

Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

After the War was Over. Reconstructing the Family, Nation and State in Greece, 1943-1960

Review Number:

206

Publish date:

Friday, 1 June, 2001

Author:

Mark Mazower

ISBN:

9780691058423

Date of Publication:

2000

Pages:

324pp.

Publisher:

Princeton University Press

Place of Publication:

Princeton, NJ

Reviewer:

Patrick Finney

If any era deserves the epithet 'tragic' then it is the 1940s in Greece. Conquered in spring 1941, its people were subjected to a brutal occupation regime, enduring famine, forced labour, deportation and terror. In 1942, armed resistance to the occupying powers of Germany, Italy and Bulgaria and the collaborationist government began in earnest. The main resistance movement, the National Liberation Front (EAM), was essentially a creation of the Greek Communist Party (the KKE) which also dominated its military wing, the National People's Liberation Army (ELAS). From 1943, large parts of Greece saw fierce fighting as EAM/ELAS established its ascendancy over other resistance organisations and engaged with the Wehrmacht and quisling Security Battalions. When Axis forces withdrew in the autumn of 1944, EAM/ELAS effectively controlled most of the country, in parts of which it had implemented popular government with progressive social policies, even if elsewhere it was viewed as a repressive military occupier. Arguably, EAM/ELAS could have seized power after the German evacuation, but instead participated in a British-backed government of national unity largely composed of bourgeois conservative politicians returning from wartime exile.

Suspicion and division ran deep, however, and soon the fragile coalition broke apart over the issue of the composition of the armed forces of the post-war state. Early in December, after a wave of communist-led strikes and demonstrations in Athens, open fighting broke out between ELAS units on the one hand and government forces, anticommunist irregulars and British troops on the other. ELAS enjoyed considerable

success elsewhere in the country but was defeated in Athens, called a truce, and entered into negotiations to secure free elections and an amnesty. The tide had turned against the left, however, and by the Varkiza agreement signed in February it agreed to the demobilization of ELAS and the exclusion from amnesty of those guilty of common-law crimes, which in effect facilitated the criminalisation of political opposition. There followed a 'white terror'.⁽¹⁾ EAM sympathisers were purged from the civil service and gendarmerie, tens of thousands of former resistance fighters and communists were imprisoned, and nationalist bands roamed the countryside engaged in murder, rape and pillage against leftist communities. Centrist politicians increasingly lost control of nationalist and royalist elements dominating the army and security services, and the government's writ scarcely ran in large parts of the country. The left abstained from elections in March 1946 which consequently saw a victory for vindictive and partisan royalists, later that year a rigged plebiscite secured the return of the monarch, and government policy became increasingly brutal, as witnessed by the executions of thousands of political prisoners.

Repression forced many leftists to leave their homes and armed units began reforming in the mountainous former strongholds of EAM/ELAS, eventually coalescing into the Democratic Army of Greece (the DSE). By 1947, the country was enveloped in civil war. Its outcome was determined by external geopolitical factors as much as internal ones, for this civil war was also a crucial episode in the nascent Cold War, precipitating as it did the shift in American foreign policy signalled by the Truman Doctrine. The left initially held its own against the reconstituted Greek National Army, but over time the latter's tight organisation, ruthless tactics and American money and materiel began to tell; the DSE also suffered grievously when it fell out with its patron Tito over the Soviet-Yugoslav split in 1948. By 1950 the war was over, and many thousands of DSE fighters, their families and sympathisers went into exile in the eastern bloc or into Greek prisons. Thereafter, democracy of a kind was re-established, but politics was dominated by conservative, nationalist elements deeply imbued with anti-communism. Individuals tainted by association with the left in the civil war or even with participation in the wartime resistance were marginalized politically and socially. Thus as Mark Mazower comments in his introduction, it was 'arguably not until the anticommunist Right was itself discredited with the fall of the junta in 1974 that the country could return to some semblance of tranquility' (p. 7).

The essays in this collection deal, on the one hand, with the history of wartime resistance and the civil war and, on the other, with their aftermath (in this respect its title is slightly misleading). Several contexts that have informed their appearance can be briefly adumbrated. First, they are testimony to what Mazower has elsewhere termed the 'remarkable renaissance of scholarship' in the historiography of modern Greece over the last twenty years, and to his own efforts to disseminate the best of it to the Anglophone world. During the repressive post-war decades it was impossible to ask critical questions about the recent national past within Greece, and so scholarship was both limited in quantity and dominated by foreign scholars. But now a 'self-standing community of modern historians' has emerged there, in tune with intellectual developments in the broader international discipline, enjoying fruitful academic interchange with specialist centres abroad but able as never before to push scholarship forward in universities and research centres at home.⁽²⁾ Second, the volume illustrates a shift in preoccupations in the historiography of the civil war. During the Cold War, that writing centred narrowly on high politics and diplomacy and the obviously politicised question of whether the KKE or Anglo-American policy-makers were more responsible for its outbreak. Some years ago, Mazower argued that with the Soviet Union gone it was time to bring the perspectives of social and cultural history and anthropology to bear, in order to integrate the 'experiences of ordinary Greeks' into the picture;⁽³⁾ it is this kind of history from the bottom up that this collection begins to delineate.

