annex Cyprus with Greece as soon as possible and make the island a "Hellenic" republic.[30] When the coup d'état was achieved and the pro-enosis Nikos Sampson came to power, Turkish Cypriots started to worry about their lives and about the possibility of unification with Greece. The Turkish Government asked Greece to release Sampson and call back all the officers from Greece, but was unsuccessful. Turkey decided to intervene and protect the Turkish Cypriots and the independence of the island. Under the Treaty of Guarantee, Turkey asked Britain to conduct a joint operation, but the British

[24] Michael Moran, "Cyprus and the 1960 Accords: Nationalism and Internationalism," *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs* 6, no. 2 (2001): 28–45.

[25] Akritas Plan: In 1963 the Greek Cypriot authorities put up a plan to reach ENOSIS through annihilation of all Turkish Cypriots within a short time.

[26] Moran, "Cyprus and the 1960 Accords".

[27] According to the Constitution of the Republic of Cyprus the Vice President was entitled to have veto power, but the Greek Cypriots now wanted to abolish this power. They also asked for a reduction in the Turkish Cypriot component in the civil and military arms of the government. In the Constitution it had been agreed that in at least five district the two sides would have separate municipalities, but until 1963 only in Lefkosa were separate municipalities established and now the Greek Cypriots wanted to unify those as well. Other important amendments the Greek side wanted was to have the Greek- Cypriot President and the Turkish Cypriot Vice President elected by the Greek Cypriot-dominated House of Representatives, neither as a whole nor separately by two sides, and to abolish separate community voting on fiscal, electoral and some other matters.

[28] Jan Asmussen, *Cyprus at War, Diplomacy and Conflict during the 1974 Crisis* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008).

[29] Asmussen, *Cyprus at War.*

[30] Yiannis Papadakis, "Nation, Narrative and Commemoration: Political Ritual in Divided Cyprus," *History and Anthropology* 14, no. 3 (2003): 253–70.

refused. With all other efforts having failed, on 20 July 1974 Turkey sent in its soldiers to re-establish stability on the island and protect the Turkish Cypriots from possible attacks by the Greeks. At the beginning of the fight, Greek forces occupied Turkish Cypriot enclaves and took them as prisoners of war. At the same time, while the Turkish troops were fighting with Greek forces, they moved towards Lefkoşa, and along the way took Greek Cypriots as prisoners of war.[31] Within two months, Turkish troops had taken control of 36% of Cyprus.

During the 1963-67 conflict, 43 Greeks and 229 Turks went missing.[32] During this period many Turkish Cypriots were abducted from the roads, from their workplaces and even from hospitals while receiving medical treatment. The Report of the UN secretary General to the Security Council provided authentic information regarding missing Turkish Cypriots prior to 1974.[33] On the other hand, the Greek Cypriot authorities have persistently declined to account for the fate of missing persons since 1963, as well as those missing since 1974 (Interview 2, 21, 22, 2017, interview 4, 8, 2018). While the Turkish side listed all Turkish Cypriot missing persons, and in 1968 Turkish Cypriot Leader Rauf R. Denktaş addressed the families of missing persons and told them that all missing persons were considered as martyrs, the Greek side denied that they have missing persons and did not list them (Interview 2, 21, 2017, interview 4, 2018). The families of the missing persons on the Greek side established a committee called *Relatives Committee for Missing Persons* 1963-64, but they were unable to gain any attention from the government until after 1974. Sir Geoffrey Howe, the former British Foreign Minister, in a letter written to a retired MP, stated that the problem of missing persons started in 1963 when the conflict began between the Turkish and Greek Cypriot communities.

In the words of a Greek Cypriot interviewee, the reason for not recognising the existence of missing person issue between 1963-67 was "Greek nationalism, which was an obstacle in front of reality that these kinds of people prefer to accuse the other side instead of trying to understand the truth and the feelings of those families of missing persons" (Interview 1, 2017). No effort was shown about solving the missing person's issues until after 1974, when over one thousand Greek Cypriots went missing. Until 1974, "The Greek side did not even accept that there was an issue about disappearance of people in Cyprus" (Interview 2, 2017).

