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12 October 1944

Liberation, Trauma, and Memorialization in Greece

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Editors' Note

This year, 2014, marks the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War in Greece, and 12 October marks the 70th anniversary of the Liberation of Athens. We wanted to note this anniversary with a paper that would deal with the importance of the event and would explain the peculiar absence of its official commemoration. We invited prominent historian of the era, Tasoula Vervenioti, to offer us her thoughts on this matter.

The end of the Second World War came to Greece on 12 October 1944 with the liberation of the country from the Occupation of the remaining Axis Powers, Germany and Bulgaria. As an event, though, it is not celebrated, because for Greece the war was not over. Two months later, in December 1944, Athens, the capital, experienced a painful armed civil conflict in which the intervention of British troops was decisive. Two years later, and framing the Cold War, the Greek Civil War began. The armed conflict lasted three years (1946-1949), but its political effects lasted more than thirty, until the end of the Cold War at the end of the 1980s. As we know, no war ends with the withdrawal of the occupying troops, or with a treaty, nor with the defeat of the opponent. Every war and a civil war even more so, leaves open wounds. In Greece, these wounds were vast. The impact of what came to be called the “Events of December” 1944 (Dekemvrianá) and the Civil War that followed were so traumatic that their occurrence obscured and transformed the memory of the Occupation. As a result it is not the end of the war but Greece’s entrance to it on 28 October, 1940 – an event that was first celebrated during the Occupation in 1942—that continues to be commemorated as a national holiday to the present day. October 28—“Oxi Day,” as it is known in Greece—continues to commemorate the glorious battles Greece waged

on the Albanian Front against Italian fascist troops, which briefly brought joy to every despairing European anti-fascist.



Mourning at Distomo following the massacre

Photographs by Voula Papaioannou at the Benaki Museum Collection. Used with permission

The Second World War officially lasted from 1939 to 1945. For Greece, it began in October 1940 and ended in October 1944. But from the autumn of 1943, when Italy surrendered, it became obvious that the Allies would be victorious. The most powerful among them on the initiative of the US, decided to design the future of the world. From 1-22 July 1944, preparing to rebuild the international economic system, 730 delegates from all 44 Allied nations gathered at the Mount Washington Hotel in Breton Woods, New Hampshire, and signed an economic agreement. The agreement established the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), which today is part of the World Bank Group. Moreover, each allied country was obligated to adopt a monetary policy that maintained the exchange rate by tying its currency to the US dollar and the US dollar to gold.¹

During WWII the Allies also enacted the establishment of the United Nations declaring their commitment to continue the fight against the Axis Powers based on a broad general sentiment that this war should be the end of all wars. In many countries—and most certainly in Greece—the experience of war, occupation, and resistance had radicalized large social groups, who believed that the end of the war and the defeat of fascism would initiate a new era of justice and humanity. To this end, the first organization established by the fledgling UN was UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration), and its aim was to help in the recovery of countries that had been devastated by the war. The assistance for Greece was conceived in London in May 1944, approved in Washington, and amended in

Cairo by the Greek government in exile and the Balkan Mission (Woodbridge 1950, 94-137).

The last year of the Occupation in Greece was particularly difficult. Since the spring of 1943, the victories of the Allies in the war fronts (most notably in Stalingrad and Africa) had given a great impetus to the resistance movement that visualized both the country's liberation and social change. The most massive resistance organization was the National Liberation Front (EAM), a coalition of small parties in which the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) played a dominant role. The second largest resistance organization, EDES (National Republican Greek League), was formed by royalist and centrist officers of the National Army. The members of EAM and KKE embraced a social-political vision for an alternative society modeled after the Soviet Union (*laokratia* or "people's rule"). On the other hand, the Palace, along with both the old, pre-war powerful moneyed class, and the nouveau riche (who had gained wealth and power by collaborating with the Occupying Forces), sought to enhance their domination after the end of the war. Critical to the outcome was, of course, the fact that Greece had been allotted to the Western sphere of influence. More specifically, as is clear from a hand-written note that appears in Winston Churchill's memoir, the "percentages agreement" reached in Moscow on 9-11 October 1944 gave Greece to "Great Britain in accord with USA 90%, Russia 10%."²

The situation was exacerbated when Ioannis Rallis, a pre-war politician, was appointed by the Germans to be the Prime Minister of the collaborationist Greek State on 7 April 1943. As a condition of taking office, Rallis established a Greek paramilitary force, the Security Battalions (*Tágmata Asphaleías*) outfitted by the Wehrmacht with weapons and equipment. Their main aim was to destroy ELAS (Greek People's Liberation Army), the army of EAM. The social and political demands presented by EAM and embraced by the majority of the population during the national liberation struggle were in direct conflict with the anticommunist and nationalist ideologies that had dominated Greek politics since the interwar period. Within this context, Greek society was operating according to the logic of a civil dichotomy, while national liberation was *ante portas*.

