

“To the average person, politics during times of civil war is more about economics than anything else.”

Written by Liz Jardine-Smith

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Discuss.

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LIZ JARDINE-SMITH, JUN 11 2008

The study of civil wars is inherently subjective and complex. Many writers have complained that these conflicts have too often been viewed through the left-right discourse, and as such have been regarded as fundamentally ideological in content and cause[1]. Kalyvas emphasises the messiness of civil wars and urges caution in efforts to simplify or explain them in broad terms. Support for different sides in civil conflict is not often crystallised ‘along well-defined cleavages’ but may stem from ‘a variety of grievances’ of which the basic economics of survival might be a prominent example[2]. This is particularly true of the Russian civil war, which took place in a country more culturally, ethnically and economically diverse than any other on earth. It is also true of the Greek civil war in which the political discourse was often imposed on the peasants and not accessed by them in any impartial manner. Relationships of necessity were sought by average people with the guerrillas and government forces in both conflicts in a bid to satisfy a vast array of grievances, many of them better explained through the parameters of economics than ideology. Although ideology might at first appear to be of major importance to average people involved in civil wars, it was often regarded as a means to an end: a method of securing basic necessities in times of political and economic flux. Economics, if it is taken to mean ‘how scarce resources are or should be allocated’, can be seen at the root of issues such as ideology and nationalism, or as a major contributing factor in their shift to prominence[3].

The roots of each conflict are important to consider because of their tangible impact on the events which followed. The roots of the Russian civil war are to be found in various aspects of the state structure and situation prior to 1917. The one of most relevance to this question was the agriculturally based nature of the Russian economy which suffered profoundly from poor productivity as a result of widely used traditional methods of farming. Between 1880 and 1917 the Russian population increased from 100 million to 182 million. The main affect of this was an intensification of the pressures on land ownership, particularly in central Russia where peasants worked on individual plots[4]. The lack of an organised, efficient and reliable system for the production of food was compounded in 1917

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by inadequate transport links, leading to a situation where the overcrowded cities suffered horrendous shortages of even the most basic foods. During the occupation of Greece, and the civil war itself, the same problem brought Athens to a virtual standstill. In the winter of 1941-2 at least 300,000 people starved in the capital alone as a result of blockades, huge rates of inflation and shortages of grain[5]. The stage was set for this catastrophe by the resettlement programme committed to in the Treaty of Lausanne (1924) which would see the refugee population of Greece increase its share of the overall national population to 20 percent. Between 1922 and 1932 forty percent of the Greek national budget was spent on the resettlement programme. Although the thorny issue of nationalism gained renewed prominence as a result of this expansion of Greek territory, at the core of the matter for most people were economic issues: land distribution, rural debt and the diversion of government funds. This all led to an intensification of the need for land, as had happened in Russia. Here can be seen a key factor in explaining both these civil wars: a lack of basic necessities. Undoubtedly in both situations people's hunger and fears of starvation were exploited by different sides in the conflicts as a means to ensure support or to consolidate a hold on power.

In Petrograd in February 1917 'what had started as a series of bread riots turned into a revolution'[6]. Political volatility had been increasing in the capital largely in proportion to the prices of basic goods. As a result of the disengagement from the grain market 'the economic difficulties of the peasantry were directly linked to the upsurge of unrest in the towns' as peasants gradually came to the conclusion that it would be better simply to consume the grain they produced within their villages, thus denying it to the cities and to the army[7]. It was on this unrest that the Bolsheviks built their power base, just as EAM (National Liberation Front) did in Athens[8]. As civil unrest grew both groups turned their attention to the peasantry and to the important issue of land reform. Both organisations initially depended for much of their support on the workers in the large cities and towns; the Bolsheviks placing emphasis on workers rights of assembly, strike and suffrage, and EAM focusing on the working class districts on the outskirts of Athens, taking advantage of popular discontent occasioned by the German occupation. In his biography *Eleni* Nicholas Gage considers the affects that the German occupation had on Greece after 'vital imports [were cut off] to a land that could grow only 40 percent of its food'[9]. The levels of emigration from Greece to America were high at this point in the country's history. Many families depended for much of their income on relatives living and working in the United States, and once the Germans had occupied the country, that line of support was cut[10].

