

University Seminar #703: Modern Greek Studies
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Speaker: Andre Gerolymatos
Topic: 'The December 1944 Events: A Reappraisal'

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Abstract: The Battle of Athens or "the December Uprising" is a pivotal moment in the history of Greece. As an event it is set between the end of the Axis occupation and the beginning of the Greek Civil War (1946-1949). The fundamental issues examined in this presentation will focus on whether the Battle of Athens was an integral part of the three "rounds of the Greek Civil War" or a distinct crisis linked to immediate circumstances. A study of the battle itself offers considerable insight into the uprising both as part of tragedy of the occupation and the greater upheaval that ravaged the country in 1946-1949.

Summary of Presentation:

Gerolymatos opened by framing the December Uprising in the larger context of the casualties and devastation Greece suffered during World War II: 310,000 people died of starvation between 1941 and 1944, 70,000 people were executed, 60,000 perished in death camps, a half million were incarcerated, about one million livestock were killed. This devastation is one of the legacies of the war; another is the resistance, which begins almost at the same time as the occupation, and becomes organized in 1943, as a mass-based resistance movement led by ELAS-EAM. A third legacy is the collaborators, who play direct and indirect roles in the December Uprising. The Greek Civil War is often divided into three rounds: the first phase in 1942-43, the December Uprising in 1944, and then the civil war proper in 1946-1949. But while these rounds are connected in that the left and the right are fighting throughout all three, beyond that it's hard to find a conspiracy of three linked uprisings of the left.

During the Occupation, the Greek right reinvented itself. Prior to that, they were monarchists, while the Greek left was constituted by members of the Communist Party, socialists, and Venezelist republicans, some of whom were as right as the Greek right. During the Occupation, the Venezelists, the anti-monarchists, the republicans, and the collaborators banded together and became a new Right. The Security Battalions, the collaborationist military groups formed in 1943, consisted primarily of Venezelist officers who had issues with EDES or ELAS, who were also seeking to retain the rank that they would have had in the army. The royalists were the only ones allowed to fight on the Albanian front, but there were 1000 professional officers and another 4000 reserve officers who went to fight for ELAS. These were the men who clashed in 1943, and many

more Venezelists went to the side of the Security Battalions, because the leader of EDES switched to a monarchist position.

When Greece is “liberated,” the Germans retreats and the British send in a liberation force, not anticipating any major problems. Churchill goes to meet with Stalin and makes a sphere-of-influence agreement, according to which Britain got 90% of Greece. No one in Greece knows this, however, until the 1950s. ELAS-EAM doesn’t resist the British at this point, and the Greek Government of National Unity installed in Athens. This government has no power and no army; its authority is carried by British troops. The only Greek forces at this point are the police forces who were working for Axis under the Occupation, and are therefore despised by the population. The Security Battalions, 16,000 collaborators who had been under the control of the SS, are interned, but continue to receive a salary.

At this point, instead of trying to come to terms with some of the fundamental problems that are besetting Greece at the time, such as the black market, the scarcity of food and medical supplies, or bringing the collaborators to trial, the Greek government pushes these concerns aside and begins instead to try to create a new army. ELAS at that point has 49,000 men, staffed by Greek officers, but the government prefers to create an army from scratch, and it soon becomes apparent that this will exclude anyone who has been in ELAS. To many people, this looks like the Metaxas regime under another name.

By the end of October, the British become aware that agitation is arising in EAM and in ELAS, and they increase their troop presence in Greece. By early November the British are actively seeking a confrontation with ELAS: Churchill was egging on his commanders to a clash. But the 22,000 British troops are mostly centered around Athens, Thessaloniki, and Patras, and a few other small cities, while the rest of the country is under the control of ELAS. As matters begin to come to a head, the British withdraw inward into Athens, until most of the forces are collected there.