On 1 October 1944, British troops landed in the southern Peloponnese, as the German forces began evacuating from Athens. The Chief of the General Staff at the Middle East General Headquarters in Cairo, Lieutenant General Ronald MacKenzie Scobie of the British Army, in line with the Caserta Agreement that had been signed in September 1944, was sent to Greece as General Commander not only of the British Forces but also of the Greek Army, including ELAS. On Thursday, 12 October 1944, the Germans lowered their swastika flag from the Acropolis and left Athens. As soon as Athenians heard the news, they began gathering in Syntagma Square. At noon the square was full of people kissing and hugging each other, as church bells were tolling joyfully. This was the day of liberation, a day of celebration, a day full of joy.



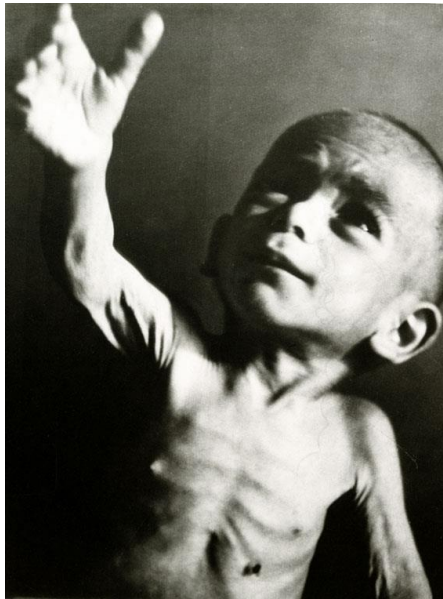
Athens, October 12, 1944

While the Nazis left Greece in October 1944, the collaborationist Greek government still situated in Athens did not control the country; most of it was under EAM/ELAS control. But also, the time of liberation varied from place to place. For example, Chania (in Crete) remained under German occupation until 1945, while in Kilkis (in Central Macedonia), liberated by ELAS in November 1944, the Greek collaborators of the departed Germans remained in control of the city. Thus, for Greece the exact day of liberation is as complicated as the meaning of liberation itself.

But even though there were still minor pockets of occupation in the country, on 18 October the Government of National Unity arrived in Athens. It included both the politicians of the old guard who had taken refuge in the Middle East and three ministers of EAM. Prime Minister George Papandreou, along with other officials, went to the Acropolis to celebrate the raising of the Greek flag and after that to Syntagma Square to address the gathered crowd. Syntagma Square represents—even now—the core of economic and political power in Greece. During the Occupation, masses of protesters had tried—and failed—to breach the blockades and to reach the square, and many had died in the attempt. But now the Occupation was over, there was liberation, Athenians occupied the square once again, and EAM and KKE established offices there. By the end of October 1944 the German troops had completely exited Greece with the exception of a small sector in the Cretan prefecture of Chania.

The end of the Occupation found Athens, and the rest of Greece, devastated.³ Athenians had lived for three and a half years in a state of horror, hunger, insecurity, and anxiety. They had endured constant fear of a knock on the door that would mean that the SS or the Gestapo had come to take them away, a fatal rumor about them that would have reached the Nazi or the collaborationist police, the daily announcements of

how many would be executed; they had seen or heard of people hanged from trees, villages and houses destroyed, public squares turned into stages for execution.⁴ Nobody could say whether the psychological or the somatic effects of the violence of the Occupation were more traumatic. They could rarely be separated.⁵



Famine and makeshift shoes.

Photographs by Voula Papaioannou at the Benaki Museum Collection. Used with permission

Athens experienced almost daily mass demonstrations in October and November of 1944. Athenians flew the Greek blue- and- white flags, red flags with the hammer and sickle, along with American and British flags. The British were especially welcomed as Greece's allied protectors and even EAM and KKE raised banners welcoming them (Benaki Museum, 2006, 237). UNRRA's Delegation reached Athens in the early days of the Liberation, initially acting under the British Military Liaison, known as ML. The first postwar distributions of aid were conducted from the British ML warehouse.



