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Athena Syriatou

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Loukianos Hassiotis

“Γεια σας, Εγγλεζάκια!” Βρετανοί στρατιώτες στην Ελλάδα (1941–1945)

[Welcome, English lads! British soldiers in Greece, 1941–1945]

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Athena Syriatou

Democritus University of Thrace

“It is shameful that the Acropolis ... should be made into a fortress by British troops against the people of Athens,” Labour peer Lord Strabolgi told the House of Lords on 21 December 1944, after the beginning of the Battle of Athens, which marked a climatic and tragic moment in the British presence in Greece during the Second World War. Strabolgi was speaking during a fierce debate in both Houses of Parliament not only on British policy in Greece but also on the predicament that Britain found itself in as the Cold War was evolving, that is, fighting the new radical powers that had been the backbone of the resistance movements in Europe and one of its strongest collaborators up to that point.

Loukianos Hassiotis’ book illuminates one of the most essential aspects of British-Greek relationship and indeed the history of the Second World War. That is, the effect of the presence of some 150,000 British soldiers in total who found themselves in Greece from 1941 to 1945 with different tasks during different phases of the war. At the beginning of the war, the troops intervened as protectors, unsuccessfully trying to halt the German invasion in 1941. They also acted as allies and collaborators with the Greek partisans against the Germans during the occupation period (1941–1944) and finally they stood as enemies of their former allies, that is, the largest faction of Greek partisans after the liberation of Greece in 1944 and the civil war that followed. In seven composite chapters, Hassiotis examines this minor, as it initially seemed, aspect of the war, which eventually became a major one, not only for the Second World War but also for the subsequent Cold War period. The book, though, offers much more than the political and military imprint of these events, which are already well researched in the international bibliography. And this is because it enquires into the experience of these soldiers, who were encountering a foreign country and culture and its inhabitants while coping with the effects of an arduous war but also their own feelings, ideas and beliefs as regards their actions, which were

determined by official British policy and their own convictions.

In a lucid introduction that informs the reader on the literature covering British–Greek relations during the Second World War, as well as the methodology and the literary sources of his research, the author makes clear that his intention is to bring to life the considerations of common soldiers who hitherto had been silent agents in this episode of the war. In so doing, he focused on diaries, correspondence and memoirs of the soldiers to construct valuable narratives. In all, he consulted 45 personal archives at the Imperial War Museum of British veterans who served in Greece. Interviews from the Mass Observation Archive also contributed to the picture of British soldiers in Greece, while extracts from contemporary newspapers and parliamentary debates offer a perspective of the activities of British officers in Greece. He is aware, though, that these narratives were subject to restrictions, such as the contemporaneous censorship of some texts; the different temporalities in which some others were produced, such as diaries written at a moment when their writers lacked the information that could give them a complete picture of the events they were experiencing; and moreover, memoirs written well after other events had permeated into their life and which made them look back at their youth from a different angle. Therefore, these sources are cross-examined and not taken at face value, as the infiltration of factors of “distortion” and “refraction” (25) of reality eventually proved significant, as did issues related to the social, educational and psychological personality of the soldiers.

The first part of the book analyses the historical framework in which British policy towards Greece during different phases of the war was forged. Hesitant at the outset of the war, the British were reluctant to get involved in Greek matters despite the fact that the newly founded Ministry of Information had, as early as 1939, set up a special Greek section to boost the British standing in Greece and also to send undercover agents to prepare a resistance effort against the enemy. However, it was only after the victorious battles of the Greeks against the Italians and the prospect of a German invasion that the British decided to send aid to Greece, which sparked fierce debates between British military officers and politicians. Finally, in early March 1941, the transfer of more than 62,000 British soldiers from Egypt to Greece began. With the establishment of the German occupation and the emergence of the procommunist National Liberation Front (EAM)/Greek People’s Liberation Army (ELAS) resistance, British officers faced a dilemma as to whether they should collaborate with what they viewed as ideologically dangerous allies. The successful Operation Harling (the destruction of the Gorgopotamos bridge), considered the first large-scale resistance operation in occupied Europe, resulted in cutting off German supplies for at least a month from mainland Greece to the Middle East and in reinforcing ties between British and Greek combatants. It also resulted in encouraging the cooperation of the two ideologically opposed Greek resistance groups between themselves and with the British. As

