

Agency in waiting: innovation and repetition in a novel Turkish Cypriot nationalist commemoration

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the Dawn Watch commemoration in northern Cyprus that has been organised since 2010 to mark the anniversary of Turkey's military operation/invasion on 20 July 1974. I argue that the Dawn Watch utilises the innovative ritual practice of 'keeping watch' to subjectivise participating Turkish Cypriots as the 'guards/watchmen' who have made Turkey's military presence in Cyprus possible. This novel commemoration seeks to address growing disinterest in Turkish nationalist narratives and commemorations in northern Cyprus, which conventionally reduce Turkish Cypriots to historically unimportant figures who were merely 'liberated' by Turkey. By adopting the innovative ritual practice of 'keeping watch', the Dawn Watch provides participants with a new way of participating in an old nationalist narrative.

INTRODUCTION

At its most elementary level, a commemoration can be considered a type of 'public event' that seeks to 'mediate persons into collective abstractions by inducing action, knowledge and experience... They are culturally designed forms that select out, concentrate, and interrelate themes of existence -lived and imagined- that are more diffused, dissipated, and obscured in the everyday' (Handelman, 1998:15-16). It follows from this definition that a national commemoration can have the effect of 'mediating persons' into the collective abstraction that is the nation. The understanding of the nation invoked in a commemoration both draws from, and in return affects, the discourses and practices of nationhood that circulate beyond the event: in a sense, commemorations can be considered, following anthropologist Clifford Geertz's understanding of the relationship between culture and reality (Geertz, 1973), both 'models of' as well as 'models for' nationhood.

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For example, in his analysis of the Dawn Service and Anzac Day commemorations that take place in Australia on the anniversary of Gallipoli landings in World War I, anthropologist Bruce Kapferer shows how convivial drinking and gambling that is practiced in these events draw from Australian understandings of ‘mateship’, which in turn help reproduce Australia as a nation of ‘rational’ and ‘egalitarian’ individuals (Kapferer, 1988:149-182).

Furthermore, ritual practice that takes place during a commemoration is often seen as a ‘snare for thought’: in a ritual, ‘everything is acceptable because no one asks more in that moment than to believe’ (Abeles, 1988:393). The intensification of symbols and practice that occurs during a commemoration means that such events can provide a particular ‘construction of political reality’ that is very difficult to challenge (Kertzer, 1988). The social reality constructed during a commemoration is often communicated beyond the specific time and space within which the event takes place (Abeles, 1988). Commemorations often aim to transmit meaning to various imagined and real audiences, and they are best analysed in comparison with similar rituals that take place in the broader social field within which they exist (Papadakis, 2003). Nevertheless, commemorations happen by design, and their emergence, re-enactment and communication contain the possibility for social change beyond the event (Handelman, 1998:17; Abeles, 1988).

The commemoration that I analyse in this paper is the Dawn Watch (*Şafak Nöbeti*) that takes place every 19-20 July in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC).¹ The Dawn Watch is a recently invented commemoration that has all the social effects and features outlined above. The Dawn Watch commemorates the beginning of Turkey’s military operation in Cyprus in 1974 on the very beach where the Turkish soldiers first landed on in the early hours of 20 July 1974. The Dawn Watch commemoration begins in the evening of 19 July and ends with the breaking of the dawn on 20 July, and has taken place on every 19-20 July since 2010 (except for in 2020 when it was cancelled due to the pandemic). First organised exactly 36 years after the event which it marks, this new commemoration is designed to both celebrate the beginning of Turkey’s military operation in 1974 as an auspicious event for Turkish Cypriots who live in northern Cyprus, as well as to mourn the Turkish Cypriots and Turkish soldiers who lost their lives in the military operation, collectively categorised as ‘martyrs’ (*şehitler*). The Dawn Watch constructs Turkey’s military operation in 1974 as Turkish Cypriots’ ‘liberation’ from Greek Cypriot ‘oppression’ and what was perceived to be an impending ‘genocide’, as well as the beginning of Turkish Cypriots’ collective historical journey towards ‘statehood’ and ‘independence’. It is important to add that Greek Cypriots overwhelmingly remember 20 July as the beginning of an invasion and their displacement from their homes that has since then been inhabited by Turkish Cypriots and Turkish nationals.

The historical narrative evoked in the Dawn Watch precedes this novel commemoration. In fact, as I argue in the first section of this paper, the recent emergence of this commemoration is a response to recent social and political shifts in northern Cyprus that has placed the Dawn Watch’s national (ist) historical narrative under suspicion. Other official national commemorations in the TRNC, which re-enact historical narratives very similar to the Dawn Watch’s, lack popular participation. More crucially, many Turkish Cypriots publicly criticise official national commemorations as meaningless occurrences that do not require their attention or participation: in other words, the official national commemorations of the TRNC fundamentally fail to ‘induce action, knowledge, and experience’ and thus fail to provide a ‘model of’ and a ‘model for’ nationhood for Turkish Cypriots living in the TRNC. The Dawn Watch is a ‘semi-official’ organisation: although it is supported by several of the TRNC’s official bodies, including its armed forces and local councils, the commemoration is funded by private companies and organised by ordinary citizens who sit at its acting committee. The foundational argument of this paper is that the Dawn Watch commemoration has been aiming to resolve the problem of popular participation in nationalist commemorations in northern Cyprus, and that it has been somewhat successful on its own terms. Unlike other national commemorations in northern



Cyprus, the Dawn Watch has consistently been able to attract several thousand participants every year since 2010. Furthermore, the Dawn Watch inspires wider public discussions and contestation, most intensely around the time of its occurrence, suggesting that it is able to mobilise, produce, and successfully communicate beyond its limits a range of evocative national sensibilities.