The first agreement about the CMP was reached between Turkish and Greek Cypriots at a high level meeting held in May 1979 under the auspices of the UN Secretary-General.[34] Both the Turkish and Greek sides blamed each other for not having made any progress on establishing a joint committee for missing persons until 1981.

After the establishment of the CMP, for more than 20 years nothing was done except for listing the missing and finding out where they were buried (Interview 3, 2017). From the Turkish perspective at the time, the Greek side in particular was using the missing persons issue as propaganda material (Interview 2, 2017, Interview 4, 2018). On the other hand the Turkish side was also delaying the issue because many of the Greek Cypriot missing persons were buried in Turkish military areas (Interview 4, 2018). After the European Court of

[31] Neoptolemos Kotsapas, *Girne düştü* [Girne has Fallen Down] (Lefkosa-Cyprus; Galeri Kültür ve Alaşiya Yayınları,, 2015), 60–70.

[32] Committee of Missing Persons.

[33] United Nations, Security Council Report No: S8286 (1967), accessed January 12, 2018, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/document/cyprus-s8286.php.

[34] United Nations, Resolution 36/164 on missing persons S/36/164, 1981, accessed January 12, 2018, https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/36/164.

Justice became involved, the CMP gained greater importance and was pushed to start taking concrete actions on uncovering the fate of the missing persons and handing over the remains to the waiting families (Interview 2, 2017, Interview 4, 2018). Both sides' politicians agreed not use the issue for propaganda purposes (Interview 1, 2017, Interview 4, 2018). Although the political debacle continued between the two sides' negotiators, the reactivation of the CMP was ultimately decided upon and implemented in 2004. The Committee for Missing Persons (CMP) remained inactive for almost 23 years but after reactivation the CMP has been described as the most successful bi-communal project since South Cyprus EU accession.[35] When the CMP resumed activities after 20 years and started finding the remains of missing persons, the activities and the methodology used started to be copied by other post-conflict societies. The CMP is the only bi-communal project in which the two sides are working in harmony, and it has become an example for other societies in the Middle East.[36]

The CMP started its program for exhumations and identification of missing persons on 30 June 2005. The stages of exhuming and identifying the missing persons are part of a very long and complicated process—beginning with finding the remains of missing persons through the exhuming of mass graves, to identifying the remains using the latest scientific DNA methods, to releasing the remains to families for funeral services.

The CMP today is one of the few functioning institutionalized bi-communal bodies in Cyprus. Through its work, with the collaboration of young scientists from both communities, from 2006 until today, 1,217 remains out of a total of 2,002 missing persons have been found. Out the 2,002 missing persons, 1,510 are Greek Cypriots and 492 are Turkish Cypriots (Figures 1-3).

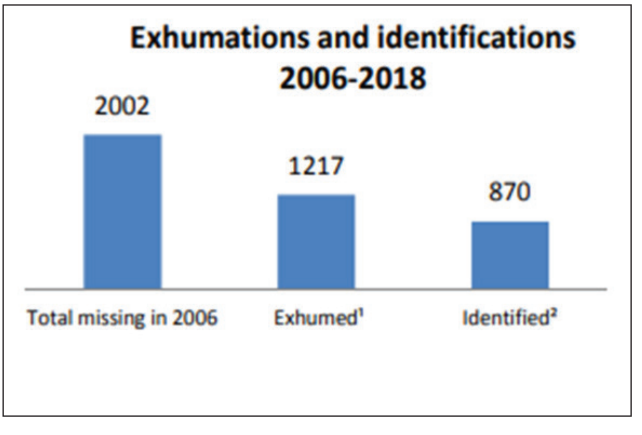

Figure 1: Exhumations and Identifications in Cyprus 2006-2018[37]

[35] Kovras and Loizides, "Delaying Truth Recovery for Missing Persons."
[36] Kovras and Loizides, "Delaying Truth Recovery for Missing Persons."
[37] "Figures and Statistics of Missing Persons," Committee on Missing Persons, accessed January 12, 2018, http://www.cmp-cyprus.org/sites/default/files/facts_and_figures_31-12-2017_0.pdf.

