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## The Greek Civil War (1944–1949) – outline

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Paradoxical though it may seem, the end of WWII was not everywhere a harbinger of peace. In the summer of 1945, when the map of Europe was being preliminarily divided into their respective spheres of influence by Britain, the USA and the USSR, Winston Churchill described the post-war continent as “a rubble heap, a charnel house, a breeding ground for pestilence and hate.”<sup>1</sup> War losses were counted in millions of lives and hundreds of ruined cities. The immensity of the destruction was a prelude to subsequent local political and military unrest. While in Central and Eastern European states, subjugated by the Soviet Union, there was smouldering partisan resistance, and Western countries were being consumed with reflection on settling accounts with the perpetrators of the recent war, for over a year Greece had been witness to the first act of its civil war, which until 1949 had claimed a total of about 85,000 victims.

At least post-1914 political history of Greece can be presented using the metaphor of the constant balancing act. Without a doubt, the genesis of the civil war dates back to interwar years. Starting with the so-called National Schism (*Ethnikos Dichasmos*, 1915–1917),<sup>2</sup> successive Greek governments and society were festered by political divisions. Over time, their lines ran more clearly between supporters of the republic and monarchists, liberals and conservatives, rightists and leftists. Of great importance was the war lost against Turkey (1919–1922), as a result of which the Greek politicians had to part with the “Great Idea” (*Megali Idea*), cultivated in their country since mid-19th century. This national concept was to unite all lands considered Greek, as far as the areas remaining under the rule of Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire (Eastern Thrace and Asia Minor). In May 1919, Greek troops landed in Smyrna. The expansion was justified by the existence of a large Greek minority in the western territory of Asia Minor. However, the clash with Turkish troops ended in a disaster. In the contentious areas Turks mounted pogroms of Greek, Jewish, Armenian and Orthodox populations, of which the bloodiest symbol was the massacre of Armenians and Greeks living in Smyrna, and setting the city on fire (about 30,000 victims)<sup>3</sup>. Conversely, repression affected also the Muslims residing in Greece. The Treaty of Lausanne (1923) ended the conflict in the international arena. However, the defeat disturbed the sentiments within the country. The military coup (known as the 11 September 1922 Revolution)

<sup>1</sup> As cited in: N. Davies, *Europa. Rozprawa historyka z historii*, Cracow 2001, p. 1134.

<sup>2</sup> A breakdown of the political scene into supporters of the pro-German policy of King Constantine I and those of the Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos, supporting the Triple Entente. Cf. collective work devoted to Venizelos, edited by P. M. Kitromilides: *Eleftherios Venizelos: The Trials of Statesmanship*, ed. P. M. Kitromilides, Edinburgh 2006, and G. B. Leontaritis, *Greece and the First World War*, Columbia 1990.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. A. Pollis, *The Megali Idea: A Study of Greek Nationalism*, Baltimore 1958; H. Athanasopoulos, *Greece, Turkey and Aegean Sea. A Case Study in International Law*, Jefferson 2001; T. Czekalski, *Pogromowcy Wielkiej Idei. Przemiany społeczne w Grecji w latach 1923–1940*. Cracow 2007; N. Nairmark, *Fires of hatred: ethnic cleansing in twentieth-century Europe*. Harvard 2002, pp. 46–52.

caused the abdication of King Constantine I<sup>4</sup>. During the first period of kingship of his son, George II (1922–1924), clashes continued between royalists and opponents of the system, embittered by the military defeat. The establishment of the Second Hellenic Republic (1924–1935) did not appease the sentiments. The global economic crisis, population exchange with Turkey – which brought 1.5 million refugees<sup>5</sup> into the Greek territory – and unstable governments, enveloped in conspiracies, all of that meant that more and more left-wing movements were gaining popularity, including the largest such organization, the Communist Party of Greece (*Kommounisitikó Kómma Elládas*, KKE).

The KKE grew out of the local base of anarchists, socialists and communists, whose views had been earning respect in industrialized areas since the end of the 19th century. The slogans of the 8-hour working day, establishment of trade unions and better working conditions acquired a new meaning with the outbreak of the October Revolution in Russia (1917). On the strength of these events, the Socialist Labour Party of Greece was established in Thessaloniki on 4 November 1918, later transformed into the KKE (1924). In the 20s, in addition to a series of demands of a social nature, the party opposed the war against Turkey and raised the slogan of “self-determination of peoples,” thus demonstrating a certain understanding for the separatist tendencies of the Macedonians living in northern Greece (Aegean Macedonia)<sup>6</sup>. At the Second Congress of the Socialist Labour Party of Greece in 1920, incorporation into the ranks of the Communist International (Comintern) was decided. The party gained popularity especially in industrialized areas and cities such as Athens, Piraeus, Patra, Thessaloniki and Kavala. The strength of the communists was visible in the organization of strikes and anti-war demonstrations, as well as trade union movement. In 1923 they managed to mobilize strike actions involving 150,000 workers. Three years later, the KKE numbered about 2,500 members and won 10 seats in the elections to the Greek Parliament (4.4% of votes). Soon the party became the forefront of Greek opposition and a major concern for the then authorities. In 1929, the Government of Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos issued a law allowing punishment for spreading ideas that threatened the social political order of the time (i.e. *idionymon*). By force of that law, left-wing activists (teachers, journalists) were sentenced to imprisonment (3

<sup>4</sup> J. Bonarek, T. Czekalski, S. Sprawski, S. Turlej, *Historia Grecji*. Cracow 2005, pp. 551–552.