This relative success can be traced back to the Dawn Watch's ritual practice which I analyse chronologically in the two main sections of this paper. Based on a thick description of the two Dawn Watch commemorations I attended in 2018 and 2019 during my 20-months long fieldwork in northern Cyprus, I argue that this novel commemoration addresses the lack of popular participation in Turkish nationalist discourse in northern Cyprus primarily by utilising 'keeping watch' (*nöbet tutmak*) as a particular form of participation and ritualised activity available for the ordinary TRNC citizens. Taken literally, 'keeping watch' is a practice that relies primarily on cognitive alertness and a form of 'situational waiting' (Hage, 2009; Janeya & Bandak, 2018). As a ritual activity, 'keeping watch' evokes in the Dawn Watch participants a militarised subjectivity: that of a 'guard' or 'watchman' (*nöbetçi*).² And indeed, the commemoration culminates in the early hours of 20 July when military re-enactors re-stage the landing of Turkish army on the actual beach where the Turkish forces first landed in the dawn of 20 July 1974. The Dawn Watch participants are encouraged to 'keep watch' on this beach until the re-enacted landing. To aid the commemoration participants in their 'watch', the 'Dawn Watch' commemoration also deploys innovative material, aural and visual elements to raise participants' involvement and attention. These elements also serve to prevent the participants from becoming a mere 'audience' (*seyirci*), who can and often do fall into boredom during such commemorations (Hyttinen & Nare, 2017:242). 'Keeping watch' presumes, as well as reproduces, a purposeful investment in its practice, and eventually, in the historical narrative that is being re-enacted in the Dawn Watch. Participation through 'keeping watch' allows participating subjects to become agents within the Turkish nationalist discourse in northern Cyprus without too much ritual effort and without fundamental changes in the said discourse. Instead of being mere recipients of Turkey's supposed benevolence, as the conventional Turkish nationalist discourse on Cyprus often declares Turkish Cypriots to be, the Dawn Watch commemoration re-enacts Turkish nationalist cosmology in a way that allows Turkish Cypriots to become an extended part of the military that 'liberated' them in 1974.

Addressing a lack of popular participation in nationhood

Official commemorations calendar of the de facto Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) is a busy one. In total, thirty-six commemorative events of varying significance inscribed in laws and regulations mark the TRNC's dates of historical remembrance (KKTC, 1984). Many of these commemorations are based on a nationalist historical narrative that traces the Turkish Cypriot's collective origin back to the Ottoman Empire's conquest of Cyprus in 1571 and justify the present-day need for a Turkish Cypriot state by emphasising the community's past 'persecution' by the more populous Greek Cypriot community of the island. The most significant date in the commemorative calendar is 20 July, which marks the anniversary of the beginning of Turkey's military operation in 1974, officially commemorated as the 'Peace and Freedom Holiday' (*Barış ve Özgürlük Bayramı*). Majority of the remaining commemorations are dedicated to the nearly 1700 Turkish Cypriots who were killed in the ethnic conflict before 1974.³ The 'Peace and Freedom Holiday' associated with the Turkish military operation in 1974 is, along with the 15 November events which mark the TRNC's declaration in 1983, one of the few official commemorative events which involve celebrations as opposed to just solemn mourning. Military parades, laying of wreaths, and speeches by politicians dominate the practice of these official events.

These official commemorations were formulated at a time when the sense of nationhood that they enact was more popular and politically more enforced. Until the early 2000s, everyday challenges to Turkish nationalism in Cyprus were rare, and the national order of things upheld by the nationalist Turkish Cypriot leader Rauf Raif Denktaş and the Turkish armed forces seemed firm. The national (ist) historical narrative enacted in official commemorations, which many Turkish Cypriots would now derogatorily refer to as the 'official history' (*resmi tarih*) of the TRNC, was until the early 2000s the main form of historical consciousness that was socially articulated in northern Cyprus. The 'official history' re-enacted in these commemorations can be conceptualised as akin to what anthropologist Alexei Yurchak, based on his empirical material on the final decades of the USSR and theoretical framework informed by Mikhail Bakhtin, calls an 'authoritative discourse': this is a form of discourse that is 'sharply demarcated from all other types of discourse' that coexist with it, which means it does not 'depend' on them, 'precede' them, and cannot be 'changed' by them, and that all other types of discourse are 'organised around it' (Yurchak, 2006:14).⁴ Yurchak argues that in the final decades of the USSR, the 'authoritative discourse' of socialism was 'performatively' reproduced in public events such as commemorations or communist party meetings, even though most Soviet citizens did not subscribe to the 'constative' claims of this discourse: in other words, ritual form and meaning were decoupled.