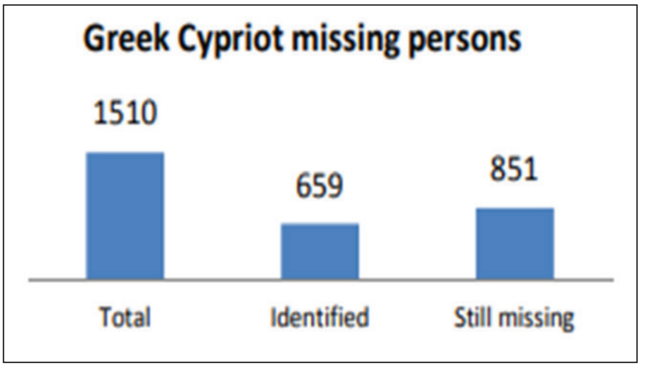

Figure 2: Greek Cypriot Missing Persons[38]

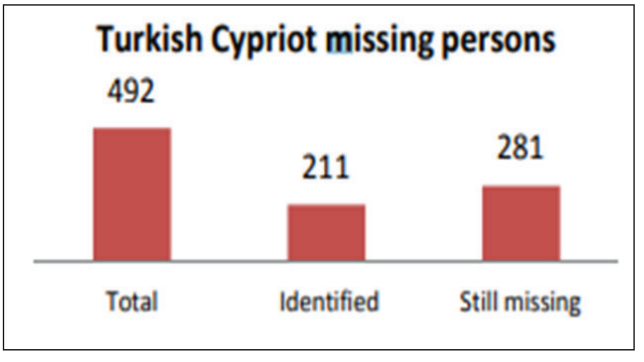

Figure 3: Turkish Cypriot Missing Persons[39]

Although there has been a small number of studies conducted with the families of missing persons in Cyprus, most of these have been related to stories of the missing persons themselves. To the author's knowledge there has not been a study conducted after the CMP has started finding remains and returning the missing persons to their families, nor has there been any study that has mainly focused on how the process of finding the remains of missing ones has influenced peoples' thoughts about 'the other'. The main concern of this research is not to give a detailed picture of what has happened in terms of the missing persons or to summarize the occasions in a statistical way, rather, it aims to discuss the missing persons issue in a more humanistic and holistic perspective through which understandings of peace building through reconciliation efforts in Cyprus can also be enhanced.

4. Methodology

For this research 22 face to face in-depth interviews were conducted to explore the perceptions and thoughts of the families/relatives of missing persons. The participants were selected through snowball sampling using multiple starting points to eliminate selection bias and ensure inclusion of diverse groups that represent a subset of the families of missing persons in Cyprus. Out of seventeen interviews with the relatives of missing persons, nine were conducted with Turkish Cypriots and eight were conducted with Greek Cypriots.

[38] "Figures and Statistics of Missing Persons."
[39] "Figures and Statistics of Missing Persons."

Five interviews were also conducted with prominent people who had knowledge about developments on the missing person's issue. After multiple exchanges of emails and phone calls to gain rapport with the possible participants, the interviews took place at the homes of the families of missing persons and lasted for two to three hours. The interviews were conducted in Turkish with the Turkish Cypriots, and mainly in English with Greek Cypriots. Only one interview was conducted mostly in Greek with the help of a local Greek-English translator. All the participants were asked for their consent, and informed about the voluntary nature of the study, matters related to data management and usage, and the confidentiality of their participation. Refusals were rare, and only one key respondent, a third member of the CMP, refused to be interviewed, although this was due to time limitations rather than unwillingness to talk.

The interviewees were asked to elaborate on how they felt about their loss and how they perceived the people from other group. They were also asked about their thoughts about the CMP and the reconciliation process. The questions were open ended in order to allow for free responses to this sensitive topic, and to better capture the local meanings and understandings for the families. All the interviews were audio taped with the permission of the participants. Audio recordings were transcribed in Turkish, and then were studied through inductive content analysis[40] and coded as themes.