EAM was founded in September 1941 'in order to resist the Germans and provide social services' but, unlike the Russian communist party, they commanded more sympathy than actual members. Bolshevik party membership leapt from 80,000 in April 1917 to 1.4 million in 1920[11]. However, the number did decrease from 50,000 to 13,000 in Petrograd during the first six months of the Bolshevik regime, as a result of the Party's policy of granting peasants the right to seize land without compensation accorded to the landowners[12]. The economic situation had not improved

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in Petrograd or in other cities around the country, and the promise of land and thus a reliable source of food drew many workers back to their villages. As a newspaper report stated at the time: ‘the Russian masses...first instinct [after the revolution] was to improve their standard of living’[13]. People chose the relative stability of village life over overt support for the Party or the communist ideology. Resentment among the land owning class increased as peasants began to forcibly seize land, sometimes burning down the estates. The students and sons of land owners who fled south to Kiev soon after the revolution were the most likely to fight with the White army, being ‘a dispossessed generation who had nothing to lose in a civil war’[14]. The peasants had initially been apprehensive towards the revolution, but after their ‘fears had been removed [they] welcomed [it]’[15]. Indeed it was viewed with almost sacred intensity in the Russian countryside; processions of peasants would form to ‘thank the Lord for newly won freedoms’[16]. A key contrast is evident here between the peasants of rural Russia and those in Greece who had already endured four years of occupation before civil hostilities erupted. As there was no landed aristocracy the peasants, making up the vast majority of the population, were not confronted day-by-day with inequality in the same way as the Russian peasants were. The respective peasant populations would therefore view economics and politics during times of civil war in very different ways; the Greeks in terms of survival, the Russians in terms of comparison with their land owners. In different ways, both these views were sufficiently resilient and intense to take priority over ideology in the minds of most; the key concern was to improve material conditions.

The inherently migrant nature of the Russian working class on the one hand had kept links with the villages very constant and on the other had allowed the rebellious attitudes of the peasants towards inequality to take root in the towns, compounded as they were by the ‘harsh and exploitative conditions’[17]. It was not until the mutiny of the Petrograd garrison on 26th February 1917 that anything more extraordinary than protests over food shortages was suspected, even by the exiled Bolsheviks[18]. The consequence was that the socialist leaders, Lenin and Trotsky among them, were trying to catch up with the striking workers, until the Bolshevik Party’s influence could be brought to bear on the newly elected soviets which gradually appeared all over Russia. West of the Urals towns, villages, factories and garrisons established soviets to challenge the local Dumas. In Figes’ account it is clear that although the initial impetus for the strikes of February 1917 was the bread shortages, they soon acquired a pronounced political air with banners reading ‘Down with the Tsar’, an indication either of overt support for the Bolshevik cause, or rather a general feeling that to support them would be the best means to the desired end.[19]

To appreciate what politics involved for average people during the Greek and Russian civil wars I think it is necessary to consider them partly within the framework of the international sphere. For the Russian Empire the First World War proved disastrous; the food supplies to the front were shakily ensured at the expense of that of the cities, and the strikes occasioned by this lack of food rendered the transport system totally inept. The Brest-Litovsk Treaty

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was also a landmark in the lead up to the civil war. By signing the treaty the Bolshevik party ceded 32 percent of Russia's agricultural land, 34 percent of the population and 54 percent of the industrial enterprises currently underway[20]. These negotiations, combined with the massing of British, American and Japanese troops on Russian territory (to secure strategic interests), created a climate ripe for the organisation of domestic resistance to the Bolsheviks. In Greece occupation by the Italians then the Germans led to intervention also by the British, and the Americans. Concerning the repression of ELAS (National Popular Liberation Army)[21] and the attempts at containment of the fighting in Athens Churchill stated 'you may make any regulations you like for the strict control of the streets or the rounding-up of any number of truculent persons'[22]. When the British decided to cease all assistance to Greece, to take effect on 31st March 1947 the then American President, Harry S. Truman, used the platform of the State of the Union Address to put forward what became known as the Truman Doctrine. He drew attention to many of the factors which had led to the situation in which the Greek people then found themselves: 'lack of sufficient natural resources has always forced the Greek people to work hard to make both ends meet' and 'the retreating Germans had destroyed virtually all the railways, roads, port facilities, communications, and merchant marine'[23]. Although the President was speaking strictly in left-right terms he recognises, in the thrust of his argument, the fact that it was economics which most concerned the majority of the Greek people, and the more equitable distribution of scarce resources which was likely to be the answer to the country's problems.

During the actual fighting of the civil war the choices of the Russian peasants show that their loyalties really lay with economics not ideology. Initially the ambitions of the Red Army were high, because of the successful conscription of 5 million men by 1920[24]. However, most were peasants, many of them were never even issued with a gun, and many did not take part in any direct combat with the White Army. The massive growth of the Red Army over such a short period outstripped the productive capacity of the economy and army discipline suffered as a result[25]. Both sides in the civil war had enormous problems with desertion, which would often follow cyclical patterns, coinciding with important periods in the agricultural calendar. The Red Army was made up largely of peasants and the White Army, despite only managing to recruit a dozen rank-and-file soldiers out of the first three thousand volunteers, also suffered[26]. Yet again the major problem was inextricably connected to the supply of food: as the peasant population easily made up the most numerous social class in Russian society they were vital to ensuring a supply of food to the army and the urban centres. This phenomenon of desertions, re-enlistment and then repeat desertions raises interesting questions about the peasant's loyalties. For the most part it appeared as if the peasants were acting as an independent force, understandably more interested by a safe and reliable source of food than by the ideological fervour of the Bolsheviks in the capital. Many of the recruits in the Red Army were generally unwilling to fight at all, having 'only joined up in order to get an army coat and a daily ration of food', which conveys the broad lack of political support and prevalence of micro-level economic factors in the peasant's decision-making[27]. It