Although the TRNC seeks to legitimize itself as a radical break from a past marked by ethnic conflict and persecution, contemporary ethnographic works conducted in northern Cyprus emphasize how the TRNC is openly recognized by its presumed nation, the Turkish Cypriots, as a 'make-believe' and 'impossible' project (Bryant, 2021; Bryant & Hatay, 2020; Navaro-Yashin, 2012). Furthermore, the TRNC is under ever present danger of formally disappearing as Turkish Cypriot leaders have since the early 2000s been negotiating with their Greek Cypriot counterparts for a prospective reunification of the island in a new, 'bicomunal' federal state. This potential came closest to its realisation in 2004 when a UN arbitrated reunification plan envisaging a 'United Cyprus Republic' was put to vote. On the simultaneous but separate referenda held on 24 April 2004, 65% of Turkish Cypriots voted in favour of the UN plan, and practically for the disestablishment of the TRNC. However, the TRNC survived an overwhelming proportion of its citizens' vote for its abolishment because 76% of Greek Cypriots voted against the UN plan. Although the TRNC survived, Turkish Cypriot leaders have continued negotiating with their Greek Cypriot counterparts for a new federal arrangement even after the UN plan that failed in the 2004 referenda. Furthermore, Turkish Cypriot governments of the TRNC since 2004 have unilaterally implemented political and social reforms in anticipation of a future federation with Greek Cypriots and prospective EU membership (Kyris, 2015); for example, Turkish Cypriot officials since 2004 have revised the Turkish nationalist narratives in school history curriculums to cultivate among younger Turkish Cypriots a sense of belonging to Cyprus and a shared history with Greek Cypriots (Hatay & Papadakis, 2012).

Such reforms in anticipation of a 'bicomunal' future polity have been undertaken even though the TRNC, with its symbols and official commemorations, continues to exist. More specifically regarding official history narratives, Rebecca Bryant argues that Turkish Cypriots have since the early 2000s begun to voice their issues with the Turkish nationalist discourse in Cyprus, produced by local Turkish Cypriots as well as others, for its marginalisation of Turkish Cypriots as 'extras on the set of history' and for the emphasis on Turkish Cypriots' 'liberation' (*kurtarılma*) by the Turkish army in 1974 (Bryant, 2012:171). After the early 2000s, many Turkish Cypriots began voicing their personal narratives to combat Turkish nationalist narratives that reduce Turkish Cypriots to passive recipients of Turkey's military intervention and goodwill, emphasising instead the Turkish Cypriots' own efforts for survival and belonging in Cyprus (see also Bryant & Hatay, 2019).

Over the course of my 20 months long field work in northern Cyprus, I was able to observe how official commemorations in TRNC reproduced in practice the passive status that Turkish

nationalist discourse bestows upon Turkish Cypriots: most of the 36 official commemorative events of the TRNC are choreographed in a way that emphasised the Turkish soldiers, allowing the ordinary Turkish Cypriots to take part only as a passive audience or mourners. This partly explains why most Turkish Cypriots, even those who profess Turkish nationalism and conviction in the TRNC project, rarely attend or pay attention to these official commemorations: 'why should I go and wait under the sun for them [referring to the politicians] to speak?', I would often hear in protest during my fieldwork. Returning back to Yurchak's points about ritual practice and 'authoritative discourses', I argue that there is something more than a decoupling of ritual form and meaning in northern Cyprus. TRNC's official commemorations persist even though the 'authoritative discourse' that they seek to enact is no longer very authoritative, and these official commemorations persist even without the 'performative' participation of ordinary citizens. The national (ist) symbols and discourses such official commemorations deploy are divorced from everyday practice, and their structures fail to 'ground' a sense of nationhood in everyday micro-interactions of Turkish Cypriots (Malesevic, 2019:14). Turkish Cypriots no longer need to perform, even without conviction, in commemorations, nor do they have to socially repeat the 'official history' of the TRNC in ritualised instances. In this political 'Status Quo', as many Turkish Cypriots term their social condition, people have come to 'recognize the performance as performance', focusing their attention cynically to what these performances are meant to 'signal' rather than 'mean' (Bryant & Hatay, 2020:256)

The Dawn Watch commemoration provides a rare exception and nationalist attempt to address this otherwise persistent 'problem' of popular participation in Turkish nationalist discourse in Cyprus. In fact, the popular disinterest, as well as the occasional performative challenges, faced by Turkish nationalist discourse in northern Cyprus was likely among the reasons why a group of nationalist Turkish Cypriots first organised the Dawn Watch with support from several TRNC institutions. In the remainder of this paper, I will provide a thick description of the Dawn Watch commemoration to analyse how and why it succeeds in attracting popular participation, partially revitalising Turkish nationalist discourse in Cyprus.

From dusk until midnight: a celebration of 'peace'

The crowd begins to gather around 8pm on 19 July. The initial gathering point is a spacious and dusty parking lot beside the main highway leading from the west coast of northern Cyprus to the resort town of Kyrenia. A few hundred metres downhill from the initial gathering spot is the beach where the Turkish troops first landed in 1974: the landing bay is now a luxurious resort and nightclub. On every 19 July, the dusty parking lot is turned into a concert arena with professional light and sound systems that are used in the first part of the Dawn Watch commemoration (Figure 1).⁵ As participants enter the area, popular nationalist songs and marches blasting from the large stage welcome them, alongside with hundreds of other participants waving their Turkish and TRNC flags. Many participants bring their own flags; those who haven't can obtain one as soon as they arrive in the area because young entrepreneurial men will soon approach them with flags that they have on sale. During my first Dawn Watch in 2018, I was among the few people who arrived in the initial gathering area without a flag and soon enough, young vendors began marketing flags and other nationalist items to me. In 2018, a flag was on sale for about 10 Turkish liras each.⁶ Many vendors expected both the Turkish and the TRNC flags to be purchased.

