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The Greek Interwar Refugee Crisis as a cause of the Greek Civil War, 1922-1949

Michael B. O'Sullivan

In his explanation for the causes of the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War, the first civil war between Greeks, Thucydides drew a distinction between "immediate" and "real" causes. This causation model is also useful in understanding the origins of another civil war between Greeks. The "immediate" cause of the 1944-1949 Greek civil war was the power vacuum resulting from the withdrawal of the German Army and the subsequent scramble for control of the state by the rival political factions of the Greek Right and Left. This is only part of the story. Identifying the "real," underlying causes of the Greek civil war is a task that historians have failed to pinpoint. Traditional narratives have seen the war as the first conflict of the Cold War and consequently have focused primarily on foreign interventions and the events in Athens from December 1944, while neglecting the communal conflicts in the provinces. Within these narratives, class and ethnic divisions are regarded as "relatively unimportant."¹

¹ See David Close, ed., *The Greek Civil War, 1943-1950: Studies of polarization*. (London: Routledge, 1993).; David H. Close, *The Origins of the Greek Civil War*. Origins of Modern Wars Series, (New York: Longman Publishing, 1995).; Edgar O'Ballance. *The Greek Civil War 1944-1949*. (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1966). In traditional accounts of the Greek civil war, As Mark Mazower points out, "Athens, London, and Washington [have] provided the focus, not villages,

The Greek civil war was not, as has been previously assumed, merely a bipolar struggle between two political groups. Instead, it was a conflict between a multitude of communities, down to the neighborhood and village level, entangled in a web of antagonistic ethnic and class cleavages. Within this imbroglio, differences of ethnic and class identity among Greeks, not competing political allegiances, were the most crucial factors in provoking the outbreak of sustained violence between communities during the Axis occupation. Communal warfare then facilitated the onset of a general civil war. The atomization of Greece into a series of divided communities, overwhelmed by outbreaks of open violence were in fact a manifestation of two decades of persistent political, social, ethnic and class divisions in Greece. The catalyst for these divisions was the refugee settlement crisis that followed Greece's disastrous defeat in the Greco-Turkish war of 1919-1922. The repercussions of these crises are responsible for what can be termed the "real" causes, as Thucydides would have understood them, of the Greek civil war.

valleys, or the provinces." The causes of the conflict have been almost entirely attributed to a division between political groups on the Right and Left. According to David Close, the circumstances of primary importance were "competition for control of the state by two sets of political leaders, each with military allies, and each drawing support from a variety of regions and from a wide range of occupational groups." Ethnic and class divisions remain largely unexplored as a catalyst for the outbreak of the war. This is curious since many historians acknowledge the ethnic problems associated with the refugee settlement and the occupation but give them inadequate attention within the explanation for the causes of the civil war.

In 1919 the Greek army established a foothold in far western Anatolia in the hopes of fulfilling the 'Great Idea,' the driving force of Greek nationalism for the past century, calling for the union of the Hellenic and Anatolian Greek lands and peoples into a Greater Greece.² In July 1921, the Greek army struck eastward and northward with the goal of capturing Angora, the seat of the new Turkish government.³ In full-scale retreat after the Turkish counter-attack in August and September, the Greek army made no distinction between Turkish and Greek communities, burning down villages and massacring the inhabitants. Left homeless by the fires set by the Greek army and fearing Turkish retaliation, Greek refugees frantically made their way to the ports of the Aegean, chiefly Smyrna.⁴

Greek refugees were rounded up and forcibly deported by the Turks from a number of regions throughout Asia Minor, enduring constant attack on their way to being deported from the port cities of Greece.⁵ These initial expulsions in the wake of the Greek retreat were however only a fraction of the story. In November 1922, Turkish and Greek representatives met at Lausanne to discuss terms and to solve the Greek refugee issue. By July 1923 the Treaty had been signed, resulting in the mandatory transfer of 1.3 million Greeks who lived in Anatolia to Greece and

² Norman Naimark, *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 44-5.

³ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

356,000 Turks, the majority of whom lived in Aegean Macedonia, to Turkey.

