

Women of the 1941-44 Greek Resistance Against the Axis: An Historical and Sociological Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an historical and sociological analysis of resistance activities by Greek women against the occupying forces of Axis powers from 1941-44. Motivated by social and political influence prior to the war, the egalitarian philosophies of the National Liberation Front and the dreadful socioeconomic conditions of the Axis occupation, Greek women effectively and proudly participated in resistance organizations.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans cet article, il s'agit d'une analyse historique et sociologique portant sur les activités de résistance entre 1941 et 1944 de la part de femmes grecques contre les forces d'occupation des puissances de l'Axe. Motivées par l'influence sociale et politique de l'avant-guerre, par la philosophie égalitaire du Front National de Libération ainsi que par la misère des conditions socioéconomique provoquée par les puissances de l'Axe, les femmes grecques ont participé aux organisations de résistance avec efficacité et fierté.

INTRODUCTION

The Greek Resistance of 1941-44 was an organized movement of political and military activities against Axis occupying forces.¹ Resistance activities refer to any sort of defiance to the rules of occupying forces. Resistance activities carried out by women included political protests and labour strikes, spying operations, supplying food, shelter and ammunition to Allied troops and resistance fighters, as well as participating in military operations against Axis occupying forces. For some of these activities either imprisonment or death would have been the inevitable result of being found out (Hart 1990, 117). During the occupation years more than one third of Greek women participated in political, cultural and military organizations of the National Resistance (*Ethniki Antistasi*).

Unfortunately, very little is written, either in Greece or outside the country, about the heroic women of the National Resistance Movement against the occupying forces of Axis countries. The purpose of this paper is to provide an historical and sociological analysis of the participation and contributions of Greek women in the Resistance Movement against the triple occupation of Greece by Italy, Germany and Bulgaria from 1941-1944. Specifically, it investigates how the Greek Resistance Movement was organized and its

objectives. More importantly, it discusses what motivated a large number of Greek women to participate in resistance organizations; who were the women who participated in the movement and what were their contributions; how did the Resistance Movement contribute to the transformation of women's social status; and, what were the long term consequences after Greece's liberation from Axis armies.

Data for this inquiry were collected from published and unpublished material of the Greek Resistance Movement. The Centre for the Study of the National Resistance in Athens was an important source of information on demographic aspects of female participants in the movement, as well as case histories and memoirs of women leaders. Information was also collected through personal interviews with women who actively participated in political and military resistance organizations during this period. Through "snowball" sampling the author was able to locate fifteen women from rural communities of the province of Laconia in southern Greece who were willing to give an account of their resistance activities, contributions, and the aftermath of Greece's liberation. The informal interviews took place in the homes of these women during the summer of 1999. These women are referred to by their first names in order to ensure confidentiality.

THE POLITICAL SITUATION IN GREECE PRIOR TO THE WAR

Prior to the war (1936-1940) Greece, a country of 7,500,000 people, was under the right wing dictatorship of Prime Minister John Metaxas and King George II of Greece. The Metaxas regime had imposed a carefully controlled reign of terror directed against communists, socialists, trade unionists, intellectuals, social activists, feminists and others known for their strong liberal and republican leanings. Many thousands of Greeks were either jailed or sent to island exile camps for "political crimes" against the state. Although Metaxas' style of government was similar to Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Germany, ideologically, Metaxas embraced the Greek monarchy, an institution supported by Great Britain, and Greece sided with the Allies (the British Empire, United States of America, Canada, and France) against the Axis powers in Europe, including Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and their satellite countries, Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia (Chimbos 1999, 253).

In the period prior to the war, Greek women were afforded very little personal freedom in a society influenced by sexist cultural notions originating from mythology, tradition and Greek Orthodox religion (Hart 1996, 99). Women were under-represented in professional occupations and in the sciences and had no representation in the Armed Forces, while being over-represented in service jobs (e.g., hotels, hospitals, domestic work), clothing and textile factories, and in farming, involving long hours of hard work.

GREECE ENTERS THE WAR

On October 28, 1940, Fascist Italy declared war on Greece by launching an invasion from Albania, a country under the occupation of Italian armed forces. The efforts of the Italian army to conquer Greece failed miserably. By November 2, 1940, the Greek army had evicted the Italian invaders and by March 1941 the Greeks had advanced deep into Albania, occupying a quarter of the country. On April 6, 1941, the German army intervened to assist the Italian forces. The German invasion came from Bulgaria and Yugoslavia and by May 30, 1941, all of Greece had become

occupied by German, Italian and Bulgarian forces (Chimbos 1999, 254).

