

The Social Life of a Border Road: Ledras Street - The Microcosmos of a Conflict

While Cyprus was a mixed island for centuries, its two main communities - Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots - are administered under the Republic of Cyprus and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus respectively, de-facto divided as the *south* and the *north* since 1974. In November 2003, after three decades of absolute division, the impenetrable border between north and south was partly lifted and Cypriots could cross again from specific locations in vehicle crossings. It was not until 2008 that the infamous Ledras Street, known previously as the Murder Mile due to violence at the time (1950s) of the guerilla fighting against colonial Britain, opened its border as the first on-foot crossing of the island.

In the southside the long and narrow pedestrian shopping street buzzing with life ends at the first checkpoint. In the north, its less busy and less touristy narrow pedestrian continuation ends too at the equivalent policed barrier. Between them lie 50 meters of ambiguity, a territory 'belonging' to no Cypriot, under the complete jurisdiction of the United Nations Peacekeeping Force. On Saturdays, a social bicomunal movement named UNITE CYPRUS occupy this polysemous space and advocate for the rapprochement of the two states. The atmosphere for these events depends on the negotiations of the two leaders. On some days it's hopeful - on others it's full of anger.

On the boulevard which oozes bitter history, both locals and tourists enjoy shopping, eating and drinking (particularly indulging in the traditional Cypriot coffee, you know, the one which is called Greek in Greece and Turkish in Turkey) and occasionally even strolling past the checkpoints and into the other side, whichever that other may be. While for tourists the opportunity to be able to walk from one state to another is utterly fascinating and ensures another checked point in their "Cyprus Trip To-Do" list, it is a very different story for the local population. Whereas some natives highly appreciate this newfound mobility of being able to cross over, to visit old (or new) friends, pay a visit to their former property, or just cross the border for the sake of having the freedom to do so, the issue of transversing can be a heavily loaded one that strikes a sensitive chord for members of all generations, even for those who have only known the street in its current, disjointed nature.

"Again my inner monologue kept me company as I made my way towards the Ledras Street border. "Okay, I can do it, I did this before, I need to think rationally. One step at a time, I will just walk up there and that's it, no big deal." But it was so much more intimate this time. Because I was there alone, weirdly exposed, or so it felt like. In reality it was nothing more than a stroll and a pit-stop at the checkpoint, I have to admit. However, the plainness of the physical action of crossing did not match the emotional reaction. I think this is the issue, the slighter the change in landscape, the greater its impact on me. But why? [...] Because these roads simply just continue. It

is individuals who decide whether to make it across. It turns the famous saying on its head: It's not "If there is a will, there is a way". It's "There is a way, is there a will?"
(Authorized excerpt from the diary of a Cypriot of the postwar generation)

Since 2008 the border road that leads to the other side is wide open and the barrier obstructing one from crossing is not tangible anymore. A visit at Ledras Street is definitely worthy - Whether one will look for cheap cigarette bargains in the north, hipster chic cafes for instagram pictures in the south, or whether one will make an effort to walk the distance in a local's shoes that is a different story. Ledras Street offers both options - it is a microcosmos of a conflict, one that is ignited and sustained both by the plighted and the passersbys.



Southern Checkpoint, photographed by Daphne Demetriou, May 2018



Southern Checkpoint, photographed by Daphne Demetriou, May 2018