<sup>5</sup> Population exchange with Turkey was one of the points of the Lausanne Treaty (1923). Due to a general crisis, the situation of refugees in Greece was disastrous. The influx of 1.5 million new residents increased the country's population by 25%. According to official Greek statistics, 75,000 died of malnutrition, disease and epidemics. Until 1939 Greece benefited from international aid programmes. There were sharp clashes with local people. Turkish-speaking refugees were persecuted and beaten. Also, the resettlement of Muslims to Turkey was marred by protests, rape and looting. Altogether 355,635 Muslims were resettled from Greece to Turkey. P. Ther, *Ciemna strona państw narodowych. Czystki etniczne w nowocześniejszej Europie*, Poznań 2012, pp. 113–128; 152–167. Cf. D. Pentzopoulos, *The Balkan Exchange of Minorities and its Impact upon Greece*, London 2002.

<sup>6</sup> This slogan was accompanied by the theory of “korenizatsiya” among the peoples of the republics, promoted in the USSR at the time. The concept was redefined in the 30s as the terror directed against the national minorities (among others) was growing. In 1934, the KKE was strongly in favour of a unified struggle for national rights under the banner of the future People's Republic, in which “all nations would be involved in building a common workers' state”. Cf. I. A. Ślupkowski, *Macedoński problem narodowy w Grecji w dokumentach Komunistycznej Partii Grecji 1918–1940*, Szczecin 2011.

months) or exile (6 months – 2 years). In early 1930s first camps for “political prisoners” were also set up.

In 1934, in response to the appeal of the Comintern to create “anti-fascist popular fronts,” the KKE set up the People’s Front – the largest organization of opposition in Greece<sup>7</sup>. It was already then that the leader of the party became Nikos Zachariadis, a “hardline” Stalinist and Secretary General in the years 1931–1936 and 1945–1956<sup>8</sup>. Further development of the Greek communist movement was interrupted in mid-1930s by political changes. In 1935, King George II returned to the throne. A year later, the People’s Front won 15 seats (73,441 votes – 5.8%) in parliamentary elections, creating a prospect of an anti-monarchist coalition with the Liberal Party. Royalists saw it as an obvious threat to the state, and the King responded by forming a government of national salvation with General Ioannis Metaxas at the helm. In May 1936, communists organized a general strike in Thessaloniki. Clashes took place with the military, resulting in the deaths of 12 people. Fearing an army revolt, Metaxas dissolved the parliament and imposed dictatorship. The official cause of declaring a state of emergency was the communist threat, as clearly stated in the so-called Special Act No. 117 of 18 August 1936, under which a person promoting communism was subject to imprisonment or exile. The KKE was banned and many of its activists, including Zachariadis, were imprisoned. According to the data available, the number of party members diminished from 17,500 in 1936 to 4,000 in 1941, and more than 2,000 activists were placed in the camps formed on the Aegean islands<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, communist data testified to the imprisonment of about 90,000 supporters of the KKE and other left-wing and opposition groups<sup>10</sup>.

The dictatorship of Ioannis Metaxas (1936–1941) was based on nationalist slogans, censorship, restriction of civil liberties, repression against the opposition and Slavic minorities, and political culture that drew from the model of Italian fascism, though – as emphasized by historians – the regime did not go beyond the framework of the authoritarian state<sup>11</sup>. Upon the outbreak of WWII, the dictator declared Greece

<sup>7</sup> The decision was taken in March 1934 at the Fifth Congress of the KKE. The People’s Front incorporated: the KKE, the United General Confederation of Greek Labour Workers, the General Confederation of Greek Labour, independent trade unions, the Agrarian Party, the Socialist Party of Greece and the social-democratic Labour Party. K. Kawecka, *Komunistyczna Partia Grecji (KPG)* [In:] *Partie komunistyczne i robotnicze świata*, ed. H. Sobieski, B. Sujka, S. Szafarz, Warsaw 1978, p. 359.

<sup>8</sup> Nikos Zachariadis (1903–1973), born in a family displaced from Turkey, spent the 1920s working his way up the Comintern career ladder. Having graduated from the Communist University of Toilers of the East in Moscow in 1931, he was sent to Greece with the mission of “healing” the internal structure of the KKE, whose activists were alleged to have yielded to “rightist deviation.” In 1935, he was arrested and imprisoned for years in Greece, and during WWII sent to the Dachau concentration camp. In 1945, he retook the leadership of the KKE. Until the end of his career in the party, he remained a strong supporter of Stalin, questioning the changes that took place in the Communist Bloc after his death. In 1956, he was removed from the post of Secretary General of the KKE, expelled from the party and exiled to Siberia, where – according to the official version – he committed suicide in 1973.

<sup>9</sup> P. Voglis, *Becoming a Subject: political prisoners during the Greek Civil War*, New York 2002, pp. 39–44.

<sup>10</sup> *Komunistyczna Partia Grecji (KPG)* [In:] *Partie komunistyczne...*, p. 359.

<sup>11</sup> The researchers suggest, *inter alia*, that the regime did not contain racist or anti-Semitic elements. Nor was it accompanied by large-scale ethnic cleansing. T. Czekalski, *Pogrobowcy Wielkiej Idei...*, pp. 33–36; P. Voglis, *Becoming a Subject...*, p. 39. Cf. M. Petrakis, *The Metaxas Myth. Dictatorship Propaganda in Greece*, New York 2006.