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Turning Points in the Greek Resistance

C. M. WOODHOUSE

Resistance to enemy occupation has stood rather apart from the general history of the Second World War. Historians have been doubtful whether to treat it as a part of military and strategic history or a part of political and diplomatic history. Some have thought the less said about it the better, in any context. In the history of particular countries which suffered enemy occupation, the treatment of resistance has varied widely according to the outcome of the war. In some countries it has occupied a major place in their war-time history: Denmark and Yugoslavia, for quite different reasons, are important examples. In other occupied countries very little has been written about the occupation by professional historians: Greece is an outstanding example. Although Britain played a leading role in promoting resistance everywhere, the subject has not attracted many professional historians, other than those who had a personal engagement in it during the war.

The significance of resistance has therefore tended to go by default except for those who have a natural temptation to exaggerate it. I have read nothing myself which has led me to regard its importance as amounting to more than a running sore in the Nazi occupation of Europe – an expression which I first used of it in a lecture at Munich in 1957.¹ I recognize that resistance was an important factor in the moral recovery of many countries from the shock of defeat. But this does not by itself make resistance a major factor in the history of the Second World War, nor does it answer the question whether resistance played a major part in military or political history.

1. *Zeitgeschichte* (Munich, April 1958), p. 149.

These thoughts were recently brought to my mind again by reading a new book by the Danish historian, Jørgen Haestrup, published in English under the title *Europe Ablaze* (Odense University Press, 1978). Dr. Haestrup says that he wrote this book in response to a challenge from myself. He recalls that at a conference at Oxford in 1962, I called on historians 'to make a total survey of the Resistance Movements in their complexity, and in their relationship to, and significance for the general development of the war'; and to do so 'by studying Resistance as an integral part of the total history of the war, and by doing so on a comparative basis over all the countries in which Resistance took place'.² This was the task which he set himself, and an excellent job he made of it.

We should now be in a position to answer my question: how important was resistance, and was its importance primarily military and strategic or primarily political and diplomatic? The answer must, I think, be that resistance was not very important historically, but it was more important in the political and diplomatic context than in the military and strategic context. I doubt, for example, whether the war would have lasted a day longer if there had been no resistance at all, though possibly this judgement is unfair with reference to the Russian front. On the other hand, the post-war history of some occupied countries would have been quite different if there had been no resistance. The outstanding case is Yugoslavia. In a different sense the same is true of Greece. In the post-war history of Greece many people would argue that the consequences of resistance were not so much important as disastrous.

Why was resistance relatively unimportant in the military and strategic context? The answer lies in the extraordinary difficulty of co-ordinating action in occupied territories with the strategic plans of the western allies. (I say the western allies because Haestrup plausibly suggests that co-ordination was easier on the Russian front).³ One can name a number of operations in Europe which were heroic and successful, and they have become well known: for example, the attack on the German heavy-water plant in Norway, the assassination of Heydrich in Czechoslovakia, and the massive campaigns of the Yugoslav

. 2. Haestrup, *Europe Ablaze* (Odense, 1978), pp. 7-8.

. 3. *Ibid.*, pp. 486-8.

Partisans. But the value of these operations was of a general character. They were not linked to specific allied plans or timed to coincide with specific allied offensives. This was due to the problems of co-ordinated timing, which arose from the difficulties of communication. To take only one example, six months elapsed between the despatch of Czech agents to kill Heydrich and the execution of the deed. Only towards the very end of the war did it become possible, particularly in France and Belgium, for the resistance to carry out specific tasks related intimately to allied strategy. Elsewhere, particularly in Poland, the heroism of the resistance was actually wasted through lack of co-ordination between the home front and the external front.

Against this background, I wish to examine the particular case of operations in Greece. Haestrup refers to two such operations, which were known to the Special Operations Executive as Operation Harling in October–November 1942 and Operation Animals in June–July 1943.⁴ Harling was the code-name for the attack on the Gorgopotamos railway viaduct; Animals was the code-name of a series of operations designed to mislead the Germans into believing that the allied landings in southern Europe, which were actually aimed at Sicily and Italy, were aimed instead at Greece and the Balkans. Haestrup rightly argues that Operation Animals was a success but Operation Harling was a failure in relation to its primary object, because it was carried out too late. The essential difference lay in timing. In October 1942 the facilities simply did not exist for co-ordinating operations with precision between occupied Greece and the British GHQ in Cairo. The execution of Operation Harling started from scratch with no chance of preliminary planning by the British team in the field. On the other hand, when Operation Animals took place seven months later, the same British team had ample time for preparations in the field, and the timing was exact.

