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Political Violence in a Borderland. The Region of Kastoria under Italian Occupation (1941-1943)

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Abstract:

This article investigates the history of the province of Kastoria (Western Macedonia) during the Italian occupation of Greece between 1941 and 1943. Inhabited by an ethnically mixed population comprised of Greeks, Vlachs and Slavophones, this province became during occupation the site of armed clashes between Slavophone militias set up by the Italian occupation authorities and the left-wing resistance. Several factors leading to the formation of these collaborationist units are investigated with reference to the history of this region in the 1920ies and 1930ies and of the occupation years until the formation of the Slavophone militias in 1943. In contrast to existing scholarship, it is argued that interethnic violence was neither the necessary outcome of preceding ethnic cleavages, nor merely the result of the Italian policy of divide et impera. Rather, it derived from socio-economic dynamics that allowed for the reemergence of latent patterns of ethnic polarization.

Keywords: Fascist occupation of Greece, Interethnic conflicts, Political Violence, Macedonia

Introduction

The town of Kastoria¹ lies in Western Macedonia, on a peninsula jutting into Lake Orestias, sitting at an altitude of 630m on a promontory

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encircled by mountains. The town and the surrounding region became part of the Ottoman Empire in 1385, remaining under the rule of the Porte until the Balkan Wars (1912-1913), when the Treaties of London and Bucharest sanctioned their incorporation into the Greek state. As was with most areas acquired by Greece with the Balkan Wars, Kastoria had a religiously mixed population comprised of Christians, Jews and Muslims and a strong linguistic diversity with Turkish-speakers, Greeks, Vlachs - a linguistic group speaking a dialect akin to Romanian - and Slavophones.² This article is focused on the history of this small province during the Axis occupation of Greece, when the Italian Royal Army promoted the formation of collaborationist units of Slavophones, under an umbrella organization called Bulgaro-Macedonian Revolutionary Committee (*Boulgaro-Makedoniko Epanastatiko Komitato*), to quell the spread of anti-Axis resistance. Continued by the Germans after the Italian capitulation in September 1943, this policy unleashed political polarization along ethnic lines and led the left-wing EAM (National Liberation Front) and of its armed branch ELAS (Greek People's Liberation Army) to establish a separate resistance organization of Greek Macedonians, the Slavomacedonian Popular Liberation Front (SNOF), to curb Slavophones' support for the Axis.³

Most historians hold that the formation of the Committee in March 1943 was stemmed from cooperation between Italy and Bulgaria and that the pro-Slavophone stance of the Italian authorities was set from the very beginning of the occupation.⁴ In line with this interpretative scheme,

¹ According to the 1940 census the population of the eparchy of Kastoria was 68.237 inhabitants, 33.206 men and 35.031 women. The population of the town itself accounted for 10.181 inhabitants.

² Terminology on ethnic groups has been highly contentious in the scholarship about Macedonia. The most common terms used for the Slav-speakers of Macedonia are Slavophones, Slav Macedonians, Bulgarians. I decided to employ the term Slavophones, as this seems the most neutral one. With a similar motivation the same term is employed by Andréas Athanasiádis, *Stī skiá tou «voylgarismoý». Apotypóseis «politikón kai ethnikón fronimatón» tōn politón tīs periféreias Flórinas katá tīn período tou Mesopolémoy* (Thessaloniki: Epíketro, 2017).

³ Historians have long debated about the role played by Yugoslav intervention in the creation of this organization, with anti-communist historians accusing the EAM of subalternity to Tito's plans for the annexation of Greek Macedonia. Recent historiography sees the formation of the SNOF rather as an attempt to integrate the Slavophone population into the resistance, thus curbing support for the Axis, see Giórgos Koymarídīs, "Snof kai slavomakedoniká tágmata (1943-1944): Mia proséggisi", *Archeiotáxio*, 11 (2009): 55-87; Ílias Groýios, *SNOF: Í sygkrótīsī kai ī drásī tou stī Dytiki Makedonía*, (Master Thesis, University of Western Macedonia, 2019).

⁴ A brief review in Tásos Kostópoulos, "To «Axomakedonikó» Komitáto kai Ochrána (1943-1944): mia próti proséggisi", *Archeiotáxio* 5, (2003): 40-51.

much scholarship argues that the convergence between the Axis powers and the Slav Macedonians was a predetermined outcome, since a common objective of both was to "plunder loyalties"⁵ and thus denationalize Greek Macedonia. Based on yet unexplored records of the Italian army, this article challenges this view. In fact, initially the Italian authorities in Kastoria had little interest in arming any ethnic group and opposed any pro-Bulgaria or Macedonian movement. Far from being cordial, relations between Italy and Bulgaria were characterized by mutual mistrust and competition. Only later on, when confronted with the challenge posed by the resistance, did Italians employ ethnic minorities to regain control of the province. Contrary to accepted wisdom, though acting as a precipitating factor, the occupiers were not always the most relevant force at play. In fact, with their decisions to hand over arms to the Slavophones the Italian authorities rather sanctioned a complex social transformation process that led political violence to be coded in the language of ethnicity.

To support this argument, the following essay first sketches the history of the region in the interwar years, when patterns of political behavior took form that were to resurface during the war. Hence, it examines the governance strategies employed by the local occupation authorities and the way the socio-economic crisis led to a disintegration of the social fabric. Finally, the last section addresses the formation of the collaborationist units and the role they played in the Italian counterinsurgency.

The Slavophones of Kastoria in the Interwar Years

Insurgencies and inter-ethnic conflicts had a long history in the whole of Macedonia, gaining momentum at the turn of the century and markedly between 1903 and 1908, when the region became the site of inter-ethnic strife between pro-Bulgarian and pro-Greek paramilitary formations, the so called "Macedonian Struggle" (*Makedonikós Agónas*). Kastoria was an important center of pro-Greek activity with prominent citizens becoming legendary "Macedonian fighters" (*makedonomáchoi*) and, thus, influential political figures in local politics in the interwar years.⁶ The Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO), a political

⁵ John Koliopoulos, *Plundered loyalties: Axis occupation and civil strife in Greek West Macedonia, 1941-1949*, (London: C. Hurst, 1999).