The difficulties associated with the settlement of the refugees in the 1920s fueled a mutual animosity between the refugee and native populations of the country. These antagonisms were compounded primarily by four factors: the failure of the Refugee Settlement Commission to successfully settle the refugees, ethnic and cultural differences between the two groups, conflicting political allegiances, and economic competition. All of these factors reinforced the refugees' sense of separation from their native Greek neighbors.⁶

Settling 1.3 million refugees in an already overpopulated country of 5.4 million people was a monumental task. In response, the Treaty of Lausanne mandated the creation of Mixed Commissions run by the League of Nations whose task was to oversee the settlement of refugees in each country.⁷ In Greece the Refugee Settlement Commission (RSC) was set up to assist the Greek government in settling the refugees. Traditionally, the RSC has been seen as extremely successful, helping to increase the economic productivity of the country and acting as a stabilizing influence in the

⁶ Renée Hirschon, *Heirs of the Greek catastrophe : the social life of Asia Minor refugees in Piraeus*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 13

⁷ Renée Hirschon, ed. *Crossing the Aegean: An Appraisal of the 1923 Compulsory Population Exchange Between Greece and Turkey*. Studies in Forced Migration, Vol. 12. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2003), 7-8. The RSC was made up of four members – two appointed by the Greek government, one by the League of Nations, and the fourth, the chairman, an American citizen named Charles B. Eddy. See also Hirschon, *Heirs...*, 39.

country at large by preventing the potential radicalization of the refugees.⁸

Upon the dissolution of the RSC in 1930, its chairman, Charles B. Eddy, published a book detailing the work of the commission over the previous eight years. Since most literature on the Greek civil war devotes only a few comments to the refugee settlement and the RSC, historians have neglected to raise objection to Eddy's conclusions. The inability of historians to adequately examine this report has profoundly influenced the histories of interwar Greece. By neglecting to scrutinize the RSC reports, historians have underestimated how the dramatic land reforms carried out by the commission undermined social stability in the villages of Greece by fostering tensions between native Greeks and the refugees. Eddy's interpretation of the RSC's successes is at best premature and at worst a deliberate turning of a blind eye to the realities of the refugee's plight.⁹ Throughout, Eddy's tone is

⁸ See Charles B. Eddy, *Greece and the Greek Refugees*, (London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd 1931).; Georgios Kritikos, "The Agricultural Settlement of Refugees: A Source of Productive Work and Stability in Greece, 1923-1930", *Agricultural History* 79, no. 3., Agricultural History Society, (Summer, 2005): 321-346.

⁹ See *Greek Refugee Settlement Commission. Settlement of Greek refugees : General summary of the work of the Greek Refugee Settlement Commission*. Geneva : League of Nations, 1928; League of Nations, Assembly, Second Committee. *Report on the work of the Greek Refugees Settlement Commission / presented to the Assembly by the Second committee*. Rapporteur: M. van Cauwelaert (Belgium). Geneva : League of Nations, 1926.; *Greek Refugee Settlement Commission. Greece : report on the liquidation of the Refugee Settlement Commission*. Geneva : League of Nations, 1931.; *Greece. Convention between the Hellenic government and the Refugee Settlement Commission*,

self-congratulatory, lauding the success of the commission in assimilating the refugees into Greek society and providing them with housing and opportunities for economic advancement.

While the RSC did bring some solutions to a seemingly impossible humanitarian crisis, the commission's policies governing the agricultural and urban settlement of refugees in Greece created new crises and incited intense animosity among native Greeks toward both the refugees and the incumbent Greek government.

The focus of the RSC was agricultural, with Macedonia as the main area of settlement, the rationale being that the homes of forcibly deported Muslims would be turned over to the refugees.¹⁰ Large estates were carved up among refugees, as were large swathes of uncultivated land that had been formerly owned by Turkish landowners.¹¹ However, the redistribution of Turkish and Bulgarian lands posed an unexpected problem. In the delay between the evacuation of the Turkish landowners and the settlement of the refugees, local Greeks and non-Greeks had settled or purchased the unclaimed land.

Preferring to deprive private owners of their land rather than sacrifice state lands, officials of the RSC expelled the native population from these areas in order to free them up for use by the refugees. This

signed at Geneva on January 24th, 1930. Geneva; League of Nations, 1930.; *Greek Refugee Settlement Commission. Greece: quarterly report of the Refugee Settlement Commission.* Geneva: League of Nations, 1924-30

¹⁰ Kritikos, 324.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 328.

triggered a number of massacres in northern Greece.¹² These conflicts led to the division of villages into distinct quarters based on ethnic identity, where the natives remained in the old part of the village while the refugees occupied enclaves away from the village center.¹³

Only in 1924 did the RSC begin to undertake the settlement of the 500,000 refugees living in urban areas. For years after returning to Greece, refugees lived in camps on the outskirts of Athens, Piraeus and Salonika where disease was rife and food and medicine extremely scarce. One report stated that forty to fifty Greeks died every day in the camps throughout from 1922-1924, hundreds more dying in rudimentary hospitals.¹⁴ These circumstances were glossed over in the often self-indulgent RSC reports.