But it is not so much in the military context that I wish to re-examine these operations, but rather in the context of their political consequences. I take Operation Animals first because, although it was later in date, its political consequences were fairly simple—which is not to say that they were not very serious. The object of Operation Animals, as I have said, was to mislead

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 437–8.

the Germans into thinking that an allied landing in Greece was imminent. For reasons of security, no one but Myers and myself knew that the operation was purely a deception. Consequently it succeeded not only in deceiving the Germans but also in deceiving the Greeks. The result was that soon afterwards the KKE launched a general attack on all the nationalist resistance organizations, presumably with the object of securing total control of the country in anticipation of the allied landings. The outcome was what came to be known as the 'first round' of the civil war. It failed, as we know, but it did very grave damage. Such was the political significance of Operation Animals.

The significance of Operation Harling, seven months earlier, was different. In the military context it was a failure, whereas Operation Animals was a success. In the political context, whereas the consequences of Operation Animals were very damaging, the consequences of Operation Harling were more complex and more interesting. Whether they were good or bad for Greece and her allies is a question which is bound to receive different answers according to the political standpoint of those who try to answer it.

In brief, the main consequence of Operation Harling was that a nationalist resistance, not under Communist control, was enabled to survive in Greece. It is very doubtful whether it would have survived if Zervas had not taken part in the attack on the Gorgopotamos bridge or if the attack had failed. In order to substantiate this argument, I must to a certain extent depart from history and imagine an alternative scenario in which Zervas played no part. But first, as background, I must outline the calendar of events.

The plan for an attack on the railway line through Greece was initiated at a meeting in the SOE headquarters in Cairo on 4 September 1942. It was intended to cut the main supply line of Field-Marshal Rommel's Afrika Korps in conjunction with the offensive of the British Eighth Army from El Alamein. A team of twelve parachutists was selected, divided into three self-contained groups of four men each. One group, led by myself, was to be dropped to Zervas, who was believed to be in Mount Tymphristos (Veloukhi); the other two groups, led by Colonel Myers, who was in overall command, were to be dropped in Mount Giona and to be met by a certain Sepheriadis, who

would put them in touch with another guerrilla force, presumably ELAS.⁵ The entire force was then to be united for an attack on one of the three main viaducts on the railway line.

The plan went astray, mainly through faulty intelligence but also partly through accident. Zervas was not where he was believed to be. Sepheriadis was arrested by the Italians a day or two before the parachutists were due to be dropped. In the event two of our three groups, led by Myers and myself, were dropped blind in Giona on the last night of September. The third group was dropped only a month later. Although Myers and I found each other within a few days, seven weeks passed before our whole team was united, together with the joint guerrilla forces of Zervas and ELAS. The attack on the Gorgopotamos bridge took place only on the night of 25–26 November. Meanwhile the battle of El Alamein had begun on 23 October. The Eighth Army had reached Benghazi by 20 November, after which the railway line through Greece was of comparatively little value to the Germans in North Africa. The long delay, while we were searching for guerrillas in the Pindus mountains, was fatal to the primary purpose of Operation Harling. The main point which I wish to make is that this fatal delay need never have occurred, if ELAS or EAM had taken advantage of their opportunities.

Let us now look at the alternative scenario. Three opportunities were offered to EAM, ELAS and Aris Veloukhiotis to make contact with the British team before it had made any contact at all with Zervas. If they had taken these opportunities, in two cases out of the three, and perhaps in the third also, they could have carried out Operation Harling with us and without Zervas, in time to affect the battle for North Africa. If they had done so, the gain in prestige for ELAS would have been enormous. It would have been decisive in fulfilling their ambition of monopolising the resistance; it would have enabled them to neutralize or even to eliminate Zervas; and it would have virtually assured them of total control over Greece at the end of the occupation. What were those opportunities, and why were they not taken?

The first opportunity occurred on 2 October, two days after we landed in Giona. As I have explained, Sepheriadis, who was to have met Myers' party, was already a prisoner of the Italians.

5. *Balkan Studies* (Thessaloniki, 1971), XII, 2, 351.