There are several factors that can affect the way an interview was shaped. For instance the ethnic identity has an impact on the interviews because the interviewee may assume that the researcher is from the 'other' side and might therefore have a bias.[41] Furthermore when the researcher is from opposite side, the interviewee might answer the questions in a careful manner, trying not to hurt the researcher. In such cases the researcher must choose the questions very cleverly, and speak carefully and sincerely to gain the interviewee's trust. There were also several other challenges faced by the author in this study. Firstly it was difficult to decide from where to start searching, as the subject matter is very sensitive. The participants were carefully selected from the missing person families. Although the author knew many families who had lost loved ones during the 1963-1974 conflicts in Northern Cyprus, there was a lack of information about such families on the South side. In Cyprus since the island is divided, it is difficult to reach people who live in different parts, therefore the only information the researcher could find about Greek Cypriots was through personal networks that operated as the starting point for her research in the South. In the North, the first name of a family member was learned through the CMP. After receiving the first names from both sides, it became a snowball effect, as everyone during the visit recommended another name.

Another difficulty faced during the interviews was related to reciprocity. Families who still had a missing family member approached the researcher with a hope of her being an authority or of her becoming a connection in the North for finding their lost ones. Although it has been 43 years since the 1974 Peace Operation happened, many Greek Cypriot families who lost someone in their family still think that their relatives are alive and might be found somewhere. One of the sisters of a missing person insisted on putting the picture of her loved

[40] Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research* (Sage publications, 1990); Ali Yildirim and Hasan Şimşek, "Sosyal bilimlerde nitel araştırma yöntemleri," (Ankara: Seçkin Yayıncılık, 2005).

[41] Joanne McEvoy, "Elite Interviewing in a Divided Society: Lessons from Northern Ireland," *Politics* 26, no. 3 (2006): 184–91.

one in the Turkish newspapers, just in case he had gotten married with a Turkish Cypriot and just hadn't informed his family. Another sister asked for the same thing, with the rationale that maybe someone would recognize him and inform his relatives where he is living.

Finally, the author was a Turkish Cypriot, and although interviews and the treatment of people towards her did not reflect any biases, interviewer bias might have influenced the answers.

5. Findings

> *K. was 15 years old when her brother C. disappeared in the 1974 conflict in Cyprus. He was a 21 old year soldier, who was last seen in H. (an area which remained in the north) before he disappeared together with 14 other soldiers. K.'s mother never lost hope about finding C alive, until she died in 1994. Every year she took out his clothes, washed and ironed them and put them back in the wardrobe again saying that he was going to be back. They believed that he was taken to Turkey as a prisoner and was going to return one day.*
>
> *When the borders between the Turkish and Greek sides were opened in 2003, K. together with a soldier who saw C. for the last time, went to the place where her brother was last seen to gather information about what happened to the missing Greek soldiers. When she started searching about her brother, some villagers got afraid and set fire to the well, where the soldiers had been hidden. When the CMP started its activities, it found the remains of the soldiers, including those of C., in that same well, and the remains were then returned to the families for burial.*
>
> *Until the borders were opened and they started to meet with the families of the Turkish missing persons, K. was not aware that the same kind of violence had also been done by Greek Cypriots to the Turkish Cypriots. After she listened to the same kind of stories from Turkish Cypriots and felt their sorrow she stopped hating Turkish Cypriots. K. got the information that two of the Turkish Cypriots who shot the soldiers were still alive. Now, she wants to go and ask them about the last feelings and words of her brother, but she clearly mentioned that she did not want any revenge.* (Interview 5, 2017)

It emerged during the interviews that the times, places and the stories of disappearances were different for each family of a missing person. The psychological distress and ambiguity of the families of missing persons, however, were very similar to that of K.'s family, as was their relief when the remains of their family members were discovered and returned back to them. It was also the time for most of the families of missing persons to start showing empathy towards the other, although they were still looking for further closures from those accountable for the disappearances of their family members. The interview findings are analysed in three sections.