⁶ Vasilis K. Goýnaris, "Voyleytés kai Kapetánioi: Pelateiakés schéseis stí mesopolemikí Makedonía", *Elliniká*, 41 (1990): 313-335. One of them, Filolaos Picheon, was appointed mayor during the Italian occupation.

movement with a Macedonian-autonomist, at times pro-Bulgarian agenda developed its activity during the Macedonian Struggle and kept operating in the following decades.⁷ Armed conflicts, however, were not only driven by nationalistic agendas. In fact, economic demands played a key role as political affiliation was partly determined by the prospect of the dispossessed peasants to gain land.⁸

The incorporation of Macedonia into the Greek state in 1913 and the post-World War I population exchanges - the voluntary one with Bulgaria and the compulsory one with Turkey - impacted significantly on the demographic outlook of the region. As a consequence of these developments, nearly all Muslims, representing 1/4 of the population at the turn of the century, left and the Slavophone community shrunk dramatically, being replaced by incoming refugees.⁹ Though relevant per se, these events impacted Western Macedonia less than the Central and Eastern part of this region, as the former area had a comparatively smaller amount of arable land to be used for resettlement. Furthermore, for the sake of maintaining good relations with neighboring Yugoslavia, the Greek government refrained from settling great masses of refugees in Western Macedonia and avoided a large emigration of Slavophones. This explains why in the interwar years the provinces of Kastoria and Florina still hosted the largest number of Slavophones in the whole of Macedonia.¹⁰ A statistics from the General Administration of Macedonia reported the population of Kastoria in 1925 as being composed of:¹¹

- 17,737 Greeks (natives), a category that excluded the refugees who arrived from Asia Minor after the population exchange with Turkey:
- 2,195 pro-Greek Vlach-speakers
- 213 Muslim-Albanians, exempted from the population exchange

⁷ IMRO lost the support of the Bulgarian authorities in 1934, after the creation of the Zveno-dictatorial regime that promoted good relations with Yugoslavia, becoming a rather marginal phenomenon Stefan Troebst, *Mussolini, Makedonien und die Mächte, 1922-1930: die "Innere Makedonische Revolutionäre Organisation" in der Südosteuropapolitik des faschistischen Italien*, (Köln: Böhlau, 1987).

⁸ Raymondos Alvanos, (2019) "Parliamentary politics as an integration mechanism: The Slavic-speaking inhabitants of interwar (1922-1940) Western Greek Macedonia", *History and Anthropology* 30, No. 5 (2009): 622.

⁹ Raýmóndos Alvanós, *Koinōnikés Sygkroyseis kai politikés sumperiferós stin periochí tis Katoriás* (PhD diss., Aristotle University Thessaloniki, 2005), 37. 17,894 Muslim and Slavophone inhabitants left, while 8,370 refugees were settled in the region.

¹⁰ Vasilis K. Goýnaris, "Oi slavófonoí tis Μακεδονίας. Í poreía tis ensómátosis sto ellinikó ethnikó krátos, 1870-1940", *Makedoniká*, 29 (1993-1994): 209-237, here 229.

¹¹ Elisabeth Kontogiorgi. *Population Exchange in Greek Macedonia: The Rural Settlement of Refugees 1922-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press. 2006), 250.

- 7,339 Slav-speakers, former Patriarchists
- 14,807 Slavs-speakers former Exarchists
- 135 Vlach-speakers pro-Romanian, namely the Vlachs that openly expressed their support of a separate Vlach identity.
- 525 Jews
- 5,962 Greek refugees.¹²

With a pattern common to most of the Balkans and Eastern Europe, ethnic and religious cleavages in Kastoria intersected with social stratification. From the 16th century onwards, Kastoria developed a burgeoning fur production and trading activities that made the town the knot of a large commercial network spanning throughout Europe. While Jews were particularly active in fur trade, craftsmanship was mostly performed by Greeks working in close collaboration with Jewish merchants. Cooperation between the two groups was smooth and made the economy of the town flourish, especially in the 19th century. Most Slavophones, instead, were peasants inhabiting the surrounding area of Kastoria who used to come to town mostly on market days.¹³ Not unlike the town itself, the countryside was ethnically **inhomogeneous**, with the Northern part of the province being predominantly, but not exclusively, inhabited by Slavophones and the South mostly by Greek speakers.¹⁴

All over Greece the refugees' settlement was marred by conflicts over the distribution of the land. Former Muslim property was to be used to

¹² Kontogiorgi, *Population Exchange*, 250. The difference between the number of refugees reported in this survey and the overall figure of 8,370 is due to the fact that the settlement process took several years to be completed. This survey is has to be taken with a grain of salt, as taxonomies used to categorize the population were largely the product of nationalistic biases. Greek authorities usually saw ethnic groups through the lens of political categories, distinguishing e. g. between pro-Greek and pro-Romanian Vlachs. The same applies to the Slavophones (also called *voylgarizontes*) that were split into former Patriarchists and Exarchists, the latter term meaning those who had joined the Bulgarian de-facto autocephalous Orthodox Church founded in 1870 and were considered of "Bulgarian consciousness". See Iakovos D. Michailidis, "The statistical battle for the population of Greek Macedonia," in *The history of Macedonia*, ed. Ioannis Koliopoulos (Thessaloniki: Museum of the Macedonian Struggle Foundation, 2007), 269-283; on the systematic underestimation of non-Greek ethnic groups in the Greek population censuses from the foundation of the state see Tasos Kostopoulos, "Counting the 'Other': Official Census and Classified Statistics in Greece (1830-2001)", *Jahrbücher für Geschichte und Kultur Südosteuropas*, 5 (2003): 55-78.

¹³ Raymónδος Alvanós, "Koinōnikés kai politikés ópseis tis synýparxīs Christianōn kai Evraïōn stin póli tis Kastoriás," in *To olokaýtōma tōn ebraïōn tis Elládas*, ed. Giórgos Antōnou, Strátos Dordanás, Níkos Záikos, Níkos Marantzídīs (Thessaloniki: Epíkentro, 2011), 353-378.

¹⁴ Vasilis K. Goýnaris, "Oi slavófonoι tis Μακεδονίας. Í poreia tis ensōmátōsis sto ellinikó ethnικό krátos, 1870-1940", *Makedoniká*, 29 (1993-1994), 212.

resettle the refugees but it proved insufficient as those who left were significantly less numerous than those who arrived. In addition, the land to be distributed had been tilled for years by local sharecroppers who now claimed their right to own it. Moreover, after 1912, when the first Muslims had started leaving the regions of Northern Greece, many of them had sold their land to locals or these had just taken possession of it. These acts were not recognized by the Greek state thus becoming a source of bitter quarrels over the following decade, as land distribution was a long process that lasted until the mid-30s.¹⁵ Finally, the resettlement process was plagued by administrative inefficiency creating fertile ground for grievances.¹⁶ As a consequence of all this, land issues sparked conflicts between natives (*dópioi*) and refugees, with the former regarding the new inhabitants' claim to land ownership as illegitimate.

