

Paramilitarism, politics and organized crime during the Greek civil war (1945–1949)¹

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The historiography of the Greek civil war has made significant progress during the past decade, but the origins, role and activities of paramilitaries remain under-researched. Most studies have focused on the period of the ‘white terror’ and explored the collusion between the state and the paramilitary groups. Although such studies have advanced our understanding of this turbulent period, they have not discussed important issues such as the motivation of the rank and file members, the sociopolitical networks used to recruit and mobilize support and the diverse conditions under which militias emerge. The article will address this lacuna and provide new insights into the origins, development and legacies of paramilitarism.

Keywords: paramilitaries; state-sanctioned violence; collusion; warfare; organized crime

Civil wars are usually represented as binary conflicts waged between clearly defined ideological and military camps. In recent years, scholars have challenged these perceptions and underlined the role of militias, criminal gangs and paramilitary outfits in civil conflict. The article contributes to this burgeoning historiography by discussing the origins, role and impact of paramilitary groups during the Greek civil war. While the historiography of the civil war has made significant progress during the past decade, the origins, role and activities of paramilitaries remain under-researched. The dearth of research on this phenomenon can be observed not only in Greek historiography. Despite the increasing preeminence of non-state armed actors in recent conflicts,

Researchers have tended to disregard the proliferation of armed actors who emerge during an armed conflict to fight on behalf of the state and/or against the rebels ... although militias emerge in most conflicts, rarely are they part of comparative studies of civil wars, be they empirical or theoretical.²

1 Research for this article was supported by the Frank Harry Guggenheim Foundation.

2 C. Jentzsch, S. Kalyvas, L. Schubiger, ‘Militias in civil wars’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59.5 (2015) 756.

Paramilitaries operate in a twilight zone located between the civilian and the military realm under a host of monikers such as ‘militias’, ‘death squads’ and ‘self-defence groups’.³ Distinguishing them from their rivals, let alone other non-state actors, such as criminal clans, vigilantes and gangs, is a complex task because ‘the term “paramilitary” has been used colloquially as a type of catch-all rather than with any element of precision or analytic conceptualization’.⁴ The same factors make a systematic analysis of their motives and activities particularly complex. Paramilitary groups are particularly careful not to leave a paper trail, while veterans are often unwilling to write or speak about their experiences.⁵

These problems are quite pronounced in the study of paramilitarism during the Greek civil war. Most studies have focused on the period of the ‘white terror’ and explored the collusion between the state and the paramilitary groups. Although such studies have considerably advanced our understanding of this turbulent period, they have not discussed important issues such as the motivation of the rank-and-file members, the socio-political networks used to recruit and mobilize support and the diverse conditions under which militias emerge.⁶ At the same time, their view of paramilitarism as being a centrally created phenomenon has overlooked the diverse origins of these groups and their often contentious relationship with the state. Militiamen were often described as state manipulated thugs. However, as Paul Staniland noted, ‘subservience to the state ‘is only one possible ... strategy’ for the paramilitaries, as ‘militias may also be violently targeted by regimes, absorbed into the state apparatus, or contained as a low level but endemic challenge. They are not intrinsically subservient junior partners of governments.’⁷

The article draws upon a wide range of sources; memoirs, oral testimonies, police and army archives and the private correspondence of politicians, army officers and paramilitary leaders in order to address three questions. What prompted the emergence of paramilitaries? What were their relations to the state? What was the impact of paramilitarism upon the socio-political landscape? The article demonstrates that paramilitary mobilization was a grassroots response, prompted by the inability of the post-war state to re-impose its authority and deal with the challenges of post-war reconstruction. The militias had a decidedly local character and were highly suspicious of the state. Nonetheless, self-interest and an obsessive fear of the Left led the state and the militias to form an alliance. The predatory activities of the militias and their flagrant abuse of power complicated their relations with the military authorities, who

3 J. Mazzei, *Death Squads or Self-Defence Forces? How Paramilitary Groups Emerge and Challenge Democracy in Latin America* (Chapel Hill 2009) 216–17.

4 Op. cit., 217.

5 F. Sanín, ‘Telling the difference: Guerrillas and paramilitaries in the Colombian war’, *Politics & Society* 36.1 (2008) 3–5.

6 T. Kostopoulos, ‘Η λευκή τρομοκρατία’, in *Η Ιστορία των Νέων Ελλήνων*, XVII (Athens 2006) 76–117; S. Marketos, ‘Η ελληνική άκρα δεξιά στην δεκαετία του 40’, in H. Hatziosif (ed.), *Ιστορία της Ελλάδος του 20^{ου} Αιώνα*, IV (Athens 2009) 286–325.

7 P. Staniland, ‘Militias, ideology, and the state’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59.2 (2015) 772.

saw them as a liability. There were repeated attempts to disperse them, but their ties to the political world prevented this and eventually transformed the paramilitaries into independent political players. This situation had important repercussions as their continuous significance and ties to a section of the political and security establishments disrupted the political and social life of the country for years to come.

The political origins of paramilitarism

The liberation of Greece in October 1944 was followed by months of political tension that finally resulted, during December 1944, in a violent clash between the National Popular Liberation Army (ELAS), the government forces and their British allies. After over a month of fighting, the government and the political branch of the resistance, the National Liberation Front (EAM), opened negotiations that resulted in the signing of the Varkiza Accord in February 1945. The accord entailed, among other provisions, free and impartial elections and the demobilization of ELAS.⁸ The accord was greeted with relief by a very large segment of the population that had been exhausted by years of fratricidal struggle and pauperization. Nevertheless, within a few weeks, fighting resumed as leftist and rightist bands clashed across the country. The origins and motivations behind this violence have been strongly disputed. Some historians have attributed the blame to the Left,⁹ while others have described this period as a ‘one-sided’ civil war waged by paramilitary gangs that were formed and equipped by the state to re-impose the *status quo ante bellum*.¹⁰ More recent studies have questioned these narratives and called for a more careful discussion of the motivations and patterns of violence during this period.¹¹

The *Dekemvriana*, as these events were called, dealt a powerful blow at the anemic efforts towards reconstruction. The Minister for Home Affairs, Konstantinos Tsatsos, noted that in the aftermath of Varkiza ‘the state apparatus was limited to some of the regional capitals...the gendarmerie was undermanned ... many civil service positions were vacant’.¹² The government was unable to offer the most basic social services or impose a semblance of order in the anarchic countryside.¹³

The weakness of the state allowed the Communist Left to retain its hold in many rural areas. Kostas Taliadouros, a political ally of Tsatsos, reported that in his home-region of

8 S. Gasparinatos, *Απελευθέρωση, Δεκεμβριανά, Βάρκιζα* (Athens 1998).

9 J. Koliopoulos, *Plundered Loyalties: WWII and Civil War in Greek West Macedonia* (New York 1999).

10 D. Close, *The Origins of the Greek Civil War* (London 1995); G. Margaritis, *Ιστορία του Ελληνικού Εμφυλίου 1946–1949*, I (Athens 2000); P. Voglis, *Η αδύνατη επανάσταση: η κοινωνική δυναμική του Εμφυλίου* (Athens 2014).

11 For a detailed discussion of the dynamics of violence during the Greek civil war see S. Plakoudas, *The Greek Civil War: Strategy, Counterinsurgency and the Monarchy* (London 2017) 20–6; see also S. Kalyvas and N. Marantzidis, *Εμφύλια πάθη: 23+2 νέες ερωτήσεις και απαντήσεις για τον Εμφύλιο* (Athens 2016).

12 Gennadeios Library, K. Tsatsos Archive, Διά να γίνωμεν κράτος, File 50.4, August 1945.

13 Dieftinski Istorias Stratou (henceforth DIS), *Αρχεία Εμφυλίου Πολέμου 1944–1949*, II (Athens 1998) 46.

Thessaly the Left 'was more powerful' than the state and 'had not lost control of the situation even for a moment'.¹⁴ The situation was similar in Epirus, and in parts of the Peloponnese and Macedonia.¹⁵ The resilience of the Left incensed conservative civilians who complained that the Left had no intention of honouring the Varkiza agreement.¹⁶ These perceptions were reinforced after the government passed a decree that called for the replacement of the EAM councillors with state-appointed ones.¹⁷ EAM councillors refused to resign from their positions and in many cases 'encouraged their followers to resist the newly appointed village councils'.¹⁸ Government-backed mayors were attacked and, in some cases, murdered by left-wing activists.¹⁹

Poverty and unemployment further heightened these rivalries. Axis reprisals, a lack of resources and the constant demands of ELAS guerrillas for food, provisions and materiel had denuded local economies. Thousands of peasants depended upon foreign aid for food and clothing. Control of these resources became a key issue in local power struggles.²⁰ The authorities were flooded with urgent requests for the replacement of village councils and mayors or the return of previous occupants.²¹ In many rural areas 'rivalries over the distribution of food and other Red Cross and UNRRA provisions ... resulted in brawls ... and on more than one occasion to bloodshed'.²²

These tensions were exacerbated by the presence of numerous bands of ELAS veterans who had refused to demobilize. The Minister for Home Affairs estimated that between 1000 and 1400 guerrillas had refused to lay down their arms.²³ Such bands were particularly active in western and central Macedonia, where guerrillas and Macedonian autonomists attacked gendarmerie stations and border patrols, assassinated local notables and sabotaged installations and infrastructure.²⁴ Renegade bands that refused to accept the Varkiza accord were also present in southern Greece, where they held up buses and trucks, raided UNRRA depots and murdered state-appointed mayors.²⁵

The presence of the bands created a morbid climate of fear and suspicion among conservative civilians who were terrified that a left-wing coup was on its way. A retired

14 Gennadeios Library, Tsatsos Archive, Επιστολή Κ. Ταλαδούρου, Box 50, Folder 1, 3/5/1945.

15 DIS, *Αρχαία Εμφυλίου Πολέμου 1944–1949*, Vol. 2, 50–76.

16 Genika Archeia tou Kratous (henceforth GAK), Petimezas Archive, Υπόμνημα της Ενωμένης Δημοκρατικής Αντιπολιτεύσεως, 163, 19/1/1947.

