

## Violence, resistance and collaboration in a Greek borderland: the case of the Muslim Chams of Epirus

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### Abstract – Violence, resistance and collaboration in a Greek borderland: the case of the Muslim Chams of Epirus

*The ethnic infighting that took place in Thesprotia between the Greek and Albanian communities during the Axis occupation has been described as a forgotten conflict. Indeed, until recently, the only existing studies were those of local «organic» intellectuals who argued that the Albanian Muslim minority collaborated collectively first with the Italian and then with the German occupiers in the hope that an Axis victory would lead to the eventual creation of a Greater Albanian state. The article will challenge these views and argue that the conflict was shaped by local issues and antagonisms that predated the war and were often unrelated to nationalist agendas. Politics were used by local actors of all nationalities as a means of expressing local differences; however, the root of the conflict must be sought in communal relations. Both the victims and the perpetrators knew each other, shared common cultural codes and often had longstanding grievances. But this was not a parochial conflict waged between pre-modern peasants. Violence became possible solely as a result of the war and the presence of supra-local actors – the Resistance organisations, the Axis militaries and the British Military Mission – who gave peasants the opportunity and means by which to settle their differences. The presence of these groups served to nationalise the ongoing local struggles and led ultimately to an escalation of violence, resulting in the bloody stand-off that took place in the summer of 1944.*

**Key words:** Epirus, Thesprotia, Chams, Second World War, violence

**Parole chiave:** Epiro, Tesprozia, Chams, Seconda guerra mondiale, violenza

The ethnic infighting that took place in Thesprotia between the Greek and Albanian communities during the Axis occupation has been described as a forgotten conflict<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, until recently, the only existing studies were those of local «organic» intellectuals; schoolteachers, senior civil servants, local politicians and retired military officers<sup>2</sup>. According to these authors, the Albanian Muslim minority collaborated collectively first with the Italian and then with the German occupiers in the hope that an Axis victory would lead to the eventual creation of a Greater Albanian state. The foremost purpose of these studies was to justify the violence perpetrated against the minority, and to back Greek irredentist claims made towards Albania. Unsurprisingly, such accounts adopted a rabidly nationalist and anti-Albanian stance. The Albanians were presented as «brutes» who were driven to violence and collaboration by «their savage instincts» and their natural propensity towards violence and loot<sup>3</sup>. Subsequently, the violence instigated by Greek guerrillas and civilians during the liberation was downplayed, while the involve-

<sup>1</sup> G. Kretsi, The secret past of the Albanian-Greek borderlands: Cham Muslim Albanians: perspectives on a conflict over historical accountability and current rights, in *Ethnologia Balcanica* n. 6, 2002, pp. 171-172.

<sup>2</sup> V. Lagios, *Alvanoï kai Alvaniki propaganda* [Albanians and Albanian propaganda] (1939-1944) Self-Published, Athens 1951; T. Papamanolis, *Katakaimeni Ipiros* [Poor Epirus] Self-Published, Athens 1945, Vasilis Krapstis, *Oi Mousoulmanoï Tsamides tis Thesprotias* [The Muslim Chams of Thesprotia], Self-Published, Athens 1986.

<sup>3</sup> V. Lagios, *Alvanoï kai Alvaniki propaganda*, pp. 2-6.

ment of the minority in collaboration and acts of violence against the Greek population was considerably exaggerated. T. Papamanolis argued characteristically that «immediately after the German attack the entire minority, men, women and children started to persecute Christian fellow countrymen»<sup>4</sup>.

More recently, a new generation of scholars has begun to re-examine the events of the period. These studies, which cast a critical eye over the existing historiography, do not dispute the collaboration between the minority and the Axis military, rather, they argue that its extent and involvement was grossly overstated. Accordingly, the studies claim that the violent expulsion of the minority was not merely a result of its collaboration with the forces of occupation, but rather «an outcome of state policy... which was embedded in the prevailing nationalistic ideology of the Interwar period» and has as its aim the eradication of the minority. According to these scholars, the Greek state had methodically stirred up hostility between the two communities and utilised «an instigative approach to increase hatred between the communities in order to successfully attain the aforementioned aims»<sup>5</sup>. Although these studies have offered important insights on the role of the Greek state and the relations between the Axis military and the minority, they largely disregarded the complexity of state policies vis-à-vis the minority, and also overlooked the role of non-state actors and the local dynamics of the conflict.

