The Civil War in Greece, 1943-49

By Brian Train

THE GERMAN INVADE AND conquered Greece during the spring of 1941 in a lightning campaign. The country was then occupied by Italian, German and Bulgarian forces. The main resistance to the Axis occupation was organized by the Greek Communist Party (KKE in Greek-language acronym). It managed to bring most of the resistance elements together in a political organization called the National Liberation Front (EAM in Greek). Its armed element was the National People's Liberation Army (ELAS). The communists' main rival was EDES, a republican organization made up largely of former army officers and recruits from the Epirus region in northwestern Greece.

The Western Allies sent the first of several military missions to Greece in September 1942. Their mission was to support anti-Axis partisans. That Allied effort wasn't large, however, and the unwillingness of the communist ELAS to work with the republican EDES meant the Greek resistance would accomplish little against the Axis.

On 8 September 1943, Italy surrendered and its troops occupying Greece and the Dodecanese Islands were disarmed and taken prisoner, some by the Germans and some by the Greek resistance. ELAS immediately used that windfall of weapons and equipment to attack rival resistance groups. For two weeks in October it appeared the communists might succeed in wiping out their competition.

Then a vigorous German anti-guerrilla operation, combined with their usual harsh policies of reprisal killings and deportations, plus a severe famine brought on by German food confiscations, and the growing strength of the German-controlled security battalions, soon had ELAS maneuvering simply to try to save itself.

In 1944 the Allies were on the advance across Europe and it became clear Greece would soon be liberated. A free Greek government was created in the mountains in March, and it presented itself as the legitimate alternative to the right-wing, pro-monarchist, government-in-exile in London. In reality it was a front organization of the KKE.

In April, communist sedition led to mutinies in Greek-exile army units and ships in the Middle East and Italy, which were fighting alongside the Allies. The mutinies were suppressed, and most of the mutineers imprisoned or sent to labor battalions. New units were formed around officers and others who'd stayed loyal to the London government-in-exile. Those units followed the British forces that landed in Greece in October, and they would form the core of the postwar Greek National Army.

By the beginning of November the Germans had evacuated mainland Greece. ELAS was by then almost 50,000 strong and organized into 10 divisions of 2,000 to 8,000 men each. It controlled most of the country.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 10 »
ELAS was formally disbanded by the Venice Agreement in February 1945, but by early 1946 it had reconstituted itself as the Dimokratikos Oluaros Elan or Greek Democratic Army (DSE). The main difference between the ELAS of the first and second rounds of the Civil War and the DSE of the third was that the latter had a secure rear area in Albania, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria in which to conduct training, rest, reorganization and receive supplies and equipment. Several thousand recruits were in training at any one time, most at the main DSE base at Bulkes, a town northeast of Volos, several hundred miles from the Greek frontier. The armies of these communist countries provided instructors and advisors at all levels. In fact, the Yugoslav Army attached a general and his staff to the base at Bulkes to oversee operations. This group was composed of about 1,200 men, 15 tanks, 12 towed Howitzers, 4 Self-Propelled Howitzers, 36x M4 Sherman Tanks, 16x Vickers MMG, 30x 2.36” Rckt, 16x 2” Mortar, 4x 3” Mortar, 1x 3.7” Howitzr, 1x 4.2” Mortar, 3x 5.5” How, 3x Bren LMG/BAR, 1x 105mm Howitzer, and 1x 75mm gun. The ELAS concept of command was based on coordination, as opposed to any centralized direction. The KKE maintained a large number of auxiliary organizations to support the fighters of ELAS and DSE. These included the following:

- ELAN. National Popular Liberation Navy. The naval aspect of ELAS, this group was composed of about 1,200 men and 100 small boats. Organized into seven squadrons, and falling under the command of the local division commanders, ELAN can supply and move men up and down the coast of Greece.
- ERGAS. Workers’ Anti-Fascist League, a group charged with organising strikes and sabotaging infrastructure in large towns and cities.
- ETA. This was the formal supply organization for the DSE. It was organized into static units of 50 to 75 responsible for catching, maintaining and distributing supplies in a given area. ETA members also took charge of evacuating wounded.
- KOSSA. Communist Organization of the Army and Security Corps. This group was formed with infiltrating the army and police. Not many Greek soldiers or policemen changed sides, but it was easy for KOSSA to exploit their grievances. It’s estimated that in 1947 to 1948 about 15 percent of GNA members were dissatisfied.
- NOE. Macedonian Liberation Front. This group supported the creation of an autonomous “Slavic Macedonia,” and maintained distinct units in the DSE order of battle. Since creating such a region would’ve required annexing most of northern Greece, DSE later de-emphasized its support for the NOF. By 1948 most DSE recruits were Macedonian anyway, as the supply of volunteers declined and the DSE declined to forced conscription in the areas it controlled.
- OPLA. Units for the Protection of the Peasles’ Struggle. Like a secret police, OPLA carried out reprisal killings, and arrested and executed collaborators and known anti-communists when ELAS moved into a new area. This organization was responsible for the assassination of several prominent political figures, including the minister of justice, in 1948.
- YAKATA. This group maintained a network of cells in cities, towns and villages to support DSE units in their local areas with intelligence, supplies and recruits. It had an estimated peak strength of 50,000 in 1947, up to 250,000 sympathizers who gave, or could be made to give, occasional help.