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wasn't until, in 1919, when Denikin's White Army was within 350 miles of Moscow (by then the capital), that the levels of peasant enlistment into the Red Army reached such levels as to produce a surplus of recruits. Many commentators understand this shift to portray the real political allegiance of many average people: they feared the potential return of the landlords, and the reprisals that would flow from any right wing government were the Bolsheviks to lose the war. This shift in allegiance by the peasant population played a vital part in ensuring the victory of the Bolsheviks, but again it was motivated by factors more connected with economics than ideology.

The fighting of the Greek civil war took place between 1946 and 1949. During this time, in the isolated and traditional village communities which punctuated much of rural Greece, relationships of profound economic necessity developed between the people and the warring group most powerful in their area. Those members of the community who did not openly support or tolerate the communists in particular tended to be higher on the social and economic strata, less dependent on their good will for survival. EAM/ELAS were particularly adept at ensuring support among the villagers by infiltrating or manufacturing village power structures to allow a small number of trusted locals to control access to food and information. As Nicholas Gage describes:

'There were committees for administration, justice, supplies and recruitment, and many who had never thought of joining the resistance were flattered to be put in charge of them'[28].

These committees altered, in a sense, something quite vital to the fabric of village life: the way in which land was divided into small plots, each assigned to one family. The family group was relatively self-sufficient in that they grew what they were planning to eat and bought less necessitous items from the few imported into the village. The system of committees instituted a hierarchy different from the culturally determined ones already deeply engrained into the fabric of village life. This form of occupation also challenged important local customs involving the role of women in society. The guerrillas enlisted women and girls into their armies, to substitute for all the men who were either travelling salesmen, had emigrated to America, or who had fled from the guerrilla forces. In a more objective account of the mountain villages of Greece before and during the civil war similar sentiments are apparent: 'EAM/ELAS came eventually to exercise a hold over village imaginations in the opportunity it offered...as a catalyst for the villagers' own private passions'[29]. Essentially the leftist guerrillas of EAM/ELAS brought something approaching a state structure to the mountains, which included in some areas protection from the 'universally despised' Italian collaborators who 'systematically blackmailed and robbed peasants'[30]. The villagers initially had reason to be grateful for the occupation of EAM/ELAS as it satisfied some urgent material concerns, but as soon as the guerrillas began to implement 'a *system of terror*...to ensure civilian compliance and maximise control over the population' resentment often grew[31]. The ideological beliefs espoused by the guerrillas were, in themselves, largely irrelevant to the

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majority of average people. In the extremely isolated and traditional societies of Greece where few if any villagers even owned a radio, the arrival of the guerrillas and their ideas at first provoked some wonder and excitement, but only for as long as it took the peasants to realise how little the guerrillas were contributing to their standard of living. In many vital ways the occupiers actually worsened the situation, and introduced new problems such as the *pedomasoma* policy in Greece, and the looting in Russia.

This overt coercion, perpetrated by the military forces on the civilian population, became a prominent part of both civil wars. The effect of both mass conscription and the ‘rapidly shifting fronts of the Russian civil war’ was to ‘militarize vast civilian areas’[32]. One Russian commentator states that ‘civilian dead and wounded accounted for 91 percent of all losses in the Russian civil war’, clearly a massive figure and one the making of which must have been painfully obvious to those involved[33]. This aspect of the conflict, and other factors detailed above, contributed to disillusionment with the Bolshevik party, the communist ideology and the civil war as a whole. Even factors such as the high level of communist party membership cannot really be cited against this view, as membership was a prerequisite for many things, including access to scarce resources.

The nature of civil wars prescribes the pervasive involvement of average people, but many have questioned the actual existence of widespread popular support in ‘old’ wars for the ideological battle[34]. Russia and Greece are major examples of ‘individual loyalties... [being] informed less by impersonal discourses and more by fluid, shifting, and often locally based cleavages’[35]. By considering the micro-level concerns of the peasant populations of Greece and Russia it can be seen that these local cleavages had far more to do with economics than with ideology or nationalism: they formed the basis for the majority of the tacit support given to all sides and as a result allow us to question the ‘civil’ qualities of these ‘civil’ wars.

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*Written by: Liz Jardine-Smith
Written at: Aberystwyth University
Written for: Dr Eric Landis
Date written: 2004*