17 Gennadeios, Tsatsos Archive, Διά να γίνωμεν κράτος.

18 DIS, *Archeia Emfyliou Polemou*, I, 544.

19 DIS, Πρέβεζα, Έκθεσις επί της καταστάσεως εις την περιοχόν της στρατιωτικής διοικήσεως, 1372/A/1, 2/5/1945; Gennadeios Library, Tsatsos Archive, Επιστολή/1, 3/5/1945.

20 DIS, *Αρχαία Εμφυλίου Πολέμου*, I, 503.

21 Istoriko Archeio Makedonias, Geniki Dioikisi Dytkis Makedonias, Επιστολή προς τη Γενική Διοίκηση, Καισάρεια Κοζάνη, File 49.1/71, 16/4/46.

22 G. Christakis, *Ο εμφύλιος και οι συνέπειες του στην επαρχία Βιάννου* (Heraklion 2005) 47.

23 GAK, Archeio Vasilikon Anaktoron, Επιστολή Γ. Ζαλοκώστα προς Β. Γεώργιον, File 94/439.

24 Gennadeios Library, F. Dragoumis Archive, Επιστολή προς Φ. Δραγούμη, Καστοριά, File 69.2, 27/3/1945.

25 DIS, Υποβολή εκθέσεων περί καταστάσεως εις περιοχή ΑΣΔΗ, Ιωάννινα, File 1372/A/1/2, 12/5/1945; 'Οι τρομοκράται, η Κουνουρία τελεί υπό το κράτος της ληστοκρατίας των κακοποιών', *Αλήθεια*, 11/6/1945.

army officer noted in early 1945 that, despite the government's victory in the *Dekemvriana*, 'the national-minded population was convinced that the (communist) danger was far from diminished'.²⁶ Such feelings were even more widespread in northern Greece, where conservative civilians believed that the 'present government will last even less than Kerensky's administration in Russia'. A local civil servant bemoaned to his superiors that government leaders were 'weak and pathetic in sharp contrast to the 'young, courageous and combative cohorts of the notorious Zachariadis, who could be safely described as the Greek Lenin'.²⁷ These views were aggressively propagated by the right-wing press, which warned its readers that 'anarchy is at the gates ... the anarchists are lurking in the wings ... their aim is to create unrest and take advantage of popular discontent to facilitate the imposition of red fascism'.²⁸

These fears led to a violent swing towards the Right among republicans, moderates and even some social democrats who saw the reinstatement of the monarchy as being the only way to avert a communist takeover.²⁹ Conservative associations and citizen groups pressured the government to adopt a more belligerent policy. Activists petitioned Tsatsos to provide them with guns and help them organize militias that would then assist the gendarmerie in suppressing the Left. Such demands were rejected by Tsatsos and his colleagues in the cabinet.³⁰

This refusal further alienated activists and ordinary civilians, many of whom came to believe that addressing their grievances through the formal channels was impossible. Fear and distrust encouraged the development of an increasingly parochial mentality. Some activists claimed that the entire government apparatus was infiltrated by the Left and 'there isn't a single prefect, governor general, mayor or village president who doesn't think like a communist'.³¹ Many conservatives came to believe that in light of this situation a violent confrontation was inevitable. An intelligence officer reported that conservative civilians 'have no trust whatsoever in the state because of the instability of the political scenery and the constant jockeying for position among the parties ... they refuse to co-operate with the state ... and view the authorities with extreme suspicion, preferring to settle their differences through violence.' The report concluded by noting that the nationalists had not formed any military organizations so far and that most acts of violence were committed by 'isolated individuals' and small, makeshift bands. However, the author believed that this was going to change soon. Subsequent events vindicated this prediction.³²

26 G. Raptis, *Συμβολή στην ιστορία της Ναυπακτίας, γεγονότα περιόδου 1940–1950* (Nafaktos 2003) 317.

27 Gennadeios Library, F. Dragoumis Archive, Έκθεση του φρονήματος του λαού της Θεσσαλονίκης, File 69.2, 15/08/1945.

28 'Η αναρχία επί θύραις', *Αλήθεια*, 8/6/1945.

29 Gennadeios Library, K. Tsatsos Archive, Για το δημοψήφισμα/εκλογικό νόμο, Box 50, File 4, 1946.

30 Gennadeios Library, K. Tsatsos Archive, Επιστολή στον Γ. Παπανδρέου, Box 51, Folder 7, 25/5/1945.

31 Gennadeios Library, F. Dragoumis Archive, Έκθεση του φρονήματος.

32 DIS, Ανωτέρα στρατιωτική διοίκησής Ηπείρου/1372/A/1, 2/8/1945.

Recruitment and operations

The first paramilitary bands emerged in April 1945.³³ These militias have been occasionally described as being a single-minded, united force that operated under an effective and ruthless leadership. The reality on the ground was very different. A senior conservative noted that the bands lacked ‘any discipline or central co-ordination.’³⁴ Militias were broadly divided into two categories. The first consisted of ‘parochial groups’:³⁵ small, locally based organizations that lacked any formal structure. Such groups were not new to the countryside. Rural elites had a tradition of raising self-defence groups, private police forces and vigilantes to protect their interests and assist them in their feuds. Such groups were institutionalized during the dictatorship of general Theodoros Pangalos, which made extensive use of militias against minorities, irredentist groups and brigands.³⁶

Militias were thus able to build upon local traditions and pre-existing social networks in order to mobilize and operate. Parochial groups organized around natural leaders; notables and local ‘hard men’, many of whom had served sentences for rustling, robbery and assault, and recruited members who were familiar with one another from the same village, quarter or neighbourhood. Local militias in Messinia were formed around groups of fellow-villagers and relatives.³⁷ A similar pattern of mobilization was common in the uplands of Achaea, where militiamen had often ‘known each other since before the war and were inseparable’,³⁸ in the prefecture of Nafpaktos, where many militias were formed with the help of local youth gangs,³⁹ and in Epirus, where militia members were often members of the same extended family.⁴⁰

These groups were relatively small but they could count upon a large number of part-timers who joined for the duration of an operation and then returned to their normal routine afterwards. Accordingly, their remit was usually limited to a single village or quarter and was shaped by local conditions, such as demography and communal relations. Collaboration between them was relatively uncommon, and ‘every village’, noted a left-wing weekly in the Peloponnese, ‘has its own small band of thugs and terrorists’, who operated independently and often with little co-ordination with each other.⁴¹ The fiercely territorial nature of these militias was demonstrated in

33 Gennadeios Library, K. Tsatsos Archive, Διά να γίνωμεν κράτος.

34 Konstantinos Karamanlis Foundation, K. Tsaldaris Archive, Έκθεσις περί της καταστάσεως εις την βόρεια Ελλάδα/10/3/36/1.

35 This typology and the following discussion are based upon Paul Staniland’s outstanding study of the origins and development of irregular formations during civil wars, P. Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (Ithaca 2014).

36 P. Apostolidis, *Υπηρεσίες Πληροφοριών στην Ελλάδα* (Athens 2014) 90–5; Elliniko Logotechniko kai Istoriko Archeio, Περί του τρόπου καταδιώξεως των ληστών Ρεντζαίων, Ioannina, File 3/11/1923.