Faced with such transformations, Slavophones in Kastoria adopted different and contradicting strategies. One was to join the local Greek element in its attempt to oppose the settlement of refugees.¹⁷ To support their claim to land, refugees represented themselves as more "Greek" than their local co-nationals spurring other groups to compete in the same arena. Material conflicts, thus, came to be articulated in the language of ethnic belonging, largely as a negotiation over the meaning of Greekness, a symbolic capital that promised access to a larger share of resources. "The local leadership of the Slav speaking villagers", has written R. Alvanos, "knew very well the role that the refugees had come to play in the region, i. e. that of Hellenization. As far as this role threatened the interests of the native villagers these perceived that they should play this game by the same rules: by exposing their own "local" Greekness."¹⁸ Thus, the Slavophones showed a strong tendency to assimilate with the Greek culture, which among other things is witnessed by their increased propensity to join agricultural cooperatives.¹⁹ In addition to these factors came the agrarian reform of the early 20s - whereby former Ottoman *tchifliks* were distributed to peasants creating a large class of smallholders. As land issues were managed mostly by local politicians who acted as intermediaries with the political center, land distribution integrated the Slavophones into the patronage system.²⁰ Polarization between Slavophones and refugees was thus mirrored in national politics with the

¹⁵ Kontogiorgi, *Population Exchange*, 165-185.

¹⁶ Goýnarís, "Oi slavófonoí tis Makedonías," 225-226.

¹⁷ Alvanós, *Koinōnikés sygkroýseis*, 50.

¹⁸ Alvanós, *Koinōnikés sygkroýseis*, 59.

¹⁹ Alvanós, *Koinōnikés sygkroýseis*, 40.

²⁰ Alvanos, "Parliamentary politics".

latter largely supporting Venizelism and the Liberal Party and, largely as a consequence of this, the former siding massively with the opposite bloc, the Popular Party.²¹ Despite the fact that the Communist party of Greece in 1924 officially adopted the Comintern guidelines supporting Macedonian independentism, communism never really challenged the Popular Party's hegemony among the Slavophones.²²

In some instances Slavophones adopted a different strategy to claim a larger share of material resources, namely that of appealing to external powers (Yugoslavia and Bulgaria). Motivated by territorial revisionism, these countries sought to exploit the land issue as a means to acquire political foothold in the region. Victimized Slav speaking peasants, thus, saw a professed belonging to a foreign nation state as a way to claim international protection by the League of Nations.²³

The attitude of the Greek authorities towards what they considered as "ethnic aliens" was rather ambiguous. While embracing the idea that increasing the "density" of Greek settlements in a border region such as Western Macedonia was desirable, most Greek officials also understood that favoring too much the refugees could stimulate the Slavophones to claim with more force their "otherness". All in all, however, efforts of the public authorities to Hellenize the Slavophone population intensified in the interwar period, especially as local officials were particularly zealous in pursuing this policy.²⁴

The outcome of these conflicting trends was not straightforward. Historian R. Alvanos holds that the forces pushing towards assimilation prevailed over those fostering deepening ethnic cleavages. As a result, in the interwar years and up to 1936 ethnic identifications in Kastoria lost political momentum.²⁵ The advent of Metaxas' authoritarian regime in 1936, though, inverted this trend. The 4th August regime's attitude towards non-Greek groups was one of deep mistrust and resulted in increased repression, with the Slavophones being prohibited to speak their language in public.²⁶ Assimilationist policies that in the interwar

²¹ Goýnarís, "Oi slavófonoι tis Makedonías," p. 233.

²² Giorgios T. Mavrogordatos, *Stillborn Republic: Social Coalitions and Party Strategies in Greece, 1922-1936*, (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press 1983), 249-252.

²³ Kontogiorgi, *Population Exchange*, 200-230.

²⁴ Philipp Carabott, "The Greek State and its Slav-Speaking Minority," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte und Kultur Südosteuropas* 5, (2003): 141-159.

²⁵ Alvanos, *Parliamentary politics*.

²⁶ Tásos Kóstópoulos, *Í apagoreyméni glóssa. Kratikí katastolí tōn slavikōn dialéktōn stin ellinikí Makedonía* (Athens: Βιβλιόραμα, 2008).

years had been advocated and carried out only by a fraction of state officials - the most nationalist faction - now became state ideology. Moreover, as a consequence of the Emergency Law 376/1936, the regions inhabited by Slavophones were declared "surveillance areas" where special prohibitions limiting the citizens' liberties could be issued. Many of them were put to confinement as communist or individuals accused of anti-national behavior.²⁷ The suspension of parliamentary politics added to this, bringing to an end the patronage system, a powerful mechanism of integration of the Slavophones. Furthermore, the economic policy of the Metaxas regime that intensified tobacco production sharpened economic inequalities between refugees and natives. The former benefitted from state control over production as, being considered more reliable than the Slavophones, they were granted more easily permits to cultivate tobacco. Efforts of the regime to undermine stockbreeding was a further source of hardship to the Slavophones.²⁸ Finally, the 1940-41 war between Fascist Italy and Greece further escalated ethnic polarization. Slavophones, already perceived during the interwar period as enemy agents, were now strongly suspected of supporting the invader. Thus, along with Chams and Vlachs, a number of members of this minority were also interned as they were perceived as a potential threat.

Italian Plans for Macedonia

As a consequence of the invasion of Greece by the Axis powers, in April 1941 Macedonia was split into three occupation areas: Eastern Macedonia went to Bulgaria becoming part of the new Bulgarian province of Belomorje; most of Central and parts of Western Macedonia were occupied by German troops; Italy was allotted the smallest share of the region, with only two towns, Grevena and Kastoria. Italian authorities had no definite political plans for Greece before the attack of October 1940 and even after the invasion their war aims remained rather generic. In preparation for the Italo-German conversations held at Vienna in April 1941 and in the following months, a number of memoranda were drafted by Italian state agencies regarding the postwar settlement in the Balkans.²⁹ Most of these plans converged on the idea that a large portion

²⁷ Surveillance or controlled areas (*epitiroýmenes zónes*) created a sort of internal frontier within the Greek territory. They continued to exist after the war and well into the 1990s, see Lois Labrianidis, "Internal Frontiers as a Hindrance to Development", *European Planning Studies*, 9, No. 1, (2001): 85-103.

²⁸ Alvanós, *Koinōnikés sygkroýseis*, 188-193.

