

Anti-Revisionism in Greece

A Note on1973, The Polytechnic Uprising

Given all the heroism shown and courage display that November, the anti-junta student movement remained largely liberal in character, mainly in defence of civil liberties and electoral politics. There is no doubt that the left, the Maoists of OMLE, both Communist parties at that time (the 'external' pro-Soviet version and the 'interior' Eurocommunist version), were very involved in the anti-junta movement, but the substance of the resistance was very much in line with liberal values. However the student uprising did demonstrate that anti-regime attitudes, sentiments and behaviour were manifestly growing, not least in the support given by working class activists who made up the majority arrested in the suppression by the military. The Polytechnic Uprising should be seen as the decisive event in the countdown to the collapse of the dictatorship.

Early 1973 saw sit-ins at the Law School in Athens in February when the junta overturned the routine military service deferments of 88 students and forcefully inducted them into the army, enraged fellow students, academic staff and supporters - in a move of unprecedented daring at the time - occupied the premises of the Athens University law school to register their protest.

The subsequent police intervention to end the demonstration used violence at a level seen as as an example of a state-sanctioned campaign of terror to punish and cow unruly citizens who had defied the regime.

The student demands had been for the progressive reforms in the educational system, the restoration of trade union, academic and political liberties. On the streets the slogans of "Down With Dictatorship" and "For Democracy" were chanted by the students of Athens, Thessalonica, Patra, Ioannina in a wave of meetings and demonstrations throughout 1973. By the October, the regime had appointed the leader of the Progressive Party, Markezinis to prepare for parliamentary elections. The KKK Interior expressed support for these manoeuvrings but the situations remain unstable with students occupying student buildings in Thessalonica and Patra. Secretary of the KKK-Interior, Dimitrios Partsalidis, was to publically state while on trial, that his party favoured the King's return.

On the third anniversary of the death of George Papandreou, father of future prime minister and Pasok founder Andreas Papandreou, the crowds congregated at the city's First Cemetery to honour the memory of the "Old man of the republic".

Fearful of the political character of the in this unplanned popular demonstration, thousands of armed riot police were called in to scatter the crowd.

Seventeen students who had been arrested were swiftly placed on trial which provoked another unplanned demonstration, which was centred at the Athens Polytechnic.

The political upheaval which broke out in Athens lasted from 14 to 17 November 1973.¹ The upheaval began with the general meetings of the students' unions on the morning of Wednesday 14 November, which result in the rejection of government measures concerning the planning of student elections. On the same afternoon, the students, who have gathered at the Polytechnic in the meantime, decide to occupy the building under the control of a Coordinating Committee.



This particular situation was not only staged by students of the polytechnic, but by students of other institutions, workers, civilians and ex-students who all joined in the protest, all of whom were encouraged to 'descend upon the streets of Athens'.

By the evening, the slogans have become clearly political. The slogans shouted and painted on banners in the Polytechnic are no longer concerned with education alone

That evening the first manifestos were scattered in Patision Avenue, defensively blocked by crowds of people.

The students of the Polytechnic University of Athens, with the EKKE militants, the Anti- Dictatorship Students Union (Anti-EFEE) and Communist Youth of Greece (KNE - aligned to KKK Exterior) in an organising role, established an illegal radio station, rallying students, young radicals and workers.

¹ The Greek Uprising on 17 November 1973 Against the Junta. Posted by irmedeaca / November 15, 2012 <http://dogmaandgeopolitics.wordpress.com/2012/11/15/the-greek-uprising-on-17-november-1973-against-the-junta-militar/>

Thursday 15 November 1973. The sit-in draws the people of Athens, who start to flock to the Polytechnic. By 9:30 p.m. the sit-in is packed, while the crowds in the surrounding streets shout anti-American and anti-Junta slogans. The crowds remain there all night to express their support of the Polytechnic students.

The rhetoric of the students and their aim to be heard internationally became a serious problem for the junta. They made clear through their illegal radio broadcasts that they were fighting for the rights of all Greeks, that bringing down the junta was 'now or never'. They completely broke the stringent restrictions on anti-junta propaganda.

Their constant reference to the 'free struggling students, the free struggling Greeks' in the majority of their addresses reflected their desire for the dictatorship to be overthrown and democracy to be restored in Greece.

Friday 16 November. The Polytechnic radio station starts broadcasting the message of the struggle to the whole of Athens, which is watching events with bated breath. "Polytechnic here! Polytechnic here! This is the Radio Station of the free fighting students, the free fighting Greeks. Down with the Junta, down with Papadopoulos, Americans out, down with fascism, the Junta will fall to the people. People of Greece, come out on the streets, come and stand by us, in order to see freedom. The struggle is a universal anti-dictatorial, anti-Junta struggle! Only you can fight in this struggle. Greece is governed by foreign interests! The dictator Papadopoulos is trying to hide behind a mask of democracy with the fake government of Markezinis and the fake elections it is proclaiming."