Aims & Equipment

ELAS units were originally armed with whatever weapons had been left in depots by the Greek Army in 1941 or that could be captured from enemy forces. The Allies supplied ELAS with little in the way of arms and ammunition compared to what they furnished their EAM’s partisans in Yugoslavia. The Italian surrender in 1943, and the later German withdrawal from the country, made more crew-served weapons available. During the 1947-49 fighting, DSE units received German weapons captured as war booty, including 75mm and 105mm guns, as well as limited amounts of Soviet weapons via Yugoslavia.

Auxiliaries

The KKE maintained a large number of auxiliary organizations to support the fighters of ELAS and DSE. These included the following:

- ELAN. National Popular Liberation Navy. The naval aspect of ELAS, this group was composed of about 1,200 men and 100 small boats. Organized into seven squadrons, and falling under the command of the local division commanders, ELAN can supply and move men up and down the coast of Greece. It was organized into static units of 50 to 75 responsible for catching, maintaining and distributing supplies in a given area. ETA members also took charge of evacuating wounded.
- ERGAS. Workers’ Anti-Fascist League, a group charged with organizing strikes and sabotaging infrastructure in large towns and cities.
- ETA. This was the formal supply organization for the DSE. It was organized into static units of 50 to 75 responsible for catching, maintaining and distributing supplies in a given area. ETA members also took charge of evacuating wounded.
- KOSSA. Communist Organization of the Army and Security Corps. This group was formed with infiltrating the army and police. Not many Greek soldiers or policemen changed sides, but it was easy for KOSSA to exploit their grievances. It’s estimated that in 1947 to 1948 about 15 percent of GNA members were dissatisfied.
- NOE. Macedonian Liberation Front. This group supported the creation of an autonomous “Slavic Macedonia,” and maintained distinct units in the DSE order of battle. Since creating such a region would’ve required annexing most of northern Greece, DSE later de-emphasized its support for the NOF. By 1948 most DSE recruits were Macedonian anyway, as the supply of volunteers declined and the DSE declined to forced conscription in the areas it controlled.
- OPLA. Units for the Protection of the Peasles’ Struggle. Like a secret police, OPLA carried out reprisal killings, and arrested and executed collaborators and known anti-communists when ELAS moved into a new area. This organization was responsible for the assassination of several prominent political figures, including the minister of justice, in 1948.
- YAKATA. This group maintained a network of cells in cities, towns and villages to support DSE units in their local areas with intelligence, supplies and recruits. It had an estimated peak strength of 50,000 in 1947, up to 250,000 sympathizers who gave, or could be made to give, occasional help.

**Committee for the Liberation of Cyprus.** The KKE organized this group but, ironically, the leader of the EOKA struggle from 1954 to 1959, and the source of real trouble, would be George Lycavos, leader of an extreme right-wing organization called “KH” (Chis) during the German occupation.
except for an EDES enclave in the Epirus region and the two major cities of Athens and Thessalonica. The ELAS high command sensed it was time to strike. The British force in Greece was too small to fully control the situation militarily, and the political situation was too fluid for the newly restored national government to assert its authority. During the last half of November, then, ELAS maneuvered its best troops into position to seize, or at least surround, Athens and its port of Piraeus, along with Thessalonica, and to try to eliminate EDES. On 3 December a massive anti-government demonstration in Athens was disrupted by gunfire and, with that, ELAS began its second bid for power. ELAS forces were effective at first, but their organizational and leadership deficiencies told against them. The decision to seize power had been taken hastily, and its divisions proved unable to move quickly, being repulsed whenever serious resistance was encountered. By the end of the year the British had reinforced and Athens was relieved. On Christmas Day, Winston Churchill arrived there to convene a conference to find a political solution. A ceasefire in mid-January 1945 was followed by the Varkiza Agreement in February. It let the KKE continue as a legal political organization, but ELAS was to disband and hand over its arms and equipment. ELAS cached many of its weapons in the mountains, and about 5,000 of its most dedicated members crossed the border into Yugoslavia and Albania into areas controlled by communist partisans. ELAS’ s failed offensive was a significant military and political defeat for the communists. They’d proven unable to take on regular troops, while the KKE lost its popular front facade when other left-wing organizations resigned from it. Worst of all for the communists, in the retreat from Athens, ELAS units took some 20,000 hostages with them into the mountains. Many of those people died of illness and exposure and some were executed. That hardened the mood against the KKE all across Greece. The remainder of 1945 and early 1946 passed in political and social turmoil. Greece had suffered badly under the Axis occupation—over half-a-million people—eight percent of the pre-war population of 7 million, had died of famine or disease or been killed in the crossfire. Short-lived governments, strikes, demonstrations, sabotage and revenge killings by both left- and right-wing organizations added to the atmosphere of lawlessness and chaos. Increasing numbers of communist guerrillas entered Greece from Yugoslavia and Albania. The Greek National Army (GNA) estimated that by December 1946 there were over 8,000 insurgents of the renamed Democratic Army of Greece (DSE) inside the country. The DSE established its strength in several bases inside Greece, mostly in the frontier corner around Lake Prespa where the borders of Albania, Yugoslavia and Greece converge. DSE also managed to infiltrate troops by land and sea to the Peloponnesian, and there were also low levels of guerrilla activity on Crete and the Dodecanese Islands. The DSE played to its strengths by adopting a protracted struggle strategy. It conducted raids and ambushes and attacked isolated border posts, convoys...