

1941-1945: Andartiko: the Greek resistance - Jack Ray



The radical, democratic working class spirit of the Greek resistance was only put down after the Allied victory, by British forces and the Greek ruling class.

Nowhere in Europe was resistance as simple as good guys in the hills with rusty rifles, and bad guys wearing swastikas and burning villages, but Greece was particularly complex. Even the Italian decision to invade seems bizarre, motivated by a desire to counter German influence in Rumania. After the Italians were humiliated by the Greek Army and their allies, the Wehrmacht stepped in and broke the stubborn resistance in April 1941. Even that wasn't simple, the old Greek ruling class were never shy in showing their sympathy for Nazism, and defeatists in the army and government tripped over one another in the race to capitulate. One such turncoat – General George Tsolakoglu formed a quisling government, while the Germans turned over most of the occupation to the Italians.

At least in spirit, much of the Greek population immediately embraced resistance. The war effort against the Italians had been popular, and in the early days of occupation large crowds applauded lorry loads of British POWs who had fought with the Greek Army. Near the capital, two young men climbed the Acropolis one night and stole the swastika that the occupiers had hung there, dodging the Wehrmacht sentries as they fled. Graffiti was daubed across Athens mocking their conquerors; if the Italians wrote 'Vinceremo - M' (We Will Overcome - Mussolini), the locals added 'erda' to the M to make the Italian word for shit. Some acts were more than symbolic; saboteurs destroyed ships in Piraeus harbour and a munitions dump in Salonika in May. By the Autumn this hostility to the Fascists flickered into an insurrection as bands of fighters emerged in the mountains of Northern Greece, attacking German troops and transport links. These groups dispersed as heavy reprisals made their operations impossible. The Germans burned down villages and massacred peasants to frighten people out of aiding the insurgents. As the resistance dissipated, the horrors of occupation began: Bulgarian troops ethnically cleansed Thrace, sending thousands of refugees toward central Greece, in the German and Italian zones, food requisition, pillaging and looting fuelled a famine that would kill 300,000 people.

With the political elite in exile, the stage was set for the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) to play a key role in the resistance movement. Communist activists were well-used to clandestine activity, having spent half a decade being persecuted by the pre-war Metaxas dictatorship, and started building networks soon after the surrender. Forming the National Liberation Front (EAM) in September. Mainstream politicians steered clear, preferring to wait for the outcome of the war, and to kow-tow to the Churchill-backed national government (headed by King George) now in Egypt. The EAM became a whirlwind of activity, establishing sections for civil servants, workers, women, students, school kids, as well as town and village committees. All this was hesitantly working toward April 1942 and the founding of the Greek People's Liberation Army (ELAS) and physical force resistance.

By this point the struggle was spreading: on 12 April a telegram clerk fainted from hunger in Athens, a common enough sight with the food shortages, but this time his colleagues sent a delegation to the office manager demanding larger food rations. He threatened them all with dismissal, so they walked out, and the strike spread rapidly elsewhere. Many were arrested, but the government eventually conceded their demands. However, with their comrades still imprisoned (and threatened with the death penalty) the stoppage continued until all were released. Meanwhile, bands of andartes (partisans) began campaigns in Central Greece. Threats of a 'civil mobilisation' that would force Greeks to work for the Axis, allowed the insurgents to

raise the slogan "Mobilisation equals death: andartes everyone!" Increasingly they were able to convince people that the risks of insurgency were nothing besides the everyday suffering of starvation and deportation.

The ELAS continued to grow in strength in 1942, with German reprisals against villages exacerbating the food supply problems and forcing the survivors into the arms of the guerrillas. Early partisan groups were usually roaming bands of de-mobbed soldiers, raiding government warehouses, distributing food, destroying tax and debt rolls, and threatening tax collectors. Gradually the more effective groups came to join ELAS but remained relatively autonomous. By September attacks on Axis personnel were becoming frequent, often with hundreds, even thousands involved. By Spring 1943 the occupation wielded only precarious control in parts of the North East, the Centre and the South West, withdrawing entirely from some towns. The Andartiko (partisan movement) covered most of Greece by May, with 17,000 fighters in the field, rising to 30,000 in July.