On April 28, 1941, the Nazis established a Greek government of collaboration in Athens to have more effective control over the Greek people: to prevent movements of national liberation and to possibly remobilize the Greek armed forces against the Allies. The Greeks who collaborated with the enemy tended to be members of pre-war right wing elements and Fascist organizations. Within a short time, the Axis occupation created serious problems for Greek society. As a result of the occupation, the economy was destroyed, factories came under the control of the Nazis, most of the schools were closed, food supplies and resources were seized and Greek citizens were heavily taxed and terrorized (Chimbos 1999, 255).

THE RESISTANCE MOVEMENT

After the oppressive triple occupation and the establishment of the Greek-German Government of collaboration, National Resistance groups were organized with the assistance of the Allies, in particular, England. On September 27, 1941, the National Liberation Front - *Ethniko Apeleftherotiko Metopo* (EAM) - was organized with the cooperation and participation of four centre-left Greek political parties, including the communists,² socialists, and liberals. The objectives of EAM were the liberation of Greece from the Axis; freedom for elections after gaining independence; establishment of a people's government without a king; and, empowerment of subordinate groups (e.g., the lower classes, women, and ethnic minorities). The leaders of the National Liberation Front perceived the Axis occupation as an opportunity for the transformation of Greece to a modern socialist state with bourgeois democratic characteristics (Alexander 1981, 160) and improved status for women and other marginalized groups.

Other smaller resistance groups under Britain's Special Operations Executive (SOE), a wartime intelligence and sabotage agency, played an important role in collecting intelligence for Allied forces and committing acts of sabotage against the Axis occupying forces. The EAM movement, however, provided the most nationwide resistance by building a firm political and economic infrastructure to deal not only with Axis occupation

but with other social problems, including hunger, illiteracy, social inequality and women's issues.

In May 1942, the National Liberation Front (EAM) organized the first team of the National Popular Liberation Army - *Ethnikos Laïkos Apeleftherotikos Stratos* (ELAS) - under the leadership of a non-commissioned officer of the Greek army, Aris Velouchiotis (the *nom de guerre* adopted by Athanasios Klaras). By October 1943, ELAS had emerged as the only effective and disciplined military organization under the supreme command of a Greek army officer, Stephanos Sarafis. ELAS, with its 80,000 regular troops and 40,000 reservists, effectively engaged 300,000 enemy troops causing them heavy casualties, including 21,800 dead and 8,276 wounded (Chimbos 1999, 260).

By the summer of 1944 more than 2,150,000 men and women (approximately 30 percent of the Greek population) were active members of EAM\ELAS auxiliary organizations, including the National Panhellenic Organization of Youth - *Ethniki Panellenios Organosis Neoleas* (EPON) - and National Solidarity - *Ethniki Alleleghii* - a philanthropic and charitable organization run mainly by women. Through these organizations, women did their best to provide moral and material assistance (e.g., food, clothing, medication) to ELAS fighters and those who were captive in prisons and concentration camps. The women of EPON in particular contributed significantly to the opening and functioning of schools and health centers in liberated Greek territories.

MOBILIZATION OF WOMEN

Available data (Hart 1990 & 1996; Vervenioti 1994; Chimbos 1999) suggest that both predisposing factors and situational factors contributed to the mobilization of Greek women. Predisposing factors refer to social and political influences experienced by women prior to the war. According to Hart (1996), defensive nationalism - the willingness to defend Greece against invaders - was a central cultural value earned in Greek schools. Thus, the social conscience of Greek women of the early 1940s was directly connected with the Greek revolution of 1821 against the occupation of Greece by the Ottoman Turks

(1453-1821). The experience of many women in feminist organizations prior to the war can also be viewed as a predisposing influence. Feminist organizations which were oppressed by the right wing dictatorship of John Metaxas included the Panhellenic Union of Women's Association, the Committee of Women's Civil Servants of Athens and the Association of Working Women. Another predisposing influence was the persecution experienced by many women for being participants in pre-World War II leftist or liberal political organizations.³ Women of these organizations were ostracized, tortured, imprisoned or sent into exile by the security forces of John Metaxas' regime.

Many situational factors operated during the occupation of Greece by the Axis armies and facilitated women's mobilization in the Resistance Movement.