the war advanced, Churchill's interventions increasingly supported the unpopular Greek king and the government-in-exile, as well as the right-wing resistance group National Republican Greek League (EDES). The liberation of Greece in October 1944 was a moment of enthusiastic celebration not only of the victory itself but also of British–Greek collaboration against fascism. Yet, only a few weeks later things came into a halt after a demonstration in Athens on 3 December against the decision of Prime Minister Georgios Papandreou and the British commanding officer in Greece, Ronald Scobie, to demand the disarmament of EAM/ELAS, came under fire from the Greek police: 33 people were killed and many injured. It was from this point that events culminated, leading to a tragic civil war for the Greeks and the reluctant, for some, involvement of British officers and soldiers in that bitter conflict. Furthermore, a few months later the British encouraged former Nazi collaborators of the paramilitary Security Battalions, due to their anticommunist and promonarchist convictions, to fight against the partisans. During this period, by far the most problematic of the British presence, 70,000 British soldiers were deployed to Greece, together with armoured vehicles and tanks, eight units of RAF artillery, and even Churchill himself, who came to inspect the operation, encouraging his men, in imperialistic tones, to act "as if you were in a conquered city where a local rebellion is in progress". The next two years, up to the British withdrawal in 1947, when the British ceded the so-called "protection" of the postwar Greek regime to the United States, was a period of severe battles, ethical dilemmas and political turmoil, which affected the lay soldiers, who now turned against their former allies as well as officers and politicians in Britain.

Hassiotis meticulously examines the resonance of these events in Britain and the debates in the Houses of Parliament, in newspapers of different political convictions and in the public sphere. A new wave of philhellenism inspired by the Greek victory against the Italian attack, the first against the Axis, was used to boost morale on the British home front, where the Luftwaffe began bombing London and other cities. Greek involvement in the war served British propaganda, which showcased the heroic resistance of the Greek army against the Axis in order to divert attention from the dreary reality of the Blitz. It is no coincidence that these events, the Blitz in Britain and the victory over the Italians for Greece, have ever since stood as the focal point of the commemoration of the war in both countries.

As the German occupation advanced in April 1941, a multitude of events were organised in support of the Greek people with the participation, among others, of the archbishop of Canterbury, who asked his flock "to pray for Greece", the provost of Cambridge University, who pleaded "to pay the debt of the civilised world to Ancient Greece", and Lawrence Olivier, who with other theatre figures, sang the national anthems of Britain and Greece at the London Palladium. Famous cartoonists, such as David Low and Philip Zec, compared the British and Greek resistance in their sketches. The vicissitudes that eventually prevailed, such as the failure of the Battle of Crete, where British and colonial forces collaborated with Greeks, in May 1941, the famine in Athens

during the winter of 1941–1942 caused by the British embargo, the atrocities of the Germans against the Greek people and especially against members of EAM, all had to be presented to the British public in such a way so as not to arouse any sympathy that would change British policies, as it happened in January 1942 with the temporary lifting of the embargo following a humanitarian plea. Most importantly, sympathy for leftist partisans and leftist ideas was not to be encouraged. Instead, newspapers drew a picture of brave Greek patriots who united to fight the enemy under British officers, without any reference to the hegemony of the communist party. This took the form of direct censorship as they prohibited the BBC from making any positive references to EAM and suggested they support the rival resistance group, EDES. Not surprisingly, when open conflict broke out between the two opposing resistance movements, Conservative politicians and newspapers in Britain often distorted the news in order to fit the narrative of a malignant communist party acting against what they considered law and order. Yet, many criticised Churchill's policies, emphasising that EAM represented the vast majority of the Greek people.