The book can also be located within broader trends in the historiography of twentieth century Europe. Mazower and contributors invoke as an inspiration the work of Claudio Pavone on the Italian resistance, for his frank dissection of its social dimension and the murky nature of resistance violence; moreover, conceiving of resistance movements as combatants in civil wars opens the way to rethinking the whole 1940s as a unitary period in which across Europe the domestic social and political order was radically contested: 'if the war years are seen as part of a broader continuum of conflict, it follows that the war cannot be seen as coming to an abrupt end with the German defeat' (p. 9).⁽⁴⁾ Finally, this text is more generally

representative of recent developments in the literature on the aftermath of the Second World War. Large scale generalisations about the manner in which different nations historicised the trauma of war, often based almost entirely on analysis of elite rhetoric and state-sponsored narratives, are now being supplemented by social histories exploring the attitudes and memories of diverse collectivities within nations, often using oral history methods and mining newly opened archives. These more finely grained analyses are helping to excavate the multiplicity of memory and how would-be dominant discourses were contested and consumed, and the essays here contribute to integrating Greece into this wider picture.⁽⁵⁾

Although their concerns overlap, these essays nonetheless revolve around four separate themes. The first group deal with justice, and bring into focus the dramatic turnaround of political fortunes in the second half of the 1940s. It was of course true in most European countries that 'the process of punishment and purge that was supposed to hand down justice upon criminals and collaborators in the postliberation era was . partial and aborted';⁽⁶⁾ but the Greek case was particularly extreme and complex since right wing reaction meant not only that collaborators escaped justice but also that participation in the resistance became, in effect, retrospectively criminalized: there was no 'myth of the resistance' here to provide national social and political cohesion in the post-war world.

Mazower's own chapter explores the competing, highly politicised conceptions of justice in play in the crucial 'inter-war' period of 1944-1945 and shows on a general level how efforts to re-establish liberal judicial norms and prosecute collaborators were thwarted by the resurgence of the anticommunist right. Eleni Haidia's valuable regional study of the trials of collaborators in Thessaloniki shows how an initial widespread determination for exemplary punishment dissipated amidst administrative disorganisation, underfunding, corruption and the new political exigencies of the civil war. Procopis Papastratis' institutional case study of the attempts to purge Athens University of those compromised by association with the Germans and the pre-war Metaxas regime is complementary, and brings out the bitterest ironies of the situation: the conservative faculty not only weathered the threat of purging (using many of the apparently timeless tactics of academic politics) but also managed to secure the expulsion of EAM supporting professors. Susanne-Sophia Spiliotis ensures that the international geopolitical dimension does not become the baby thrown out with the bathwater and shows how it was not merely collaborators but actual German war criminals who fell into Greek hands that could evade retribution: in the later 1950s the mutual interest of Greek and West German governments in concealing the murkier dimensions of the wartime past to bolster their contemporary political and economic relations ensured that Max Merten, a Nazi functionary who played a key role in the deportation of Thessaloniki's Jews, escaped justice.

The best contribution here - though some may find it a little encumbered by literary critical circumlocution - is Polymeris Voglis' study of the fate of leftist political prisoners in the civil war. Drawing on various forms of personal testimony, he conjures up the palpable pain and bewilderment of those interned and in many cases executed by the reconstructed right wing state. He casts new light on the strategy of coercing prisoners into signing declarations of repentance, characterising it as a means of textually manipulating and re-fixing prisoners' identities, forcing them into 'a self-betrayal, a self-negation' (p. 77). The psychological price of purchasing one's life in this way was terribly high, for individuals would be stigmatised as sinners and traitors by the KKE and shunned by former comrades, yet scarcely accepted as loyal and trustworthy members of the reconstructed national community. The alternative, however, was often execution, and Voglis sensitively explores, drawing on the final correspondence of moribunds, how those who were literally rather than textually negated attempted to make their own deaths explicable as sacrifices in the name of freedom and democracy. Reading their final words arouses feelings of almost unbearable poignancy, particularly now that the ideals of communism for which they died are apparently so universally discredited.