Around 9pm, a professional presenter on stage formally initiates the event with the Turkish national anthem. After the anthem, elderly veterans of the Turkish and Turkish Cypriot armies are welcomed on the stage to briefly share their experience of the war. The veterans' speeches are followed by recordings of historical speeches delivered by various important Turkish and Turkish Cypriot political figures being cast on the large screen on stage. The cast speeches



FIGURE 1 The main stage as seen from among the crowd.

include the recording of a speech delivered by Bülent Ecevit at the very beginning of the military operation in 1974: in his locally famous words, Ecevit declares that Turkey's military operation is intended to end the bloodshed initiated by the Greek nationalist coup d'état that took control of Cyprus on 15 July 1974, and states that Turkey aims to 'bring peace to not just the Turks, but also to the Greeks in Cyprus'. Therefore, the Dawn Watch commemorates Turkey's military operation in Cyprus through an evocation of what the commemoration construes as the operation's 'originary' discourse, rather than its subsequent interpretations. This 'originary' discourse is one that emphasises 'peace', and it has historically pre-emptive affinities with what was in the 1990s internationally termed the 'responsibility-to-protect' and 'humanitarian intervention'. The Dawn Watch's emphasis on this said 'originary' discourse was reiterated, perhaps somewhat exaggeratedly, in 2019 when one of the prominent organisers of the event declared during his speech on the stage that 'Greek Cypriots should participate in the Dawn Watch as well next year, for Turkey has brought them peace also by saving them from the coup plotters, and restored in Greece its democracy'.

Ecevit's speech is followed by the speech delivered by the Turkish Cypriot nationalist leader Rauf Raif Denktaş during the very first Dawn Watch in 2010. Denktaş, who passed away in 2012, was the nationalist politician who led the Turkish Cypriot community from 1973 until 2005. His transfer of power in 2005 to a left-wing and pro-unification Turkish Cypriot figure epitomised and precipitated much of the social changes that has been taking place in northern Cyprus since the early 2000s. Denktaş participated in the first Dawn Watch in 2010 as an ordinary citizen as well as a figurehead for the then disorganised Turkish nationalists in northern Cyprus. His statements in 2010 Dawn Watch, reiterated on the large screen at each commemoration ever since, contain celebrations of Turkish and Turkish Cypriot soldiers and the TRNC, as well as a 'warning' to ordinary Turkish Cypriots, including those who are present in the Dawn Watch. Addressing the Dawn Watch participants directly in 2010, and through the large screen in 2018 and 2019, Denktaş urges Turkish Cypriots to not be 'deceived' by calls for reunification with Greek Cypriots, and to not 'abandon their state again' as they purportedly have done in 2004 through their vote in favour of the UN plan for reunification. Addressing the 'youth' more directly, Denktaş urges them to 'gather their wits' (*aklunuzu başımıza toplayın*) because the 'Greeks are ready for an ambush' (*Rum pusudadır*), and continues:

A state is like a child. The state [the TRNC] has been founded by the sacrifices of your mothers and your fathers, as well as the lives and blood of those who came from the Motherland [Turkey]. Just as a mother gives birth to a child in pain and suffering, a people give birth to a state through years of suffering and persecution, and by spilling its blood. You have a state that is 27 years old. If anyone wishes to ignore your state and calls it void, and if anyone seeks to achieve a false peace by claiming that your state doesn't exist, may God curse them ... Today, your enthusiasm shows that you oppose a false peace, and that you wish to protect your state and sovereignty ...

This reiterated 2010 speech by Denktaş constitutes the founding charter of the Dawn Watch commemoration: it formulates the main 'message' that the commemoration seeks to communicate beyond the event and declares the various 'audiences' which are intended to receive its message. According to the Denktaş speech, the primary audience of the Dawn Watch are those Turkish Cypriots who wish to see Cyprus reunited in a federal state: the fact that the majority of TRNC citizens voted for one such plan in 2004 means to Denktaş that the 'youth' needs to 'gather their wits' and reinvigorate their conviction in the TRNC, which according to him represents Turkish Cypriots' 'freedom' and 'sovereignty', and furthermore, a true 'peace'. In this formulation, the Dawn Watch is how participants can demonstrate their reinvigorated conviction. A ritual which condenses thoughts, feelings, and symbols in an extraordinary practice is a perfect method for a people to 'gather its wits'; thus, the Dawn Watch is the instance and the method by which Turkish Cypriots can reconstitute themselves as the 'nation' of the TRNC, rather than a 'community' of a prospective federal state shared with Greek Cypriots.

Another audience of the Dawn Watch is an imagined Turkish nation and Republic of Turkey which are reiterated in the event as being the ‘Motherland’ of the Turkish Cypriots. During his time in power, Denктаş very successfully practiced a politics of fealty in relation to Turkish authorities in Turkey and in northern Cyprus, frequently using his amicable relations to gain increased financial assistance for Turkish Cypriots, while retaining a reputation in Turkey as being a true Turkish nationalist (see Bryant & Hatay, 2020:227-235). The period following Denктаş’s fall from power saw the relations between Turkish Cypriots and Turkish authorities and public increasingly strained, with tensions culminating in 2011 when the then Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan called Turkish Cypriot trade unions protesting against austerity measures ‘*besleme*’. This term literally means a foster child and has an implicit subtext of ungratefulness and spoilt behaviour. It was an accusation and derogation which played on the conventional ‘Motherland-Babyland’ discourse that was well established between Turkey and Turkish Cypriots during Denктаş’s leadership. By reiterating his past discourses on the large stage, the Dawn Watch also seeks to repeat and revitalise a form of relationality between Turkish Cypriots and Turkey that has been largely dormant since Denктаş’s fall from power and passing.