²⁹ See e. g. "Promemoria relativo al nuovo confine tra l'Albania e la Grecia", 1 June 1941, Politisches Archiv Auswärtiges Amt (hereafter PA AA) 105125; Comando Supremo a

of North-Western Greece, a region lying to the West of the Pindus Chain and of a line running up to the Arta Gulf, should be carved out and attached to Albania. Along with the annexation of Kosovo and parts of Montenegro, this would fulfill the aspirations of the Albanians to incorporate their ethnic kin living within foreign states. On the contrary, Macedonia was to remain part of Greece, in fulfillment of one of the basic tenets of Fascist empire building i.e., as Mussolini said in a much-quoted speech, that Italy's New Order should make "the ethnic element" correspond with the "political and geographic".³⁰ In line with this principle, Italy strove to create political bodies with homogeneous ethnic character, avoiding the creation of large ethnic minorities. Since the Italian authorities considered Macedonia as thoroughly "Hellenized" by Athens in the interwar years and, therefore, an inseparable part of the country, they deemed it unadvisable to attach it to Albania. The possibility of creating an independent Macedonian state was considered but rejected for fear that this new creature would become a proxy of Bulgaria or Germany.³¹ All this, though, did not apply to Kastoria that was considered separately from the rest of the region. Most Italian authorities shared the view that the Slav-speaking population of this province, which they estimated around 1/3 of the total, were incapable of developing a real national identity as they were mostly peasants without political consciousness. Pro-Bulgarian attitudes among the Slavophones of Kastoria were seen as the product of Bulgarian propaganda among illiterate peasants rather than a spontaneous national movement. Given the composite nature of the population and the strategic position of this province, therefore, most internal documents suggested attaching it to Albania.³²

Such plans did not come to fruition. Being defeated by the Greeks on the battlefield and forced to seek for German military support to invade the country, the authorities of Rome had to abide by the German wish to establish a regime of classic military occupation, with a Greek government and institutions in charge of running the administration of

Ministero degli Affari Esteri, "Nuovo Confine tra Albania e Grecia, 17 luglio 1941, PA AA 105125

³⁰ Corriere della Sera, 11.6.1941.

³¹ Paolo Fonzi, *Fame di guerra. L'occupazione italiana della Grecia (1941-43)* (Roma: Carocci, 2019), 36.

³² A typical example of this attitude is in the memorandum Ufficio del Generale Delegato del Comando Supremo presso la Commissione Centrale Delimitazione Confini del Comando Supremo presso la Commissione sulla confinazione nella Macedonia occidentale, "Studio sulla confinazione nella Macedonia occidentale" August 1942, Archivio dell'Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito (hereafter AUSSME) E10-41.

the country. Moreover, since the Greeks did not consider itself as a defeated country, Prime Minister Georgios Tsolakoglou, head of the collaborationist government, set as a precondition to his appointment that Italians territorial claims be silenced, as fulfilling them would have undermined its legitimacy towards the Greek population. This attitude compelled Germany to impose the postponement of these claims to the territorial settlement to be negotiated after the end of the war. As a result, besides a number of regions where the Italians appointed civilian governors, over the two following years they governed the country through a sort of indirect rule, largely relying on the collaboration of local elites.³³

Italian Governance in Kastoria

In observance of the armistice, the areas of Greece assigned to Italy were initially garrisoned by the Wehrmacht, which handed them over to the Italian army after a few weeks. As in much of Northern Greece, in Kastoria this initial phase was characterized by an institutional void, with key state institutions such as the gendarmerie and the tribunals not performing their duties and the administration being solely entrusted to village councils and mayors. This state of exception ended upon arrival of the 13th Rgt. of the Pinerolo Division, on 27 June 1941, when the local Metropolitan Nikiforos went to Athens to ask the government for the appointment of civilian authorities. Gerasimos Voulieris, who was to run the administration of the district until April 1942, was thus designated sub-prefect (*éparchos*).³⁴

Despite its brevity, the interlude of self-government gave the Slavophone villages a sense of independence from the central Greek authorities, with "civil guards" (*politofylakí*) taking over policing duties.³⁵ In the uncertainty following the collapse of the Greek army, some communities asked to be attached to Bulgaria or ruled by Bulgarian personnel. It goes without saying that this **also** increased the mistrust of the Greek authorities towards the Slav-speaking population. In the eyes of the Greek officials appointed in May-June 1941, their major task was to save the region from slipping into anarchy and from the spread of foreign propaganda. In part, as already mentioned, this attitude had informed the

³³ Fonzi, *Fame di guerra*, 86-112.

³⁴ When in July 1941 the province of Kastoria was made independent from the prefecture of Kozani, he became its prefect (*nómarchos*), Decree 325/1941, ΦΕΚ 257/Α' /31.07.1941.

³⁵ Sofia Iliádou-Táchou, *Ta chrómata tīs vías stī Dytikī Makedonía 1941-1944. Katochií - Antístasī - Ethnotikés kai Emfilytēs Sygkroýseis* (Thessaloniki: Epíkentro, 2017), 100.

behavior of the Greek authorities already in the interwar years. As these areas had bordered states that tried to exploit the national issue to expand southwards, such as Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, state officials appointed there had a sort of "trench mentality", considering themselves as outposts of Hellenic civilization in foreign territory.³⁶

Cooperation between the Italians and the Greek local authorities ran smoothly in the first months. As the Italian authorities' primary concern was to reestablish the rule of law, they regarded the attempts of the Slav population to oppose law enforcement as an undesired source of chaos. Also, they were apprehensive about the activity of the Bulgarian representatives who toured the region distributing foodstuffs to Slavophone villagers and conducting pro-Bulgarian propaganda.³⁷ To strengthen their appeal to the population the Bulgarian envoys promised that, with the annexation of the region to Bulgaria, local peasants would be returned all that had been seized from them by the refugees.³⁸ Worried by the prospect of losing control of Macedonia, the local Italian authorities expelled repeatedly Bulgarian envoys and **wanted** food distribution **to be** entrusted **solely** to the Greek authorities.³⁹

To be sure, the initial synergy between the Italians and the Greek authorities was a mere marriage of convenience. In fact, Italians were suspicious also towards Greek officials, as they saw that their conduct was guided by anti-Slavic sentiments. They understood, for example, that the gendarmerie displayed far greater harshness in punishing crimes committed by Slavophones than by Greeks. Furthermore, in order to persecute suspected communists they could not but rely on the

³⁶ A similar attitude shaped the mentality of the Italian officials posted by Rome in the Italian borderlands with Yugoslavia, where a peculiar "frontier Fascism", imbued with violent anti-Slavic stereotypes, developed. See Annamaria Vinci, *Sentinelle della patria. Il fascismo al confine orientale 1918-1941* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2011).

³⁷ On the tense relations between Bulgaria and Italy between 1941 and 1943 due to the conflicting territorial claims of both sides in Vardar Macedonia see Alberto Basciani, "Alleati per caso. Italia e Bulgaria durante la Seconda guerra mondiale", in *40 anni di relazioni fra Italia e Bulgaria. Diplomazia, Economia, Cultura - 140 ГОДИНИ ОТНОШЕНИЯ МЕЖДУ ИТАЛИЯ И БЪЛГАРИЯ ДИПЛОМАЦИЯ, ИКОНОМИКА, КУЛТУРА (1879-2019)*, ed. Stefano Baldi - Alexander Kostov (Sofia: Tendril Publishing House, 2020), 155-186.