The second group of essays deals with various forms of social relations and intensifies this focus on the human impact of the conflicts. Mando Dalianis' gratifyingly finds that the children of political prisoners - some of whom spent formative years in jail with their mothers or in state institutions - generally suffered few long-term psychological problems, but does detect a lingering resentment that parents had put ideology before family. Riki van Boeschoten's writes on the people of Ziakas, a northern Greek village of predominantly leftist sympathies that lost 90% of its population, scattered across the eastern bloc from

Prague to Tashkent, in the aftermath of the civil war. Her essay is somewhat overburdened by general methodological reflection, but nonetheless contains fascinating material on how refugees separated from family members coped with exile, the efforts of those villagers that remained in Greece to reconstruct family and community relations, and also the processes of reconciliation with each other and with the state that followed the return of the exiles in the changed political climate of the 1980s. Perhaps the best essay here is Tassoula Vervenioti's analysis of how resistance and civil war impacted upon the lives of leftist women. The war destabilised entrenched family values, and participation in the resistance offered many women unprecedented opportunities to operate in the public sphere. But despite the KKE's progressive and revolutionary commitments it too was a patriarchal institution; moreover, after the war with conservative ideals once more ascendant 'choosing between traditional gender roles or continuing the struggle for social liberation was often a life-or-death matter' (p. 105) and most women were forced to return to 'a domesticity beset with enormous political and economic hardships' (p. 116). There is tremendous pathos in the heart-rending life stories explored in each of these pieces.

The essays in the third group open up a fresh field of inquiry through innovative methodological approaches and regional case studies, and confront squarely the nature of violence in the two conflicts. Stathis Kalyvas' analysis of resistance violence - indeed, the 'Red Terror' - in the Argolid during the Nazi occupation is the longest piece in the volume, and is hallmarked by impeccable research drawing on regional and national archives, oral testimony and unpublished memoirs, autobiographies and local histories. There is, however, more than a whiff of *The Black Book of Communism* about the whole enterprise as he sets out to show that left-wing violence was much more systematic, ferocious and organised than previous historians (preferring to 'overlook, minimize, or whitewash' it (p. 142)) have allowed.⁽⁷⁾ The valuable evidence that he has uncovered certainly shows that EAM/ELAS fought a dirty war in the region, and he is surely right to contend that the violence of the two sides must be analysed as relational phenomena; but through the language he employs, the selection of material and the mode of emplotment he adopts it is almost invariably the left that appear to be initiating violence and committing the graver crimes. Future historians will have to reckon with his empirical material and his exposition of how private vendettas intertwined with political and ideological motives, but he surely sets the bar of morality too high in expecting EAM/ELAS to have fought a partisan war against the Wehrmacht and collaborationists by unimpeachably and consistently fair means.

John Sakkas' work on the civil war in Evrytania tackles a similar subject a little more even-handedly. He too argues that the violence of the Greek resistance requires further systematic research, but he is not so quick to dismiss the role of individual 'ideologically fanatical *kapetans*' (p. 194) in its worst excesses, or to assert that the black hand of the KKE lay behind every single atrocity (indeed, he highlights palpable tensions between ELAS fighters and their political advisers). Surveying violence across the whole decade, and thus encompassing the 'white terror' before and during the civil war, also helps to put 'red terror' in perspective. Sakkas is also eloquent, again through the use of well-chosen life stories, in invoking the manner in which those on the losing side were 'not only silent and silenced, but . . . virtually written out of history except in the role of the "enemy" in the moral Greek drama of Good versus Evil' (p. 204). Lee Sarafis' piece on the policing - by state authorities and EAM/ELAS - of the village of Deskati in northern Greece is, in contrast, rather one-dimensional: she paints a rosy picture of the resistance that would surely infuriate Kalyvas and even appears to contradict herself, since having described the assassination of two collaborators she goes on to recount the villagers' pride that 'in Deskati, no one was killed by the resistance movement' (pp. 213, 217). Taken collectively, however, these essays successfully further the ongoing excavation of the murky ambiguities of resistance, and even if the wider applicability of arguments based on local studies may be questioned, this point becomes less significant as they accumulate. They also unintentionally illustrate that lingering Cold War tensions still inflect interpretations of this crucial issue.

The final set of essays is the least cohesive but uniformly interesting. It focuses on issues of national and ethnic identity that have loomed large in recent research, not least because developments in former Yugoslavia through the 1990s sensitised scholars to this dimension.⁽⁸⁾ Bea Lewkowicz' study of the fragment of the Jewish community of Thessaloniki that survived the Holocaust very perceptively handles oral testimony gathered from those who faced most starkly the problems of attempting to return to normality

after violence. She skilfully traces how Jews returning from the death camps or the mountains attempted to reconstruct family and community life, and how they too were rendered invisible not only by physical decimation but also, until very recently, by the dominant discourses of the Greek state that stressed historical continuity and homogeneity. Xanthippi Kotzageorgi-Zymari and Tassos Hadjianastassiou also use oral testimony to great effect to trace the impact of the Bulgarian occupation in Eastern Macedonia on those that suffered it, and how those events have been remembered by subsequent generations; they discover that whilst the post-war generation is rather dismissive of the emotions and experiences of their forebears, they share similar ethno-cultural stereotypes of the Bulgarians.

