

# Occasional Papers 3

## *Editors' Note*

*In the context of the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Liberation of Greece from the Axis Powers we asked Dimitris Kousouris to offer us his thoughts on the matter, presented herewith.*

## LIBERATION 1944: NOT A MOMENT, A TIME IN HISTORY

Dimitris Kousouris

*This end of war is suffocating, not only because of the terror that is all around and of the possible dangers lurking behind the end of the Occupation in Athens, but also (and maybe above all) because one feels (the crowd subconsciously and the more clear-sighted consciously) that the end will not be an end, that nothing will end, neither economic instability, nor political and social confusion, nor the inhuman regimes or the danger of a new war. Especially here, in our part of the world.*

*George Theotokas, [1945]*

The most common misunderstanding concerning the Liberation of Greece, as that of other European countries, was that it was a moment, that magnificent moment of *fête folle*, crazy party in the streets of Paris, Athens, Rome, Brussels, in which the people united—men and women of every age, children and youngsters waving flags, flags of the Allies and flags with the sickle-and-hammer. Street fighters brandishing their weapons to the retreating German troops and to the photographers were perfectly aware that this would make another weapon of propaganda to raise the spirits of popular insurrection, to awake memories of autumn 1918 all over the continent, to raise the specter of revolution against the old ruling classes. Any photographer in any of the cities that broke the yoke of Nazi rule and foreign occupation in late 1944 - early 1945 had plenty of opportunities to immortalize a snapshot of those demonstrations. Athens, too, in that October 1944, was a landmark of the huge popular and military blow that swept Fascism and Nazism away from power all over the continent. Why would then George Theotokas, the Athenian bourgeois writer -one of the most prominent of his time- write those pessimistic words in his personal diary, on the eve of those glorious events?

Theotokas's vision was so gloomy because he knew that the process of liberation had a dark side, too: that of the extrajudicial purges, summary trials and executions of Nazis or Nazi-collaborators, rituals of public shaming, ignoble shavings of women's heads, and so many more. What have been termed as the “excesses” of the resistant guerillas have become the bread-and-butter of historical revisionists ever since, just as for the victors the level of Nazi violence that reached a peak in 1944, with the perpetration of mass killings as reprisals against resistance troops and civilians, proved the barbarity of the Nazis. The villages of Distomo (in Greece) and Oradour-sur-Glane (in France), destroyed and decimated by the Nazi troops at the very same day, 10 June 1944, in two different parts

of the continent, have been among the major *lieux de mémoire* of the antifascist camp, just as much as the popular uprising that in 1944 spread from Paris to Warsaw and from Athens to Brussels.

Liberation was not a sudden outburst of violence and mass mobilization; it was the culmination of a general crisis, composed of open conflicts that had been pending for decades or more. The moment of Liberation was long and had various stages. Before becoming reality, the episode of liberation was conceived as a real expectation—since the second battle of El Alamein, and even more after the victory at Stalingrad, in early 1943, Allied victory had become an imminent perspective, a matter of weeks or months. By the summer of 1943, people living in occupied Athens expected the war to end by early 1944; after all, as the Great War had proved, no European Great Power could endure more than four years of total war. Thus, as the tide was turning, instructed by the revolutionary crisis of 1917-1923, each camp started taking positions for what was next, shaping the political and social coalitions that would claim political power after the war.

Thus, Liberation was also a time of revolution. As Germans were defending themselves unrelentingly and Soviet troops rushed to counter-attack, the fight was over the power vacuum that the retreat of Axis troops would leave behind. In an ultimate demonstration of old-style diplomacy practices, Winston Churchill was rushed to Moscow to agree upon the postwar spheres of influence with Stalin (Resis 1978). The World War was transforming itself into a highly diversified set of local and peripheral political, ethnic, and class conflicts. As the *Armja Krajowa* was launching the Warsaw Uprising, communist-led guerillas were taking control of large territories in Yugoslavia, Greece, France, and Italy. This was also a time of utopia in which democracy – that is people's rule, social justice, peace—a world without violence (Joas 2003), seemed to be within easy reach. A few years later, Italo Calvino would illustrate this feeling as follows: <sup>1</sup>

### *Oltre il ponte*

.....  
*La speranza era nostra compagna  
A assaltar caposaldi nemici  
Conquistandoci l'armi in battaglia  
Scalzi e laceri eppure felici*

Hope used to be our companion  
When we attacked the enemy's strongholds  
Conquering our weapons in battle  
Barefoot, in rags and yet so happy.

*Avevamo vent'anni e oltre il ponte  
Oltre il ponte ch'è in mano nemica  
Vedevam l'altra riva, la vita  
Tutto il bene del mondo oltre il ponte.  
Tutto il male avevamo di fronte  
Tutto il bene avevamo nel cuore  
A vent'anni la vita è oltre il ponte  
Oltre il fuoco comincia l'amore.*

We were twenty and beyond the bridge,  
The bridge in the hand of the enemy  
We saw the bank in front, and life,  
All the good of the world beyond the bridge.  
All the evil did we see in front of us,  
All the good did we have in our heart,  
Life at twenty is beyond the bridge,  
Beyond the fire, love is beginning.