In cities like Salonika, urban space was drastically transformed in order to accommodate the refugees. The settlement of the refugees in specific districts was based on a logic of class stratification.¹⁵ The removal of the city's 25,000 Muslims after 1923 cleared space for the settlement of the more affluent refugees from

¹² Ibid., 330. Both locals and refugees were massacred in the district of Serres as the two sides struggled to set the boundaries of their lands. At Plevna, refugees and locals fought in the fields. In Nigrita, locals burned down makeshift refugee huts and at Kouppi a number of killings occurred.

¹³ Elisabeth Kontogiorgi, *Population Exchange in Greek Macedonia: The Forced Settlement of Refugees 1922-1930*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 259.

¹⁴ Naimark, *Fires of Hatred*, 55.

¹⁵ Vilma Hastaoglou-Martinidis, "A Mediterranean City in Transition: Thessaloniki Between the Two World Wars." *Facta Universitatis*. Architecture and Civil Engineering 1, no. 4. (1997), 502.

Anatolia in undamaged areas of the city. On the other hand, poor refugees were settled in eighteen refugee housing districts on the city's outskirts, consisting of little more than shanty towns with squatter houses.¹⁶

The organization of urban space based on affluence greatly accelerated class divisions within cities like Salonika. The stigma of ethnic difference endured by the refugees was exacerbated by their spatial segregation on the city's outskirts. Class now came to compound already existing divisions based on ethnic and political differences within the refugee community. As upper class refugees became involved in politics they began to distance themselves from the poor masses of refugees. For the first time, "stratification and class distinctions began to prevail over place of origin or ethnic affiliation for a section of the Asia Minor population."¹⁷ This would have significant repercussions during the Second World War and the Greek civil war.

A common view, among both historians and observers living at the time, maintains that the ultimate result of the population exchanges after the Greco-Turkish war was to turn Greece into a more homogeneous society.¹⁸ In fact, the Asia Minor refugees were yet another stream of refugees inundating Greece from 1912 to 1922.¹⁹ Each group was extremely diverse in terms of language, wealth, and customs. What proponents of the 'Great Idea' had failed to take into account was that the Greek communities of Asia Minor, far removed from the Greek mainland and having lived

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Hirschon, *Heirs...*; 45.

¹⁸ Kontogiorgi, 19.

¹⁹ They were preceded by groups of Greek refugees from Thrace, Bulgaria, the Black Sea littoral, and the Caucasus.

under Ottoman rule for more than five centuries, possessed a linguistic, cultural, and ideological heritage markedly different from the Greeks of the mainland.

As subjects in the Ottoman Empire, Anatolian Greeks saw their connections with the Orthodox Church in Constantinople as providing the basis for their "enduring sense of separate identity." Despite being a subject people, the religious identity of Anatolian Greeks during the centuries of Ottoman rule produced no sense of inferiority, but rather one of superiority to other groups under Ottoman rule.²⁰ The Anatolian refugees kept this sense of cultural superiority and a separate identity when they came to Greece. Their opinions of local Greeks were pejorative, perceiving "locals as narrow-minded, ignorant, and uncouth, a view which became entrenched as time passed and disillusionment grew."²¹ For their part, the locals leveled insults at the refugees like "Turkish-seed," "yoghurt-baptized," and "orientals."²² Most Anatolian Greeks did not consider themselves Greeks at all, seeing themselves instead as "Anatolian Christians" or "Christians from the East."²³ Linguistic differences made the divisions between refugees and natives even more pronounced. Many refugees only spoke Turkish and those few refugees who did speak Greek did so in

²⁰ Ibid., 13.

²¹ Hirschon, *Heirs*, 12. Refugees also referred to local Greeks as uncultured, rough, and boorish, commonly calling them 'Vlachs', shepherds or 'country bumpkins.' See Ibid., 33

²² See Mazower, *Salonica, city of ghosts: Christians, Muslims and Jews, 1430-1950*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 337; Hirschon, *Crossing*, 19.