Between each of these recorded footages, the professional presenter on the stage urges the crowd to wave their flags ever more enthusiastically by addressing the participants as ‘Dawn Guards’ (*Şafak Nöbetçileri*). When unsatisfied with the level of enthusiasm demonstrated by the commemoration participants, who are largely a literal ‘audience’ at this stage of the event, the presenter often takes the initiative and stops the procession of recorded speeches until the participants demonstrate greater fervour through their cheers and flag waiving. The cameras which broadcast the Dawn Watch live on social media occasionally point towards the crowd and project the participants’ images on the large screen on stage, and thus, back to themselves



FIGURE 2 The participants projected back to themselves on the main stage.

(Figure 2). Time and again, the presenter congratulates the participants for being there, for being the ‘guards’ of this historically important site on this crucial anniversary. The participants are constantly reminded that they are not passive witnesses in the event, but also active participants who make it possible. In the words of the presenter, they are there to demonstrate Turkish Cypriots’ commitment to ‘peace’ and ‘freedom’, which, also according to Ecevit and Denktaş speeches reiterated at the very beginning, represent the ‘original’ promises of Turkey’s military operation.

The sense that participants are more than a mere ‘audience’ is invoked nowhere more intensely than the blood donation centre that is a bus placed at the very back of the main gathering area (Figure 3). Long queues form outside this makeshift clinic from the very early hours of the evening until midnight as participants leave the crowd to queue for blood donation. In both years that I attended, the donation centre had run out of medical equipment and storage space before they did of donors. This was the case even though the presence of the blood donation centre was not very visible among the large crowd. The Dawn Watch organisers do not actively encourage participants to donate blood, and there are no material incentives for the donors to do so. In fact, queuing for donation means that donors miss much of the Dawn Watch activity that takes place before midnight.

The role of blood donation in commemorative rituals has been analysed extensively by anthropologist Jacob Copeman in the context of India (Copeman, 2004, 2009). Copeman shows how blood donation campaigns are part of political party rituals that commemorate deceased leaders, especially as part of the contemporary Nehruvian campaigns for ‘national integration’ across caste and ethnic differences. Copeman argues that blood donation is conceptualised as a ‘difference-traversing gift’ in Nehruvian secular nationalism: this is because the anonymity of the relationship between the donor and the recipient means that each blood transfusion has the potential to cross ethnic and caste boundaries and link persons to each other as Indian nationals. Blood is also very central to Turkish nationalist narratives and politics in Cyprus, but very often as a symbol and metaphor: indeed, in Turkish nationalist discourse in Cyprus, as



FIGURE 3 Blood donation centre at the back of the event area.

represented by Denктаş's speech discussed above for example, 'blood imbues the land and becomes consubstantial with it' (Bryant, 2004:200). As a further example, one of the elderly veterans who was invited to speak on the stage in 2019 recited a locally well-known nationalist poem, the most famous line of which states that 'it is the blood that makes the flag; a land is a homeland if there are people willing to die for its sake' (*Bayrakları bayrak yapan üstündeki kandır. Toprak, eğer uğruna ölen varsa vatandır*). However, during the Dawn Watch, blood is present as more than a metaphor or discursive trope: its actual donation and exchange provides one of the primary methods with which commemorators can become agents, and not just a mere 'audience', during the first part of the Dawn Watch. Blood donation provides commemoration participants with the opportunity to reproduce the nation as an actual community of shared blood.

A popular music concert that starts towards the midnight concludes the first part of the Dawn Watch. The organizers often pay large sums to have famous Turkish artists perform in Dawn Watch. These performances are often without any obvious political or historical meaning: they primarily aim to entertain. On the margins of the gathering area, I could observe the presence of people who stood without any flags or any seeming nationalist enthusiasm. Some of these people were in fact international residents living in northern Cyprus, often in the holiday homes that they own in Kyrenia. In the spontaneous conversations I had with several of the Turkish speaking 'participants' on the margin, I could even hear criticisms of the nationalist historical narratives that were being reproduced in the event: the most common criticism was that what was being said in the event were 'old fashioned'. However, given the social reality that was being ritually reproduced, such criticisms could hardly be publicly articulated beyond private conversations held on the margins of the event area.

One such participant, a Turkish man in his 50s who settled in northern Cyprus in the early 2000s, whom I will call Mr. Ahmet, told me in 2018 that he came to Dawn Watch mainly to hear his favourite Turkish rockstar Kıraç sing. During our otherwise very ordinary conversation, Mr. Ahmet, who lived and worked not far from the event area, even told me as a side point that elderly Turkish Cypriot war veterans living in the area have told him in the past that many Turkish soldiers who died in the first day of the military operation in 1974 were buried unceremoniously in mass graves found around the concert grounds. This is a plausible claim given that the main location of the Dawn Watch concert was the site of an intense battle in July 1974, and that Turkish troops that landed in Cyprus on 20 July were scarcely reinforced until mid-August 1974.

That Mr. Ahmet could be there to hear a rockstar sing despite having no nationalist conviction, and despite expressing an otherwise uncanny local information, can be taken as evidence of how the Dawn Watch achieves in practice what anthropologists have long argued to be the primary effect of a successful mortuary ritual, a category of practice which can include commemorations. Mortuary rituals are supposed to, among other things, ensure the proper separation of the dead from the living and to reproduce the society of the living as 'eternal': mortuary rituals regenerate social 'life' as eternal out of the mortality of living persons (Bloch & Parry, 1982; Bovensiepen, 2018; Hertz, 1960). Commemorative events are exceptional instances when the separation of the living and the dead is temporarily overcome for mourning, and, as anthropologist Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry argue, they may include life affirming symbols pertaining to, for example, fertility. In other words, mortuary rituals are supposed to celebrate life as they mourn and make sense of death: they aim to reframe death as socially regenerative (Bloch & Parry, 1982:18). This is also because the dead who are not mourned with proper rites can return to haunt the living, and unsettle the social order with renewed demands of mourning (Kwon, 2008). Those categories of the dead who are constructed as crucial to the life of a nation, soldiers who died in a war for example, can be particularly demanding in many contexts, as their families often request proper burials even when that is practically impossible (Wagner, 2019).