³⁸ This information about Bulgarian propaganda was given by a local informant Galáteia Christodýloy, "Schéseis synergasías kai sýgkroysis tôn chōrión toy Dimoy Makedonón Kastoriás katá ton eikostó aióna." (BSc thesis, TEI Western Macedonia, 2004), 22. This paper is based mostly on oral sources.

³⁹ In September 1941 Ivan Dujčev, Professor of Bulgarian History at Sofia University, who worked as an interpreter for the Italian authorities was removed and expelled, Comando divisione Pinerolo, "Organizzazione comunista macedone (Comunisti Orgànosis Makedonias)", 19 April 1942, AUSSME N1-11-660.

information provided by the Greek authorities⁴⁰ and on lists compiled during the Metaxas years.⁴¹ All this was a source of great concern to them as they clearly saw that this information was biased against the Slavophones. It was, however, impossible for the Italian authorities to take over the administration of the region or to replace the Greek personnel as they lacked sufficient knowledge of the environment and had to rely initially on the local Greek administration to sort out opponents. Only in November 1941, in the context of a general reform of the gendarmerie, the Italian authorities managed to have some of members of the local gendarmerie, whom they designed as "ultranationalist", removed.⁴²

It is interesting to note that the Italians' attitude was, and remained until the very end of their occupation in September 1943, one of extreme mistrust towards the multi-ethnic environment they were in. Significantly, Gen. Cesare Benelli, Commander of the Pinerolo Division, in a report from January 1942⁴³ distinguished the population of Western Macedonia and Thessaly into five groups: Slavs, Aromanians, Jews, Greek elites and Greek peasants. In the General's opinion all of these groups were unreliable as collaborators, except for the Greek peasants who, he believed, admired Fascist Italy sincerely as a country with real social justice. Particularly worrying for the General was the presence of a Jewish community, as witnessed by numerous anti-Semitic passages in his reports.⁴⁴ Although Jews were never interned and survived safely the Italian occupation, being deported by the Germans in 1944, the Italian intelligence service kept them under strict control and imposed restrictions on their freedom to communicate through telephone.⁴⁵ Jews who escaped to Kastoria when the first wave of persecutions by the

⁴⁰ Comando Divisione Pinerolo, "Relazione sulla situazione politico-amministrativa", 3 settembre 1941, AUSSME N1-11-462.

⁴¹ Such stereotypes were common in Italy, especially in the army. However, Italians did not necessarily regard the local Slav speaking communities as Slavs and applied the Slavo-communist stereotype rather to the Bulgarian officers in the region and to Bulgaria in general. For the anti-Slavic stereotypes in Italy see Enzo Collotti, "Sul razzismo antislavo," in *Nel nome della razza. Il razzismo nella storia d'Italia 1870-1945*, ed. Alberto Burgio (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1999): 33-61.

⁴² Fonzi, *Fame di guerra*, 128-129.

⁴³ Comando Divisione Pinerolo, (Nucleo P), "Relazione mensile", 20 January 1942, AUSSME N1-11-542.

⁴⁴ See e. g., Comando Divisione Pinerolo (Ufficio Affari Civili), "Relazione quindicinale sulla situazione politico-amministrativa", 20 January 1942, AUSSME N1-11-542.

⁴⁵ Comando Divisione Pinerolo, "Relazione sulla censura postelegrafica effettuata nel territorio di giurisdizione nel periodo dal 1° al 15 aprile 1942", AUSSME N1-11-660.

Germans took place in Salonika were arrested by the Italians.⁴⁶ All in all, it can be concluded that ethnic cleavages were not seen by the Italians as an opportunity to establish collaboration but rather as a mere threat to public order and the enforcement of state law.

Smuggle and Food Crisis

As wartime Greece was hit by a severe food crisis immediately after the inception of occupation, black marketeering became a common social praxis. The collapse of the internal transport system and the parallel decrease in food availability was conducive to the development of a large para-state.⁴⁷ Border regions such as Kastoria were particularly well suited for smuggling. The abrupt end of the war meant that the Greek army was not demobilized in an orderly manner but dispersed rather chaotically, with many soldiers returning home by their own means. Although they soon gathered in the major ports in search of a possibility to embark on ships, a large amount remained for some time in the northern areas. Here they sold large amounts of army stock, such as pack animals and weapons, to the population, which resulted in the inhabitants largely engaging in smuggle over the next years and in a strong concentration of weapons.

As soon as the war ended in April 1941, a large stream of commerce set on between Albania and Kastoria. Greek authorities complained that Albanian merchants would come to Kastoria and buy any sort of items as prices in the region were initially particularly low in comparison to those in Albania, where, as an effect of war and of the Italian large investments, inflation was already on the rise.⁴⁸ The proximity of different boundaries in a small area hindered law enforcement, as outlaws could easily seek refuge over the border. Tightening the borders around the plateau of Kastoria became, thus, one of the foremost targets of the Italian authorities, though to little avail. As an effect of the partition of the region

⁴⁶ Comando Presidio Italiano Kastoria, "Relazione mensile", 26 July 1942, AUSSME N1-11-789.

⁴⁷ Giórgos Margarítis, *Apó tîn ítta stîn exégersī: Elláda, ánoixī 1941-fthínópōro 1942*, (Athens: Polítis, 1993); Giórgos Margarítis, *Proaggelía thyellódōn anémōn...O pólemos stîn Albanía kai ī prótī períodos tīs Karochís* (Athens: Bibliórama 2009).

⁴⁸ Comando Divisione Pinerolo, "Relazione sulla situazione politico-amministrativa del territorio occupato", 10 July 1941, AUSSME N1-11-462; in June 1941 the Prefect of Kozani ordered harsh punishments against citizens who traded illegally with Albania, Geōrgia I. Tzavára, "Koinōnikí geōgrafia tīs peínas stîn Elláda tīs Katochís (1941-1944). Ī dimografiikí sumperiforá tou Ellinikoý plithysmoý kai ta thýmata tīs peínas" (PhD diss., Panteion University Athens, 2017), v. 1: 266.

into different occupation areas, people from Kastoria exploited differences in economic conditions between the German area (the demarcation line run a few km north-east of the town), Bulgaria occupied Bitola (80km from Kastoria) and Albania. Familiarity with the culture and the language of Macedonia increased the Slavophones' disposition to exploit connections with neighboring Bitola. These movements were mostly of non-political nature, namely motivated by the will to escape social conditions prevailing in the district, when food scarcity made itself felt. Later on, when Italian authorities started to persecute political opponents, passing the border became an easy way to escape prosecution and many Slavophones found refuge in the Bulgarian part of Macedonia.