37 GAK, Archeio Vasilikon Anaktoron, Έκθεση Ζαλοκώστα, Folder 439/205, 20/8/1945.

38 G. Prioulos, *Μια αλυσίδα μνήμης: Αχαΐα και Βόρεια Πελοπόννησος 1940–1949* (Athens 2007) 217.

39 V. Stavrogiannopoulos, *Πικρές αναμνήσεις* (Athens 1974) 186.

40 K. Vlachos, *Η αντίσταση στην Λάκκα Σούλι* (Ioannina n.d.) 63.

41 ‘Οι στήλες της τρομοκρατίας’, *Κονουριακή*, 10/1/1945.

the constant feuds and turf wars between the various groups: ‘militias are not interested in expanding or disseminating propaganda ... they are more interested in poaching each other’s turf and recruits’.⁴²

Patterns of recruitment were accordingly shaped by local realities on the ground. In northern Greece, militias were formed as a response to the activities of Macedonian autonomists who operated from across the Greek-Yugoslav border. These groups were formed along an ethnic axis. The majority of the militias were raised by Pontic Greek refugees who had served in nationalist and pro-Axis groups during the occupation. Initially, these groups concentrated upon defending their villages from raids. However, as they expanded and recruited more men, they undertook offensive operations against Slav-speaking villages.⁴³ These operations were often undertaken with the full knowledge and support of the gendarmerie, which used the militias to ‘cleanse’ the border areas of a potentially dangerous and disloyal minority.⁴⁴

Ethnic tensions were less important further south, where groups were mostly based on kinship ties. Some of these bands were raised by the families and friends of EAM victims who sought to avenge the slaying of their kinsmen.⁴⁵ Other groups were formed as a response to the presence of renegade bands that raided flocks and taxed local landowners.⁴⁶ Finally, a significant number of bands were formed by peasants and local elites who sought to re-assert their authority and gain the upper hand in local rivalries over access to land, resources and pasturage. In the region of Astros and the lowlands of Messinia the first militias were formed by pastoralists from the upland villages of Kynouria who sought to reassert their claim to winter pastures that was severely limited by EAM village councils during the war.⁴⁷

The origins of the militias also had a direct influence upon the forms and patterns of violence employed against dissidents. The ‘white terror’ has been often presented as being a period of brutal, premediated violence that was inspired and co-ordinated by reactionary politicians. Militia violence was brutal but seldom co-ordinated or lethal. In Kynouria, the left-wing press recorded over fifty incidents of violence between March and July 1945. However, only two of these incidents resulted in a fatality. Distinguishing between political and private violence was often difficult. Indeed, in many cases, the actions of militiamen were motivated by personal and local disputes; access to pasturage and disputes over land rights and honour rather than political grievances.⁴⁸ Anecdotal and archival evidence from Epirus and western Greece provides a similar picture.⁴⁹

42 GAK, Archeio Vasilikon Anaktoron, Έκθεση Ζαλοκώστα.

43 Gennadeios Library, F. Dragoumis Archive, Επιστολή, Καστοριά 69.2, 27/3/1945.

44 ASKI, Communist Party Archives, Έκθεση κομματικής οργάνωσης Καστοριάς, 413/69/88.

45 Ch. Tsongas, *Αίμα και δάκρυα: Η πραγματική αλήθεια μιας πολυάνθρωπης τραγωδίας* (Ioannina n.d.) 83–9.

46 Priovolos, *Μια αλυσίδα μνήμης*, 215–17.

47 ‘Η δήθεν τρομοκρατία’, *Ελεύθερη Μεσσηνία*, 11/4/1945.

48 Data collected from *Κονουριακή*, 1/8/1945–16/5/1946.

49 DIS, Ανωτέρα στρατιωτική διοίκησης Ηπείρου, 1372/A/1, 2/8/1945.

Many attacks took place after heavy drinking in bars and taverns or during festivities when alcohol was consumed in large quantities. The phrase ‘drink had been taken’ appears often in accounts of paramilitary violence. In the town of Gavalou, for instance, local militiamen ‘were drinking heavily, talking and hurling threats ... and when they got drunk as lords they moved to another bar where they came upon an ELAS veteran from Bourlesa’,⁵⁰ the militiamen attacked the man and beat him to a pulp. In the village of Kastania locals attacked a local EAM member after a day of heavy drinking in the local *kafeneion*.⁵¹ The spontaneous nature of this violence was also demonstrated by the militiamen’s choice of weapons. Victims were commonly assaulted with fists, clubs, shepherds’ staffs, knives and stones. Firearms were seldom used and, while victims were badly beaten, killings were relatively rare.⁵²

However, this violence was by no means irrational or merely reactive. Violence served as a calculated warning to left-wing political activists and their supporters. Public beatings in places such as taverns and bars served to terrorize and humiliate opponents, to underline the militiamen’s ability to dominate their community and to convey a particular message to their fellow-villagers. Thus, locals who were accused of denouncing their fellow villagers to ELAS during the occupation had part of their tongue or earlobe cut off. Priests who were known as left-wing sympathizers had their beards shaved⁵³ and women who took an active part in EAM had their heads shaved.⁵⁴

The second group consisted of ‘vanguard organizations’ such as X, the brainchild of the ardent royalist General Georgios Grivas, and EVEN [National Monarchist Youth Union], which was created by a group of senior conservatives allied to Konstantinos Tsaldaris.⁵⁵ These groups were urban-based, had a tight, centralized leadership, a coherent political programme and access to important revenue streams. Nonetheless, they lacked extensive ties to local social networks. As a result, vanguard organizations faced an uphill struggle to recruit and establish their presence in local societies where a multitude of home-grown groups already operated.

During the occupation, X numbered fewer than two hundred armed men who were based in Athens. Grivas tried to expand his group to the northern Peloponnese and central Greece but was unable to secure local allies. The organization was kept alive with the help of well-placed allies in the police and the various collaborationist units. In the spring of 1943, X formed an alliance with RAN [Romyliia-Avlon-Nisoï] an ultra-royalist organization created and led by general Konstantinos Ventiris.⁵⁶ This collaboration continued after the war, when Grivas formed an alliance with IDEA [Sacred Union of Greek Officers], a secretive ultra-monarchist organization that was

50 Raptis, *Συμβολή στην ιστορία*, 317–19.

51 Z. Zinelis, *Η δεκαετία του 40 στην Καστανιά και τα γύρω χωριά* (Athens 2016) 111.

52 GAK, Archeio Vasilikon Anaktoron, Σημείωμα υπαρχουσών συμμοριών, Folder 442/421–2.

53 ‘Από την ζωή και την κίνηση της επαρχίας μας’, *Λαός της Ολυμπίας*, 20/11/1945.

54 G. Vrachniaris, *Πορεία μέσα στην νύχτα* (Athens 1990) 152.

55 DIS, Δελτίον πληροφοριών εσωτερικού/1372/A/1, 2/6/1945.

56 DIS, *Αρχεία Εμφυλίου Πολέμου 1944–1949*, VII (Athens 1996) 269–73.

created by Ventiris and other senior officers to support the cause of the monarchy and cleanse the army of left-wing and republican elements.⁵⁷

In the summer of 1945, a number of IDEA officers approached the British and sought their help for a military coup. These entreaties were rejected by the British Military Mission and senior conservatives. Exacerbated by the ‘cowardice’ of the political world, and the unwillingness of the British to back their designs, they forged an alliance with X and other smaller militias.⁵⁸ The purpose of this alliance was to neutralize the Left through a campaign of selective assassination and political intimidation.⁵⁹

Nevertheless, Grivas was no mere puppet. X developed its own political branch which evolved into the Ethnikon Komma Chiton [National Party of Chites]. It also created a youth and workers section and a football team and included a propaganda section run by far-right intellectuals. Grivas and his collaborators presented X as being an alternative to the traditional Right, which they eventually aimed to replace with their own brand of far-right politics. The organization promulgated a distinct ‘third way’ ideology, known as ‘Chitismos’, which combined corporatist, anti-Semitic and ultra-nationalist elements. Grivas saw himself as the saviour of the country and his men as the defenders of the nation.⁶⁰ The organization’s motto was ‘Men of X, be alert, the fatherland is in peril’.⁶¹

In spite of these ties, Grivas faced significant difficulties in expanding his brand of paramilitarism beyond Athens. X was barred from operating in Epirus, which was considered to be the de-facto territory of general Napoleon Zervas,⁶² and Macedonia, where local Pontic Greek militias were wary of any Athens-based groups. The organization even encountered problems in the Athenian districts of Pangrati and Kypseli, where X members were attacked by rival nationalist organizations.⁶³

This situation forced Grivas to turn to the criminal underworld for recruits. Criminal gangs had a long tradition of collusion with the state. In the pre-war period royalist and liberal politicians hired gang members to canvas, threaten political opponents and mobilize the working-class vote in the slums of Athens and Piraeus. Gang members were also used by the police as strike-breakers and informants. This relation continued during the occupation, when gang-leaders played a pivotal role in the formation of various anti-communist militias.⁶⁴ The liberation, and the consequent effort to purge

57 Benaki Museum Archive, S. Venizelos Archive, Εγκύκλιος διαταγή του ΙΔΕΑ σχετικά με τους σκοπούς και τη δράση της οργάνωσης, Folder/009/2, 10/4/1949.

58 Benaki Museum Archive, S. Venizelos Archive, Εγκύκλιος διαταγή.

59 GAK, Archeio Vasilikon Anaktoron, Η εθνική πολιτική ένωση.

60 ‘Ο αεικίνητος σιονιστικός δάχτυλος’, *Εφημερίς των Χιτών*, 10/5/1948.

61 ‘Το πιστεύω του Χίτου’, *Εφημερίς των Χιτών*, 27/5/1946.