That Mr. Ahmet can enjoy a concert despite knowing the commemoration area to be a site of unceremonious burial rests on the Dawn Watch's successful construction of the Turkish and Turkish Cypriot war dead as sacrificial beings who were 'exchanged' in return for the 'peace' and 'freedom' of the living; thus, the Dawn Watch is also about making the violent death suffered in 1974 socially regenerative of life. As anthropologist Salih Can Aciksoz argues based on his ethnography of disabled war veterans of Turkey's military operations since the 1990s:

Sovereignty claims embody presumptions about the meaning (or meaninglessness) of violent loss, assertions about whether violent loss has a transcendental dimension, and pronouncements about whether injured or dead bodies have some sort of worldly or otherworldly political and symbolic value beyond their immediate materiality. Sovereignty is the alchemy of making bodies sacred through the logic of sacrifice ... (Aciksoz, 2020:10)

Much of Aciksoz's own ethnography is about the poignant struggle of disabled Turkish veterans to have their sacrifices, often visible through their missing limbs and injured bodies, socially recognised. Based on Aciksoz's conceptualisation of the relationship between sovereignty and sacrifice, Mr. Ahmet's ability to overlook the mass graves demonstrates the commemoration's success in asserting how the violent loss suffered in 1974 has a 'transcendental dimension' and a value beyond the 'immediate materiality' of sacrifice. Commemoration and celebration of Turkey's military operation as the beginning of 'peace' enables participants such as Mr. Ahmet to overlook the potentially troubling material proximity of actual Turkish soldiers who died during the event.

If the first part of the Dawn Watch until midnight can 'celebrate' the Turkish army's 'liberation' of Turkish Cypriots, and 'regenerate' social and political life in northern Cyprus, this is also because the second part of the Dawn Watch more properly 'mourns' the loss of life involved in the process, re-enacting more directly the 'transcendental meaning' attached to the violence which occurred in 1974. In the remainder of this paper, I will analyse what happens in the Dawn Watch after the clock hits midnight on 19 July.

From midnight until dawn: mourning and meaning in waiting

Once the popular music concert ends just around midnight, the presenter on stage invites participants to collect oil torches from a truck parked beside the stage. About half of the initial crowd leaves after the concert, leaving more than enough torches for the remaining participants. The Dawn Watch staff ask participants who have picked up torches to march downhill towards the beach where they are due to begin the 'watch' in a proper sense (Figure 4). A solemn silence is more appropriate now.

The second part of the Dawn Watch can be most readily compared to an ordinary Turkish Cypriot 'wake' (*mevlid*) that is held on the third and the fortieth days after someone's death, as well as at each anniversary thereafter. This is because the Dawn Watch participants entering the beach are welcomed by young Turkish Cypriot soldiers who distribute to them large chunks of *helva*, a dessert made from semolina that is consumed during Turkish Cypriot 'wakes'. Unlike its Arabic cognate halwa, which is often referred to as 'tahini helva' in northern Cyprus, *helva* made from semolina connotes funerary rites, as it is very rarely consumed in ordinary social occasions. After a death, the closest kin of the deceased are often tasked with cooking and distributing *helva* to mourners who visit the deceased person's home to share their commiserations.

The second part of the Dawn Watch is similar to a Turkish Cypriot 'wake' also because participants marching towards the beach are welcomed by imams who can be heard reciting passages from the Quran on loudspeakers. Such recitations are also a feature of the Turkish Cypriot 'wake', which in fact represents one of the rare occasions where Muslim religiosity finds social and public expression in the otherwise very secular northern Cyprus.⁷ The imams' Quran recitation provides the sonic context of the first hour that participants spend on the beach after midnight. The imams eventually end with a Turkish language prayer, in which they declare that they have dedicated their Quran recitations to the 'souls' (*ruh*) of the 'martyrs' who



FIGURE 4 Participants marching downhill towards the beach.

have died in Turkey's military operation in 1974, as well as in the other wars before and ever since. Quran recitations during a 'wake' are often intended to benefit the commemorated persons in the afterlife.

When the participants eventually arrive at the beach with their torches and *helvas*, much of what they are meant to do is not obvious. Most of the participants who come down to the beach after midnight are younger people and families, as elderly participants often leave the Dawn Watch after its first part, likely for practical reasons. As participants arrive on the site where the Turkish troops first landed in 1974, which is now a beach resort and nightclub, they sit on the first available spot on the sand or on the area just above the beach. With their faces towards the darkness of the bay, an abyss disturbed only by the lights of the hotels afar, the participants begin what the Dawn Watch presenter declares to be their 'watch' proper (Figure 5). After the imams finish their Quran recitations, the laser equipment otherwise used by the beach resort's nightclub is turned on to light the smoke-filled air. Meanwhile, nationalist popular music and marches play on loudspeakers, but they are quieter than before midnight.