Although the small town of Kastoria never experienced the same dramatic rise in starvation deaths as Athens or Salonika, it did suffer hard economic setback.⁴⁹ First, manufacture that constituted a main source of income for the town underwent a general crisis. Collapse of trade networks and shortages of raw materials struck a hard blow to the once flourishing local economy. The multiplication of borders aggravated the economic crisis. The Kastoria plateau was detached from most of its surrounding areas, in particular from Florina, which **was put** under German rule. Adding to the collapse of transport caused by the dearth of vehicles and fuel, this led to increased isolation. For vital items such as fuel, for example, Kastoria had to be supplied from Florina and Salonika, which implied lengthy negotiations and often run against the lack of cooperation with the German authorities.⁵⁰ Finally, just as the rest of Macedonia, Kastoria saw an influx of refugees from Eastern Macedonia and Thrace, under Bulgarian occupation, who escaped persecution. Until the Greek government introduced a redistribution scheme of the refugees in all regions of Greece, most of them concentrated in the immediate adjoining areas, namely German and Italian occupied Macedonia.⁵¹

While in terms of foodstuffs the town was never completely self-sufficient, its agricultural surroundings may have assured a certain degree of food security. Initially, local Italian authorities planned to feed the town off its hinterland. Greek state authorities imposed mandatory

⁴⁹ Tzavára, *Koinōnikí geōgrafia tis peínas*, v.1: 265-295, v. 2: 126-168.

⁵⁰ Comando Divisione Pinerolo, "Relazione sulla situazione politico-amministrativa del territorio occupato", 27 August 1941, AUSSME N1-11-462; 4464, Befehlshaber Saloniki/Ägäis, "Montalicher Verwaltungsbericht September-Oktober 1942", Bundesarchiv Militärarchiv Freiburg RW 40-161.

⁵¹ The exchange of messages between the Greek Government and the German authorities on redistribution is in *Archeío Ypourgeío Exoterikón*, Athens KY 1941.3.3

crops collection on the peasants but, as Italian reports signaled as early as August 1941, collected quotas were only a tiny fraction of estimated production. Much of the local crops found their way into the black market and to other regions where demand and prices were considerably higher.

In the whole of Greece, the food crisis undermined the legitimacy of the state. As state intervention in the economy had increased in the interwar years, particularly in the field of food production and distribution, the failure to meet the demands of the population was particularly harmful to the legitimacy of the public authorities.⁵² Furthermore, hyperinflation and food crisis undermined state governance, as public officials' pay did not keep pace with price increases. This resulted in widespread corruption and delegitimization in the eyes of most citizens. In the first year of occupation, riots against local Greek officials broke out all over the country. In some cases, they even led the population to ask for the Italians to take over the administration.⁵³

Conflicts between the state and the peasants over the control of food resources reached their peak in the summer of 1942. To prevent the peasants from selling agricultural produce on the black market, the occupation authorities and the Greek gendarmerie went great lengths in trying to enforce mandatory crops collection by the use of violence. In regions with multi-ethnic population these conflicts intersected with ethnic cleavages. In Kastoria, for example, conflicts over crops were coded in "ethnic terms" following a pattern that, as already seen, had established itself in the region in the interwar years. Thus, in Slavophone villages opposition to public crops collection was conceived of as a form of resistance to the Greek state. Interestingly, the same occurred in Thesprotia (Chameria), a Greek region at the border with Albania, where the Muslim-Albanian population put up particularly strong resistance to public crops collection.

Applying a simplified template, much of the scholarship explains the collapse of state institutions with the intentional activity of the

⁵² Increasing state intervention, especially in the agricultural sector, was a global phenomenon in the '30s, see. e. g. Karl Schiller, *Marktregulierung und Marktordnung in der Weltagrarswirtschaft*, (Jena: Fischer, 1940); Kiran Klaus Patel, *The New Deal: A Global History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 56-65. A similar link between state intervention and a crisis of legitimacy in Vichy France, Shannon L. Fogg, *The Politics of Everyday Life in Vichy France. Foreigners, Undesirables, Strangers*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 2 and passim.

⁵³ See, e.g., the account of the riots in the village of Astakós, in Aetolia-Acarmania, Comando XXVI CdA, "Relazione settimanale," 1 October 1941, AUSSME N1-11-376.

Slavophone minority that, influenced by the Bulgarian propaganda, refused to obey the Greek authorities. Recent studies tend to explain the increase in ethnic attrition with the interwar repressive policies that reached their peak during the Metaxas regime.⁵⁴ In my opinion, both explanations are only partially correct and need to be combined to fully grasp the dynamics at play. While the history of the interwar years set the templates in which local conflicts were articulated, these were not their only possible manifestation. The process through which local conflicts over material and symbolic resources became increasingly ethnicized occurred as a consequence of several factors. As the economic crisis deepened the split between the town and the surrounding countryside, this cleavage came to be seen increasingly as an opposition between "state" and "Slavophone countryside". It should be regarded, therefore, as a crisis of hegemony that induced those groups that perceived themselves as "subaltern" to resort to one of the social codes through which opposition had been articulated in the interwar years.

Towards Armed Collaboration

It was not long before cooperation between Greek authorities and Italian occupation forces began to fall apart. Italians were in **principal** adverse to favoring the pro-Bulgarian movement and saw their main goal being that of disarming the population and recognizing the state representative and the occupiers as the only legitimate bearer of arms. With the passing of time, though, they became increasingly aware that Greek authorities pursued their own ethnic and political agendas and were therefore dysfunctional to their governance. In addition, Italians encountered strong difficulties in disarming the population and became extremely concerned about their lack of control of territory. As an effect from all this, in a matter of months relations with the prefect began to sour. Though initially content with their behavior towards the Slav population, in October 1941, Prefect Voulhieris complained that the Italians favored explicitly the Slavs and repressed with particular harshness the

⁵⁴ Giórgos Margarítis, *Anepithýmioi sympatriótes. Stoicheía gia tin katastrofí tòn meionotítōv tis Elládas. Evraíoi, Tsámides*, (Athens: Βιβλιόραμα, 2005).

refugees.⁵⁵ Not surprisingly, in April 1942, he was interned by the Italians and substituted with a new prefect.⁵⁶

What is more, the province displayed increasing instability. This is testified by the fact that Italian reprisals against civilians occurred much earlier in this province than in the rest of Greece. As early as December 1941, Italians conducted in Kastoria mopping up operations with a large use of torture and beatings. Also, in July 1942, in response to the killing of two Italian soldiers, two suspects were killed without trial and their village was set on fire, a practice that at that time was extremely rare in the Italian occupation area.⁵⁷ Evidence shows that in those months the Italian authorities of Kastoria started relying increasingly on the Slav-speaking population. Though still refusing any commitment to a pro-Macedonia policy, the Italian army used them increasingly, along with the Vlachs, as guides and informants in mopping up operations outside the region.