62 DIS. Δελτίον πληροφοριών εσωτερικού Ιουλίου 1945/1372/A/1/2.

63 Elliniko Logotechniko kai Istoriko Archeio, Napoleon Zervas Archive, Επιστολή στον Ν. Κόκκινο, File/3/1.3, 25/10/45.

64 ‘Ο βασιλεύς του αθηναϊκού υποκόσμου Νίκος Κατελάνος’, *Ελευθέρια*, 25/10/1959.

the security services of compromised elements, alarmed the various criminal groups which sought to renew their ties with the government and find new allies in the security establishment.⁶⁵ X approached the gangs with the help of senior conservative politicians and police officers.⁶⁶ The gangs were offered money, weapons and protection from the law in exchange for their help. As a senior police officer noted, 'every thief, conman, smuggler and drug-dealer was given a licence to ply his trade freely if he agreed to co-operate'.⁶⁷

These promises enticed numerous gang leaders to join forces with X and allowed the organization to establish a presence in working-class areas, such as Drapetsona, Peristeri and Kokkinia, that had remained outside its scope during the occupation.⁶⁸ The organization also recruited extensively among the rural poor and the rural lumpenproletariat. The countryside and many working-class districts were swarming with unemployed, destitute youths who lived on the edge of starvation and survived through a combination of part-time work, petty crime, smuggling and begging. The appearance of X bands was seen as a unique opportunity to escape poverty and earn the respect of their community and peers. As an army officer noted, impoverished peasants and labourers saw the acquisition of 'a X identity card as a sensible professional choice ... since they believe that a person who possesses such a [membership] card has the right to bear arms, to abuse whomever he likes and to travel freely to Athens, where he will be wined and dined'.⁶⁹

The presence of a large number of military officers and the availability of a large pool of 'specialists in violence' such as gangsters and bandits allowed X to develop a relatively efficient and well-organized military structure. X was organized along military lines. The organization was divided into three bureaus that were responsible for operations, intelligence and propaganda. X members were issued with identity cards and were divided into sections and platoons that were placed under the command of retired NCOs and police officers.⁷⁰ The organization often operated in tandem with the National Guard and the gendarmerie. Junior leaders in both organizations were rabid anti-communists who believed that the Left had no intention of abiding by the Varkiza accord. Faced with a 'severe shortage of manpower', many officers 'tried to address this problem by working alongside those private citizens who were willing to fight back ... against ELAS'.⁷¹

X militias behaved as a 'state within a state': they set up roadblocks, issued and checked passes and licences, conducted searches for weapons and punished 'moral

65 E. Karellas, *Ιστορίες της κατοχής και του εμφυλίου, από την σκληρή καθημερινότητα εκείνης της εποχής* (Thessaloniki 2003) 108.

66 GAK, Archeio Vasilikon Anaktoron, Σκέψεις επί της πολιτικής καταστάσεως, File 373, 25/2/1946.

67 V. Daras, *Γ38: Βίος και βιώματα ενός απλού ανθρώπου* (Athens 1995) 32.

68 Gigourtakis, *Αυτοβιογραφία*, 90.

69 GAK, Vasilika Anaktora, Αναφορά, File 373/298, 18/7/1945.

70 Raptis, *Συμβολή στην ιστορία*, 377–82.

71 DIS, *Αρχεία Εμφυλίου Πολέμου 1944–1949*, II (Athens 1996) 76.

transgressors'.⁷² X also kept files and surveilled thousands of citizens who were deemed to be 'politically dangerous.'⁷³ Accordingly, the decision to persecute or kill was often dictated from the top down. A local EVEN leader noted that 'when something needed to be done', such as an assassination or an attack against local leftists, 'we called Giorgos [Tsadoulas], and I told him I wanted so many men in this place to do such and such and warned the police to steer clear as we had business to do.'⁷⁴ In this respect, violence had a clear, long-term political rationale, 'to use our own brand of terrorism to create a climate that would facilitate the re-establishment of a constitutional monarchy'. Violence would 'persuade the republicans and the communists ... to repent and move over to the nationalist side'.⁷⁵

Military operations were meticulously organized. X and EVEN deliberately used excessive and spectacular forms of violence to intimidate and terrorize civilians and political opponents. Paramilitaries would encircle a village and order all civilians to assemble in the central square or the church. Then they would proceed to search the homes of local leftists for weapons and administer public beatings or murder known leftists. Sometimes, the militias would spend three or four days in the same village or town interrogating and torturing suspects. Such raids were conducted by large groups who were often on horseback.⁷⁶ Militias were bands of ten to fifteen men who carried out drive-by shootings and raided left-wing parts of town, where they would attack, beat up and occasionally murder civilians and sexually assault activists.⁷⁷

The use of extreme violence and collusion with the security forces allowed X to expand rapidly across the country. Although an accurate estimate would be difficult, it is likely that X could marshal over three thousand armed men in Athens and an equally large number in the countryside of Attica, Boeotia and Korinthia.⁷⁸ Other groups were also able to broaden their scope and increase their strength. This sudden upsurge had a detrimental impact on the discipline and organization of the militias. Neither Grivas nor his counterparts in the ETHNEE [National Youth of Greece] and EVEN were able to control their men. A senior conservative noted that the 'nationalist movement ... lacks discipline and a unified command.' Militias acted in a 'highly decentralized manner, orders and directives are constantly issued ... however, their implementation rests upon the mood and willingness of the various parties, organizations etc... as a result, the organizations lack a unity of purpose and are therefore unable to mobilize the bulk of the population'.⁷⁹

72 DIS, Αρχεία Εμφυλίου Πολέμου 1944–1949, II, 122.

73 Raptis, *Συμβολή στην ιστορία*, 383.

74 M. Kliafa, *Σιωπηλές Φωνές: Μαρτυρίες Θεσσαλών για τον 20^ο αιώνα* (Athens 2000) 136.

75 GAK, Archeio Vasilikon Anaktoron, Έκθεση Ζαλοκώστα, File 439/205, 20/8/1945.

76 'Η τρομοκρατική δράση εις τας επαρχίας', *Ελευθερία*, 23/6/1945.

77 K. A. Glendi, *Εφτά χρόνια στην Σπάρτη* (Athens 1979) 137.

78 'Αι χθεσιναί εκδηλώσεις νεαρών μελών της οργανώσεως X', *Ελευθερία*, 13/10/1945.

79 GAK, Archeio Vasilikon Anaktoron, Η εθνική πολιτική ένωση.

These developments alarmed both the government, which saw many areas of the country slipping out of its control, and several monarchist politicians, who came to believe that Grivas had become a liability. A senior conservative wrote to King George that the militias had become a hindrance to the monarchist cause: 'the contribution of these organizations has fallen far below our expectations.'. He described the organizations as being a 'cancer ... particularly X, which, with the exception of its Athenian chapters, has caused much damage to our cause'.⁸⁰ Such perceptions led the monarchists to withdraw their support and collaborate with the government, which had begun to move against the militias. The gendarmerie and the police dispersed several of the most violent gangs and arrested a large number of X and EVEN activists in Athens, Macedonia and Thessaly.⁸¹

Nevertheless, this was not the end of the road for the militias. Many local militias survived unscathed thanks to their ties with junior politicians, who viewed them as a 'legitimate response' to left-wing provocations and a valuable ally in their factional struggles.⁸² Moreover, neither the conservatives nor the government were willing to destroy the militias root and branch. The ultimate aim of the conservatives was to turn the scattered groups into a disciplined force that would allow them to gain the upper hand in the forthcoming elections and restore the monarchy.

To raise a shadow army: the evolution of the paramilitary world

In the winter of 1945 'the organizations were in a state of decay ... the enthusiasm that drove them during the early days was well and truly gone.'⁸³ X was particularly affected, as it lost hundreds of men who defected to other organizations. The remaining X bands were consumed by rivalries and feuds over rackets and turf.⁸⁴ Local 'parochial' groups fared much better. Although these groups had no contacts in the higher political echelons, they could still count on the support of local politicians and a significant segment of the local population. Their ties to local societies thus allowed them to brave the government onslaught and coalesce into large and disciplined military organizations.

The most characteristic example is ESEA [Union of Fellow-combatants for the National Struggle]. This organization was created by Pontic Greek militiamen who had fought against ELAS during the occupation. These militias remobilized in the summer of 1945 in order to combat the bands of Macedonian Autonomists that targeted their communities. Group-leaders held a series of conferences in the autumn which resulted in the unification of the bands and the creation of ESEA, which made

80 GAK, Archeio Vasilikon Anaktoron, Επιστολή στον Β. Γεώργιον, Folder 439/123, 19/8/1945.

81 Gennadeios Library, K. Tsatsos Archive, Διά να γίνωμεν κράτος.

82 Gennadeios Library, Tsatsos Archive, Επιστολή Κ. Ταλιαδούρου.

83 Benaki Museum Archive, Sofoklis Venizelos Archive, Σημείωμα σχετικά με τις οργανώσεις της Δεξιάς από το 1945 μέχρι σήμερα, File 011/264.