5.1. "We were good friends before": Hatred and broken trust

Unless the relatives of missing persons have a proper burial, providing closure to a long period of anguish and uncertainty, they may remain unhappy and be hateful. A few interviewees in line with this talked about hatred towards the other. A Turkish Cypriot woman (Interview 6, 2017) whose father has been a missing person since 1964 showed hatred towards Greek Cypriots, to a level at which she hoped they would all die. Her hatred involved not only having a missing father, but also losing trust in Greek Cypriots, who had in fact good relations with her father:

> In *1964 we were living in Tuzla and I had a two month son. Although the conflicts started my father insisted on doing his job, a driver. He had good relations with Greek Cypriots. He was driving passengers to Dikelya, one of the two British bases. In May 1964 many people told my father not to go to work but he didn't listen. Around 11:00 someone came and told us that my father was captured and the bus was taken. Then we didn't hear anything about my father. I was so depressed and because of my hostility, in the 1974 war I thought and hoped that all the Greek Cypriots would die.* (Interview 6, 2017)

Showing hatred towards the other was not very common among the families of missing persons, and these feelings were more common when they were talking about the times of conflict. Indeed, the loss of trust in friends and neighbours was a much more common theme that reappeared during the interviews, particularly among the Turkish Cypriots who were living in peace with the Greek Cypriots before the conflicts of 1960s, and later realised their friends or neighbours were involved in the killings of Turkish Cypriots:

> *We were very good friends with some Greek Cypriots but later on we realized that one of them was a member of EOKA-B. We heard that he captured many Turkish Cypriots, killed and threw them into wells.* (Interview 13, 2017)

Some of the interviewees specifically mentioned that they did not hate "the other", but they also mentioned that they were still not comfortable with them. For instance, the son of a missing person, who also lost his father in 1964, said he did not see Greek Cypriots as enemies but admitted he is a little bit leery of them. He felt more comfortable being in the North rather than the South, and preferred not discussing the Cyprus problem with his friends.

> *I don't feel any hatred to Greek Cypriots. Sometimes I travel to the Greek side but when I come back I feel more comfortable. Generally I do not prefer to discuss Cyprus problem with my Greek Cypriot friends. They do not have a tendency to understand. Even my best friends do not accept our political equality.* (Interview 15, 2017)

Some others tried escaping from old memories, like one Greek Cypriot interviewee, whose parents went missing in 1974. She reported being unable to visit her village, although she was able to meet with her Turkish best friend from the same village after the borders were opened in 2003:

> *Our life went upside down after our parents disappeared and we left the village. We had no money, no job and no land to do agriculture…For many years me and my husband were watching the village from our windows, but we don't want to go to the village now because we will go through the same sorrow. The whole family wants to sell all the land we have there… Besides being best friends we were living on the same road. In 1963 when Turkish Cypriots started to see Greek Cypriots as a threat to their lives, they moved to Turkish populated secure places. For forty years we the two friends did not see each other. When the borders were opened in 2003 we started to visit each other.*(Interview 9, 2017)

Although most of the Greek Cypriot interviewees expressed tremendous sadness because of the loss of their loved ones, they did not show too much hatred to Turkish Cypriots and it seemed that they did not want any revenge. Some of them even mentioned the help they had received from Turkish Cypriot neighbours during the conflict as a good memory:

> *My two sons were arrested by Turkish people and brought to the camp near the village. The next day my friend, Turkish Cypriot N., helped me go and see my sons M. (17 years) and E. (19years) just for ten minutes. I and my wife visited our sons the next day also, and when*

> *the Red Cross came to our village they told us about our sons. When the Red Cross went to the camp the Turkish army officers rejected that they have any prisoners and since then their destiny is not known.* (Interview 10,2017)

5.2. Empathy: We have similar stories

As Ladisch states, the main emphasis should be on creating dialogue and mutual understandings about the past, acknowledging the harm done on both sides, and moving forward.[42] More than the stories of hatred and mistrust, there were far more narratives of mutual understandings and empathy between the Greek and Turkish Cypriots.