Despite this early escalation of violence, armed resistance in the Kastoria district developed only at a relatively late stage. While a first network of EAM-activists was formed early on by a group of communists liberated at the request of the Bulgarian government from the internment camp of Akronauplia, guerrilla activity followed only with a certain delay. The first armed band started operating in the mountains in April 1942, but it dispersed after two months owing to Italian repression, lack of supply and the hostility of the Slavophone population.⁵⁸ A former resistance member explained this delay with the entrenched anti-Communist feelings of the urban bourgeoisie and the ethnic conflicts between Greeks and Slavophones.⁵⁹ A more active resistance began only in the first months of 1943 and increasingly in March, with the formation of local ELAS-units and the arrival of bands from South-West Macedonia. By that time large parts of Macedonia south of Kastoria and Thessaly were already under partisan control. In February, the Italians had started giving up isolated posts scattered in the countryside and had ordered the

⁵⁵ Nomarch of Katorias to the Greek Government, "Ékthesī perī tis epikratoýsis en tō Nomó katastáseōs", 10 October 1941, A. E. 4/14, Records of Leonidas Mpatrinos, 1941-1945, Elia-Met, Salonika.

⁵⁶ Fonzi, *Fame di guerra*.

⁵⁷ Comando Presidio Italiano Kastoria "Trasmissione foglio notizie ed istruzioni nr. 12", 26 July 1942, AUSSME N1-11-789

⁵⁸ Athanásios Kallianiótis, *Oi archés tis Antístasis stin Dytikí Makedonía (1941-1943)*, (PhD diss., Aristotle University Thessaloniki 2000), 34-35; Kolliopoulos, *Plundered Loyalties*, 92.

⁵⁹ P. Douvalidis, "To xekínima tou ethnikoapeleytherōtikoý kinímatos stin periféreia Kastoriás (1941-1944)", *Ethnikí Antístasi*, 27 (1981): 146-149.

disarmament of Greek gendarmerie to prevent them from being captured or make common cause with the partisans. In the battle of Fardykampos (near Siatista), on 5-6 March 1943, an entire Italian battalion was taken prisoner by the partisans and two weeks later, the town of Grevena was abandoned by Italian forces. As a consequence, the Italian garrison of Kastoria and the few military posts in the region became a sort of enclave encircled by the enemy. Normal supply lines were interrupted since Kastoria and Grevena could only be reached from Korça (Albania) through Amynteion, situated in the German occupied area.

Facing complete isolation, in March 1943 the Italians had to overcome their reluctance to distribute weapon to minorities and decided the formation of armed units of Slavophones. There are no reliable figures on the number of armed men, as Italian records are extremely spare in this period, but Bulgarian sources provide a number of 1,600. While approximately 1/3 of them were engaged in mopping-up operations and were mobile, the majority were employed in self-defense units in their own villages. The region was divided into areas comprising several villages and led by a commander subordinated to a so-called Bulgaro-Macedonian Revolutionary Committee (*Boulgaro-Makedoniko Epanastatiko Komitato*), based in Kastoria. Italian instructions mandated that in case of a partisan attack armed Slavophones from other villages of the same area should come in support of the attacked village. If attacked the Italian Command of Kastoria could request each village to provide 20% of its armed men to form unities that were to be dissolved when the emergency was over.⁶⁰ Securing supply lines was one of the key motivations behind the formation of these units. As the intelligence of the 1st German Mountain Division noted in the summer of 1943, during a tour of the Italian area, most "Bulgarian militias" were formed in villages lying along the Florina-Kastoria road.⁶¹ Italian forces rarely abandoned the town of Kastoria, leaving to the Slavophone units the task of fighting the partisans, their support being confined to aircraft bombing and shelling villages under partisan control.⁶² Moreover, they did not supply these

⁶⁰ Spyridōn Sfétas, "Ἡ ίδρυσις καὶ ἡ δράσις τῆς Οὐχράνας (1943-44) στὴ δυτικὴ καὶ κεντρικὴ Μakedonía, στα πλαίσια τῆς πολιτικῆς τῆς VMRO καὶ τῶν ἰταλο-germanικῶν ἀρχόντων Κατοχῆς", *Valkaniká Símmeykta* 11 (1999-2000): 341-376, here 353.

⁶¹ Strátos Dordanvás, *To áima τῶν ἀθῶν. Antípoina τῶν germanικῶν ἀρχόντων κατοχῆς στὴ Μakedonía, 1941-1944* (Athens: Εστία, 2007), 390.

⁶² A similar pattern was used by the Italian army in the cooperation with the Chetniks in former Yugoslavia. While Italians garrisoned towns they assigned control of the countryside to the collaborators, see Federico Goddi, "L'occupazione italiana in Montenegro. Forme di guerriglia e dinamiche politiche del collaborazionismo četnico (1941-1943)", *Qualestoria*, 43, No. 2 (2015): 65-80.

bands, or did this only insufficiently, so that they resorted massively to pillaging. The management of violence was thus largely left to local chiefs proving in many cases counterproductive. Not before long, the alliance between Italians and Slavophones underwent a serious crisis and in August the Committee was close to dissolution.

In this period, the Bulgarian military tried to convince the Italians to allow them to take control of the Slavophone units. Bulgarian representatives travelled from Bitola to meet the officers of the Italian Command of Kastoria and asked to be entrusted the command of the Slav Macedonian military units. "In my opinion", recalled Italian Lieutenant Giovanni Ravalli in a postwar interrogation, "it is incontestable that Marinoff's intention to establish Bulgarian troops in our zone and still more to place Bulgarian officers at the head of the *comitadjis* bands had one sole object: to reinforce the Bulgarian interference in Kastoria and even his visit had that aim".⁶³ As clearly expressed by Ravalli's words, Marinoff's intervention increased the Italians' mistrust of the Slavophones as they feared that this may raise expectations of political autonomy.⁶⁴ Interestingly, the Bulgarian authorities held similar reservations as they saw the formation of the Committee as an Italian initiative they could hardly keep control of.

While IMRO or other political forces had in this phase little or no real influence in the region and did not played a role in the formation of the Slavophone units⁶⁵, armed collaboration seems to have followed rather a bottom-up logic. Generally speaking, there was, in those who sided with the Committee, a sense of empowerment as collaboration was seen as a chance to overturn existing hierarchies, in particular that between the Greek town and the Slavophone countryside. According to the memoirs of a gendarmerie officer, armed villagers blocked all accesses to the town under the motto: "Until now you sucked our blood. It is now our turn".⁶⁶

⁶³ Sworn Testimony of the Witness Ravalli, Athens, June 17, 1946, UNWCC, 67.041, reel 10, Holocaust Museum Washington DC, f. 1403.

