

Exiles in Exile: the Case of the Greek ‚Marxist-leninist‘ Political Refugees in the Eastern Bloc in their own words

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Prisoners

*Camps, prisons and exiles
keep militants away from home
nourished by their hope and faith
they honor the Party – keep the flag up.*

*Winds, tempests, persecutions and pressure
sought to crush our faith to the party
but the honest prisoners solid as rocks
offered their shoulders, answered back and persevered.*

*Years go by in harsh exile
and the flame of victory brings them together
they move forward upright, the truth like a flag
waves high for the fair struggle.*

*Their thought is always
to the people, the comrades, the brothers who live away
nourished by their hope and faith
they honor the party – keep the flag up.*

Stefanos Economu, November 1964¹

In this paper I aim to examine the way how a political upheaval – namely the 6th Wide Plenum of the Communist Party of Greece, that took place in 1956, and its aftermath, as well as the clashes that preceded it in September 1955 in Tashkent – led to the creation of a ‚Marxist-leninist‘ movement and marked the movement's identity. Furthermore, how an underground and dissident press was used as the vehicle for this formation of identity. The paper is based on the nearly exclusive use of memoirs, underground and dissident press of the ‚Marxist-leninist‘ political refugees, or material of the ‚Marxist-leninist‘ political refugees that was reproduced in other publications. All the material is collected in my personal archive. The translations from Greek into English are made by myself.

¹ The poem of Stefanos Economu, then exiled in Siberia, was published in *Laikos Dromos*, nr. 79 (1976-03-13).

On the 29th of August 1949, the defeated fighters of the Democratic Army of Greece (DSE) led by the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) were forced to leave the country. According to the statistics provided by KKE, almost 56.000² men, women and children fled Greece and settled in Romania, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, East Germany and the U.S.S.R. The biggest settlement, of approximately 12.000 political refugees, was created in Tashkent (Uzbekistan).

On the 5th of March 1953, the demise of Joseph Stalin marked the beginning of political developments that concluded with Nikita Khrushchev's speech³ during the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) on February 1956. A month later, on the 11th - 12th of March, the 6th Wide Plenum of the Central Committee of the KKE⁴ was held; there the political line of the 20th Congress was adopted and the General Secretary of the KKE, Nikos Zachariadis, was overthrown. These political developments are by and large known as de-Stalinization, but the majority of the Greek political refugees perceived them as a betrayal of the Revolution.

These political changes were not welcomed by the majority of the Greek political refugees.

As the minority very well accepted the decisions of the 6th Wide Plenum of the KKE and of the 20th Congress of the CPSU and thus was backed up by the Soviet leadership, a political conflict arose within the communities of the political refugees. The members of the majority not being aligned with the Soviet leadership and continuing to support the former leadership of the KKE, actually became outcasts in exile.

The first major clash between the two wings of the Greek communist refugees, in September 1955 in Tashkent, where the largest number was concentrated, is noted as well as a breach of relations among the members of the exile community that never healed. Although, in time, the tension might have faced fluctuations, it was always visible and pervaded all over the Greek political refugees communities and not just in Tashkent where everything took place. These events even had an impact on the Greek communists that lived in Greece.

The dissidents of the new line faced various kinds of discrimination on the part of the new leadership of the KKE and the CPSU. These ranged from discriminations regarding housing or education, being under surveillance, confiscation of correspondence, lay-offs or party expulsion to committal to psychiatric institutions, imprisonment, exile or deportation. There is even one case of a political refugee who was deported from Bulgaria after being deprived from all identity documentation. Finally, after having written a letter published in the „Marxist-leninist“ press in Italy, Greek and Italian leftists organized a campaign to save him. There is also a letter from another political refugee deported from Bulgaria in similar conditions, who was never traced. This traumatic experience of the political refugees is clearly to be seen in almost every statement, report, or declaration, published in the Marxist-leninist press.

From Storming Heaven to Trauma and Dystopia

The dissidents in exile being consecutively defeated in two guerrilla war-fares and mostly being separated from their loved ones, ended up in an exile within exile. This situation had another dimension, since exile was identical with what was formerly believed to be the land of their

² Karapanou, *Kali Patriida* (Athens 2011, 8).

³ Khrushchev, *The „Secret Report“ at the 20th Congress of the CPSU* (Athens 1989).

⁴ *The 6th Wide Plenum* (Athens 2010).

political utopia, the land of their dreams: the Soviet Union. It was not just a sense of disappointment or bitterness, but a much deeper feeling while their expectations were once again shattered to pieces.