Ideally, the time spent on the beach until dawn is meant to subjectivise the participants as 'guards' of the landing site: in so doing, they keep it ready for the re-enactors who will re-stage the landing at dawn. The 'watch' kept by the participants on the beach has a wider historical meaning too. This is revealed when another historical speech by Denктаş is played on loudspeakers back to the 'guards' who are sat on the beach. The replayed speech is the one that Denктаş delivered in the early hours of 20 July 1974 on radio to announce to Turkish Cypriots the beginning of military landings. In this particular speech, Denктаş addresses Turkish Cypriots to declare, among other things, that:

You [the Turkish Cypriots] have done all it takes to protect the existence of an independent Republic of Cyprus. You have performed a glorious and historic resistance with full confidence in the Motherland Turkey, which is the protector and guarantor of our rights and independence. Today, at this very moment, the heroic Turkish forces are landing on all corners of Cyprus by air and sea ... This is not an invasion, for they have come to reinstate the unity, independence, and security of Cyprus... This is not an operation against the Greek Cypriot people, with whom we have always strived to live in friendship and who are our partners in independence ...

Denктаş's references to the independence and sovereignty of the Republic of Cyprus, which is the post-colonial intercommunal power-sharing republic established in 1960, may sound incongruent in retrospect given that this commemoration takes place in, and celebrates, the TRNC which claims to have unilaterally seceded from the Republic of Cyprus in 1983. However, such incongruences are beside the point in ritual practice, as the primary effect of the reiterated speech is to invoke Turkish Cypriots' 'resistance' (*mukavemet*) until 1974 as the precondition that made Turkey's military operation possible. As I discussed in an earlier section, the official commemorations of the TRNC, as well as the conventional Turkish nationalist discourse in Cyprus, often erase Turkish Cypriots' agency in their history, reducing them, as Rebecca Bryant states, to 'extras' on the set of their own history. By evoking the Turkish Cypriot 'resistance' before 1974 as a precondition of the Turkey's military operation in 1974, the Dawn Watch produces two effects: first, a space is opened for Turkish Cypriots to participate in Turkish nationalist discourse on Cyprus as the people who made Turkey's military operation possible; second, the historical emphasis on Turkey's military operation is reinvigorated against local challenges and disinterest. In the Dawn Watch, 'set of history' remains firmly about Turkey's military operation, but Turkish Cypriots are upgraded from 'extras' to important supporting characters.

Therefore, what the Dawn Watch participants are meant to do on the beach is to 'resist' and 'keep watch' in Cyprus until the Turkish army arrives. In practical ritual terms, 'keeping watch' and 'resisting' during the Dawn Watch commemoration practically do not involve much. There is no specific activity expected from the participants who are sat on the beach.



FIGURE 5 Participants as they 'keep watch' on the beach.

Nor are there explicit ritual 'prohibitions', although of course participants have their own ideas about what should or shouldn't be done. For example, after a group of four young people cracked open cans of beers during their 'watch', I could hear a group of slightly older participants express among themselves disapprovals of the young group's action. Furthermore, several nationalist Turkish Cypriot politicians grasped the opportunity in both years to socialise with commemoration participants during their 'watch' on the beach. In the conversations I had with several participants I heard disapprovals of such actions as political opportunism. However, neither instance of disapproval relied on universal or explicit social sanctions, and as such they were instances when individual participants transposed their pre-existing dispositions onto what the 'watch' should or shouldn't involve. In fact, the lack of centrally sanctioned practices or taboos during the 'watch' allowed for broader participation in the Dawn Watch: as David Kertzer argues, ambiguity can be a virtue in a ritual as it enables solidarity where discursive consensus is lacking (Kertzer, 1988:57-76).

However, this does not mean that 'keeping watch' is fully without constraints. There is a bare minimum required, which is participants' presence and occasional attention. Participants are free to leave the area, and in fact, many do as the night proceeds. Although many people would surely find sitting beside the Mediterranean until dawn in summer a pleasant experience, I have noted in both years that many Dawn Watch participants, especially those accompanied by children, tended to leave much earlier than the dawn of 20 July. The exodus of participants in 2018 was so sudden and significant that the Dawn Watch organisers initiated the re-enactment of the landing, which in that year involved military scuba divers emerging from the sea and a helicopter flyover, at around 3 am. In 2019, the re-enactment of the landing, which in that year involved marine landings and fighter jet flyovers (Figure 6), happened much later, at 4am (which was still before the actual dawn). Therefore, although there are no social sanctions in the meanwhile, it is important that participants remain present on the beach with their faces turned towards the sea.

The problem with the lack of social sanctions regarding a practice, and with being asked for nothing more than a mere presence, is that this can make a commemoration boring (Figure 7). On a closer analysis, 'keeping watch' is a form of attentive waiting towards a purpose: in the Dawn Watch case, it involves literally waiting for re-enactors to re-stage a landing, and symbolically for 'liberation' by the Turkish army. However, 'boredom' is always 'potentially implicated within, but not identical to, experiences of waiting. Boredom is a state, while waiting is an activity' (Coleman, 2018:47). For waiting during the Dawn Watch to be a purposeful form of activity, and for it to achieve its desired effect of reproducing the participants as 'guards', 'keeping watch' needs to remain what Ghassan Hage calls 'situational waiting', and not collapse into 'existential waiting'. For Hage, 'situational waiting is an experience fully embedded in time' and social relations, as it is directed towards a purpose; in contrast, 'existential waiting is seemingly removed from time or, rather, from the meanings ... accorded to time in conventional Western settings', because 'existential waiting' lacks a clear telos (Hage, 2009:21). Although boredom can be a part of either type of waiting, boredom that leads to abandonment of a practice is closer to experiences associated with 'existential waiting' which often involves pervasive senses of uncertainty and loss of agency (Hage, 2009:23).