84 Op. cit.

its public debut in October 1945.⁸⁵ ESEA was not just a military group. The organization had its own political branch and a youth section, and it published a newspaper and a newsletter. This allowed ESEA to exercise an undue degree of influence upon local politics. ESEA leaders were able to infiltrate the local administration and capture key positions in local government and aid committees. They used these positions to offer a series of benefits to their members: civil service positions, preferential treatment in the distribution of aid and licences to bear arms. ESEA was thus able to bolster its power and attract a significant following among the local peasantry. Within six months, ESEA had managed to expand across Macedonia and recruit thousands of members.⁸⁶

The expansion of these groups was quietly assisted by a faction of ‘Young Turks’ in the Populist (Monarchist) party. This group of radical politicians was led by Spyros Markezinis, a lawyer from a prominent political family, and the industrialist Theodoros Zalokostas. Both men had strong ties to the palace and IDEA. In the spring of 1945, the two men formed the Epitropi Syndesmou Ethnikou Agonos (Committee for the Coordination of the National Struggle), which was an ultra-conservative organization whose expressed purpose was to restore the monarchy and suppress any efforts by the Left to seize power.⁸⁷ Although this was not the only organization of its kind, the group led by Markezinis stood out for its willingness to use violence against its rivals and internal enemies in the Populist Party.⁸⁸

Markezinis and Zalokostas had disagreed with the government’s anti-militia operations and were convinced that the only way to preclude the re-emergence of the Left and facilitate the victory of the Populist Party and the return of the monarchy was to work in tandem with the militias. The two men initially tried to forge an alliance with X. However, Grivas’ excessive demands, and the growing fragmentation of X, convinced them that such an alliance would be detrimental to their cause. Zalokostas, Mavromichalis and Markezinis turned to the local militias.⁸⁹ Although these groups lacked the contacts and scope of X, they commanded great support among the local peasantry and were able to play a critical role in mobilizing the rural vote in northern Greece, where the Populist Party was traditionally weak. Zalokostas was able to forge an alliance between his group, ESEA, EVEN and various other organizations. The alliance between the conservatives and the militias was formalized on the eve of the elections. The militias agreed to provide their full backing to the conservatives. In return, they requested the inclusion of several of their leaders on the conservatives’ lists. This co-operation ultimately paid off as it led to a landslide victory for the

85 A. Kalliniotis, ‘Οι αντικομμουνιστές καπετάνιοι στη Δυτική Μακεδονία’, in N. Marantzidis (ed.), *Οι άλλοι καπετάνιοι: αντικομμουνιστές ένοπλοι στα χρόνια της κατοχής και του εμφυλίου* (Athens 2008) 240.

86 S. Dordanas, *Η γερμανική στολή στην ναφθαλίνη: επιβιώσεις του δοσιλογισμού στη Μακεδονία, 1945–1974* (Athens 2012) 239–44, K. Konstantinidis, *Στάθης Κωνσταντινίδης, Χασίλας: ένας αλλιώτικος καπετάνιος* (Thessaloniki 2010) 320–9.

87 GAK, Vasilika Anaktora, Έκθεση Μαρκεζίνη, File 439/148, 3/8/1945.

88 Op. cit.

89 Op. cit.

conservatives and the return of the Old Guard to parliament. The historian Georgios Dafnis noted that the new parliament 'largely comprised old notables who lacked direction and were incapable of creative work'.⁹⁰

The elections further consolidated the position of the regional militias and helped them to complete the transformation from localized self-defence groups to integrated political-military organizations. In Macedonia, the leader of ESEA and six of his subordinates won seats in the parliament. Militia leaders from Epirus, the Peloponnese and Crete were equally successful.⁹¹ These men formed a small but powerful lobby that pushed the government into channeling funds and weapons to the militias and give them immunity from prosecution. This support allowed other local militias to develop into large private armies. In Laconia, X bands united with the self-defence units created by Panos Katsareas, a retired army officer, to form EAOK [National Anti-communist Hunter Detachments]⁹² while in Crete the various local bands united under the banner of EOK [National Organization of Crete], which was created and led by the local strongman Manolis Badouvas and the Liberal Party MP Giorgis Petrakogiorgis.⁹³

Co-operation between the militias and the state was further intensified by the prospect of the crucial referendum on the monarchy that was scheduled for September 1946. Paramilitaries took an extremely active part in promoting royalism and attacking dissenting republicans and leftists. The referendum was a triumph for the monarchy. The return of King George II coincided with the launch of a left-wing offensive which escalated into an all-out civil war.⁹⁴

The hit-and-run tactics adopted by the guerrillas and the inability of the army to deal with the mobile guerrilla bands convinced several leading conservative politicians that it was time for the paramilitaries to join the fray in a more energetic manner. Zalokostas first introduced this idea in a personal letter to King George II. Zalokostas berated the army, noting that it was incapable of adapting to the exigencies of guerrilla warfare and suggesting that the only way to curtail and eventually smother the rebellion was to turn the paramilitaries into 'counter-guerrilla' bands because 'a shadow army can only be combated by another shadow army'. According to Zalokostas, the only way to combat the insurgents was to act outside the boundaries of the law and engage in 'terrorism, selective assassination and propaganda' in order to break the resolve of pro-insurgent civilians and cut off the guerrillas from their supporters. The militias were the ideal force to undertake such activities because their lack of formal ties to the state and army would allow the government to retain plausible deniability.⁹⁵

90 G. Dafnis, *Τα ελληνικά πολιτικά κόμματα 1821–1961* (Athens 1961) 153.

91 Konstantinos Karamanlis Foundation, K. Tsaldaris Archive, Πρακτικόν συνεδριάσεως αρχηγόν και καπεταναίων εθνικής αντιστάσεως Αν. Μακεδονίας Θράκης, File 26/8/2/2, 17/8/1947.

92 Konstantinos Karamanlis Foundation, K. Tsaldaris Archive, Δ. Τσιριγώτης προς Κ. Τσαλδάρη/11/1/88/1, 28/7/1947.

93 A. Sanoudakis, *Καπετάν Μπαντουβά απομνημονεύματα* (Heraklion 1979) 401.

94 C. M. Woodhouse, *The Struggle for Greece 1941–1949* (London 1976) 169.

95 GAK, Vasilika Anaktora, Έκθεση Γ. Ζαλοκώστα, File 439/106, 7/6/1946.

Premier Tsaldaris was initially unwilling to condone such tactics, but he was forced to back down under pressure from Zalokostas, Markezinis, Mavromichalis and the numerous militia-affiliated MPs.⁹⁶ In June 1946 the three men formed the ‘Makedoniko Komitato’, a secret organization that was tasked with raising and fitting out militias in northern Greece.⁹⁷ The army provided ESEA and other regional militias with a total of 11,500 rifles and automatic weapons in order to raise small mobile detachments that became known as ‘Hunter Platoons’.⁹⁸ The activities of these groups were co-ordinated with the help of SED [Association for National Action], a paramilitary ‘supreme council’ that was funded by the army and presided over by Ventiris.⁹⁹ The army came to a similar arrangement with EOK and EAOK in southern Greece. These organizations were allowed to operate in an independent manner and to keep their structure, leaders and insignias.¹⁰⁰

The government took a step further in September 1946 when it created the MAY [Rural Defence Units). Although the Hunter Platoons were seen as being the spearhead, the MAY were envisioned as being a type of auxiliary rural police that would act as the first line of defence against the guerillas. The MAY were tasked with surveilling local attitudes, locating and neutralizing spies, providing intelligence and protecting key infrastructure and routes from the guerrillas. The government believed that the know-how of the MAY and their ties to the local communities would allow the army to establish a firm foothold and put an end to guerilla incursions in rural areas. Initially, the units were expected to operate under strict military control. However, the plan never came to fruition as there were only a few junior officers and NCOs willing and able to play this role. As a result, the army delegated the command and leadership of the MAY to local conservative notables.¹⁰¹

The performance of the MAY and the Hunters Platoons was extremely uneven. The ‘Hunters’ lacked discipline and engaged in indiscriminate terrorism against innocent civilians. Moreover, leaders who belonged to different organizations refused to co-operate with each other or follow the instructions of the army.¹⁰² The performance of the MAY was even poorer. For most MAY leaders protection of the community took precedence over compliance with the strategic goals of the army. MAY units would desert when they thought that the army or the insurgents’ operations put their families and communities in harm’s way and would then join again, asking for

96 GAK, Vasilika Anaktora, Επιστολή, File/473, 27/10/1946.

97 Plakoudas, *The Greek Civil War*, 42–3.

98 Benaki Museum Archive, Sofoklis Venizelos Archive, Έκθεση επί των γεγονότων της Μακεδονίας, File 013/086, 22/09/1946.

99 Benaki Museum Archive, Sofoklis Venizelos Archive, Σημείωμα.

100 Sanoudakis, *Καπετάν Μπαντουβά*, 401; Konstantinos Karamanlis Foundation, K. Tsaldaris Archive, Δ. Τσιριγώτης προς Κ. Τσαλδάρη.