The puppet government's control in the capital began to deteriorate at the beginning of 1943. For weeks, strikes and pickets would litter the city. The funeral of the nationalist poet Kostas Palamas became an opportunity to voice opposition. With Fascists among the mourners, to the face of their oppressors, speakers gave nationalist speeches, and the crowd began singing the national anthem, shouting 'long live Greece!' and 'long live Freedom!' On the 5th March 7,000 marched through Central Athens, with banners calling for the death of collaborators and denouncing civil mobilisation. As the parade reached Panepistimiou Street the Gendarmerie opened fire, killing 5 people. Resisters responded with a general strike and civil mobilisation was then withdrawn. This fury and the accompanying government violence continued; flowers marked bloodied spots around the city where fallen comrades had been shot, the streets became filled with people, waving the Greek flag, shouting patriotic slogans. Graffiti was daubed across the city asking, 'what you had done for the struggle today, patriot?' By Summer, strikes forced rises in wages, as well as supplies of food and clothing. The people became fearless, as the Italians walked down the streets, the people sang the national anthem or shouted abuse. On the 25th June the EAM called another general strike and mobilisation: 100,000 marched and were attacked by Italian soldiers, but such were their numbers they continued to the government building, shouting 'down with the Fascists', 'down with the traitors', and 'down with the Nazis'.

As the Andartiko grew they began liberating parts of the country, which were known as 'Free Greece.' This process had been accompanied by mass rejection of pre-war politics, with its mass poverty, corruption and clientalism. Liberated zones started governing themselves as autonomous communities, run by elected village committees, whose work was to be overseen by monthly mass meetings of all the villagers. These bodies oversaw the distribution of food, formed people's courts and provided supplies for the andartes. Increasingly they became drawn into complex questions surrounding land reform and communal rights. Taking their lead from the peasantry, the EAM sought to export the local self-government model across their zones and by 1944 most villages had a committee. The emerging 'people's democracy' in the countryside caused headaches for the Communists. On the one hand it was vital in a country with poor communications and scarce supplies that an effective form of administration could keep the war effort going. On the other, party ideology clashed with some conservative villagers, who were often determined to maintain long established gender relations (in which women's public roles were restricted), as well as deferential attitudes among the young. The EAM was also dependent on the support of some large landowners, who came under threat from squatters and threats of land re-distribution.

Ever larger numbers were politicised in 'the Organisation,' through schools, mutual aid organisations and village self-government. The trouble was that the KKE had very little idea what to do next. Increasingly the EAM looked simply to assert its authority within the resistance, establishing a secret police force and andartes courts to crack down on 'brigandage' and supporters of the anti-communist resistance or the British (who gave supplies to conservative groups of questionable military value). At this point the questions facing the KKE were simple: to strike out on their own for a revolution or to continue courting a popular front and take the reformist road to power. Soviet agents joined much of the leadership in promoting moderation, Stalin and

Churchill had already carved up most of Southern Europe between them, and Greece was to be under British influence.



The guerrilla army itself was a complicated beast. Beginning as more of a collection of independent bands, only slowly did the process of 'armyfication' occur. Still, ELAS was never the Communist army that its opponents (and often its allies) liked to paint it. Individual groups tended to be led by charismatic kapetans, usually lacking any overt political allegiances, but generally sympathetic to the KKE. Figures like Aris Velouchiotis emerged as resistance heroes, and often resented the tendency of the EAM to foist ageing army officers and inappropriate tactics on their groups. Some would come to play a key role in the Civil War, continuing the fight when many of their political masters would not. The rank-and-file of their army were for the most part peasant smallholders and rural labourers. The minority were committed Communists, and most persisted with a rugged localism that had marked pre-war attitudes. Their politics were 'radical democracy'; looking for freedom from the Athenian ruling-class.

The occupiers by this point were changing tack. In April 1943 Ioannis Rallis, an old-school Monarchist, was appointed as head of the puppet government, a move designed to affirm anti-communist rather than Fascist principles. Rallis set about the creation of an auxiliary army to aid the Germans in attacking the EAM. Called the Security Battalions, many of their men were drawn from resistance groups which the EAM had forcibly disbanded, and who now sought revenge with the aid of German guns. In Patras, the survivors of EKKA, still in British uniforms, enlisted in the battalions and went on a rampage across the region. Such was the concern surrounding a 'Communist' victory in Greece that the government-in-exile and even some British officers considered co-operating with the Nazis in joint operations. Those conservative resistance groups that were still functioning were ambivalent as to which were the greater threat – the Communists or the Nazis – with some of their members active within the battalions. The British for their part had ceased to broadcast negative opinions about these collaborators. Meanwhile the battalions engaged in some of the worst brutality of the war, their ill-disciplined troops engaging in widespread rape, theft and murder. Death squads operated in the North, where the anti-communist groups roamed towns and villages committing random acts of violence.