But a certain Karalivanos, whose name had been mentioned to us as a guerrilla leader, was by chance very near the spot in Giona where Myers landed. He and his small band helped Myers during the first few days, but vanished when rumours spread of an Italian patrol in the mountains. Karalivanos was no more than a petty brigand, but he was probably the man with whom Sepheriadis intended to put Myers in touch. More important, he had served with Aris Veloukhiotis and must have had some idea where he was. It is therefore hard to believe that Aris did not fairly soon learn of the arrival of British parachutists, for even rumours travel with extraordinary rapidity in the mountains. Yet Karalivanos made no attempt to put Myers in touch with Aris, nor did Aris make any attempt to contact Myers. The failure to do so must have been deliberate.

The second opportunity was offered independently to EAM. On 3 October, three days after we landed in Greece, I had not yet found Myers and I had no contact with any guerrillas, so I walked down to Amphissa, the nearest town on a motor-road, in the hope of contriving some sort of contact with Athens, and through Athens with the guerrillas. On 4 October, in the outskirts of Amphissa, I met Niko Karvounis, a well-known journalist who was both a member of EAM and a Communist, though he did not tell me so. In fact, he told me very little, not even his reasons for being in the mountains. I told him in broad outline the purpose for which I had come to Greece, and asked him if he knew the whereabouts of any guerrillas. He was extremely reserved in reply, but he said he was returning to Athens and he would see what he could do to help. Our meeting was entirely fruitless, and I saw nothing more of him till eighteen months later. I have little doubt, however, that he could have put me in touch with Aris Veloukhiotis, through contacts with EAM in Lamia, in Amphissa, or even in Athens, if he had exerted himself to do so; but he did not.

The third opportunity occurred some weeks later, though still in time for ELAS to have undertaken the Gorgopotamos operation with us on its own, before we had any contact with Zervas. On the last night of October the third group of parachutists was finally dropped very near Karpenisi, where there was a large Italian garrison. By a miraculous chance Aris was nearby, and he acted with great speed and resolution to save

our group from capture by the Italians. One of the group was an English-speaking Greek officer, Themistocles Marinos. He explained the purpose of their mission to Aris. It must be supposed that even at the beginning of November it was not too late for Operation Harling to affect the battle for North Africa, since otherwise there would have been no point in sending in the third group of parachutists a week after the battle of El Alamein had begun. But Aris was not to be persuaded. Instead of proceeding eastwards toward the railway line, he set out south-westwards in the direction of Agrinion, taking the four parachutists with him to display them to the villagers as evidence that the British supported his movement.

Why was he not willing at this date to make his force available for Operation Harling? It seems likely that he was under standing orders from EAM. One version has it that his orders were 'not to attack formed bodies of the enemy'.⁶ Another has it that he was ordered specifically not to co-operate with us because 'our intentions were known and it would be madness to attack the bridge'.⁷ Even more circumstantially, there was a rumour at a later stage, when Aris had taken a decision to co-operate with us after all, that 'a special emissary was coming from the Central Committee of EAM in Athens with the object of persuading him not only not to take part in the operation against the Gorgopotamos bridge, but even if possible to prevent it'.⁸ At any rate it seems clear that there was some kind of pressure on Aris not to give active support to Operation Harling.

But he was a man who took his own decisions rather than blindly obeying his superiors, as was shown again in the final episode of his life. After refusing to accept any persuasion from Marinos for over a week, he changed his mind on or about 9 November. The circumstances of his recantation were as follows. On the last day of October, which happened to be the day when Aris picked up our third group near Karpenisi, Myers and I had learned in our cave on Giona, through a courier from Athens, where Zervas in fact was: in Valtos, west of the Pindus range. On 2 November I set out to find him, with a deadline of

6. E. C. W. Myers, *Greek Entanglement* (London 1955), p. 72.
7. D. Hamson, *We Fell Among Greeks* (London 1946), pp. 91, 100.
8. K. Pyromaglou, *O Doureios Ippos* (Athens, 1958), p. 53.

17 November fixed for my return. On 8 November, passing through the village of Velota, I learned from the priest that Aris Veloukhiotis and his band, with four men in British uniform, had passed through the village a day before, marching at right-angles to my own route. The priest undertook to convey a message to Aris for me, while I continued my journey towards Valtos.