Therefore, 'keeping watch' during the Dawn Watch ideally involves a 'situational waiting' with a clear sense of purpose: this form of waiting is probably only available to participants who fully embrace the future-oriented nature of their presence on the beach. This future-oriented presence may oscillate between different 'teleoaffective structures' such as 'hope' or 'expectation' (Bryant & Knight, 2019), as well as the occasional sense of boredom. However, these do not matter as long as participants remain on the beach and pay the occasional attention to time progressing towards the impending re-enactment. This form of presence needs to avoid presentism and keep the future/dawn in the purview to avoid collapsing into 'existential waiting'. Thus, 'keeping watch' during Dawn Watch presumes and requires constantly renewed



FIGURE 6 Jet fighters deploying flares during the re-enactment in 2019.



FIGURE 7 Commemoration participants several hours into their 'watch'.



attention to the ultimate purpose of the commemoration and a ‘situational waiting’ grounded in the temporality of the event and the wider narrative of Turkish nationalism in Cyprus: in other words, it requires a disposition towards a literal and symbolic ‘dawn’. This is the dawn when the history that is being re-enacted reaches completion with the ‘peace’ and ‘freedom’ brought by Turkey’s military operation in Cyprus. By anchoring participants’ attention onto this particular future, and by making their presence and occasional attention a precondition of its arrival, the Dawn Watch grounds participants in a specific understanding of time, history, and sense of nationhood both during and beyond the event.

CONCLUSION: FROM ‘BABY-LAND’ TO ‘BORDER-LAND’?

The narrative of the Dawn Watch reiterates much of what Turkish nationalism traditionally has to say about Cyprus and Turkish Cypriots. However, it ritually bestows upon participating Turkish Cypriots the role of local ‘guards’, whose orientation towards the telos of this specific national (ist) time is a precondition for it to reach completion in a full circle. The completion of this national (ist) history is achieved through the future-oriented and embodied practice of ‘keeping watch’, which is a temporal practice that (re)grounds Turkish Cypriots participating in the Dawn Watch in the Turkish nationalist narratives in Cyprus. What I showed in this paper was how a novel commemorative practice can reinvigorate a waning nationalist symbolic universe by introducing minor variations in discursive structures and by deploying innovative ritual practices.

When I attended the Dawn Watch in 2018 and 2019, many Turkish Cypriots who were not participants would probably profess to find the ‘model of’ nationhood re-enacted in the Dawn Watch as ‘old fashioned’. Mustafa Akıncı, a firm believer in the reunification of Cyprus in bicomunal federal state, was the elected Turkish Cypriot leader in 2018 and 2019. In those years, the Dawn Watch expressed a ‘model of’ nationhood not shared by the elected leader of Turkish Cypriots. However, Akıncı lost the elections in October 2020 to Ersin Tatar, a Turkish Cypriot politician, and prime minister in 2019, who’s firmly against reunification of Cyprus and proud of his closer relations with Turkey. Tatar was a prominent participant in the Dawn Watch both in 2018 and 2019. In July 2019, while he was the prime minister of TRNC, Tatar claimed that the Turkish vice-president visiting northern Cyprus had come up with a new term to redefine its relationship to Turkey and replace the old discourse on it being the ‘Baby-land’ (*Yavru Vatan*) to the Turkish ‘Motherland’: this new term was ‘Serhat Vatan’ (Postasi, 2019).

This new term can be translated as ‘Border-land’ or as ‘Frontier-land’. It draws on Ottoman understandings of the ‘frontier’, governed by semi-autonomous ‘frontier lords’ (*uç beyleri*), most commonly in the Ottoman territories in the Balkans (see Antov, 2017). Following Tatar’s election as Turkish Cypriot leader/president in 2020 – with substantial direct support of Ankara, I have to note – some of the quotidian practices and affects associated with the Dawn Watch were writ-large in the official political scale, providing a miniscule form of the new official Turkish Cypriot position in relation to Turkey. For example, much like in the actual Dawn Watch commemoration, Turkish Cypriots’ presence in Cyprus has come to be seen as one of the preconditions for Turkey’s sovereignty practices over the Eastern Mediterranean, where Turkish Cypriots represent both the guardians of Turkey’s presence, as well as its semi-autonomous recipients of its patronage.

Nevertheless, the role of such commemorations should not be overstated in international politics without further empirical research, although they surely provide certain ‘models for’ practicing international politics, as well as some everyday ‘models of’ experiencing it. A better understanding of commemorative rituals requires longitudinal and comprehensive attention to the various scales of sociality to which they relate as well as evoke.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The TRNC is a 'de facto' state that is recognised only by Turkey.
- ² Although 'watchman' would be a more appropriate translation of the Turkish word *nöbetçi* given how I have translated the name of the commemoration, the Turkish word *nöbetçi* lacks the gender connotations inherent in the word 'watchman'. Therefore, I will translate *nöbetçi* as 'guard' in the remainder of this paper.
- ³ This figure is per TRNC's own official estimations. For the politics and silences regarding war-time casualties in Cyprus, see Sant Cassia (2005).
- ⁴ See Killoran (1994) for an ethnography conducted at the height of nationalist power in northern Cyprus.
- ⁵ All photographs in this paper are my work.
- ⁶ 10 Turkish Liras was about 2 British Pounds in July 2018.
- ⁷ See Nevzat and Hatay (2009) for a discussion of a historical overview of the 'decline' of Islam and modern forms of Muslim religiosity in Cyprus. See Bryant & Hatay (2020:78-82) for a discussion of the relationship between national and religious identity among Turkish Cypriots.

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