In the capital, ELAS's small fighting force now exerted effective control in parts of the city. In Kokkinia they managed to clear out the gendarmes and battalionists in the quarter, which eventually triggered 1944's wave of repression. A fight with a gendarmerie lieutenant who refused to surrender his revolver ended with the officer being shot dead. The following day, 1,000 gendarmes and Security Battalionists raided the area. Greek auxiliaries rounded up hundreds of people, shooting 4 EAM suspects in front of the barber shop where the Lieutenant had been killed. After this, 'blocos' or round-ups became routine in the capital, where hundreds were detained, and EAMists shot on the spot. The SS became involved and those rounded up were deported to the Haidari concentration camp. Special Security, an SS trained branch of the Gendarmarie, roamed the 'red quarters' terrorising the inhabitants and carrying out executions. Every morning fresh bodies appeared, usually the work of the collaborators. ELAS responded in kind, with the assassination of political figures and security service personnel.

In September 1944 as the Red Army threatened to cut them off, German morale collapsed. Gradually troops were withdrawn from various parts of the country, allowing the EAM and ELAS to liberate new towns and cities. Battalion units still held on in some towns, refusing to surrender to the andartes, preferring to stick it out and wait for the British to come. As they were defeated by the insurgents, the enraged communities they terrorised often carried out brutal reprisals. Meanwhile, the EAM set out to restore order rather than seize power, though the de-centralised nature of their army meant some bands behaved with more moderation than others. Athens was liberated on October 12th and celebrations embraced everything; Greek flags, red flags, singing the Marseillaise and the Internationale, even priests chanting the EAM slogan – 'Laokratia' (People's Democracy). When the British arrived, they too were greeted with enthusiasm, like elsewhere showered with kisses and flowers.

Yet politically, the capital was rapidly being turned into a tinderbox, ready to ignite. The government of national unity invited former collaborators into its ranks, even heading the particularly sensitive security services. Churchill had prepared his troops for war with the ELAS (who he expected to try and seize power), and tension continued to rise in the city, as workers and youth pressed their grievances in the streets. Returning after liberation an exiled Greek leader had his landmark speech constantly interrupted by the crowd shouting 'LA-OK-RA-TIA' over and over again, finally urging them to quiet by saying "I'm not here to talk about laokratia." Finally on December 2nd, the EAM broke with the national government after negotiations over disarming the andartes broke down. The following day, the police opened fire on an EAM demonstration. Their supporters responded by attacking police stations, and the city was pitched into open warfare (the Dekemvriana). This caught resistance leaders off-guard and left them once again without a plan. British troops now set out to clear the city in 2 to 3 days, but were still fighting over a month later, finally reaching a ceasefire on 11 January. ELAS snipers turned central Athens into a 'little Stalingrad', and after failing to retake the city with ground troops, the British resorted to strafing apartment blocks and wooded areas from the air.

Churchill was unrepentant, falsely claiming that the EAM had sought to seize power and had to be put down, even though the partisans had spurned a better chance of victory before Allied troops arrived. British forces then rounded up 15,000 leftists, deporting 8,000 of them, with ELAS responding by seizing thousands of wealthy Greeks. The tragic struggle in Athens broke the EAM. The agreement they came to with the British forced most of the guerrillas to turn in their weapons, with only a minority refusing and taking to the hills. Aris – one of the most prominent Kapetans – led one band that refused; he was eventually caught and beheaded. A White Terror gripped Greece as the newly formed National Guard (mostly ex-Security Battalionists) set about persecuting the EAM. War-crimes went unpunished, as former guerrillas were arrested, sometimes for acts of resistance; by the end of 1945 ten times as many resistance fighters as collaborators had been convicted, a trend that was to worsen with the beginning of the Civil War. Even in the 1960s Greek jails still held people whose only crime was fighting Nazism.

The tragedy of the Andartiko was that it placed brave resistance fighters between so many obstacles. After successfully fighting the Nazis, guerrilla fighters who wanted to create a true Laokratia still had to overcome the imperialist interests of both the British and the Soviets, the scheming of their own capitalist class, as well as the provocative brutality of former collaborators who were now 'saving the country from communism'. A dirty trail of collaboration with Nazi terror stretched through the Security Battalions and conservative resistance groups, to the puppet government, pre-war politicians, and ultimately the British and Soviets. The resistance's own leaders, directionless without guidance from Moscow, timid to the point of suicide, left their fighters to face the guns of the British, whilst they tried to come to a compromise with the status quo. A revolution in Greece might well have been no prettier than those that occurred in Yugoslavia or Czechoslovakia. Yet the betrayal of the Greek resistance (and the genuinely progressive values for which many of its participants stood) stands as a testament to the pre-cold war machinations of the capitalist democracies, as well as the counter-revolutionary practice of Stalinism.