Flags of every stripe

The joy and pleasure of liberation lasted a very short time, and we can see the portents in the documents and memoirs of the period. The photographer Voula Papaioannou, employed by UNRRA, documented the levels of destruction of the country during the Occupation and the years after, and mentions in her archive that the Americans and Queen Frederica's (Welfare) Fund did not use the word 'Liberation.' The titles of the detailed records that she has kept from the time of the withdrawal of occupying troops mention only the date and the event: "October 1944," or "1944—The Arrival of the English."⁶ From a different angle, Patra Hatzisavva, a member of EPON (the youth organization of EAM) remembers:

"[When the Liberation came] there was an anxiety. We were not so happy during these Liberation days. . . . You could understand that something was wrong. . . . We expected a celebratory day that would change everything, that would give power to the people so that they would be able to shape their lives in their own way. . . . And out of all these high expectations, the only thing that actually happened was agony and an endless participation in demonstrations—and then, December came."⁷

The sense that something was wrong derived from the continued presence of the Security Battalions as well as from deep conflicts among the different resistance organizations, reverberations of their differences that dated to the Resistance. During the Occupation, there had been armed clashes between ELAS and EDES in the mountains of Epirus; members of the civil organization of EDES had also collaborated with the Germans in Athens. Throughout 1944, in the neighborhoods of Athens, there were daily conflicts between EAM/ELAS and the Security Battalions and among the resistance groups themselves over the control of districts. "A [football] match was enough to set Athens on fire like a pot of gasoline," wrote the author George Theotokas in his diary (quoted in Mazower 1994, 392). The violence that had accumulated during the Occupation erupted and came to the surface. Its result was the "Dekemvrianá," the "December Events."

On 2 December 1944 the ministers of EAM withdrew from the Government of National Unity, when negotiations for the conditions under which ELAS would disarm, the formation of a temporary militia, and the question of the participation of EAM in the government broke down. The next day the police fired on demonstrators at Syntagma Square. The response of EAM was to occupy the police stations of the city. The "December Events," "Battle of Athens," or "Red December" (as that period has come to be known) lasted for 33 days. Barricades were erected and buildings were badly damaged as the city became a battlefield. The British, who in October were welcomed by EAM, attacked and were counter-attacked by the members and followers of EAM. The US and the Soviet Union kept their distance. Greece, with its population of seven million, belonged at the time to the sphere of influence of Great Britain. Its geostrategic position was very important to English interests, in particular the petroleum of the Middle East. Great Britain, with its empire in decline, brought more troops to Athens and the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, came personally to Athens on Christmas Day in order to resolve the situation. WWII was still raging in Europe and the Pacific, so Churchill intended to send a clear message not only to those who fought to defeat the Axis, but also to those who had looked to the East and the Soviet Union for visions of a better, fairer society. Within weeks of Liberation the Allies had become enemies of those who had fought against the Nazis, something that eventually became a traumatic memory in Greece.



Dead on cart, Athens

Adrien Lambert, a representative of the International Committee of the Red Cross then in the Kolonaki district of Athens which was under British control, tried to negotiate with EAM leaders to provide aid to those caught in their zones. But he failed to secure the cooperation of the international and national civil aid organizations, which were caught in their own conflict with one another (Verveniotti 2009, 44-55). Lambert wrote:

They have been shooting from houses and rooftops. There are tanks in the streets and British planes are patrolling the city. At night the planes begin to attack and the noise of the bombing intensifies.

On 7 December one realizes that the fighting instead of abating is becoming more intense and more violent. We watch from the apartment of a friend, who is in a particularly good position for the occasion, the systematic attack of some districts by the airplanes.⁸ We see the positions taken on rooftops and the fighting between buildings. In the twilight the fires help us watch this deadly battle. Instead of improving, the situation is getting worse day by day.

On 8 December it was impossible to reach Piraeus, where I tried to go. Roads are blocked by barricades. The fight from house to house has intensified. During the night, the Eamites [EAM fighters] were blowing up entire buildings.

The hospitals are full and have no water or coal or electricity. The basement of one of them, where the injured had been placed, flooded with water when a cannonball broke a pipe.

The situation is tragic.

In the “Red Cross” and “Soteria” hospitals, which are the strongholds of the fighters, fierce battles are taking place with the active participation of the patients.

No more food or even rags or bandages.