First, the social and political philosophies of the National Liberation Front (EAM) emphasized change for equality and the emancipation of women. The leaders of the EAM told women that it was acceptable and proper for them to step outside the boundaries of traditional behaviour and enter the public sphere (Hart 1966). A very influential leader and strategist of the EAM was social activist and educator Dimitri Glinos. According to Glinos,⁴ "Greek society had limited itself to subservient female stereotypes" (Hart 1996, 111) and these stereotypes had to be changed. Glinos further argued that women's liberation would only benefit Greek society, generating a comprehensive transformation that would lead to much healthier relations and a stronger nation (Hart 1996, 112). The movement for Greece's liberation from the Axis armies was transformed into a progressive social movement as far as the National Liberation Front was concerned. Hart (1990, 99) writes: "The movement attracted many heroic women and girls who by participating in Resistance organizations were for the first time defying the rigid standards of conduct that the patriarchal social structure of Greece had in the past demanded for them."

The leaders of the National Liberation Front repeatedly told women that Fascism wanted women to be slaves of the kitchen and raise children to fight and die in rapacious wars. Thus, the message of EAM leaders was to liberate women by crushing Fascism. Nazi ideology, as well as Fascist ideology of Greek organizations collaborating with

the Nazis, stressed domestic roles for women and discounted any possible public or military role for them (Hart 1996, 212).

Second, male relatives who were already involved in resistance organizations motivated women to resist. Many Greek women resistance fighters identified strongly with male members of their families (husband, father, brother) who were liberal or progressive, men who valued education and the liberation of women (Hart 1996, 217-218). For example, General Emmanuel Mantakas, the commander of the Greek Resistance fighters on the Island of Crete, was accompanied by his two daughters during military operations against Nazi troops. The commander of the first ELAS battalion in the region of Attika, Captain Theoharis, was accompanied by his fiancée even when he was on the battlefield (Vervenioti 1994, 305).

Third, the Axis occupation created such dreadful conditions as poverty, political persecution and executions of Greek citizens, and the rape and sexual exploitation of women by Axis troops and their Greek collaborators. Hunger and starvation also motivated women to join resistance charitable organizations to combat famine. Despite this, over 260,000 Greek citizens starved to death during the Axis occupation.

SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

The women who participated in the Resistance Movement came from all social classes and occupational groups, and from urban as well as rural communities. However, the leaders of women's groups and organizations within the movement were urban middle-class women, many of whom were members of feminist and professional organizations established prior to the war. Many were teachers, students, lawyers and doctors. Some of them had traveled abroad (to England, France, Italy) for education and conferences on women's issues, where they became familiar with socialist ideologies emphasizing the liberation of women from traditional patriarchal systems, especially in the rural areas (Clogg 1992, 125). The writings of the Italian theorist, Antonio Gramsci, for example, had a tremendous influence on many of these young Greek women intellectuals. Gramscian philosophy involved the search for egalitarian solutions to the problems of society

(Hart 1996, 63-64).

The women of the Greek Resistance came from all age groups, but the most active, especially those in the underground military operations, were relatively young (ages 17-23). The youth organizations, *Ethnike Panelladeke Organose Neolaias* (EPON), an auxiliary organization of EAM, was able to mobilize more than 600,000 young men and women. Many of EPON's members joined the National Popular Liberation Army (ELAS) and performed their military duties with enthusiasm, effectiveness and national pride.

CONTRIBUTIONS

In the beginning, women resisted by playing supportive roles in the nonmilitary sphere. They provided food and clothing for the combatants and the hungry citizens, including war orphans. During the winter of 1941-42 women were the main organizers of food banks and soup kitchens in many cities, and saved many thousands of Greeks from starving to death. Moreover, the women participated in political protests and labour strikes in large cities, administered local clinics and public schools, and organized cultural activities and seminars on women's issues. In fact, prominent women served as role models in certain circles, and their writings in Resistance bulletins were influential, especially among the literate (Hart 1996, 103).

Women of the National Resistance also took care of the wounded and buried the dead. Many of these women buried their husbands, brothers, sons and daughters who were killed on the battlefield or executed by enemy firing squads. Georgia, who during the summer of 1944, when the Nazis and their collaborators killed four of her close relatives, said:

Fearing being rounded up by the Germans and their collaborators, most men, especially the young, would flee from the village for days or weeks. The women who remained behind took care of things. They took care of the sick, the wounded and buried those who were executed by the enemy.

The daring women of the Greek Resistance often risked their lives. Katerina recalled:

It was March 16, 1944 when myself and three other women relatives of mine left the village to go and visit my husband Andreas who was imprisoned by the Germans in the city of Sparta. You see, Andreas was a leader of the EAM organization in the village. Unfortunately, he was caught by Nazi collaborators and handed over to the Germans for execution without a trial. We wanted to see him for the last time. His execution was already announced by the Germans to take place within a week or so.

