

Anti-Revisionism in Greece

A Note onThe Greek Civil War

Elected General Secretary of KKE in 1931, aged 28, Nikolaos Zachariadis, was imprisoned under the Metaxas regime in August 1936 and spent the next nine years incarcerated. From prison, he lent his political influence to a united antifascist front following Italy's invasion of Greece on October 28, 1940. He issued a letter urging all Greeks to resist the Italian invasion and transform the war into an anti-fascist war.

After the Wehrmacht received the surrender of the cowardly ancien regime, the 6th session of the KKE in July 1941 declared the need for a National Liberation Front (EAM). Along with its military wing ELAS (National People's Liberation Army), and later the legendary youth organisation EPON, these legendary organisations engaged the Nazi occupation. The resistance had by April 1944 liberated 90% of the mountainous Greek mainland. In areas controlled by EAM women were enfranchised for the first time, popular democratic councils and courts were established. Through the struggle against the occupation the foundations of a democratic peoples Greece were being created, with the KKE in the vanguard. Zachariadis had remained imprisoned throughout the war, transferred to infamous Nazi concentration camp at Dachau in 1941 by the occupying Germans. Zachariadis returned to Greece, when Dachau was liberated by the US Army on April 29, 1945. He re-assumed the leadership of the KKE from Georgios Siantos, acting general secretary of the KKE since January 1942.

There were attempts made to undermine EAM/ELAS, mainly through the British bolstering the small and highly anti-communist EDES organisation. In April 1944 Churchill even ordered the BBC to stop favourably reporting the activities of EAM/ELAS. There were other manoeuvres to shape the post-war settlement in Greece: the British purge of the Greek army in North Africa of left wing soldiers saw 18,500 imprisoned in concentration camps in North Africa. Contemporaneously Britain oversaw the formation of ultra-royalist battalions in the Greek army such as the alpine regiments, in order to form the tools which could be used against the popular movement.

18th October 1944, George Papandreu and the government in exile were brought in on a British warship. This was a government of national unity, in which the KKE, EAM and ELAS were represented. The KKE placed the fighters of ELAS under British military authority.

Churchill manoeuvred the pre-war Greek politicians like George Papandreu into leading positions in the first ecumenical government, and failed to check the formation of pro-royalist death squads like Grivas' X battalions. A series of right-wing terrorist attacks against the popular movement and its representatives culminating in the resignation of the EAM ministers from the government.

A massive protest demonstration was called for Sunday the 3rd of December, as the crowds entered Constitution square the police opened fire killing 15 demonstrators and wounding 100. After this massacre the General Secretary of EAM Dimitris Partsalidis declared that “the people will fight for their freedom no matter what the cost”.

Fighting broke out between ELAS and the British troops who were outnumbered and clinging onto a small section of the city. And so began the battle of Athens which was fought between ELAS on the one hand and on the other the British army and the collaborationist security forces.

'Do not hesitate to act as if you were in a conquered city where a local rebellion is in progress' were Winston Churchill's orders to General Scobie on the uprising in Athens, December 1944. Once British Army reinforcements arrived they regained the initiative: artillery shelled, and Spitfires strafed the working class suburbs of Athens, the British denied food to areas under EAM control and suppressed the uprising. After 44 days ferocious fighting ELAS units withdrew from Athens, a week later a ceasefire was declared. On Christmas Eve, Churchill and his foreign secretary Anthony Eden flew to Athens to resolve the situation. A ceasefire was agreed on 11 January and a “political settlement” reached in February.

Back in Britain, the Communist Party had developed links with Left Labour Party MPs pushing for a change in British policy, campaigning in support of the persecuted EAM militants, communists and other left-wingers. After the electoral victory of the Labour Party in 1945 the need was seen for the establishment of a permanent official pressure group: so on 7th November the *League for Democracy in Greece* was born. The campaigning on behalf of the Greek resistance did bear some fruit: In 1946 three Labour MPs visited Greece and wrote a shocking account of the conditions there, the "White Terror", and the involvement of British troops, called "*Tragedy in Greece*".

It was the conditions of a shattered indebted economy that had more influence than the pressure group arguments on the Labour government and its foreign minister Ernest Bevin. Disheartened by their failure to crush EAM and the KKE, to establish a stable pro-British regime based on the return of the monarchy, they were forced to recognise Britain's diminished status in the world. The "Communist Threat" could only be averted by massive ruinous financial and military investment that the British Empire could not sustain

From the beginning of 1946 small bands of partisans left the towns for the mountains in self-defence. The first major operation undertaken was a raid on the police station in the town of Litochori. There began a series of confrontations with government forces and paramilitary death squads. On the 28th of October 1946 the Democratic Army of Greece (DAG) was formed. The wartime resistance to occupation was reignited against attempts to re-establish the pre-war monarchist regime.