Meanwhile there are two branches of ELAS, the one that comprises 49,000 men and is based in Lamia. There is also the reserve ELAS, which consists of about 6000 or 7000 men and women in Athens, armed with rifles, pistols, and revolvers. Why does Georgios Siantos, the leader of EAM-ELAS at this point, not bring in the regular men? In fact, the best divisions in ELAS are at this point heading away from the battle. There have been conspiracy theories that he was working for the British, but Gerolymatos claims that this isn’t true. Instead, it’s evident that Siantos was aiming at political solution: he wanted to use the battle of Athens to change the Greek government. For an entire week after the crises broke out on December 3, they don’t kill any British. After the bloodletting in Syntagma Square, they don’t take on the 22,000 British troops, but attack the police stations, and try to force Papandreou out, in order to force the constitution of a new government that would include more members of the KKE, more members of EAM and ELAS. Siantos also separates the KKE from ELAS, because he can’t trust the professional officers or royalists who are in ELAS, only the ones who were in KKE.

On December 4, 5, and 6 they fight for the government buildings and police stations, and manage to take over 22 out of the 24 police stations in Athens. There are spasmodic clashes with British, but Siantos only allows his forces to retaliate against the British, not to instigate fighting with them. At this point there is evidence of an effort on the part of the British commanders to instigate a battle: Churchill wants ELAS to be

destroyed, and Scobie more or less does everything wrong, pulls all his forces into the center of Athens, and doesn't control the road to Piraeus, so there are no supplies coming in. At this stage the fighting is centered in Athens; there's no fighting in the rest of Greece (except for some fighting between EDES and ELAS in Epirus).

On December 8 or 9, Churchill sends new a commander, John Hawksworth, and on December 13 Siantos has no choice but to take on the British. The fighting lasts until the January 14 or 15, when an armistice is signed; by December 27, the situation has started to shift against ELAS, and the media begins to heap condemnation of Churchill, including the British and American press—oddly enough, only the Russian press does not. Churchill couldn't afford to let go of Greece, because he wanted control of the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East. But of course contrary to Churchill's wish to destroy ELAS, what happens after this is the white terror. Instead of using the defeat of the left to try a reconciliation with the left, they look the other way while there's mayhem going on in the countryside. The Security Battalions are let out of prison and armed, as the Greek National Guard, and sent out into the countryside to police the villages and towns. This single-handedly sparked the 1946 Civil War, which is not a pre-planned war by the Greek Communist party: they simply realize that unless the KKE leads events, they'll have to follow.

Summary of Discussion:

Q: Can you tell us about the sources you've used?

A: I relied a great deal on memoirs by participants on the Greek side, generals of ELAS, but the most interesting are the British materials, which have been declassified and are now available. These are things that people had speculated about, and they're now perfectly open for us all to see.

Q: Could you say how your position relates to what came before, to earlier representations of these events?

A: Greek history is divided between historians of the left and historians of the right. All of us we were all speculating, but now that the material has come out, my position is to let the sources take you where they take you. I always thought it was peculiar that Siantos would take on the British army, I was leaning on the side that the British precipitated the crises, because they had the power to make Papandreou try the collaborators—and did the government really need to constitute an army in 1944, couldn't it have waited and taken care of food and medicine first?

Q: The Communist Party archives that have been released confirm this position, don't they?

A: Yes, they do.

Q: At some point you said that the KKE had 2,500 members, but what about the 1940s? Were the numbers higher?

A: A lot higher, because of the declarations of repentance: Greek policemen were given quotas to fill, so whether you weren't or were you got grabbed off the street and made to sign. That's what made the ranks of the party swell in the 1940s.

Q: Meanwhile, we have 2,500 people imprisoned in the Akronafplia prison. Can we assume these are all communists?

A: It's hard to say.

Q: Because we have the entire spectrum of the left at that point—members of the party, Marxists, Trotskyites, anarchists, and a few Trotskyites who are not members of the 4th International. But I have a few questions to add. First of all, I agree with the sports metaphors, the notion of rounds one, two, and three. But you said it's older scholars who actually use this metaphor. Does that mean you consider Kalyvas and Antoniou among this group of older scholars?

A: Kalyvas is not quite there, but Iatrides and all of them took it on faith that there were three rounds, and thus that there was some kind of continuity of intent. Greek history is still ideological.

Q: Why are you unwilling to recognize the fact that there is a new ideologically-driven historiography happening now in Greece, one that rehashes old arguments that were first voiced during the 1950s?

