

World War II, Occupation, and the Civil War in Greece, 1940-1949



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World War II, Occupation, and the Civil War in Greece, 1940-1949: Records of the U.S. State Department Classified Files



The Axis occupation of Greece during World War II began in April 1941 after the German and Italian invasion of Greece was carried out together with Bulgarian forces. The occupation lasted until the German withdrawal from the mainland in October 1944. The occupation brought about terrible hardships for the Greek civilian population. Over 300,000 civilians died in Athens alone from starvation, tens of thousands more through reprisals; minorities, particularly Jews, were deported to concentration camps; and, in the Bulgarian and German occupied areas, ethnic cleansing attempted to eradicate generations of Greek residents. When liberation came in October 1944, Greece was in a state of crisis, which soon led to the outbreak of civil war. The Greek Civil War was fought from 1946 to 1949 between the pro-Western Greek governmental army and the Communist Democratic Army of Greece. It was the result of a highly polarized struggle between leftists and rightists which started in 1943 and targeted the power vacuum that the German-Italian occupation during World War II had created.

Date Range: 1940-1949

Content: 85,413 images

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Greece in World War II

Fascist Italy had initially invaded Greece in October 1940 but was defeated, and the Greek Army pushed the invaders back into neighboring Albania. A rapid German Blitzkrieg campaign followed in April 1941, and by the middle of May, Greece was under joint occupation by three Axis powers: Germany, Italy and Bulgaria. A collaborationist Greek government was established immediately after the country fell.

The occupation brought about terrible hardships for the Greek civilian population. The great suffering and the pressure of the exiled Greek government eventually forced the British to partially lift the blockade, and from the summer of 1942, the International Red Cross was able to distribute supplies in sufficient quantities to the population

Few Greeks cooperated with the Nazis. During this time Greek Resistance, one of the most effective resistance movements in Occupied Europe, was formed. The largest source of partisan activity were the Communist-backed guerrilla forces, the National Liberation Front (EAM), and its military wing, the National People's Liberation Army (ELAS).

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The Greek Civil War

The Greek Civil War was fought from 1946 to 1949 between the Greek governmental army, backed by the United Kingdom and United States, and the Democratic Army of Greece (DSE), the military branch of the Greek Communist Party (KKE), backed by Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and Albania. One of the first conflicts of the Cold War, according to some analysts it represents the first example of a postwar Western interference in the internal politics of a foreign country, and for others, marked the first serious test of the theory of the so-called Churchill-Stalin percentages agreement.

The prelude of the civil war occurred in December 1944, after the country had been liberated. EAM and British troops fought a battle in Athens after British troops fired on protestors. The result was defeat of EAM by the British forces.

The civil war erupted in 1946 when forces controlled by the KKE, having political and logistical backing from the newly-founded communist states to the north (Albania, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria) organized the Democratic Army of Greece (DSE), and started fighting against the internationally recognized Greek government which won the 1946 elections. Despite initial failures by the government forces from 1946 until 1948, increased American aid, lack of high numbers of recruits to the ranks of DSE and the side-effects of the Tito-Stalin split, led to their victory.

The final victory of the Western-supported government forces led to Greece's membership in NATO, and helped to define the ideological balance of power in the Aegean for the entire Cold War. The civil war also left Greece with a vehemently anti-communist security establishment, which would lead to the establishment of the Greek military junta of 1967-1974, and a legacy of political polarization which lasted until the 1980s.

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