At 9 a.m. the first barricades are raised and two mass demonstrations form in Panepistimiou and Stadiou Avenues. At midday a farmers' committee from Megara, protesting against the expropriation of their land, visits the Coordinating Committee and the radio broadcasts: "The people of Megara promise to stand and fight at the side of the students and workers... This is a common struggle... It is not just for the town of Megara or the Polytechnic... It is for Greece. For the people of Greece who want to determine their own lives. To walk on the path to progress. The basic requirement is the overthrow of the dictatorship and the restoration of democracy."

The people gathered outside the Polytechnic singing the traditional Cretan revolutionary song "Pote Tha Kanei Xasteria" (When Will the Sky Be Clear Again).

By the afternoon thousands of demonstrators have gathered, including many workers. At 6 p.m. clashes between police and demonstrators begin, with many injuries. At 7 p.m. a mass march heads for the Polytechnic and the police choose this moment to strike. Police armoured cars appear and the first shots are fired. There are running fights all along Solonos, Kanningos, Vathi, Aristotelous and Alexandras Avenues and Amerikis Square.

At 9:30 the police declare a curfew in the centre of Athens until further notice. At 11 p.m. the radio station and loudspeakers ask people not to leave. The area around the Polytechnic is shrouded in choking teargas.



The regime was alarmed at the developments of an emerging Uprising receiving wider support. Thus after just two days of protests, the decision was made by Papadopoulos to send tanks to the university.

“Neither I nor any other witness I have ever spoken to, will forget the unwonted sound of tank treads as an armoured column first hove into sight high up on Alexandras Avenue, heading for a Patission Street thronged with Athenians in a high pitch of excitement but expecting riot police, not tanks.

The sight was greeted with a mixture of amazement, fear and sheer disbelief.

The tumult was deafening, as the scream of steel tank treads scraping asphalt and torturing concrete kerbs competed with the sound of people shouting and the sound of shooting as pockets of snipers took aim at the armour from the terraces of buildings adjacent to the route taken by the tanks – Mavromateon Street below Pedion tou Areos park, then Scholi Evelpidon Street, then a by-now fast-emptying Patission Street as the column headed for the Polytechnic.”²

Saturday 17 November 1973. The first tanks appear shortly after midnight, while more and more dead and injured are taken to the makeshift hospital in the Polytechnic. By 1 a.m. the Polytechnic has been surrounded by tanks. The radio station and loudspeakers call, “Don’t be afraid of the tanks”, “Down with fascism”, “Soldiers, we are your brothers. Don’t become murderers”. At 1:30 the tanks set off with their headlamps on. The students cling to the gates, singing the national anthem and calling to the soldiers, “We are brothers”.

The army gives the people inside 20 minutes’ notice to get out, while a tank takes up position near the main gate. The Coordinating Committee tries to negotiate the students’ safe exit.

2:50 a.m. Saturday 17 November: The commanding officer waves the tank forward. The gates fall and the tank continues up to the steps of the “Averoff” building. It is followed by men of the security forces and the LOK Special Forces. Shots are fired. Some soldiers help the

² Allan Wilson, Greece remembers bloody '73 revolt against Colonels

<http://dogmaandgeopolitics.wordpress.com/2012/11/15/the-greek-uprising-on-17-november-1973-against-the-junta-militar/>

students escape, but plain-clothes policemen are waiting at the exits. By 3:20 there is no-one left in the Polytechnic...

According to official records, 56 people were killed. According to police records, 1103 citizens and 61 policemen had been injured. As to the casualties, the real number remains unknown. As it became known after the fall of the dictatorship, 34.000 bullets had been used by the police, in addition to the 300.000 cartridges of all kinds, used by the army, so as to repress the revolt. After the killings, the regime went on to arrest around 2,500 people, although it announced merely the arrest of 866.

Part of the memory of the **Polytechnic Uprising** is that it symbolises not only the heroic struggle but also the unity of all democrats. Since the 1970s, 17 November has been a day of remembrance and a school holiday, and an annual memorial is conducted in the Polytechnic to pay tribute. There is another destination on the day, and that is the American embassy. The annual protest recalls popular anger over what everyone still perceives as US support for the colonels who usurped power in a coup d'etat on April 21, 1967.

“The memory of the Polytechnic made two overlapping contributions to the cultivation of a culture of resistance. First, the youth acquired independent agency. It was only the student movement that overtly resisted the dictatorship; the act becomes even more heroic when one considers that they were sacrificing their prospects of a better life for a noble cause. Second, the memory of the Polytechnic has institutionalized one’s ‘duty to resist the authority’.”³

³ Peter Bratsis, *Legitimation Crisis and the Greek Explosion* (Lecturer in Political Theory, University of Salford)