Anyway, to reach Sparta, we had to walk for about eight kilometers while carrying bags of food in our hands for Andreas and other sick political prisoners. Since the German command had declared the area under curfew we were walking cautiously and fearfully. We knew we were taking risks. We were about two kilometers from the city when suddenly we saw a patrol of German soldiers approaching us. Then I said to the other three women: "let's run away [through a ravine which was near by]. They are going to kill us." One of the women replied: "If we run away the German soldiers will become more suspicious and hostile." Anyway, I ran away by myself as fast as I could. The three women remained behind walking toward the German patrol. Within a few minutes I heard them screaming and begging the German soldiers to spare their lives for the sake of their young children. Unfortunately, the ruthless soldiers ignored their request. I heard machine gun bursts. All three women were executed on the spot. One of them was Andreas's sister. About ten days later Andreas and 41 other male prisoners from various Resistance organizations were also executed by the Germans.

As the resistance to Axis occupation grew, Greek women began to undertake more radical and risky activities and participated in acts of sabotage that were punishable by death. This involved

sabotage operations such as destroying telephone and railroad lines and enemy ammunition supplies, as well as running guns and ammunition to the underground forces. Some were actively and effectively involved in spying for the British Intelligence and Greek Resistance forces. For example, Mrs. Lela Karayannis' underground organization, *Bouboulina*, in Athens, provided the Allies with useful information on Axis shipping, which resulted in the destruction of several German and Italian ships and submarines (Jecchinis 1960, 31-33). Lela Karayannis also used her own money to organize the escape of 150 Greek and Allied army officers and soldiers. On September 7, 1944, Lela Karayannis was executed by a Nazi firing squad for her underground resistance activities in Athens.

More importantly, however, women participated in armed resistance units (e.g., women's platoons) of the National Popular Liberation Army (ELAS). In the armed units these young women had to learn how to perform military salutes, become physically fit, live under harsh conditions, as well as how to use firearms and protect themselves from enemy fire. Some served as weapons' instructors, where they instructed other resistance fighters how to dismantle and reassemble rifles or machine guns (Hart 1996, 178).

Women were encouraged by their male military comrades to attend the Military Officers School, operated by the National Liberation Front (EAM). By the summer of 1944, the Sarafis Military School in Rentina, Northern Greece, had commissioned over twenty-five women at the rank of Second Lieutenant. After graduation, the women officers were assigned to leadership positions in women's combat units attached to divisions of ELAS in Macedonia, Epiros and mainland Greece. Initially, the women in military units (platoons) performed guard duty, escorted prisoners, carried ammunition to the battlefield, gave first aid to the wounded and sick, and provided military intelligence and surveillance. Within a relatively short time women began to participate in battles where they fought the enemy with courage, and died honourably beside their fellow male combatants (Vervenioti 1994, 302-13). After one fierce clash of ELAS combatants with Nazi troops, a female officer described the performance of women in the battlefield:

With machine guns in their hands, women gave a deadly blow to Nazi troops and their collaborators. None of the women was faint-hearted. All of them stood their positions with courage and fought on the side of men with confidence and decisiveness. On the battlefield women always went forward and won.

(Vervenioti 1994, 319).

With regard to the courage of young women, Maria commented:

Many of the young women who participated in resistance activities were fearless. I remember the heroic efforts of two young Athenian women during an organized political protest in downtown Athens on July 22, 1943. They climbed on the German tanks and with their shoes attacked the machine gunners who were firing at the protesters. Unfortunately, both women were shot dead by the German soldiers.

RESISTANCE AND THE WOMEN'S STATUS

The Resistance Movement contributed to the transformation of women's status. An equal rights clause which appeared in the constitution of PEEA (Political Committee of National Liberation) in 1941 considered women to be equal to men in all institutional spheres. The National Liberation Front (EAM) empowered women to vote for the first time in Greek history and encouraged them to stand up and speak for their individual rights and freedoms. EAM also attacked cultural stereotypes of women (e.g., women are inferior, weak and destructive), appointed women to serve as judges in liberated Greek territories and proposed youth oriented sex-role changes emphasizing liberal education and non-exploitative relations between the sexes (Hart 1966, 137). Angela, who was an active member of EPON during the occupation, explained:

EPON, an auxiliary organization of EAM created in 1943, encouraged young women to go forward - participate in community politics and cultural activities, stand up for

their rights, as well as defy the oppressive occupation of the Nazi and Fascist war machines. And women did all these with enthusiasm and perseverance. I am proud to say that the generation of the Resistance movement lived and worked for the benefit of both men and women.

Another important effort made by Greek Resistance organizations was the protection of women against violence. In fact the National Liberation Front (EAM) had a built-in cultural sanction to "respect women" and the penalty for rape was death (Hart 1996, 302). EAM, which encouraged women's liberation and participation in military units, and other nonmilitary resistance activities, had a moral and legal responsibility to protect its young women from male violence and exploitation.