²³ Mazower, *Salonica*, 336-7.

dialects incomprehensible to their native Greek neighbors.²⁴ One particular episode vividly illustrates this point. As refugees from Anatolia flooded Salonika in 1923, the city's Muslim population, awaiting their own deportation, were shocked to find that the refugees spoke Turkish and sang in the same scale.²⁵

Cultural differences then intensified political dissension. Ethnic divisions between refugees and natives occurred against a backdrop of political instability in Greece and the refugees worsened the political divides initiated by the National Schism (Ethnikos Dikhasmos) between monarchists and republicans. The refugees pledged their support to the Republican Party of Eleftherios Venizelos, the masterly politician who, in direct opposition to the monarchy, brought Greece into the First World War on the side of the Allies and spearheaded the Asia Minor campaign. Venizelos instituted massive land reforms throughout the country, turning many Greeks, especially rural refugees, into small landholders.²⁶

With the support of the refugees and the new territories recently incorporated into the Greek state after the Balkan and First World Wars, the Venizelists were able to dominate the polls throughout the 1920s.²⁷ To the refugees, Venizelos was 'Leader of the

²⁴ Naimark, *Fires of Hatred*, 55.

²⁵ Mazower, *Salonica*, 337.

²⁶ Mark Mazower, *Inside Hitler's Greece: the experience of occupation, 1941-1944*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 12.

²⁷ Thanos Veremis, "1922: Political Continuations of the Exchange of Populations for Turkey," in *Crossing the Aegean: An Appraisal of the 1923 Compulsory Population Exchange Between Greece and Turkey*, ed. Renee (sic) Hirschon, Studies in Forced

Nation,' 'the One,' 'Our Father.'²⁸ On the other hand, the political opponents of Venizelos, the anti-Venizelists, regarded him as "nothing less than the embodiment of Satan himself."²⁹ Stoutly monarchist and anti-refugee, the anti-Venizelists drew their support from the Peloponnese and Attica, the heart of the nineteenth century Greek state, and areas where few refugees settled. The regions where refugees were settled were more divided between Venizelist and anti-Venizelist supporters, the basis of support often being ethnic identity. Although the refugees constituted around one-quarter of the country's population, they remained drastically under-represented in national politics.³⁰ Despite their under-representation, the refugees completely transformed the political landscape of Greece in the interwar period, principally because they were responsible for defeating the old political parties of Greece and infusing Greece with new social perceptions.³¹

The Venizelists began to lose popularity among refugees after the Treaty of Ankara in 1930. Here Venizelos and the Turkish representatives concluded that the refugees from Anatolia would not receive compensation for their properties left behind in Asia Minor.³² Venizelos soon thereafter fell out of favor with many refugees and they began to look for political

Migration, Vol. 12. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2003), 57.

²⁸ Mazower, *Hitler's Greece*, 12.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁰ Hirschon, *Heirs*, 44.

³¹ Dmitri Pentzopolous, *The Balkan exchange of minorities and its impact on Greece*, (London: Hurt and Company, 2002), 168; Veremis in Hirschon, *Crossing*, 55.

³² Hirschon, *Heirs*, 47.

patrons elsewhere, which allowed anti-Venizelist factions to secure the significant refugee vote. Coaxing the refugees in with the promise of compensation denied to them by the Treaty of Ankara, the anti-Venizelists immediately upon taking power reneged on the promise and once again undertook an anti-refugee program.

It was the combined effects of disillusionment with the Venizelists, the economic depression of the 1930s, and the persecution experienced under the anti-Venizelists that led a small percentage of refugee communities to abandon traditional political patrons in favor of more radical ones.³³ The movement among refugees away from traditional patrons dissolved the threadbare unity of culturally diverse rural refugee communities, stimulating the further atomization of the country into rival sects. All of this had dramatic repercussions during the Axis occupation in the Second World War.

The refugees pledged support to Venizelists because they “appealed to the sense of alienation of the new lands which were under-represented in the state machine.”³⁴ Among urban refugees, neglected by the RSC and living in overcrowded slums in Greece’s major cities, this sense of alienation prompted them to support the burgeoning Greek Communist Party (KKE).³⁵ Founded in 1918, the KKE was never a popular party during the interwar period. The most votes it obtained in any election was 10%.³⁶

³³ Hirschon, *Heirs*, 44.

³⁴ Close, *Origins*, 13.

³⁵ Hirschon, *Heirs*, 29.

³⁶ O’Mallagh, 30.