101 D. Ploumis, *Η ελληνική τραγωδία 1946–1949* (Athens 1973) 43.

102 GAK, Archeio Vasiliko Anaktoron, Σύσκεψη διά το ζήτημα δημοσίας τάξεως, 144A/130, 3/2/1947.

weapons and ammunition when the tide turned.¹⁰³ Feuds between different MAY bands were also common as the various units used their guns to settle local scores and gain the upper hand in feuds over access to land, water and prestige.¹⁰⁴ Some MAY leaders also occasionally collaborated with local guerilla commanders in operations against their rivals.¹⁰⁵

The presence of such attitudes puts into question the image of the militias as brutal predators and unrelenting opponents of the Left. Many memoirists have argued that militias led otherwise peacefully-inclined men to join the insurgents in order to escape persecution. According to this view the violence of the state and the militias left the peasants with two choices: the first was an ignominious end at the hands of the militias, while the second was the ‘path of the struggle’ and an ‘honorable death’ in the mountains.¹⁰⁶ However the number of women and men who chose to follow this path was surprisingly small. Many left-wing peasants were willing to work with the militias and blamed the Left for the violence and repression they suffered. A KKE report from central Greece noted that left-wing civilians ‘did not trust the guerillas and actually blamed them for the repression and the beatings they suffered at the hands of the gangs ... many of our own supporters took up arms and joined the paramilitaries’.¹⁰⁷ This was far from uncommon. Many militia chiefs were happy to enlist left-wing civilians. Those who were unwilling to join the bands were guaranteed ‘protection’ and immunity from violence in exchange for a small fee. Some local leaders of various paramilitary organizations such as X and EVEN also sold membership and identity cards to left-wing civilians who could afford to buy them.¹⁰⁸ Many took advantage of this opportunity to refashion themselves as nationalists.¹⁰⁹ Civilians who were unwilling or unable to bribe their way out of trouble could always count on the help of relatives and friends. A senior KKE activist from the uplands of Arta noted in his memoir that he spent six months hiding in the house of his cousin Dinos Papadimitriou, a leading militia leader. His kinsman also helped him to find a job and deal with his legal problems.¹¹⁰ On some occasions MAY leaders and members used violence to protect their kinsmen from rival bands.¹¹¹ Such attitudes led politicians and military leaders to accuse the MAY of conspiring with the enemy and undermining the common struggle against the Left.¹¹²

103 ASKI, Communist Party Archive, Μια ματιά στην ύπαιθρο της Λάρισας, File 418/24/2/63/1946.

104 ‘Φόνος αρχηγού ΜΑΥ’, *Θάρρος Τρικάλων*, 9/5/1948.

105 ASKI, Communist Party Archive, Έκθεση από Γενάρη–15 Σεπτέμβρη 1947, File 24/2/57.

106 V. Apostolopoulos, *Το χρονικό μιας εποποιίας: Ο ΔΣΕ στη Ρούμελη* (Athens 1995), 15.

107 ASKI, Communist Party Archives, Η κατάσταση στην Στερεά, 24/2/116, 26/10/1946.

108 ‘Επί μιας ατιμίας’, *Λακωνικό Βήμα*, 1/12/1946; ‘Ανακοίνωσις’, *Εφημερίς των Χιτών*, 19/7/1946.

109 ‘Νομός Φθιώτιδας’, *Εφημερίς των Χιτών*, 30/6/1947.

110 G. Simentzis, *Στα μονοπάτια της ζωής* (Athens 1986) 131.

111 For the importance of kinship ties see K. Georgiadis, *Οδοιπορικό της αντίστασης* (Athens 1980).

112 ‘Επί μιας ατιμίας’, *Λακωνικό Βήμα*, 1/12/1946.

Such attitudes provoked the anger of liberals and conservatives alike and pushed the government to order the dismantling of the militias. The question of the paramilitaries was raised with unusual force at a confidential meeting between the prime minister, party leaders and senior staff officers which took place in February 1947. The senior liberal politicians Georgios Papandreou and Themistoklis Sofoulis urged the immediate dispersal of the bands, arguing that they had not only failed to produce any results but had also made a habit of attacking liberal politicians and candidates.¹¹³ These views caused considerable commotion, particularly among politicians such as the Minister for Public Order Zervas and the Minister of Defence Mavromichalis, who had propagated the use of paramilitary gangs. Zervas accused the Chiefs of Staff of sabotaging the bands' efforts and asked for an increase in their number.¹¹⁴

Zervas' efforts were vindicated, as the government not only declined to disband the militias but also provided him with funds to raise more militias. Zervas' defence of the militias was not completely disinterested. His political appeal was limited to his home region of Epirus. Zervas tried to expand his political influence by using the militias to form a separate security apparatus that would be answerable only to him. In March 1947 Zervas created a 'special command centre' within his ministry which was responsible for co-ordinating militia operations across the country. All positions in the centre were filled by former EDES officers.¹¹⁵

A month later Zervas was provided with funds and weapons to raise nine special gendarmerie regiments that were known as MAD [Defence and Pursuit Units]. The MAD were tasked with policing duties. Their role was to shore up local defences, assist the MAY whenever they came under attack and engage in small-scale military actions, such as patrols and ambushes. Zervas also used a special discretionary fund to form five so-called Free Companies – independent militias whose task was to operate in tandem with the Hunter Platoons and take the war to the guerillas by using aggressive commando tactics. These groups were raised and led by former EDES officers such as Dimitris Galanis and Areistidis Kranias. Both groups were directly accountable to his command centre and were led by his close confidants and political clients.¹¹⁶

The units were recruited on a volunteer basis. Rank and file members received a monthly stipend while their families were granted privileged access to medical attention and government aid.¹¹⁷ As a result, demand for membership was exceedingly high. Local notables and MPs lobbied Zervas to hire their unemployed constituents.¹¹⁸ Zervas was happy to oblige provided they were willing to defect to his

113 GAK, Archeio Vasiliko Anaktoron, Σύσκεψη.

114 Op. cit.

115 K. Antoniou, *Ιστορία Ελληνικής Βασιλικής Χωροφυλακής 1833–1964* (Athens 1964) 2229.

116 Konstantinos Karamanlis Foundation, K. Tsaldaris Archive, Προς τον αρχηγόν του Λαϊκού Κόμματος και αντιπρόεδρον της κυβερνήσεως Κ. Τσαλδαρην, File 22/4/58/1, 25/12/1948.

117 DIS, 1η Στρατιά, μισθοδοσία, 1071/B/2/1, 27/4/1947.

118 DIS, Κατάστασις ΜΑΥ/ΜΑΔ χωροφυλακής, 8ης Μεραρχίας, Κατόπιν εξερευνήσεως αντ/χου Παπαθανασιάδη, 1071/B/2/1.

party. This led to a huge expansion of the MAD and the Free Companies that grew from a mere 4000 in the spring of 1947 to over 10,000 three months later. This expansion had a detrimental impact on morale and discipline, as these units ended up recruiting men who were completely unsuited for this type of warfare. Many of these troops were below the age limit and most lacked training, while a large number was recruited from the prison population and the ‘criminal element in the slums of Piraeus and Athens’.¹¹⁹

As a result, their military performance was extremely poor. The MAD suffered a series of catastrophic defeats in Laconia, Thessaly and Macedonia, while they were implicated in largescale atrocities against civilians. Morale was so low that in some cases MAD troops ‘deserted after a few weeks, taking home their guns, uniform and equipment which they considered to be their own property’.¹²⁰ Many units abandoned any pretensions of discipline and turned to overt criminal activities. In central Greece, the Free Companies imposed taxes upon all local produce, looted indiscriminately and forced the peasants to pay protection money.¹²¹ Violence between the various groups was constant. In Laconia, clashes broke out between the local Hunter Platoons that were supported by members of the Populist Party after the MAD tried to depose the local mayors and replace them with Zervas-backed candidates.¹²² The situation was even more chaotic in central Greece, where ‘confusion, panic and deep divisions reigned’, as the Free Companies, the MAD and the MAY clashed over control of turf, resources and political posts.¹²³

The situation finally came to a head in the autumn of 1947. After a series of intense meetings with representatives of the American Military Mission, the government agreed to disband all militias except the MAY.¹²⁴ Nevertheless, by this stage, the paramilitaries were too big to fail. The militias numbered well over 40,000 men and had acquired valuable patrons in the army and the political world who fought a desperate rearguard action to keep them in existence.¹²⁵ The alliance between army officers, militia leaders and the Crown bore fruit. The government passed legislation which allowed local prefects to form their own self-defence groups which were rebranded as ‘Dimosiosyntirita Tagmata’ [Publicly-Funded Battalions].¹²⁶ This law allowed the recently demobilized units to continue operating, albeit under a different name. In Laconia the entire force of EAOK was absorbed into two Dimosiosyntirita Battalions that were allowed to operate under their own leaders. A similar process was followed

119 Konstantinos Karamanlis Foundation, K. Tsaldaris Archive, Προς τον αρχηγόν του Λαϊκού Κόμματος και αντιπρόεδρον της κυβερνήσεως Κ. Τσαλδάρην, File 22/4/58/1, 25/12/1948.

120 DIS, Κατάσταση MAY/MAD χωροφυλακής.

121 Konstantinos Karamanlis Foundation, K. Tsaldaris Archive, Προς τον αρχηγόν.

122 ‘Συζητείται η νομιμοποίησης των συμμοριών της άκρας δεξιάς στην Πελοπόννησο’, *Ελευθερία*, 25/4/1947.