I wrote a note in Greek to Aris, telling him that I expected to find Zervas in a few days, and asking him to change direction himself and to meet us in Giona, with the four parachutists, as soon as possible. The priest wrote on a corner of the envelope the initials 'ELAS', which I then saw for the first time. The note must have been delivered to Aris on the 9th or 10th. He did not himself proceed at once to Giona, but he sent the four parachutists there with an escort under Nikiphoros Dimitriou. On 10 November I found Zervas in Valtos. On 12 November I set out on the return journey to Giona with Zervas' force. On 14 November, at Viniani north of Karpenisi, we were unexpectedly joined by Aris with his own force. There could be no doubt that he had decided to join us for fear that Zervas would gain all the credit from the impending operation. We proceeded together to Giona, where the whole force, Greek and British, was at last united on 20 November. The Gorgopotamos bridge was successfully attacked on the night of 25–26 November. But it was a good three weeks too late to affect the battle for North Africa.

When Field-Marshal Montgomery was asked by a Greek journalist some years later whether our operation had contributed anything to his victory, he replied that he had never heard of it. This was disappointing, especially since it was his own headquarters which had requested it. But he would certainly have heard of it if it had occurred three weeks earlier. My reason for recapitulating these events is to show that this could have happened if EAM or ELAS or Aris himself had taken their earlier opportunities. They had at least three opportunities to monopolize Operation Harling, and the first two were certainly available in time to affect the battle of El Alamein. On the other hand, Zervas had no contact with any of the British team until 10 November, ten days after the last of Aris' opportunities.

If the opportunities open to ELAS had been taken, they could

have carried out Operation Harling together with the British team and without the participation of any other guerrillas; they could have done it in time to exercise an important influence on allied strategy; and they could thereby have won a decisive predominance in the Greek resistance. The whole credit for the first major action in occupied Europe ever to be successfully co-ordinated with an allied offensive would have fallen to ELAS. In that case the role of Zervas would have been a matter of relative indifference, and probably he would not have survived on his own as an important leader at all. Nor would Saraphis and Psaros have taken the field as independent leaders. If they had taken the field at all, it could only have been under the leadership of EAM. The position of EAM both under the years of occupation and afterwards would have been unassailable. Greece would almost inevitably have gone the same way as Yugoslavia. But all these opportunities were thrown away in October 1942.

My argument is entirely speculative, of course; and while we are speculating it is fair to mention an alternative hypothesis of Komninos Pyromaglou. He pointed out that if other officers of senior rank – he had in mind Psaros, but the same would apply to Saraphis – had taken the field at the same time as Zervas (July 1942) instead of seven or eight months later, then they could have mustered a combined force sufficient to carry out Operation Harling without the participation of ELAS.⁹ In that case the nationalist resistance would have gained the predominance which, under my hypothesis, would have been gained by the Communist-led resistance. In other words, the nationalist leaders also missed the same opportunity as the Communists.

Pyromaglou's hypothesis seems to me to be true in theory, but in practice it overlooks the reaction by ELAS which must have been stimulated by the conjunction of these senior officers and the British team. Aris Veloukhiotis would surely have intervened to offer his services, just as he did as soon as Zervas was involved; and we should certainly not have rejected him. So the credit for Operation Harling would again have been divided, as it was in reality, between the Communist-led and the nationalist resistance. We return then to my original point. It

9. K. Pyromaglou, *O Giorgios Kartalis* (Athens, 1965), I, p. 157.

was only EAM, ELAS and Aris who were offered and failed to take the opportunity of a single-handed triumph – a triumph that would have been equally important in the military context to the allies and in the political context to themselves.

How should history judge this missed opportunity? Writers whose sympathies lie with the left would presumably judge it as a fatal error on the part of the popular movement. Those whose sympathies are not with the left might feel inclined to echo the argument of George Papandreou, who concluded that the error of the KKE in launching the rising of December 1944 ‘may be regarded as a gift from the Almighty’.¹⁰ The detached historian must insulate himself from such judgements and stick so far as possible to the facts. The basic and inescapable fact is that in October 1942 a historic opportunity was thrown away, never to recur. Tito and his Partisans would never have made such a mistake. Perhaps that is essentially why they succeeded in Yugoslavia, while the KKE failed in Greece.

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10. G. Papandreou, *I Apelevtherosis tis Ellados* (Athens, 1949), 3rd edition, pp. 292–301.