It is also impossible for anyone to go out to bury the dead.⁹

Lambert’s description is accurate, and, as a Swiss from Geneva, he rates as an objective observer (if such neutrality is possible anywhere in a civil conflict). As it becomes obvious from his text it was already nearly impossible to maintain even the pretense of unity and celebration after Liberation. Toula Mara, who experienced the December conflict from the vantage point of a militant of KKE and had carried the wounded and the dead on a tricycle through the streets of the city to be tended to or buried, put the traumatic weight of the events simply: “After December, I was never again able to cry” (Interview, 27 June 1995). We still do not know—even now—the exact number of injuries and fatalities. The deaths were caused by stray bullets and intentional assaults, from bombing by English aircraft and from ground retaliation.

The overwhelming intervention of British forces led to the defeat of EAM and its withdrawal from Athens on 5 January 1945. British action was censured by the international democratic press, the Opposition in Britain itself, and some members of Churchill’s own party. In January 1945, Churchill was forced to defend his policy in the House of Commons, especially that Great Britain had openly collaborated with the former Nazi collaborators, the Greek Security Battalions, and with other anticommunist organizations (Mazower 1994, 382). In its turn the KKE was also accused of crimes, and the Party quickly accepted the responsibility for “transgressions” (“*hypervasies*”) that had been committed.¹⁰

In February 1945 ELAS surrendered under the terms of the Varkiza Agreement. What followed is the so-called period of “White Terror,” during which the left-wing fighters of EAM and other members and sympathizers of KKE were massively persecuted, exiled, imprisoned, or executed. Patra Hatzissava was arrested in December, and her head was shaved; she remained in jail until 23 March 1945. Two days after her release, she was arrested again and was beaten up. She remained in jail at the end of 1945.

In March 1946, elections took place in Greece from which the KKE abstained. The parliament passed a series of special measures, among which was the institution of a court martial even for civilian offenses. The Greek Civil War (1946-1949) had begun. General Scobie remained in command of the British forces in Greece until 1946. The same year, Patra Hatzissava graduated from high school and prepared for university entrance exams, which she could not take, because she could not afford the examination fee.

The British economy could not bear the double burden of reconstruction and Greek military expenditure resulting from the Civil War, and in February 1947 Britain officially withdrew its forces and operations from Greece. In March of the same year, the US President proclaimed what is known as the Truman Doctrine, soon to be followed by the Marshall Plan. In June AMAG (the American Mission for Aid to Greece) was created and in July the Marshall Plan was delivered (Stathakis 2004, 147) in accordance with the platform of the Breton Woods agreement. In October 1947

Patra Hatzissava got married. In May 1949, her husband was arrested; in November of that same year, 40 days after the execution of her brother, she was arrested, too, and the court martial sentenced her to death. She was released in 1953. The grip of the civil conflict on her did not end there: she was arrested again in 1967, during the dictatorship of the Colonels that lasted from 1967 to 1974.

The “December Events” and their sequel, the Greek Civil War, were the violent legacy of WWII, Occupation, and Resistance. The entire decade of the 1940s was for Greece a decade of wars—the six victorious months on the Albanian Front (October 1940–April 1941), followed by the Occupation and Resistance (1941–1944), and on their heels the Civil War (1946–49). The Liberation of October 1944 does not exist in personal, social, or political memories in Greece as it does in other European or Allied countries; in Greece it is a parenthesis. The decision to designate the beginning of the war, the 28th of October, as a national holiday was acceptable to all parties of the divided society and its divided memory. As Liberation was so proximately and historically connected to the civil conflict that outlived the war, both in its armed and its Cold phases, over time, as the decades went by, its memory was deleted, and its memorialization was never effectuated. Ten years of war is an intolerable load; the heavy burden of this history has not yet been resolved in Greece.

HISTORIAN, INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR

NOTES

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¹ The IMF and the IBRD became operational in 1945 after a sufficient number of countries had ratified the Agreement. This system lasted until August 1971, when the US abandoned the gold standard and terminated convertibility of the US dollar to gold.

² See http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d8/Percentages_Agreement.png (accessed 23 September 2014).