123 ASKI, Communist Party Archive, Αναφορά, File 24/2/111/α, 10/12/1946.

124 Konstantinos Karamanlis Foundation, K. Tsaldaris Archive, Σημείωμα σχετικόν με μείωσιν δυνάμεως χωροφυλακής, File 28/1/36/1, 20/1/1948.

125 Ploumis, *Η ελληνική τραγωδία*, 244.

126 Op. cit., 176.

in other regions. The government thus not only failed to punish the rogue commanders and their political backers but also further embedded the paramilitaries in the state machinery.¹²⁷ This decision was to have far-reaching consequences for the political and social life of the country.

A new class

The Dimosiosyntirita Tagmata and the MAY were relegated to purely defensive tasks and were not allowed to operate outside the boundaries of their district. Their funding was also severely reduced. However, this did not make their influence less intense or pernicious. In fact, as the paramilitaries were increasingly starved of resources, they had to embed their forces more and more in the local economy. Illegal activities were nothing new to them: many bands already operated as mafia-like groups which specialized in providing ‘protection’ to a number of social groups. This change entrenched them even further within the criminal underworld.

The civil war created a world of opportunities for men with the disposition and the know-how of the paramilitaries. Conflict led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of peasants who languished in makeshift slums and shanty towns. Most of them had no ties to local society and lacked steady income and employment. As a result, they were forced to turn to the informal economy and petty crime in order to supplement their income. Pauperization, the decline of agricultural production and the huge increase in food prices also had a dire effect upon the lives of urban populations which began to rely upon the black market for a series of goods. Falling living standards and the complete lack of policing eventually led to a rapid increase in criminal activities such as drug dealing, prostitution, gambling and smuggling.

EAM’s strict anti-drug policies and the unavailability of the relevant products had diminished the consumption of illegal drugs during the occupation.¹²⁸ The situation changed radically during the civil war. The police forces saw crime as being a secondary problem and focused their activities upon the Left, thus leaving the field open to criminal gangs. This change coincided with the re-opening of the old smuggling routes that brought drugs from Turkey and the Middle East to Europe. Drug-dealers were thus able to start resupplying their old clientele and also to appeal to a new clientele consisting of displaced persons, prostitutes, servicemen and the lumpenproletariat. In the following years, the rise in drug consumption took a cataclysmic turn, with drug-dealing taking place in the centre of Athens in broad daylight.¹²⁹

Drug profits were invested in a number of illegal activities such as prostitution, gambling and night clubs. Volos, a town of less than 40,000 inhabitants, contained

127 *Εφημερίς της Κυβερνήσεως* 309 (1948) 56.

128 ‘Χασίς’, *Ριζοσπάστης* 6/6/1947; ‘Χασίς ο μεγάλος κίνδυνος που κυκλώνει τις φτωχογειτονίες’, *Ριζοσπάστης*, 18/10/1946; Karellas, *Ιστορίες της Κατοχής*, 108.

129 ‘Αθηναϊκή ζωή: τα ναρκωτικά’, *Εμπρός*, 3/3/1949.

more than 200 women of 'ill repute' next to whom lived a whole army of 'protectors, pimps, drug dealers and madams'.¹³⁰ The situation was even worse in Athens, where, according to a national army soldier, it was impossible to sit in a park or a bar without being solicited.¹³¹ Many brothels also functioned as illegal casinos and speakeasies. This situation led the state to take punitive measures against prostitutes and their procurers, shut down hundreds of night-clubs and prohibit gambling.¹³² The prohibition of vice did not lead to a fall in demand. Gambling dens and nightclubs continued to operate, in a clandestine manner.¹³³ Prohibition made policing even more difficult and led to a huge increase in violence. Stabbings, fights and shoot-outs were common both between patrons and vying professionals who sought to expand the scope of their operations or curb those of a rival.¹³⁴

This situation created a niche for the paramilitaries, who embedded themselves deeply into the fabric of the demi-monde first as 'protectors' and then later as providers of illegal services. Militia leaders received a cut of the profits. In exchange, they protected illicit businesses from the law and dealt with rowdy clients and competitors.¹³⁵ Paramilitaries were also heavily involved in the drug trade.¹³⁶ In Thessaly and parts of Macedonia and the Peloponnese, militia-leaders supervised the cultivation of marijuana and opium poppy farms¹³⁷ and the management of numerous hashish dens in provincial cities such as Sparta, Trikala and Preveza, where drug use 'had become an epidemic'.¹³⁸

Militia leaders additionally engaged in usury, smuggling and black marketeering. The EOK supplied guns, often in exchange for drugs, to various criminal gangs in Egypt, Syria and Lebanon, as well as urban gangs and militias in Athens and northern Greece.¹³⁹ This militia was also involved in fraud and graft. In Crete, construction companies had to pay a hefty bribe to militia leaders if they wished to gain a state contract.¹⁴⁰ In the cities of Heraklion, Chania and Rethymno, local shops were forced to purchase coffee, sugar and equipment from militia-approved suppliers and pay a monthly fee to Badouvas' militias.¹⁴¹ Paramilitaries were also heavily involved in the black market,¹⁴² contraband and extortion.¹⁴³ Such activities led local administrators

130 Istoriko Archeio Makedonias, Geniki Dioikisi Voreiou Ellados, Οίκοι Ανοχής, File B26, 22/12/1950.

131 V. Pitarakis, *Εφτά χρόνια φαντάρος 1940–1947* (Athens 1978) 90–5.

132 G. Kairofylas, *Η Αθήνα μετά τον πόλεμο* (Athens 1988) 268.

133 Op. cit.

134 Gigourtakis, *Αυτοβιογραφία*, 55–8.

135 'Νίκος Κατελάνος, ο βασιλεύς του αθηναϊκού υποκόσμου', *Ελευθερία*, 25/10/1958.

136 'Χασίς', *Ριζοσπάστης*, 6/6/1947.

137 'Συλλήψεις', *Θάρρος Τρικάλων*, 11/8/1947.

138 'Από την πόλιν', *Λακωνικό Βήμα*, 5/1/1947.

139 Z. Badouvas, *Ο ήλιος είχε σκοτεινιάσει* (Heraklion 1991) 238–9; Konstantinos Karamanlis Foundation, K. Tsaldaris Archive, Σημείωμα, File 4/12/1, 8/6/1948; Ploumis, *Η ελληνική τραγωδία*, 245, 238–9.

140 'Το υπερκράτος Μπαντουβά', *Εφημερίς των Χιτών*, 21/6/1948.

141 Konstantinos Karamanlis Foundation, K. Tsaldaris Archive, Σημείωμα.

142 'Το έλαιον του Καμαρινέα εισήχθη ήδη λαθραία εις τον Πειραιά', *Ελευθερία*, 30/4/1949.

143 'Κατορθώματα Χιτών', *Ελευθερία*, 19/9/1947.

to describe them as being ‘an even greater threat than the communists’. The governor-general of eastern Macedonia noted that ‘if we are serious about re-imposing the writ of the state in the area we should direct the army to disperse the [ESEA] militias as soon as we finish fighting the communists’.¹⁴⁴

Such operations were not the work of a few rogue commanders. In fact, they were carefully co-ordinated and often involved hundreds of militiamen and civilians. In some cases, the operations were controlled by the local commander of the Dimosiosyntirita. However, there were instances where such operations were led by politicians such as the ESEA-affiliated MP for Serres Pandelis Papadakis¹⁴⁵ as well as mayors, police officers and senior civil servants.¹⁴⁶ Ringleaders and commanders co-operated with local MAY leaders, whom they used in order to collect protection money, threaten businessmen and professionals who failed to comply, and intimidate local officials.¹⁴⁷ Some MAY leaders also tried to set up their own illegal schemes. However, most of them lacked the contacts and the manpower to challenge the supremacy of the Dimosiosyntirita.¹⁴⁸

The militias collaborated with judicial officials, lawyers and local politicians who helped them to launder and invest their money and provided intelligence and protection from prosecution in exchange for a cut of the profits and the assistance of the militias in their private feuds.¹⁴⁹ These networks eventually controlled huge swathes of the local economies and displaced traditional elites; landowners, industrialists and business leaders. A northern Greek daily newspaper noted that ‘the war ... created an entirely independent and predatory new class of individuals ... who control our fatherland and our economy and act as if they are above the law and the state’.¹⁵⁰

These activities allowed the local militias to bolster their power base by providing a series of social services which the state was unable to provide to the civilian population. The civil war had led to the collapse of the state in rural and working-class areas. Civilians in these areas had no access to services such as education and healthcare and were viewed with suspicion by the gendarmerie and the police force who perceived all peasants as being ‘subversives’ and potential allies of the guerillas. The situation was further exacerbated by the corruption and brutality in the gendarmerie and the police force.¹⁵¹ Peasants were casually assaulted and blackmailed by gendarmes. In several

144 GAK (Rodopis), Archeio Genikis Dioikisis Anatolikis Makedonias Thrakis, Αναφορά, File 10.1/31/02, 23/6/1949.

145 ‘Μια απίστευτος και ανήκουστος καταγγελία’, *Θάρρος Δράμας*, 22/7/1948.