Anastasia Karakasidou explores how the Greek government attempted to instil a sense of conservative national identity and unity after these bitter internecine wars through the orchestration of patriotic pageants on national holidays. Although there is some interesting empirical material on the staging of national holiday festivities, her essay as a whole is rather disappointing because it lacks firm focus and does not connect sufficiently closely to the central concerns of the volume. What one would have liked to see here was an analysis of what kind of authorised version of the Second World War the state attempted to propagate in its aftermath, and a detailed analysis of precisely how through rhetoric and symbolism leftist values were marginalized and discredited during and after the civil war.⁽⁹⁾ These issues are touched on: the decision to make a national holiday of 28 October, the anniversary of Greece's defiant 'no' to Mussolini's ultimatum of 1940, clearly focused attention on a moment of unambiguous national unity unlike what followed the German invasion in 1941. But instead of developing them, the essay ranges too widely and sometimes reads like a general study of Greek nation building in the twentieth century.

These essays vary quite widely in length and scope and employ a pleasingly eclectic range of source materials and methodologies. Some are based on oral testimony and anthropological analysis, others employ newly available Greek and German archival materials, while yet others use more familiar documentary evidence (Mazower's chapter, for example, shows the enduring utility of the FO 371 and similar series in the Public Record Office). Given that the volume aims to showcase cutting edge research, it inevitably raises as many questions as it answers, pointing productively if perhaps rather untidily in numerous directions. But it makes a fine contribution in sketching out with an unprecedented level of sophistication how the Greek polity in the 1940s was 'fragmented and reformed', 'how Greece recovered from the most prolonged and traumatic experience of its brief life as a nation-state' (p. 21). Some minor gripes can be raised. The two maps included in the volume are not really adequate since they are insufficiently detailed to permit location of most of the places mentioned in the text, which will frustrate precisely those general readers, unversed in Greek geography, that Mazower wishes to reach. Moreover, although some repetition of basic narrative and factual material is probably unavoidable if the essays are to stand alone, on some occasions a firmer editorial intervention would have been welcome: for example, when two successive authors reproduce the same paragraph from C. M. Woodhouse's memoirs and deem it 'well-known and much-quoted' (pp. 146, 189).

These quibbles should not detract, however, from the achievements of the editor and his contributors in producing an exceptionally absorbing collection that should command a wide readership. What is most arresting and rewarding is the manner in which new source materials and sensibilities are opening up entirely new perspectives on the human dimension of these conflicts: how, in a particular national context, the grand ideological passions of the twentieth century shaped and scarred the lives of flesh and blood individuals.

Notes

1. David Close, *The Origins of the Greek Civil War* (London: Longman, 1995), pp. 150-188.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Mark Mazower, 'British Historians of Greece since the Second World War', *Synthesis: Review of Modern Greek Studies*, 1 (2), 1996, pp. 14-21, here at pp. 19-20.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Mark Mazower, 'Historians at War: Greece, 1940-1950', *Historical Journal*, 38 (2), 1995, p. 505.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Claudio Pavone, *Una guerra civile. Saggio storico sulla moralità nella Resistenza* (Turin: Bollati

Boringhieri, 1991). Similar themes are prominent in István Deák, Jan Gross and Tony Judt (eds.), *The Politics of Retribution in Europe. World War II and its Aftermath* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).[Back to \(4\)](#)

5. Compare the approach in Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991) with that in Pieter Lagrou, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation. Patriotic Memory and National Recovery in Western Europe, 1945-1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Tony Judt, 'The Past is Another Country: Myth and Memory in Postwar Europe', in Deák, Gross and Judt (eds.), *The Politics of Retribution*, p. 300.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Stephane Courtois et al., *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, and Repression* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. See, for example, John Koliopoulos, *Plundered Loyalties: Axis Occupation and Civil Strife in Greek West Macedonia* (London: Hurst, 1999).[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. See Mazower's own 'The Cold War and the Appropriation of Memory: Greece after Liberation', in Deák, Gross and Judt (eds.), *The Politics of Retribution*, pp. 212-232.[Back to \(9\)](#)

This is a very generous and thoughtful review which leaves me little to disagree with and obliges me to thank the reviewer for his attentiveness and his willingness to set the volume in its broader European context.

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/206>

Links:

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/1215>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>