But, as the poem quoted above as well as their statements, reports, and memoirs clearly prove: despite finding themselves in this dystopian situation, the dissidents do not lose their spirit: „they honor the party – keep the flag up“, and still remain faithful to their ideals. This can be interpreted as a manifestation of the idea that their expectations will be fulfilled in the future, so patience and faith are the only qualities needed. Having a strong belief that history would justify them (Castro 1975), their stance affirms Walter Benjamin's notion of *Angelus Novus*: „while for Marx, revolution looks towards the future [...], Benjamin looks towards the past, to the defeated who still resist to the enemy who has already won. The spark of hope lays there, on the ashes of the great fire“ (Liakos 2012², 308-309). This extraordinary preservation of their ‚faith‘ can be explained since for the Greek people „[p]olitics and political visions had taken the role of a secularized religion, where an individual's dignity was defined according to the faith in certain ideals and values“ (Karambelias 1993, 54). The persecuted political refugees adopt an almost Christian approach where the martyrdom is a test and their endurance a proof of their (revolutionary) faith. In a one-page leaflet – probably published in the summer of 1971 – on the occasion of the death of a Marxist-leninist political refugee one may see the above framework in practice. The leaflet is titled by what are stated to be his last words: „Comrades, hold the Marxist-leninist party flag up“. After a brief biographical reference it reads as follows:

The coup of the 6th Plenum of 1956 found comrade Lazaro Spiridi at the front-lines of the resistance and struggle against Khrushchev's raid on the KKE, for the defense of Marxism-Leninism, the revolutionary history of the KKE and the heroic traditions of the Greek people. Comrade L. Spiridis remained unbowed despite of all sorts of slander, pressure, blackmails, financial measures, and persecutions by the revisionists. [...]

Comrade Lazaros Spiridis remained an unbroken communist – a popular militant up till his death. Overcoming his state of aphasia, while dying he left the following order to his nearby comrades: „Comrades, hold the Marxist-leninist party flag up.“ Enemies of the people and their lackeys can extinguish a communist but they cannot defeat him. [...]

The day that the renegades will be called to account for their crimes against the Greek people and the revolutionary people of the world is not far. [...]

Comrade Lazaros Spiridis remained faithful to the service of the people until his death. His irreconcilable and indomitable struggle against the revisionist renegades, inspires and exemplifies the real militants in the struggle for the rebirth of the Marxist-leninist KKE which does not count any sacrifices [...].⁵

The Tashkent events have been a key event in the memory of political refugees. Tashkent is mentioned in all memoirs, interviews, or assessments on the period of their exile I came across, even by those who had not been present in the events, by those who lived in other regions or countries (e.g. Vasilis Galatos, Nikos Magopoulos). According to Venetia Apostolidou,

Greek political refugees in Eastern Europe form a unique memory community

⁵ *Comrades, hold the marxist-leninist party flag up* (undated).

*which, although devastated by defeat and exile, possessed from the outset many of the requirements for constructing a collective memory of their traumatic experiences. In other words, they had an organized community which fostered their sense of belonging and gave them the means to shape and circulate a narrative.*⁶

Although this conclusion is drawn on how fiction is used by a combination of the Communist Party of Greece in order to record the traumatized experience of its consecutive defeats and also, if not primarily in order, to reproduce the official party assessments of the defeats in a literary fashion, it accurately describes the case of the Marxist-leninist political refugees as well. They themselves have recorded and distributed, in writing, their own accounts on the events and on their persecutions. Their purpose was to preserve but also construct a distinctive political identity contrary to the official post-1956 Communist Party ideological, political and organizational, policies and tactics.

The Dissident's Publishing Activities

The dissidents – known as „Zachariadikoi“ named after the former general secretary of the KKE, or, especially from the mid-sixties onward, as „marxistes-leninistes“ – produced a lot of paper. First of all, the publication of the discussions on common declarations, or of the letters of complaint that circulated amongst them served as a means to their unification and constitution. Secondly, the papers were a medium of information and propaganda towards either other political refugees. The refugees in other countries were not aware of what exactly went on in Tashkent—at least at the early stages—when the capital of Uzbekistan was the 'theatre of war'. Also these papers informed Greek communists and members of left-wing groups who lived either in Greece or – especially during the Greek Junta, 1967-1974 – in Western Europe and North America, on their struggle.

But, the documents were either handwritten or typewritten and the duplication or reproduction was done in the same manner, that is by handwriting or typewriting. Thus, only a limited number of copies was produced and circulated among the dissidents and their supporters. This explains the fact that most of the original material is very difficult to find.

This material, however, played a fundamental role in the formation of the „marxistes-leninistes“ identity and belief that the pro-Soviet Communist Party of Greece and the Soviet Union itself abandoned the cause of the Revolution and thus turned ‚revisionist‘. The identity was mainly composed by two elements:

- 1) The continuation of the revolutionary tradition of KKE by embracing the dissidents who were veteran communists and fighters of both the Greek Peoples Liberation Army (1941-1944) and the DSE (1946-1949).
- 2) The conviction of being discriminated inequitably and illegitimately by the harsh measures of the new leadership of the KKE and by the regimes in Eastern Europe.