146 Benaki Museum Archive, S. Venizelos Archive, Επιστολή Απόστολου Κουνούπη, File 013/215, 18/3/1947.

147 Konstantinos Karamanlis Foundation, K. Tsaldaris Archive, Σημείωμα.

148 Vrachniaris, *Πορεία*, 120.

149 ‘Συζητείται η νομιμοποίησης των συμμοριών’, *Ελευθερία*, 25/4/1947.

150 ‘Έως εδώ’, *Θάρρος Δράμας*, 11/8/1948.

151 Konstantinos Karamanlis Foundation, K. Tsaldaris Archive, Βουλευτά Βορείου Ελλάδος προς πρόεδρον της κυβέρνησης κ. Θ. Σοφούλην, File 28/5/33/1, 1/9/1948.

cases, local communities petitioned the local army command to remove the gendarmerie altogether and provide them with guns in order to raise a self-defence group ‘that would allow us to protect our families and properties’.¹⁵²

In many areas, peasants preferred to turn for help to militia leaders rather than the state. Although militia leaders were violent and predatory, they also shared cultural ties and codes with the peasants. The paramilitaries thus became the peasants’ first port of call when dealing with the authorities. Civilians turned to them to expedite the approval of a business licence, help quash a warrant and get access to medical care and higher education. Militiamen also played a critical role in assisting displaced persons and refugees from their home regions with accommodation, state aid and protection from local civilians.¹⁵³ Finally, militias provided swift and brutal conflict resolution. Peasants would often turn to a militia leader to retrieve stolen property, discipline a feral youth or an unfaithful spouse, and punish local ‘deviants’; child molesters, paedophiles and petty thieves.¹⁵⁴

These activities allowed the militia leaders to command wide support from local communities and eventually emerge as independent political players. The case of Tsaus Andon, also known as Antonis Fosteridis, presents a characteristic example. Fosteridis was a fugitive from justice who formed a small but effective resistance organization during the occupation in eastern Macedonia. In late 1945, Fosteridis raised a small local militia which served as the armed branch of the ultra-nationalist party of general Stylianos Gonatas. Fosteridis was thus able to forge contacts with senior conservatives and members of the royal family.¹⁵⁵ These contacts allowed Fosteridis to break away from Gonatas and form his own independent political organization in the areas of eastern Macedonia and Thrace.¹⁵⁶ Fosteridis was also allowed to raise his own independent militia which, in 1948, joined the Dimosiosyntirita Tagmata.¹⁵⁷

Fosteridis had total control of his territory. According to the local governor general, ‘he forced all local teenagers to join his youth organization’, appropriated public land which he then distributed to his followers, and he used intimidation and corruption to replace civil servants with his own men. Fosteridis did not rely solely upon fear. He presented himself as the protector of the local peasantry from the Athenian elites ‘who had dominated and pushed around Macedonians for far too long’. Fosteridis proclaimed to the peasantry that his party would rid the area of the politicians and civil servants from ‘Old Greece’ and instead hire local civilians in their place. This rhetoric alarmed some local officials, who protested that Fosteridis’ rhetoric ‘has more than a passing resemblance to the rhetoric of the communists’.¹⁵⁸

152 DIS, Προς την 83ήν στρατιωτική περιοχή, 1071/B/2/1, 19/05/1947.

153 D. Karakatsianis, *Η Μάχη στον πόλεμο: Κατοχή, αντίσταση και εμφύλιος*, PhD thesis, University of Athens, 2010, 340–3.

154 ‘Ο Χίτης της Αβιάς’, *Ελευθερία*, 22/5/1948, D. Stoufis, *Ενθυμήσεις* (Kamarina 2005) 18–19.

155 ‘Συνάντησις Διαδόχου και Φωστεριδῆ’, *Ελευθερία*, 17/1/1947.

156 Konstantinos Karamanlis Foundation, K. Tsaldaris Archive, Εμπιστευτικό, File 31/1/1, 2/1/1948.

157 ‘Ίδρύεται τάγμα χωροφυλακής με έδρα την Δράμα’, *Θάρρος Δράμας*, 18/5/1948.

158 GAK (Rodopis), Archeio Genikis Dioikisios Anatolikis Makedonias Thrakis, Αναφορά.

Nevertheless, neither Fosteridis nor his counterparts in southern Greece were in any way plotting to subvert the state. Militia leaders used these activities to augment their social status and forge deals with local and national authorities that then allowed them to move from the margins to the centre of the political stage. Fosteridis was elected as a member of parliament in 1952 and he continued to exercise a huge political influence in northern Greek politics for the next two decades. Other militia leaders followed a similar trajectory.¹⁵⁹ The nexus between the militias, the security services and the political world remained in place well into the late 1970s. In the aftermath of the war, the MAY were refashioned as the TEA [National Guard Defence Battalions], which were a home-guard force. The nominal purpose of the TEA was to serve as a first line of defence in case of war. Nonetheless, their real target was the ‘internal enemy’; the Left, minorities and the trade unions. The TEA were involved in suppressing dissent, intimidating left-wingers and trade unionists and also monitoring political attitudes in the rural areas. The presence of these groups had a detrimental effect upon the form and quality of political life and played a pivotal role in derailing democracy and the advent of the military junta in 1967.

Conclusion

Existing studies have seen the post-war state as being a unified actor and described the ‘reconstruction of the right-wing state’ in terms of a top-down process that was carefully planned and implemented by the military and political elite.¹⁶⁰ Nevertheless, as this article has demonstrated, the rise of the militias was not the work of an all-powerful and vindictive state. The militias were grass-roots organizations raised and funded by local elites and ordinary peasants who believed that the state was unable to deal with the threat posed by the Left and address the problems that marred the reconstruction of the state and society; poverty, a lack of resources and crime.

The relationship between the state and the militias was contentious from the very beginning. Militias were distrustful of the state and the politicians, whom they viewed as weak and corrupt. Such feelings were reciprocated by many state officials, who saw the militiamen as no different to the numerous bandit gangs that infested the countryside. However, they were brought together by self-interest and fear of the Left. The bands were aware that they could not operate without political protection, while the political world was in need of their services in the pending elections. This alliance facilitated a landslide victory for the conservatives and the triumphant return of the monarchy. At the same time, it tipped the balance in favour of the paramilitaries.

159 V. Tzoukas and N. Vafeas, ‘Από την Αντίσταση στη Βουλή: πρώην εδεσίτες στα κοινοβουλευτικά έδρανα’, *Δοκίμεις* 16 (2010) 349–66.

160 D. Close, ‘The reconstruction of the right-wing state’, in D. Close (ed.), *The Greek Civil War 1943–1950: Studies in Polarization* (London 1993) 156–89.

Local militias were able to coalesce into 'integrated' political military organizations that played an increasingly important role in local political affairs.

The collaboration between the state and the militias became even closer after a string of military setbacks at the hands of left-wing insurgents. Political and military leaders believed that the only way to combat the insurgency was to fund and arm counter-gangs. This effort backfired as the authorities were unable to co-ordinate the activities of the militias or discipline the paramilitaries, who were more interested in lining their pockets and settling scores than fighting for King and country. This anarchy was further facilitated by the disagreements between the military, Zervas and Mavromichalis, who used these formations to further their own agendas. The state made a last effort to control the militias by cutting their funding and relegating them to local policing duties. This change did not to curb the lawlessness of the paramilitaries or loosen their hold upon local societies. Militias used their ties to the security service and military know-how in order to seize control of the thriving illicit economies and to bolster their power base through a combination of threats, bribes and social work.

Anti-communist networks did not lose their salience in the post-war period. Insecurity, lack of employment and endemic poverty allowed the militias to retain their hold over local societies. Anti-communist networks provided access to good jobs, prestige and a chance for social mobility to otherwise marginalized individuals and constituencies. This alliance not only helped to complete the process of nation-building by facilitating the inclusion of these groups into the national body politic but also expedited a massive shift in political attitudes. Peasants in the so-called New Lands had traditionally voted for the Liberal Party.¹⁶¹ The co-operation between the paramilitaries and the Conservatives allowed the latter to put down roots in communities that were traditionally hostile to them and form patronage networks that persist to this day.

Nevertheless, the inclusion of the paramilitaries within the political system had other more malignant effects in political and policing practices. The collusion between the state, the militias and law enforcement led to the institutionalization of extra-legal practices against political opponents and the emergence of a 'custodian' mentality among members of the military and the security services. Militias and their backers had a lingering distrust of democracy and its institutions, which they saw as an obstacle in the fight against communism, and they believed that they were entitled to act decisively if they felt the state was under threat. However, their opposition was not entirely disinterested. The leaders and rank-and-file members of this alliance were keenly aware that their wellbeing depended upon their ability to control criminality and dispense state patronage to their political clients and followers. The normalization of politics

161 For the formation of inter-war political allegiances and cleavages in refugee communities see G. Mavrogordatos, *Stillborn Republic: Social Coalitions and Party Strategies in Greece, 1922–1936* (Berkeley 1983).

posed an existential threat to the militias and their patrons, who became increasingly hostile towards any efforts to construct a more inclusive polity and end politically based persecution. Such mentalities had a devastating impact upon efforts towards democratization and contributed significantly to the derailing of democracy in the 1960s and the advent of the military junta.