Unsurprisingly, Communism held little appeal among rural refugee landowners, because the ownership of land ensured a certain degree of financial security and created a petit-bourgeois mentality among rural refugees.³⁷ In addition, because the Greek state had provided them with their landholdings, refugees saw little reason to subvert the state.

Chief among the reasons why Communism failed to catch on with rural refugees was the KKE's 'Macedonia' agenda. Under orders from the Comintern in Moscow, the KKE was obliged to campaign for an independent Macedonian state. It was obviously unpopular among refugees in northern Greece who had recently been settled on landholdings in Macedonia.³⁸ The refugees certainly did not wish to become minorities once again, especially after they had gained superiority in numbers in their new landholdings. The KKE was also directly opposed, like the anti-Venizelists, to the distribution of land to the refugees at the expense of the natives.³⁹

With the adoption of an anti-fascist Popular Front policy in 1934, the KKE abandoned its 'Macedonia program', for one that proclaimed "political equality for all minorities."⁴⁰ Now the Communists began to find support among rural refugees, albeit a limited amount. Also important to success of Communist propaganda,

³⁷ Vilma Hastaoglou-Martinidis, "A Mediterranean City...", 503.

³⁸ See Kritikos, "The Agricultural Settlement of Refugees...", 337-40.

³⁹ Kontogiorgi, 188-9; George Th. Mavrogordatos, *Stillborn Republic: Social Coalitions and Party Strategies in Greece, 1922-1936*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, Ltd), 1983, 219.

⁴⁰ Veremis, 58.

was the abandonment of the rhetoric of rigid class categories. This allowed the party to address the refugees as a whole group, unified on the basis of ethnicity and no longer separated by class differences.⁴¹ Although rural refugees still remained a small minority within the KKE, the developments in 1936 indicated the growing importance of ethnicity in determining political affiliation. By 1935, half of the Central Committee and most of the Politburo members were refugees, including Party Secretary, Nikos Zachariades.⁴²

In the elections of 1936, the KKE gained 15 seats in Parliament, which was enough to create a parliamentary impasse.⁴³ When the Liberals began negotiating a secret deal with the KKE, the Army withdrew its support for the government. Fearing a coup, the recently restored King appointed General John Metaxas premier and gave him the authority to rule by decree.⁴⁴ Soon thereafter, the KKE was suppressed, its leaders were arrested and its ranks infiltrated by the Metaxas security police. The Metaxas government's identification of the KKE as an internal enemy coincided with the fostering of a national Greek identity based on certain ethnic criteria, which helped to reinforce the refugees' separateness.⁴⁵ The

⁴¹ KKE statement from 1936 titled "On the Refugee Question." Mavrogordatos, *Stillborn Republic*, 222-3.

⁴² Veremis, 58; Mavrogordatos, 222-4. Zachariades was born in Asia Minor in 1903 and came to Greece in 1922.

⁴³ Haris Vlavianos, *Greece, 1941-49: from resistance to civil war: the strategy of the Greek Communist Party*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 11.

⁴⁴ See Vlavianos, *Greece, 1941-49*, 13-4.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

prevalence of urban refugees within the ranks of the KKE led to the association of refugees, who were seen as culturally and ethnically 'un-Greek', with Communism, a foreign political ideology.⁴⁶

The Axis invasion and occupation of Greece beginning in April 1941 removed the controls on civil society enforced by the Metaxas regime. It also transformed the KKE's role in Greek society. The KKE took the lead in organizing systematic resistance, forming the National Liberation Front (EAM) in September 1941. Unable to persuade the bourgeois parties to join EAM, the KKE was able to recruit several left-wing political groups into EAM, which it easily dominated. EAM was principally a political organization and the need for a more militaristic resistance to the occupation led to the creation of the National Popular Liberation Army (ELAS) in April 1942.

ELAS was the only effective nation-wide resistance group. The bourgeois parties failed in their attempt to create a resistance movement since they lacked KKE's ability to organize a mass mobilization and many traditional politicians rejected the need to conduct a resistance. The other principal resistance groups operated in specific regions only and were primarily military organizations, lacking the political program of EAM/ELAS.⁴⁷ Despite the fact that the KKE dominated EAM/ELAS, the majority of its members were not

⁴⁶ Hirschon demonstrates that the prevalence of Communist sympathizers in refugee communities was later used to stigmatize them. Even in the 1970s native Greeks continued to stigmatize urban refugee localities because of this association. See Hirschon, *Heirs*, 47.