Britain announced its withdrawal from Greece would take place on the 31st of March 1947, after a winter in which the Greek regular army had been routinely humiliated by the DAG in what was presented as a "bandit-war". The prospect of the collapse of the Greek bourgeois state was imminent. The 'Truman Doctrine' of 1947 promised US intervention to prop up any regime that was facing socialist revolution. The American Aid Mission to Greece took control.

After three years, the conflict came to an end on October 16th, 1949.

A vicious anti-insurgency campaign saw the displaying of the severed heads of dead partisans in the town of Florina in July 1947. This went in conjunction with a systematic clearing of the countryside to deprive the DAG of support and recruits an estimated 700,000 people were driven away from their villages and became internal refugees in the towns and cities. The network of prison islands and concentration camps was extended, suspected leftists, their families, leftwing soldiers (it is estimated that



between 1947-50 28,800 were sent to prison camps) were sent to these notorious dungeons, Makronissos, Yioura etc. Every form of torture and degradation was inflicted on those unfortunate to find themselves there.



The Communist spearhead was the Democratic Army of Greece, organised in the northern mountains by a former resistance leader, Markos Vafiadis. Zachariadis was an integral figure in the formation and operations of the KKE-led Democratic Army of Greece. The unconventional guerrilla insurgency, the hit-and-run tactics scored many successes at first. However, when Markos tried to seize towns near the northern border in Greek Macedonia as the seat of a provisional Communist government, the open military intervention of Great Britain – securing Athens for the royalists, and given arms, equipment and massive help by the Americans from 1947 onwards, combined with, what Greek communists called the traitorous behaviour of the Yugoslav leadership after 1948, led to the defeat of the Democratic Army of Greece in 1949.

In July 1949 Tito closed the Yugoslav frontier to the Democratic Army. In the following month, royalist government infantry with artillery and air support, that included the first use of napalm, decisively defeated the Democratic Army in the Grammos Mountains on the frontier with Albania. The rebels fought bravely and some positions were held to the last man. Most of the Communist remnant retreated into Albania and on October 16th the KKE announced through its 'Free Greek' radio that its forces had temporarily ceased operations; although resistance continued in some areas, such as Lesbos, into 1950.

This period of Greek history has been subject to the historiography of opportunists and social-democrats whom dwell on and distorts the real and imagined mistakes of the DAG and KKE, underplays the importance of imperialist intervention in Greece and the level of violence directed against the people's movement.

It remains contested terrain with complexities and judgements that are subject to claim and counter-claim. The KKK itself with its analysis of a “stab in the back” from Yugoslav and its explanation that it was the logistic problems of maintain the army in the mountains that explains its defeats are less forthcoming in a self-critical analysis of policy and strategy at that time. Disagreement with the Greek comrades analysis over the strategy and tactics of the war of the Greek Democratic Army were expressed by Enver Hoxha in a meeting , according to his own account, overseen by Stalin with Molotov, Malenkov, Nicos Zachariades, Mitsos Partsalides attending.¹ Western scholars argue that the Soviet Union was pre-occupied elsewhere, and argue that because of a wartime agreement were not prepared to fully support the Greek struggle. While the war was still going on, in manoeuvring for post-war advantage, Churchill, on a visit to Moscow, had proposed a secret share out of the Balkan states: with Rumania, Bulgaria and Hungary to fall within the Soviet sphere of influence, while Britain would control Greece. Stalin was said to have had tacitly accepted what became known as the 'Percentages Agreement'. The Foreign Office reported to the British Embassy in Greece “that the Russians are apparently prepared to let us take the lead in Greece in exchange for the predominant role which they play in Romania.”²

The KKE leadership and the remnants of the Democratic Army fled into exile in the USSR and the People's Democracies. Zachariadis and other leaders of the DSE eventually settled in Tashkent, capital city of Uzbekistan. More than 65,000 communists and other fighters and supporters of EAM and DAG were forced to leave Greece and seek refuge in the Socialist countries (around 20,000 of them were deprived of their citizenship), 40,000 were sent to the prisons and concentration camps such as Makronnissos. The executions of resistance fighters continued until 1955 (at least 5000 were executed including the famous case of Nikos Belogiannis member of the leadership of the KKE). The last two partisans of the DAG in Crete, Giorgos Tzompanakis and Spiros Blazakis, came down from the mountains in 1975 after the fall of the dictatorship, on the 24th of February 1975.

¹ With Stalin (Memoirs), «8 Nentori» Publishing House, Tirana 1979,

² FO 371/43731–R7758/9/G, May 26, 1944, D. S. Laskey, FO, to D. Balfour, British Embassy to Greece, Cairo.