> *I feel no hatred to Greek Cypriots; I know how they feel because both sides did almost the same faults and suffered a lot."* (Interview 15, 2017)

> *I use empathy, as I know Turkish Cypriots also did many bad things to Greek Cypriots."* (Interview 13, 2017)

> *I tried to explain that if we had to do something we had to do it with Turkish Cypriots…I argued openly that we should always be mindful that there were also Turkish Cypriot missing persons.* (Interview 16, 2018)

> *The Greek side tried to show that there is a tragedy of missing persons, only one-sided, this is not correct. There were missing persons long before the Turkish invasion and this is what we have to face*. (Interview 17, 2018)

It is seen that the opening of the borders in 2003 was a milestone, which helped many Turkish and Greek Cypriots to understand what really happened. Both sides understood that the "other" was not very different than them, and that both sides had missing family members and similar sufferings. In this case, the empathy towards the other appeared as the most common expression used by most of the families. For instance, a Greek Cypriot woman whose brother is a missing person (Interview 12, 2017) showed her empathy as follows, and mentioned that her hatred was not towards ordinary Turkish Cypriots:

> *I have some Turkish Cypriot friends and my family are aware that the same kind of things happened to Turkish Cypriots as well. I don't have any hostile feelings against the ordinary Turkish people.*

The ones to blame for them were not the ordinary people of Cyprus, it was the politicians and the fanatics following these politicians. A Greek Cypriot woman said:

> *I don't feel hatred towards Turkish people, but never want to have any war again. I am aware that these kinds of things were done to Turkish Cypriots by Greek Cypriots. We were good friends, living in nearby villages before the conflict, and I believe that conflict started because of the politicians.* (Interview 18, 2017)

> *EOKA is the one to blame for all these kind of problems, the fanatics did the same things to Turkish Cypriots.* (Interview 9, 2017)

5.3. The *CMP's* contribution to reconciliation

Almost all of the interviewees appreciated the works and projects of the CMP, with its goal

[42] Ladisch, "The Challenge of Peacebuilding."

of recovering and identifying the remains of missing persons, and then handing them over to their families. The relatives of the missing persons in Cyprus believe that the CMP may also contribute considerably to the establishment of peace and reconciliation in Cyprus. More than half of the interviewers criticize the years 1982-2004, which the CMP spent without any progress, and they blame the politicians for not giving enough importance to the missing persons issue for all those years. In particular those interviewees who were themselves politicians appreciated the work of the CMP, both for its contribution to recovering the pain of relatives and helping to bind relations in line with reconciliation.

The CMP's role could help the reconciliation processes by bringing the past to the current day through mutual efforts, and make both sides realize that there were missing persons from both Greek and Turkish Cypriots:

> *Any efforts to confront the wrongs of the past and name them as events not to be repeated are for sure a contribution to the Cyprus peace process. Denial of past wrongs creates distrust between the sides. I also feel it is an exceptional example of work done for a humane purpose by teams of cooperating experts from all over the island as well as from other countries. It is proof that if you work together for a common good stripped of politics and discrimination, there can be no harm, only benefit and the CMP showed this.* (Interview 19, 2017)

> *In the negotiations, the missing persons issue was never discussed before the Missing Persons Committee was established. After the Committee on Missing Persons was established the Greek side has lost one of the six legs of their propaganda materials. They were using the missing persons issue at international platforms for propaganda and abusing the issue. Now they cannot do this. As the excavations began, the facts appeared that both sides had missing persons and that the problem was not started in 1974 but in 1963. It has been proven in the world that the losses of the Turkish side are more civilian, and the losses of the Greek side are the fighting soldiers.* (Interview 8, 2018)

The CMP's efforts also helped people to have closure, but they have also seen this development as just a start of the reconciliation between the two sides, rather than an end itself:

> *Because of the good works of the CMP, the winds of hatred have been enormously reduced. Because people on both sides have seen that mistakes were mutual."*(Interview 1, 2017)