³ Panourgíá (2009) mentions the following in regards to the devastation of the country “Greece was left with 250,000 dead from famine, 15,700 dead from the Italian war, 8,000 dead from the week-long German invasion, 3,000 dead from the German bombings, 50,000 dead from Allied bombings, 40,000 dead from the Bulgarian forces, 30,000 dead from German and Italian retaliation to acts of resistance, 4,000 military deaths abroad, 1,000 dead in the merchant marine, 60,000 disappeared Jews. In a country of fewer than eight million, there were 415,300 dead between October 28, 1940, and October 12, 1944. These figures are given by Constantine A. Doxiadis, the urban planner and architect who was the Minister of Housing and Reconstruction from 1945 to 1946. Doxiadis resigned his post shortly before the elections of 1946, but he remained as director of the project of reconstruction until 1949. [Constantine] Tsoucalas gives slightly different figures. He says that 8 percent of the population (550,000 people) died and 34 percent of the national wealth was destroyed (rather than Doxiadis’s 40 percent): 401,500 houses were destroyed, leaving over a million people homeless; 1,770 villages were burned; harbors, railway tracks, bridges, steam engines, telephone networks, and civil airports were destroyed; 73 percent of the cargo ship tonnage

was gone, as well as 94 percent of passenger ships, 65 percent of private cars, 80 percent of public buses, 60 percent of trucks, 60 percent of horses, 60 percent of cattle, and 80 percent of domesticated small animals; 25 percent of the forests had been burned; and the Greek national product was at 40 percent. The aftermath of the war took its impetus from these realities: a population that was broken, starved, unclothed, and barefoot” Panourgia, 2009 <http://dangerouscitizens.columbia.edu/1936-1944/and-then-came/5/>

ΑΠΩΛΕΙΕΣ ΤΟΥ ΠΛΗΘΥΣΜΟΥ ΑΝΑΛΥΤΙΚΑ ΚΑΤΑ ΤΗ ΔΙΑΡΚΕΙΑ ΤΗΣ ΕΧΘΡΙΚΗΣ ΚΑΤΟΧΗΣ 1941 - 1944

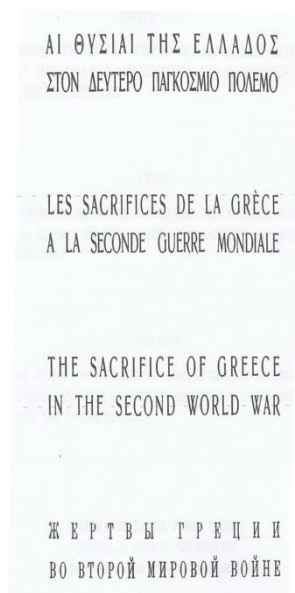
Ο πληθυσμός της χώρας ελαττώθηκε τρομακτικά.
Η πείνα, οι σφαγές, οι διωγμοί τον άφησαν πολύ λιγώτερο από ότι ήταν όταν άρχισε ο πόλεμος.

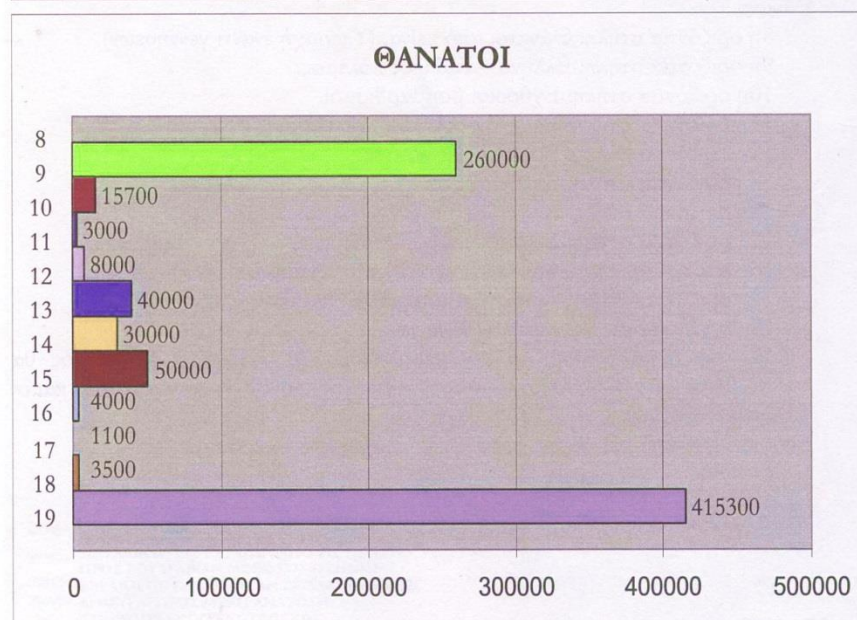
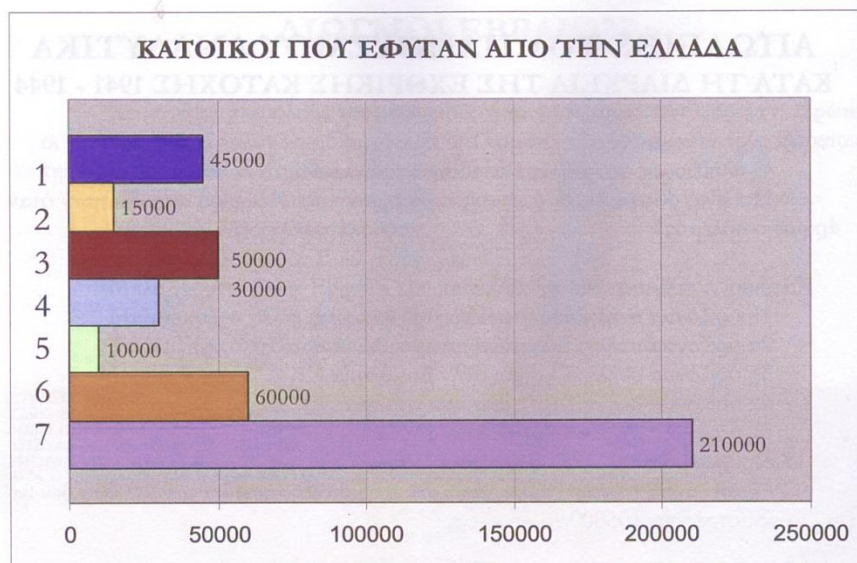
Κάτοικοι που έφυγαν απ' την Ελλάδα:

- 1η οριζόντια στήλη: Πολίτες προς Μ. Ανατολή.
- 2α οριζόντια στήλη: Στρατιωτικοί προς Μ. Ανατολή.
- 3η οριζόντια στήλη: Όμηροι στην Βουλγαρία.
- 4η οριζόντια στήλη: Όμηροι στην Γερμανία.
- 5η οριζόντια στήλη: Όμηροι στην Ιταλία
- 6η οριζόντια στήλη: Εβραίοι στην Πολωνία.
- 7η οριζόντια στήλη: Υπολογίζεται ότι από το άνω σύνολο των 210000 δεν θα επιστρέψουν 105000.

Θάνατοι:

- 8η οριζόντια στήλη: Θάνατοι από πείνα. (Υπεροχή έναντι γεννήσεων)
- 9η οριζόντια στήλη: Ελληνο – Ιταλικός πόλεμος.
- 10η οριζόντια στήλη: Εχθρικοί βομβαρδισμοί.
- 11η οριζόντια στήλη: Ελληνογερμανικός πόλεμος.
- 12η οριζόντια στήλη: Βουλγαρικές σφαγές.
- 13η οριζόντια στήλη: Εκτελέσεις από Γερμανούς και Ιταλούς.
- 14η οριζόντια στήλη: Αντίποινα για τον ανταρτοπόλεμο.
- 15η οριζόντια στήλη: Συμμαχικοί βομβαρδισμοί.
- 16η οριζόντια στήλη: Απώλειες στρατού στο εξωτερικό.
- 17η οριζόντια στήλη: Απώλειες Εμπορικού Ναυτικού.
- 18η οριζόντια στήλη: Σύνολον θανάτων.
- 19η οριζόντια στήλη: Αν δεν μεσολαβούσε η κατοχή ο πληθυσμός θα ανέβαινε κατά 300000 (υπεροχή γεννήσεων) ή 410000 αν λογαριαστούν και οι παλινοστούντες.





Doxiadis's (1946) recounting of deaths and departures from Occupied Greece

⁴ <http://www.poein.gr/archives/3156> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TrXeUIeShYk>

⁵ See the research carried out by a team of four doctors just after Liberation in Skouras 1947.

⁶ Papaioannou's archive is held in the Photographic Archive of the Benaki Museum.

⁷ Patra Hatzisavva, was born in Athens in 1927. The interview was conducted on 1 March 1995.

⁸ He refers to the neighborhoods of Kaisariani, Pangrati and Vyronas, where most of the inhabitants were members or followers of EAM/KKE.

⁹ Andrein Lambert, «Rapport sur mon activité á Athènes 3.12.1944 au 4.1.1945», Archive de la Comité Internationale de la Croix Rouge (ACICR) G 3/27 c [152]. The text, originally

in French has been translated into Greek and published in Vervenioti, *Representations of History*, 40-53. The present translation is mine.

¹⁰ The admission can be found in many of KKE's texts. See, for instance, "KKE, Central Committee, Keynote and final speech of Giorgis Siantos" *The 7th Conference of KKE*, Vol. 2 (Athens 1945), reproduced in *Rizospastis*, 10 October 1945.

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