⁶⁴ Magistrati (Italian Representative in Sofia) to Italian Foreign Ministry, 21 April 1943, ASMAE AP 31-45 Grecia b. 21.

⁶⁵ Ivan Mihailov, the leader of the organization who during the war resided in Zagreb, tried several times to meet Mussolini, but the Duce refused. According to S. Sfetas, at the beginning of 1943, Croatian leader Ante Pavelić went to Rome and convinced Mussolini to arm the Slavophones, Sfetas, "Í idrysí kai í drási tis Ochránas", 349. In Italian records, though, there is no evidence of this intervention..

⁶⁶ Kōnstantínos Sp. Antónioy, *Í slayikí kai kommunistikí epivoylí kai í antístasis tōn Makedōnōn* (Thessaloniki: self-publishing, 1950) quoted in Raýmóndos Alvanós, "Mesopolemikés

Crops collected by the state were seized by the villagers and entrusted to the Committee that was put in charge of food distribution. The Italian authorities also promised to dismiss officials originating from Southern Greece and replace them with Slavophones. According to Tasos Kostopoulos,⁶⁷ villages that engaged in armed collaboration were not those that in the interwar years were characterized by Greek state sources as "*boulgarízontes*". Therefore, no clear link connects the political struggles of the interwar years with collaboration during the war. In fact, ethnic conflicts as they developed during occupation were a decisive factor. Yet, also this explanation has to be taken with a grain of salt as it does not account for all of the choices made in those months. A further factor to be taken into account, according to Kostopoulos, were the relations developed between a certain village and the occupying forces. Villages that had experienced Italian violence in previous years mostly chose to side with the resistance. Also, the existence of strong links with Bulgaria, for example in villages that had had a consistent emigration to Bulgaria in the interwar years, led to side with the Committee. Finally, of course, the existence of a strong network of EAM-activists in a village prevented it from joining the collaborationist forces.

By this time the Italian authorities had shifted significantly their strategy of governance. If they had initially relied on the Greek state authorities as an instrument of indirect rule, they now took the collapse of the Greek state's monopoly of violence as a matter of fact and sought therefore to establish a direct alliance with social and ethnic groups. Both strategies of governance - the one adopted in 1941-42 and that of 1943 - were largely the result of a lack of knowledge about the local society and of sufficient resources to govern it by creating strong and reliable alliances with local actors. If we understand occupation as a form of "inter-organizational organization"⁶⁸, in which a military force rules a foreign society through collaboration of locals, be they state officials or differently legitimized social actors, the Italian occupation suffered from its very beginning of a shortage of resources to activate collaboration. The relations between the Italian garrison and the Committee show sufficiently that the Italian way of indirect rule was highly inefficient. Moreover, it was hampered by the constant lack of trust towards groups

politikés kai ethnotikés sygkroýseis: O ellinikós emfýlios pólemos stin periochí Kastoriás, *Epistímí kai Koinōnía: Epitheōrísí Politikís kai Íthikís Theōrías* 11 (2015): 71-110, here 83.

⁶⁷ Kōstópoulos, "Axomakedonikó Komitáto".

⁶⁸ Cornelis J. Lammers, "The Interorganizational Control of an Occupied Country", *Administrative Science Quarterly* 33, No. 3 (1988): 438-457.

perceived as ethnic minorities that derived from Italian weakness as a protecting power in the region.

Conclusion

The history of Kastoria allows us to observe the development of interethnic violence with a micro-analytical approach, dismissing explanations based exclusively on political ideologies.

The occupiers' policy was not the cause of ethnic conflicts, nor was it the preceding history of discrimination against the Slavophone population, though these for obvious reasons were preconditions to the deepening of ethnic cleavages. Crucial was the unleashing of social dynamics during occupation and the complex interaction between multiple actors - Italian occupation authorities, Greek state authorities, Bulgarian representatives, Greek resistance - that led to the ethnicization of conflicts over resources. Recent studies on inter-ethnic violence in the Balkans during WWII⁶⁹ suggest that, although inter-ethnic conflicts were part of social life before the war, they were not necessarily the only way social conflicts were coded. In the case of Kastoria, as we have seen, ethnicity was only one of the possible ways to play out social conflicts in the interwar years. This pattern was reactivated during the Metaxas years leading to a dramatic surge of violence in the context of the economic crisis and famine unleashed by occupation. This interpretation is consistent with what social scientists have argued about the dynamics of civil conflicts in different regions. While preexisting collective identities do play a role in unleashing ethnic conflicts, group-making is largely the product of social variables, among which modernization is a key factor conducive to the rise of grievances against the political center.⁷⁰ Moreover, according to recent scholarship, the inability of failed states to control a peripheral region is crucial in determining the rise of insurgencies.⁷¹ Finally, the case of Kastoria shows that civil strife is sparked by conceptions of moral economy shaping the expectations of

⁶⁹ Alexander Korb, *Im Schatten des Weltkrieges. Massengewalt der Ustasa gegen Serben, Juden und Roma 1941-1945* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2013); Max Bergholz, *Violence as a Generative Force: Identity, Nationalism, and Memory in a Balkan Community*, (London: Cornell University Press, 2016).

⁷⁰ A review of existing theories in Stuart J. Kaufman, *Ethnicity as a generator of conflict* in *Routledge Handbook of Ethnic Conflict*, ed. Karl Cordell and Stefan Wolff (London/New York: Routledge, 2011): 91-102.

⁷¹ James D. Fearon and D. D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War", *American Political Science Review*, 97, No. 1, (2003): 75-90.

actors about the fair distribution of resources.⁷² Thus, it reminds of us of the importance of avoiding sharp distinctions between material and symbolic factors in explaining violence and civil war.⁷³

While conflicts and violence were the result of the interaction between multiple actors, a dynamic in which the occupiers were not always the driving force, the Italians did constitute a important variable as they had the higher instance in the managing of weapons. In fact, the Italian decision to arm the Slavophone villages exacerbated leading ethnic polarization leading to the formation of two opposing camps one identifying with Bulgarian nationalism and the other with the resistance in its different versions, the SNOF or the EAM/ELAS.

⁷² A strong case for this interpretation of the peasants' behavior has been made by James Scott, *Moral Economy of the Peasant Rebellion and Subsistence in South East Asia*, (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 1977). For a contextualization of Scott's arguments see Marc Edelman, "Bringing the Moral Economy Back in... to the Study of 21st-Century Transnational Peasant Movements", *American Anthropologist*, 107, No. 3 (2005): 331-345.

⁷³ For the debate see *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars*, ed. Mats Berdal and David Malone (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2000).

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