A: The thrust of that argument is twofold: on the one hand, there is a communist attempt to overtake Greece, and on the other hand, the war is really a collective fight between a bunch of people who want to take over one another's chickens and wives. Which reduces the conflict to a ridiculous parody of what it was.

Q: My second question is about Siantos. You said at one point that he didn't want to take on British because he didn't have enough armament to follow through. Might it also be because he was sticking with the National Bands and Plaka agreements?

A: I think Siantos was like anyone else in the situation of power: if he could have taken over all of Greece he would have, but he understood the firepower of a modern army—he had faced it for four years with the Germans. He got to watch all that, and knew what he would be up against. So all the rhetoric about ELAS not really wanting to fight the Germans and saving their strength is poppycock. How could they have taken on the tanks?

Q: You don't think that Siantos had a desire not to provoke a civil war, but to have a democratically apportioned government?

A: Yes, of course—as a Communist you dream of taking over, but politically, not through a civil war. That was the dream, though, not the reality.

Q: Getting back to the issue of sources, you mentioned British and American and the internal KKE sources, but about this time, after 1999, the Soviet sources also opened up. I wonder if there's anything interesting there.

A: They're really intriguing, but as one colleague told me, the Greek Civil War is big stuff for us, but not for Stalin. There is also the issue of access: I do have a graduate student who went to Moscow and wanted to write about the policy of the Comintern, but she couldn't get into the archives.

Q: Does that apply to other places as well, like Bulgaria under Dimitrov, or Yugoslavia under Tito?

A: I just hope those materials haven't been destroyed.

Q: Why would they be keeping those materials closed?

A: The theory is that Stalin's role in it was to set up Tito, he didn't believe the Greeks could win, he thought Tito would embarrass himself and that would give him a chance to cut him down to size. In 1951, as we all know, the Greek Communists asked Stalin why he hadn't helped them. Of course Russia didn't have a navy, which lent credence to the idea that Stalin did set Tito up.

Q: But the Russian army did reach Bulgaria, right?

A: Yes, but they didn't ever come across. Did Stalin really want a war with the British and Americans in 1946? And if he got one, could he have supplied his army? I think Siantos knew all that, and that's why he tried to avoid civil war in 1944. But in 1946 Zahariades had been away, outside of Greece, and didn't know the situation as well.

Q: Could you talk more about the deployment of the Security Battalions, their release into Athens and then the countryside? It wasn't really necessary at that point, was it?

A: No, they were really wreaking revenge on ELAS. They're the national guard, and remained so until 1945, and then they're out of business. In the summer of 1946 the officers are brought into the main Greek army, because the Minister of Defense is told that they're fierce anti-Communists. And does anyone know what they're brought in as? The secret organization known as the Enosis Neon Ellinon Axiomatikon: most of the junta were members of the Security Battalion.

Q: I'm fascinated by the history of the officer core, and I think there's not enough being work done on this, the shift in the membership and attitude of the officer core. Can you talk more about their connections to the British, perhaps also in relation to the officers who were in Egypt, the group that comes in? What are the networks there and what happens to any officers who choose not to follow this position from 1946 onward?

A: The Greek forces in the Middle East were purged repeatedly until you had a small number of royalists or reformed Venezelists who became royalists. They come back to Athens, while officers who had served in ELAS were reinstated but put in Category B, to be disbanded immediately.

Q: Can I ask what you think the British were doing at El Daba? Between December 6 and New Year's Eve of 1944 here were 15,000 people picked up on the street and taken to Egypt by the British. They were just picked up, put in ships, and sent to Port Said in Egypt, and then transported to an old prison camp of the British in El Daba outside of Alexandria. It was a real concentration camp, and they were released in bunches starting in March up to June of 1945. I can understand that on December 15, the British were taking people they thought had participated in the Battle of Athens, but what was the strategic point of taking them to El Daba?

A: To deplete the left. If there's going to be another round, they want to get rid of the potential armed insurgents.

Q: But they weren't fighters, some of them were kids who were ten years old.

A: But the British just transported them—the people who picked them up were Greek police who had quotas to fill. They were just evacuating numbers. The British couldn't speak Greek, couldn't distinguish between insurgents and normal people. Isn't the same thing happening in Iraq today? And how do you guarantee a civil war? That's how you do it, right?