⁴⁷ Vlavianos, 26-7.

Communist and by war's end the membership of EAM/ELAS included 30% of the Greek population.⁴⁸ Yet, while the pre-war refugee urban districts were bastions of support for EAM/ELAS, among rural refugees support for the organization varied dramatically depending upon the region. The realities of collaboration and resistance in cities and villages throughout Greece during the Axis occupation starkly reflected pre-war communal and ethnic cleavages. Both the Greek resistance groups and the Axis gendarmerie, with the support of Greek collaborators like the Security Battalions, exploited pre-existing disaffection between refugees, non-Greeks, and Greeks.

Collaboration or resistance was contingent upon a multiplicity of factors and motives, all of which varied depending upon the region. For instance, the Turkish-speaking Pontians who accepted arms from the Germans did so in order to "promote their interests as a community linguistically different from a neighboring community."⁴⁹ In many cases collaboration or resistance was based upon whoever was the more dominant element in the town.⁵⁰ A report written by ELAS in 1944 "explained the arming of the refugee or mixed villages of the eastern lowlands in terms of pre-existing communal disaffection and friction."⁵¹

Mixed villages throughout northern Greece and Macedonia were divided between collaborators and resisters based upon ethnic differences. In the case of

⁴⁸ Ibid., 251, 24.

⁴⁹ Kolipulous, 77.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Kolipulous, 77

the Macedonian town of Pelargos, the Greek-speaking refugee population sided with ELAS while the Turkish-speaking refugees from the Pontus and the Caucasus sided with the Germans. In other mixed villages, Slav Macedonians sided with guerilla forces while the refugees sided with the occupying forces.⁵² In rural Euboea, a region made up of Greek natives, Albanian-speaking Greek Orthodox natives, and Asia Minor refugees, it was only the refugees who supported EAM/ELAS.⁵³ Regions where the KKE had been unable to gain much support before the war were now strong supporters of EAM/ELAS. In parts of Western Macedonia, Turkish-speaking refugees from Asia Minor accepted arms from the Germans in order to protect against ELAS attacks.⁵⁴ However, in that same region, EAM/ELAS could rely on the support of Greek-speaking refugees from the Caucasus who were pro-Russian and supported Communism. To add to the confusion, other communities of Greek-speaking villagers in western Macedonia fled from EAM/ELAS abuses.⁵⁵ In Thrace, the impact of EAM/ELAS was virtually non-existent because of the presence of a large Muslim minority and Bulgarian garrisons allied with the Germans. In Thessaly, support for EAM/ELAS existed only among the radical refugees living in the plains.⁵⁶

Typically, EAM/ELAS found support in those regions, which were traditionally Venizelist. On the other hand, many collaborationist forces like the

⁵² Kolipulous, 73.

⁵³ Close, *Origins*, 98.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 97.

Security Battalions were from the central provinces and the Peloponnese, regions where support for EAM/ELAS was minimal.⁵⁷ The lack of support in these regions can be explained by the fact that very few refugees had settled there in the 1920s and they were traditionally anti-Venizelist,⁵⁸ which left no room for the development of political and ethnic cleavages characteristic of regions where refugees were settled in large numbers.

These inter-communal conflicts were not merely a rural phenomenon. However, the source of conflict was different in the urban areas. Whereas in the rural areas ethnicity determined allegiance, class divisions fueled conflict in urban centers. Fighting in the urban centers had none of the confusion characteristic of rural regions. Essentially it was a bipolar conflict between the proletarian-backed EAM/ELAS and the bourgeois-supported collaborationist forces.

The refugees who had lived in the shantytowns of Greece's major cities had been radicalized by the KKE's propaganda well before the war and their stratification within the urban space made them intensely aware of the significant socio-economic disparities between themselves and the wealthier sections of the city. Before the war the refugees had remained politically marginalized, excluded by the bourgeois parties and the elite from participating in the country's political process. EAM/ELAS provided the refugees with opportunities of mass activism.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ See *Ibid.*, 97-9, 114-5.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁵⁹ Mazower, *Inside Hitler's Greece*, 285.