However, it was only when the Battle of Athens unfolded that British politicians and indeed civil society had to take sides. The intervention of British troops in support of right-wing supporters of the king who persecuted the partisans and managed to disarm them provoked fierce debates in Britain and indeed the first rupture on the home front. The nine British correspondents in Athens, who were following the demonstration from high up in a nearby hotel, were all censored. Many correspondents intentionally spread falsehoods about the dead of the demonstration, blaming the partisans and not the police, who were eventually found to be responsible. Yet others dared to speak out. Michael Foot, then correspondent for the *Daily Herald*, maintained that EAM should become a basic agent in the reconstruction of postwar Greek society and its members should not be persecuted as criminals. That and many other protests and resolutions against the British intervention from many local organisations, such as the Communist Party of Great Britain, National Council for Civil Liberties and others, spread in the public domain, with the slogan “Leave the Greeks Alone”, as expressed at a huge demonstration on Trafalgar Square on 17 December 1944. However, as the first clashes of the civil strife were taking place, the voice of those who supported the resistance movements against Churchill's policy had a very weak effect on the British political world and indeed Labour politicians. Mass Observation reports brought forward the voice of those who declared their disappointment in British policy and expressed their shame for Britain's involvement on the side of former German collaborators. As one witness said: “What a pity that our lads did not turn their back to those who asked them to shoot an ally” (140), expressing the indignation that some of her compatriots supported the creation of the hated anticommunist Security Battalions, comprising of former collaborators who now engaged in an anticommunist rampage, supported by Churchill and other allies. Yet Mass Observation interviews also reflect

opposing opinions as well as the ignorance and indifference of many.

The second part of the book addresses the focal questions promised in the introduction. What were the feelings of these soldiers who found themselves in Greece during these turbulent times? How did they view the Greeks, Greece and their actions in the country? Their letters, diaries and the famous Mass Observation interviews depict the contrasting feelings of confusion, fear, nostalgia, friendship and self-doubt of men in life-threatening circumstances. Very characteristically, the bombing of Piraeus in an early phase of their presence evoked memories of the Dunkirk evacuation. Many were critical of the poor organisation of the British war machine and the decisions of their superiors, such as the choice not to mobilise a greater number of troops to stop the German occupation. Matters were further complicated as officers and soldiers collaborated with partisans against the Germans while intervening to forestall the clashes between the different partisan groups. More interesting were the ethical dilemmas that emerged at every stage of this war, at all levels of the military command. Should they negotiate with the enemy in order to prevent the destruction of harbours, factories and infrastructure? Harry Hainsworth, a Special Operations Executive officer, for example, after the mediation of the Red Cross with the Germans, managed to avert the destruction of the Marathon Dam and save local antiquities, in exchange for the delay of the arrival of British troops (171).

The British perceptions of the Greeks depended on which the phase of the war the former came to Greece and, therefore, what their mission was. Obviously those who came during the first period and had to fight along with the partisans endured hardship and saw the suffering Greek men and women went through. They also enjoyed the generous hospitality of the poor people they encountered and were often sceptical about the ideological disparities which turned allies into enemies. Soldiers and officers in all three periods do mention the friendship and comradeship which developed among them. A pilot, William G. Rockall recalled the first phase of the war: "Everywhere we went we could hear 'Long Live Greece! Welcome, English lads'" (270), while others exclaimed "Greeks are the most hospitable people in the world".

As things turned rough after the Battle of Athens, most soldiers could not avoid reproducing the ideas communicated to them by their superiors. On their part, the partisans of ELAS avoided attacking the British during the first skirmishes. British soldiers' correspondence reflects the unofficial ceasefire between them and ELAS fighters, "who were coming to offer retsina bottles and asking 'Why are you fighting us? You are our allies!'" After more bitter battles between the two sides, a lieutenant wrote to his wife: "You cannot tell a friend from a foe until someone shoots and then it is too late (unless he misses you)" (190). Some would go along the propaganda which was in full swing, especially after Churchill's visit to Athens.

Often the soldiers downplayed the abilities of the partisans from both sides and praised the effectiveness of their own comrades, in their diaries speaking in orientalist terms about a people that they could not "improve". Yet others, such as the New Zealander

John Mulgan, who fought along the mountainous villagers, noted in his diary that he felt “safe among villagers, no traitor among them. They suffered more than any other during the war and those who blame them because they turned on each other should remember that” (275).

Hassiotis’ book is a very important contribution to the history of the Second World War. It brings forward the complications of the conflict at the level of high politics, civil society, the press and the common people. In so doing, he reveals the state mechanisms of war and propaganda as well as the unexpected bonds and affiliations created in extreme circumstances. Perceptions about the self, social status and gender are all discussed with a multitude of documents (sometimes too many for the reader’s ease), in order to paint a multifaced picture of the experience of British soldiers in Greece. Overall, apart from the well-discussed political aspects of the period, it reveals the humanity of those involved and the forging of their personalities as it concerns national, gendered, political and ideological developments. The book deserves to be translated into English since it contributes to the analysis of the British national and imperial self in distress.