Let me quote two examples of the doctrinal rhetoric of the ‚Marxist-leninist‘ movement on these characteristics:

Without any exaggerations, and for the sake of historical truth toward the Greek people as a whole, the international labor movement, and the progressive forces all

⁶ Apostolidou, *The Politics of Memory* (2009, 225).

over the world, it must be stressed that the Greek militants in Tashkent – this pure part of the Greek people –, the partisans of the resistance in 1941-1945, the partisans of the titanic struggle in 1946-1949 [...], have been the first to shoulder the burden of contemporary revisionism, the splitting, the liquidating action of Khrushchev's clique and its servants.⁷

Similarly:

In its attempt to subject the thousands of communists who stoutly opposed to the revisionist line of the 6th Plenum of 1956, the newly appointed leadership of the KKE, in collaboration with advocated parties, used all means of elimination, as: expulsion of thousands of members and cadres of the KKE, exile in Siberia which left honored fighters of the ELAS (Greek PLA) and the DSE paralyzed and suffering from tuberculosis, they sent whole families to exile in Bulgaria, contrived trials, lay-offs from work, cutting pensions, expelling students from the university, etc. [...]

What revisionists did not succeed in, though, was that despite the many measures they took and take, they could not subject the Marxist-leninist forces of the KKE who, weaponed with the principles of marxism-leninism, acted resolutely and inseparably from the masses. In Greece and abroad, they came out more case-hardened with regard to ideology, politics, and organization. The only thing the revisionists succeeded in was bankruptcy [...].⁸

These were the fundamental characteristics of the political tendency which were transmitted mainly through its press but also in the memoirs of various political refugees, that were published for almost two decades before this tendency declined. Letters and statements by the ‚Marxist-leninists‘ refugees were reproduced by the press of this tendency along with reports based on the written material of political refugees.

The handwritten pamphlet of January 1965, *The Tragedy of the Greek Militants of Tashkent*, which describes the events in Tashkent from 1955 until 1962, was first published in 1975 as a series in the magazine *Kokkino Asteri (Red Star)* and served as a source for articles on the Tashkent events in the seventies. It was not published as a book until 2006. This handwritten text and the way it was disseminated, from Tashkent to the rest of the political refugees' communities of Eastern Europe and then to the Greek ‚Marxists-leninists‘ who lived in Europe and Greece, is exemplifying the interrelation between textual transmission and political identity formation.

The political refugees publishing activity – apart from personal or collective letter of complaints – was initiated in 1968 with the circulation of two bulletins, *The Spark* and *The Revolutionary*, in Czechoslovakia and Romania respectively and were circulated all over the Eastern Bloc and beyond.

Other publications appear from 1968 onwards in the UK, Italy, Germany, France, Canada, USA, and, after 1974, in Greece as well. These publications were heavily based on the respective publications of the ‚Marxists-leninists‘ political refugees on issues regarding Tashkent and the conflict between the Communist Party of Greece and the Eastern Bloc regimes on one hand, and the ‚Marxists-leninists‘ political refugees on the other hand.

⁷ *The tragedy of the Greek militants of Tashkent* (Athens 2006, 20).

⁸ *Stop the interventions* (January 1971 (in Greek)).

In Eastern Europe the political refugees themselves comprised the audience; in Western Europe, America and Australia, the audience at first consisted of Greek immigrants and students, then local Marxist-leninists followed. As far as Greece is concerned, the audience was composed of the leftist movement that developed especially after 1974. These publications, however, belong to different political groups and organizations of the ‚Marxist-leninist‘ tendency which try to present themselves as the representatives of the dissident political refugees. In issue 10 (July 1971) of *The Revolutionary* we find the following statement:

Because a series of confusions have been created by the actions of a group abroad based in West Berlin, which appears as Organization of Greek ‚Marxist-leninists‘, the Central Organ of the Marxist-leninist organizations of political refugees from Greece makes it known that it has no collaboration or relation with the group above.

A safe conclusion that can be drawn by a close reading of this statement above is that based on the first characteristic of the aforementioned ‚Marxist-leninists‘ identity, there was a fierce struggle among these groups on whom the political refugees would embrace. The group that would align with the political refugees would gain what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as *symbolic capital* and would be considered as being the genuine ‚Marxist-leninist‘ group. In 1976, when the biggest ‚Marxist-leninist‘ organization at the time faced a split, dozens of articles were published in the newspapers of the two organizations that were formed after the split, claiming that the majority of the political refugees aligned with their group. In the first 100 issues (1974-1975) of the weekly newspaper *Laikos Dromos*, the organ of the biggest ‚Marxist-leninist‘ organization in Greece, OMLE, there were 76 articles regarding the political refugees, 20 of which concerned persecution.

The dissident press of the Greek ‚Marxist-leninist‘ refugees has been the source of information for the Greek ‚Marxist-leninists‘ abroad. The stories of all kinds of persecution were reproduced and became the root for the developing of the ‚Marxist-leninist‘ identity in the sixties as well as from the mid-seventies onward in the struggle for repatriation. The construction of both the political identity and the collective memory by the use of textual transmission is a phenomenon one may come across often in the history of ideas.