> *Finding the missing persons and giving them back to their families highly contributed to the relaxation of the families. But this is not enough for reconciliation. Especially authorities on both sides should sit for more sustainable strategies which are agreed upon.* (Interview 14, 2017)

> *The topic of loss is a humanitarian issue and the expectations and hopes of the lost martyr families to reach their loved ones is rising with the successful work of the CMP. While the Committee on Missing Persons accelerated this program to meet these expectations, it adhered to the principles of scientific methods, international protocols and standards, which have not been compromised since its establishment. The CMP has done very good work. The families with the losses have relaxed. This is a positive contribution to the Cyprus problem. However, on the other hand, when families receive the bones of their loved ones they are better able to understand what the other side did to them.* (Interview 20, 2018)

Families of missing persons from both sides appreciated the efforts of the CMP, and have generally seen the exhumations of missing persons as a very positive step towards building empathy between two communities. Many of them stated the importance of understanding the past, and acknowledgement of mutual suffering and a commitment to forward looking approaches based on cooperation and mutual respect.

6. Conclusions

This research aimed to improve understandings of reconciliation processes and the possible impact of the CMP at the grassroots level through looking at the perceptions of the families of missing persons towards the other in Cyprus. The findings suggested that the focus on the missing persons issue in Cyprus since the mid- 2000s has brought about subtle changes and contributed positively towards reconciliation efforts, at least by reducing hatred and creating empathy between the two communities at the individual level. Although there continues to exist some discomfort in being in touch with the other, most of the families participating in this study expressed their empathy towards the other. This empathy, as noted by the majority of the families, emerged after they realized the existence of similar sufferings of the families on the other side after the opening of borders and with the efforts of the CMP. Almost all of the interviewees appreciate the works and projects of the CMP and believe that the CMP may also contribute considerably to the establishment of peace and reconciliation in Cyprus. As Ladisch specified, "[a]nother way to conceive of reconciliation is a process of acknowledgement of one's own suffering as well as that of the other."[43] In other words, the findings of this research revealed that reconciliation does not mean to forget, but it means to remember without deliberating pain, bitterness, revenge, fear, or guilt, to co-exist and work for the peaceful handling of continuing differences.[44] This research also revealed that exhumations and reburials contributed greatly to healing the pain of the families of missing persons, and to developing empathy towards the other. These findings remind us of the importance of collaborative efforts, like those of the CMP, in conflict situations.

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43 Ladisch, "The Challenge of Peacebuilding."

44 Willemien Du Plessis, "The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission," in *Healing the Wounds: Essays on the Reconstruction of Societies after War,* ed. Marie-Claire Foblets and Trutz von Trotha (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2004), 169–200.

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List of Interviews done by Author

Interview 1. Former president of South Cyprus, 2017

Interview 2. The former mayor of Lefkosa (Turkish side), son of a missing person, 2017

Interview 3. Turkish member of the CMP, 2017
Interview 4. Former president of North Cyprus, 2018
Interview 5. Sister of a missing person, 2017
Interview 6. Daughter of missing person, 2017
Interview 7. Daughter of a missing person, 2017
Interview 8. Minister of Foreign Affairs of North Cyprus and son of a missing person, 2018
Interview 9. Daughter of a missing couple, 2017
Interview 10. Father of two missing person, 2017
Interview 11. Brother of a missing person, 2017
Interview 12. Sister of a missing person, 2017
Interview 13. Technical director of BRT (Radio, television), director at Telecommunication Department, 2017
Interview 14. Former speaker of the parliament of North Cyprus, 2017
Interview 15. Son of a missing person, 2017
Interview 16. Former Greek member of CMP, 2018
Interview 17. Lawyer and a member of the Central Committee of AKEL party, 2018
Interview 18. Sister of a missing person, 2017
Interview 19. Former Minister of Foreign Affairs of North Cyprus, 2017
Interview 20. Chairperson of the Martyr's Families and Veterans Association, 2018
Interview 21. Chairperson of Relatives Committee for Missing Person 1963-64 and brother of a missing person, 2017
Interview 22. Former Turkish member of the CMP, 2017