Many native Greeks in the urban areas were vehemently opposed to EAM/ELAS and collaborated in significant numbers with the Axis. Beginning in 1944 in the major cities of the country – Athens, Piraeus and Salonika – heavy street-fighting broke out between EAM/ELAS and a number of collaborationist groups. In anti-partisan sweeps in the major cities, the Security Battalions and the Germans attacked the working-class refugee quarters, like Kokkinia in Athens, which were strongholds of EAM/ELAS.⁶⁰ On the other hand, the urban middle and upper classes were ardent supporters of collaborationist groups like the Security Battalions.⁶¹

Inter-communal conflicts reached their zenith in 1943-4, as EAM/ELAS grew more popular, which made other Greek resistance groups, as well as the exiled King in Cairo and the bourgeois-backed collaborationist battalions, increasingly apprehensive about a Communist takeover. In 1943, the other Greek resistance groups like EDES signed a ceasefire with the Germans in order to fight EAM/ELAS. As the Germans conducted large anti-partisan sweeps throughout the country with the support of collaborationist groups, the profusion of inter-communal conflicts became more magnified.

They did not end with the German evacuation in October 1944. The well-known battles that took place in Athens between EAM/ELAS and the British-backed monarchist forces in December 1944, which have

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 341-2.

⁶¹ As a Security Battalion marched through wealthy neighborhoods in Athens before an attack on a section of the refugee quarter held by EAM/ELAS the wealthy citizens applauded in support. *Ibid.*, 278.0

always been the centerpiece of traditional histories of the Greek civil war, were just one aspect of a much larger pan-Greek conflict. Since the fighting in Athens was a relatively straightforward conflict between two groups, bereft of the chaos that distinguished rural conflicts, historians have consequently characterized the Greek civil war as a conflict between two political factions. This interpretation is misguided. ELAS activity in Athens in December 1944 was not part of a coordinated effort to gain control of the country. In fact, the majority of ELAS operations took place far from Athens in the provinces, where its armed bands worked towards suppressing communal conflicts, disarming villages and defeating rival groups.

The nature of fighting in December 1944-January 1945, the first phase of the Greek civil war, was born out of the conditions of collaboration and resistance to the occupation and bore little resemblance to the later years of the civil war. The Greek civil war only took on a perceivably political character in the second phase of the war, when after twenty-one months of ceasefire, EAM/ELAS re-opened hostilities in September 1946 when a plebiscite brought the King back into power. Three years later, EAM/ELAS was finally suppressed, but in the interim the conflict had created a new wave of refugees as 500,000 people were driven from their homes. The creation of even more refugees was a tragic, yet fitting complement to the original refugee crisis that helped to explain why Greece had disintegrated into civil war.

In drawing a distinction between “immediate” and “real” causes, Thucydides understood that the reasons for wars were multidimensional. He recognized that a multiplicity of factors, occurring over the short-term

and long-term, were at play when communities entered a struggle. Thucydides' appreciation of complex causality helps the modern historian to identify the underlying reasons for the outbreak of Greek civil war. The occupation and the civil war were measures of the extent to which the settlement of the refugees after the Greco-Turkish War had fostered mutual ethnic and class animosity between refugees and native Greeks. These mutual hatreds manifested most strongly in the conflicts between Venizelists and anti-Venizelists, the inability of the refugees to assimilate as a result of cultural differences, and the physical segregation of the refugees in the cities and villages, all of which strengthened the refugees' sense of a separate identity. Yet the marginalization of the refugees and their abandonment of traditional political patrons after 1930 provoked a greater degree of splintering within communities. During the occupation, pre-war fragmentation produced a profusion of competing ethnic factions vying for local supremacy, even within minor villages.

With the outbreak of war, the artificial physical boundaries that had been constructed before the war broke down, as Greeks, both refugee and native, were drawn by the tumultuous experiences of occupation into the vortex of collaboration and resistance. The occupation led to the reassertion of separate, conflicting identities on the part of both refugees and natives on the basis of ethnicity and class. These identities were more virulent in their character because divisions between groups were exploited by the policies of the Greek resistance groups and the occupiers. In each community the reaction to collaboration and resistance varied, but the basis for

finding identifiable patterns among groups in the midst of the chaos of war rests on an understanding of the pre-war divisions between refugees and native Greeks. It can be concluded then that the traditional Cold War vision of the Greek Civil War as a conflict of two political camps misreads the situation poorly. This paper reoriented the focus of traditional approach to the Greek Civil War by turning attention away from “Athens, London, and Washington” and towards “villages, valleys, [and] the provinces.” Only with this perspective can historians construct a narrative of the war that finally puts flight to the outdated Cold War interpretations.

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