<http://www.antiwarsons.org/canzone.php?id=771&lang=en>

Liberation also marked the peak, so to speak, of socialist hegemony in Europe. After five or six years of popular mobilization and of mass engagement on the war front or in shadow armies, trade unions and communist or left-wing political parties were strong enough to impose their agenda. That balance of class forces laid the foundations for the creation and/or further development of postwar European welfare state institutions on both sides of the iron curtain (Eley 2008). Meanwhile, in some cases, the left-wing resistance had become much more than a powerful component of the political system: controlling large self-administered sections of the countryside, and combining this with mass mobilization in the cities, pro-communist resistance movements in Greece, as in Yugoslavia, had established a situation of dual power on the eve of the Liberation.

Yet more than a passage from war to peace, liberation was rather a continuation of war by other means. Beside the gallows and the firing squads, governments of broad republican power coalitions took over, and a broad universe of emergency justice institutions emerged in order satisfy the quest for justice, punishing war criminals and collaborators and restoring the rule of law. In a first attempt to gather the bearings of a world that was about to emerge, the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty described the period of Liberation as a transition to a “time of institutions” (1945, 64). Polish critic and Shakespeare scholar Jan Kott, on the other hand, described the newly liberated continent of 1945 in that “*never before was there such a thin line between the demand for vengeance and the call for justice, between anarchy and law, between the violent need to begin everything anew and the equally desperate need to return to that which was*” (Borowski 1976). In Greece, the line separating reality and fiction of the antifascist struggle was almost completely transparent. Pro-British and pro-German anticommunists were merging together against the threat of a communist takeover, sometimes in somewhat grotesque ways, as in the case of the collaborationist militia men of Corinth who, some days before the definitive departure of the Wehrmacht, had new “English-style” resistance uniforms sewn for them, renaming themselves as a unit of an anticommunist resistance group.

However, the cheers and shouts for the liberation did not last long in Greece. Less than three months after the Liberation, a major government crisis led to open civil conflict between resistance troops and the united anticommunist forces, which were gathering among their ranks former pro-Allied officers and collaborationist militia men alike. The massive military intervention of the British in favor of the latter during the “Battle of Athens” in December 1944 marked the first major breach in the international antifascist alliance against the common enemy. This was even before the war was over. These developments paved the way for the legal and extralegal persecution of the Left in Greece and for a civil war that only ended in 1949.

In her discussion of the poetry of René Char, written soon after his engagement in the French Resistance during World War II, Hanna Arendt spoke of the “lost treasure” of the generation of the resistance as symptomatic of a broader crisis in modern Western culture. For her, it was an “age-old treasure of revolutions that appears abruptly ... and disappears again as though it were a *fata morgana*” (1961, 9). Arendt argued that the complexity of this cultural symptom of loss manifested itself in intervals between *what is no longer and what is not yet*. In Greece, this odd in-between interval lasted for one quarter of a century and acquired institutional status through an authoritarian regime that lasted until 1974.

Thus, it is not a coincidence that as early as 1945, the poet Manolis Anagnostakis (in Karen Emmerich’s unpublished translation) retorted:

### Ο Πόλεμος

.....  
*Ύστερα ήρθανε τα λάβαρα, οι σημαίες κι οι φανφάρες κι οι τοίχοι γκρεμιστήκανε απ’ τις άναρθρες  
κραυγές*

*Πτώματα ακέφαλα χορεύανε τρελά και τρέχανε σα μεθυσμένα όταν βαρούσανε οι καμπάνες*

*Τότε, θυμάσαι, που μου λες: Ετέλειωσεν ο πόλεμος!*

*Όμως ο Πόλεμος δεν τέλειωσεν ακόμα.*

*Γιατί κανένας πόλεμος δεν τέλειωσε ποτέ!*

## The War

And then the banners came, the flags and fanfares and the walls crumbled, brought down by  
inarticulate cries  
Headless corpses madly danced and ran as if drunk when the bells tolled

Then, remember, your telling me: The war has ended!

But the war hasn't ended yet.  
Because no war has ever ended!

<http://www.antifonies.gr/%CE%BF-%CE%BC%CE%B1%CE%BD%CF%89%CE%BB%CE%B7%CF%83-%CE%B1%CE%BD%CE%B1%CE%B3%CE%BD%CF%89%CF%83%CF%84%CE%B1%CE%BA%CE%B7%CF%83-%CE%B4%CE%B9%CE%B1%CE%B2%CE%B1%CE%B6%CE%B5%CE%B9-%CF%80%CE%BF%CE%B9%CE%B7/>

Once more on the frontier between East and West, during the long and eventful process of Liberation, the Greek periphery offered a privileged and instructive view on a major historical transformation of the continent. Or, as Jan Patočka, the Czech philosopher put it several years later, the Second World War mutated into something peculiar which looked “neither quite like war, nor quite like peace” (1996, 119).

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## NOTES

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1 Text of the famous song of Sergio Liberovici, in *Cantacronache I* (1961). Transl. by Riccardo Venturi

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