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WORLD WAR II, OCCUPATION, AND THE CIVIL WAR IN GREECE, 1940-1949: RECORDS OF THE U.S. STATE DEPARTMENT CLASSIFIED FILES



The Axis occupation of Greece during World War II began in April 1941 after the German and Italian invasion of Greece was carried out together with Bulgarian forces. The occupation lasted until the German withdrawal from the mainland in October 1944. The occupation brought about terrible hardships for the Greek civilian population. Over 300,000 civilians died in Athens alone from starvation, tens of thousands more through reprisals; minorities, particularly Jews, were deported to concentration camps; and, in the Bulgarian and German occupied areas, ethnic cleansing attempted to eradicate generations of Greek residents. The country's economy was ruined and the food situation desperate. When liberation came in October 1944, Greece was in a state of crisis, which soon led to the outbreak of civil war. The Greek Civil War was fought from 1946 to 1949 between the pro-Western Greek governmental army and the Communist Democratic Army of Greece. It was the result of a highly polarized struggle between leftists and rightists which started in 1943 and targeted the power vacuum that the German-Italian occupation during World War II had created.

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Detailed Description:

Greece in World War II

The Axis occupation of Greece during World War II began in April 1941 after the German and Italian invasion of Greece, and was carried out together with Bulgarian forces. The occupation lasted until the German withdrawal from the mainland in October 1944. In some cases however, such as in Crete and other islands, German garrisons remained in control until May and June 1945.

Fascist Italy had initially invaded Greece in October 1940 but was defeated, and the Greek Army pushed the invaders back into neighboring Albania. This forced Germany to shift its military focus from the preparation of Operation Barbarossa to an intervention on its ally's behalf in the southern Balkans. A rapid German Blitzkrieg campaign followed in April 1941, and by the middle of May, Greece was under joint occupation by three Axis powers: Germany, Italy and Bulgaria. A collaborationist Greek government was established immediately after the country fell.

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The country's weak economy had already been devastated from the 6-month long war prior to German invasion, and to it was added the relentless economic exploitation by the German Reich. Raw materials and foodstuffs were requisitioned, and the collaborationist government was forced to pay the cost of the occupation, giving rise to inflation, further exacerbated by a "war loan" Greece was forced to grant to the German Reich which severely devalued the Drachma. Requisitions, together with the Allied blockade of Greece, the ruined state of the country's infrastructure and the emergence of a powerful and well-connected black market, resulted in the Great Famine during the winter of 1941-42, when an estimated 300,000 people perished in greater Athens. Despite aid from neutral countries like Sweden and Turkey, the overwhelming majority of foodstuff ended up in the hands of the government officials and black market traders who used their connection to the Axis Occupation authorities to "buy" the aid from them and then sell it on to the desperate population at enormously inflated prices. The great suffering and the pressure of the exiled Greek government eventually forced the British to partially lift the blockade, and from the summer of 1942, the International Red Cross was able to distribute supplies in sufficient quantities to the population

The Germans set up a Greek collaborationist government, headed by General Georgios Tsolakoglou, before entering Athens. Some high-profile officers of the pre-war Greek regime served the Germans in various posts. This government however, lacked legitimacy and support, being utterly dependent on the German and Italian occupation authorities, and discredited because of its inability to prevent the cession of much of Greek Macedonia and Western Thrace to Bulgaria. Both the collaborationist government and the occupation forces were further undermined due to their failure to prevent the famine of 1941-42, which created the impetus for resistance by the Greek civilian population.

However, few Greeks cooperated with the Nazis and most chose either the path of passive acceptance or active resistance. During this time Greek Resistance, one of the most effective resistance movements in Occupied Europe, was formed. The first signs of armed resistance activity manifested themselves in northern Greece, where resentment at the Bulgarian annexations ran high, in early autumn 1941. The Germans responded swiftly, torching

several villages and executing 488 civilians. The brutality of these reprisals did indeed lead to a collapse of the early guerrilla movement, until it was revived in 1942 on a much greater scale. The largest source of partisan activity were the Communist-backed guerrilla forces, the National Liberation Front (EAM), and its military wing, the National People's Liberation Army (ELAS), which carried out operations of sabotage and guerrilla attacks against the German Army with notable success. Other resistance groups included a right-wing partisan organization, the National Republican Greek League (EDES), led by a former army officer, Colonel Napoleon Zervas a well-known Republican, and the National and Social Liberation (EKKA), led by Colonel Dimitrios Psarros, a Royalist. These groups were formed from remnants of the Greek Army and the conservative factions of Greek society. Starting in 1943, on a number of cases EDES and ELAS fought each other in a sort of prelude to the civil war that sprang up after the German withdrawal in 1944.

The Greek Civil War

The Greek Civil War was fought from 1946 to 1949 between the Greek governmental army, backed by the United Kingdom and United States, and the Democratic Army of Greece (DSE), the military branch of the Greek Communist Party (KKE), backed by Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and Albania. It was the result of a highly polarized struggle between leftists and rightists which started in 1943 and targeted the power vacuum that the German-Italian occupation during World War II had created. One of the first conflicts of the Cold War, according to some analysts it represents the first example of a postwar Western interference in the internal politics of a foreign country, and for others, marked the first serious test of the theory of the so-called Churchill-Stalin percentages agreement.

The first signs of the civil war occurred in 1942-1944, during the Occupation. With the Greek government in exile unable to influence the situation at home, various resistance groups of differing political affiliations emerged, the dominant one being the leftist National Liberation Front (EAM), controlled effectively by the communists. Starting in autumn 1943, friction among EAM and the other resistance groups resulted in scattered clashes, which continued until the spring of 1944, when an agreement was reached forming a national unity government which included six EAM-affiliated ministers.

The prelude of the civil war occurred in December 1944, after the country had been liberated. EAM and British troops fought a battle in Athens after British troops fired on protestors. The result was defeat of EAM by the British forces. The traditional historical view claimed that EAM instigated the fighting, but more recent and less biased sources have shown that had EAM truly desired control of Athens in the wake of German withdrawal, there was nothing to stop them from taking control. The defeat of EAM forces spelled the end of its ascendancy: ELAS, the military arm of EAM, was disarmed, and EAM continued its political action as a multi-party organization. Tensions remained high however, as clashes between right and left-wing factions continued.

The civil war erupted in 1946 when forces controlled by the KKE, having political and logistical backing from the newly-founded communist states to the north (Albania, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria) organized the Democratic Army of Greece (DSE), and started fighting against

the internationally recognized Greek government which won the 1946 elections. Despite initial failures by the government forces from 1946 until 1948, increased American aid, lack of high numbers of recruits to the ranks of DSE and the side-effects of the Tito-Stalin split, led to their victory.

The final victory of the Western-supported government forces led to Greece's membership in NATO, and helped to define the ideological balance of power in the Aegean for the entire Cold War. The civil war also left Greece with a vehemently anti-communist security establishment, which would lead to the establishment of the Greek military junta of 1967-1974, and a legacy of political polarization which lasted until the 1980s.

Publisher's Note: This collection comprises, in their entirety, the Scholarly Resources microfilm collections entitled *Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs, Greece, 1940-1944*; and *Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs, Greece, 1945-1949*.