THE AFTERMATH

After the withdrawal of the Axis forces from Greece in October 1944, the British, who already had put Greece under their sphere of influence and who feared that the popular EAM/ELAS forces would form a post-war socialist government without a king, intervened immediately to demobilize the Greek Popular Liberation Army (ELAS)⁵. They hindered the process of bringing traitors and collaborators to trial for war crimes; organized a post-liberation Greek army of right-wing officers and enlisted men, many of whom had served in the pro-Nazi security battalions, and re-established the monarchy after a twisted and coerced plebiscite (Chimbos 1999).

With the return of a pro-monarchist and vengeful right-wing government in power, all EAM policies and programs for social reconstruction and improvement of women's social status vanished and women were encouraged to choose more traditional lifestyles. Men and women of EAM/ELAS forces were labelled as "communists" (the leftist bad guys), anti-nationalists and consequently were excluded from civil service jobs and the armed forces. Many thousands were unjustly terrorized by paramilitary right-wing groups (e.g., X-ites), imprisoned, tortured, sent into exile or tried in military courts and executed by army firing squads. As Hart puts it:

Women and girls who had participated in the Liberation Front with open enthusiasm were now in great danger of being raped, maimed, or killed by the fanatical right-wing gangs that were terrorizing the Greek countryside unchecked, as the government alternately encouraged their exploits or looked the other way.

(1966, 240)

Repression and persecution against the left drove many former ELAS fighters (men and women) and leftist political refugees back to the mountains for survival and protection. In October 1946, the communist party of Greece announced the formation of the Democratic Army of Greece (DAG), this time to fight against the British and the Greek pro-monarchist forces. In many units of the Democratic Army 25 percent of the combatants were women. The Greek civil war of 1946-49 between the "leftists" and "nationalists" had begun, causing the deaths 158,000 Greeks.

The bloody civil war was an ideological conflict between two conceptions of Greek society, one with ultra-conservative views of social institutions and values and the other social/revolutionary emphasizing radical institutional changes. The leftists who were ahead of their time on progressive institutional reforms were defeated in 1949 by the nationalists who were supported by the superior forces of the West. England and the United States were determined to maintain a pro-monarchist conservative government in Greece at any cost in order to protect their geopolitical interests in the region and possibly contain Soviet expansionism.

After the defeat of the Democratic Army, more than 40,000 leftists were sent to concentration camps by the pro-monarchist government. About 20,000 men and women, most of whom were

ex-resistance fighters, were tried for crimes against the state and of those, at least 5,000 were executed. According to Hart (1996, 240) "from 1948-50 seventeen women were executed in the Averoff Prison in Athens for 'subversive activities' and for refusing to sign statements of repentance in which signers renounced all participation in the resistance against the Axis, declared themselves traitors for joining the EAM and promised thereafter to be good Greeks."

CONCLUSION

The movement for Greece's liberation from Axis forces and social reconstruction could not have been successful without the dynamic and enthusiastic participation of women in cultural, as well as military organizations of the National Resistance. The experience of the Resistance Movement has demonstrated that when egalitarian institutional arrangements become available and are supported by men, women take an active part in successfully defending their social milieu, as well as emancipating themselves from oppressive status, consequently contributing to the social and economic welfare of a nation.

The emancipation experienced by Greek women from 1941-45 was short-lived as it was interrupted by post-war right-wing government policies and philosophies. However, the National Liberation Front raised women's expectations and women's rights during the last three decades of the twentieth century. Consequently, the reforms helped women to gain more power and influence in many aspects of social and economic life in contemporary Greek society.

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ENDNOTES

1. Axis Forces in occupied Greece referred to military occupation by Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and their satellite country of Bulgaria.
2. The Communist Party of Greece (KKE), founded in 1924 by intellectuals, trade unionists, workers and members of various leftist

political organizations, played a pivotal role in organizing the National Liberation Front (EAM). As the nucleus of the Resistance Movement it provided leadership, organization and central planning.

3. Most feminist organizations in Greece appeared during the 1930s when feminist and leftist movements were active in Europe, especially England, France and Italy. Many leaders of these organizations had participated in European feminist conferences dealing with women's issues.

4. Professor Glinos established the first female Academy in Greece to "allow a woman to take her place in accordance with her true worth in the highest manifestations of social life" (Glinos 1971, 36).

5. For explanations as to how the effective and popular EAM/ELAS were so easily overcome by the British and the right-wing pro-monarchist forces, see Chimbos, 1999, pp. 363-66.

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