Q: And these people were absolutely randomly picked.

A: It was during the battle of Athens, it was hard for the British to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants, ELAS wasn't wearing uniforms, it was composed of men and women alike. And there's always the element of revenge. I came across the story of a woman who was in prison, this Greek American who had gone there to volunteer as a nurse and asked what she had done. The woman said, My husband wanted a divorce, so he denounced me as a Communist. She was picked up and he was free to divorce her. But after the uprising, eventually she did become a committed communist. Civil wars are very tragic affairs, and very difficult to understand, because they involve such a range of things taking place.

Q: That's why it's terribly problematic to reduce the motivations to personal ones. It's fair to say that the ideological components are very complex, too complex perhaps to analyze fully—but you can't go to the other extreme and just say it's a matter of personal retribution.

A: There are 45,000 men in EAM-ELAS, and if you look at American archives you get a very different picture than the one the British present: ELAS as an organized, patriotic force. And the ideological dimension is interesting, too: you have the right/left split, but there are also the socially conservative people who don't like what EAM-ELAS stands

for. As for the idea that these wars can be reduced to persona issues, I also think the fact that these conversations are coming back has a lot to do with the Iraq war. People want to make that argument, that it's not a civil war in Iraq, that it's people killing one another over goats and things.

Q: Though Kalyvas's first article came out in 2000, so it predates the Iraq war.

A: But when the Bush administration was looking for justification for the war, they looked around for things like this, like the Phoenix Program during the Vietnam War. But it doesn't work.

Q: It doesn't work in the sense that no population could ever be driven entirely to submission. But meanwhile we're talking about extraordinary bloodletting. You started out talking about a ruined social landscape, and the issue of reconstruction: even if the ideological questions have been worked out, there is still the lingering effect of the war.

A: And what's interesting, this devastated landscape—well, it's like that by 1942 or 1943, and the Greek political establishment opts out, it goes to the Middle East, or sits back and let things happen as they are. They create a vacuum, EAM-ELAS steps in, and then the government wants to just waltz back in in 1944.

Q: But they had already been discredited before that. There were 22 coup attempts before the Metaxas regime, and so people were happy to have some kind of stability.

A: You're absolutely right. But they're not playing to the Greek population, they're playing to the British. Their audience is not the Athenian population; they want to suck up so the British will keep them in power. It's easier to convince one general or a handful of British politicians than to get the whole Greek population to vote for you when you've done nothing for them.

Q: You have some access to diaspora in Canada and here. Do you find that the diasporic community is one stage back in this process of healing?

A: The diaspora in Canada is different than the diaspora here with regard to the Greek Civil War, primarily because when the Russians evacuated in 1949, a lot of those people ended up in Tashkent. Then in 1966 Canada passed a law that allowed people to reunite families, and a lot of those people came over. So that makeup of the population affects the tone of these conversations there.

Q: In 1943-44, the Greek American community was very in favor of ELAS.

A: So were the Americans. The irony and the tragedy is that the OSS, everyone but Roosevelt, thinks ELAS is a good force. The OSS forces in Greece were mostly Greek Americans, so they could speak Greek, could understand.

Q: But during the war ELAS wasn't selling itself as a Communist force, and that's why they were so popular. But it became more evident that a power struggle was going to take place later on, and by the end didn't they have support from half the population?

A: ELAS is an organ of the Greek Communist party, every memoir you read of a British person who was there says that. The American reports are completely different, but they weren't published, they were kept secret until the late 1990s. There were a lot of Greek Americans who fought in the OSS, but nobody knew about it.

Q: I have a question about ELAS. Perhaps they had 50% of the people behind them, but did they still have that after Psaros? Did people know about that?

A: A lot did, but how do you communicate in an occupied country? And how do you control all of ELAS in an occupied country?

Q: What about after the war, when the party went into a deep critique?

A: ELAS and the Communists killed a lot of people during the December Uprisings, bodies were mutilated. You can't control 15,000 ELAS reserves. Think about how the American army is behaving now, in Iraq. It happens.