The article will challenge these views and shift the focus from the role of the political elites and Axis commanders to the activities and experiences of the Greek and Albanian peasants, who found themselves in the midst of this conflict. The article will draw from a series of sources including reports and memoranda of the resistance organisations, the British Military Mission and the Governor General of Epirus, diaries and memoirs of resisters and oral testimonies collected in a series of field trips in the areas of Thesprotia and Preveza between 2005 and 2011. Previous studies have ignored the usage and potential of this source, but, oral testimonies can provide invaluable insights into the actions and perceptions of everyday actors particularly in such an under-documented area. Most interviewees were farmers and pensioners who lived in formerly mixed Christian-Muslim rural communities and were themselves Albanian-speakers; many of the interviews were conducted at least in part in Albanian. I chose to focus on this group for two reasons; firstly, such people have been underrepresented in the memoir literature that is largely compiled by intellectuals and schoolteachers from Greek-speaking communities; in contrast to Greek-speaking peasants they have been less exposed to the dominant nationalist narratives and therefore more likely to provide insights and views that have been excluded or under-represented in the existing historiography. Such «misfits», challenge the predominant stereotypes, and prompt questions about the dominant narratives that surround the conflict.

In contrast to the existing interpretations that stress political factors and present the period as an unrelenting nationalist struggle between Greeks and Albanians, this article argues that the conflict was shaped by local issues and antagonisms that predated the

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<sup>4</sup> Papamanolis, *Katakaimeni Ipiros*, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> L. Baltiotis, *The Muslim Chams of Northwestern Greece*, «European Journal of Turkish Studies» 12 (2011) at <http://ejts.revues.org/4444> accessed at 12/01/2015.

war and were often unrelated to nationalist agendas. Despite the efforts of the state and nationalist activists, neither the Greek nor the Albanian peasantry had been fully nationalised by this period; peasants identified primarily with clan, village and faith, while co-nationals from adjoining communities were regarded as foreigners. The persistence of such loyalties accounts for the bewildering politics of resistance and collaboration during this period. Initially, at least, collaboration was not a one-off choice; Muslim communities pursued different politics according to circumstances, alternating between collaboration, neutrality and, more seldom, resistance. Albanian and Greek communities changed sides successively; allying themselves with the stronger available patron and shifting their allegiances when a more suitable one appeared.

Politics were used by local actors of all nationalities as a means of expressing local differences; however, the root of the conflict must be sought in communal relations. Both the victims and the perpetrators knew each other, shared common cultural codes and often had longstanding grievances. But this was not a parochial conflict waged between pre-modern peasants. Violence became possible solely as a result of the war and the presence of supra-local actors – the resistance organisations, the Axis militaries and the British Military Mission – who gave peasants the opportunity and means by which to settle their differences. The presence of these groups served to nationalise the ongoing local struggles and led ultimately to an escalation of violence, resulting in the bloody stand-off that took place in the summer of 1944.

### *The land and the people*

Thesprotia is located in north-western Greece, and before its incorporation in the Greek state it was a part of the vilayet of Ioannina. During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the population was a little over 65,000 one-third of whom were Muslims<sup>6</sup>. While the majority of local Muslims were Albanian-speakers, there was a significant presence of Roma and Greek-speaking Muslims in the towns of Parga and Paramithia, many of whom had emigrated from southern Greece after the 1821 revolution<sup>7</sup>. The «Greek» community was also highly fragmented. The majority of Christians in the highlands of Mourgana and Souli were Greek speakers, while in the lowland areas of Margariti, Igoumenitsa and Paramithia, Albanian speakers comprised the majority<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, there was a strong presence of Vlach transhumant pastoralists who wintered their flocks in the lowlands of the region<sup>9</sup>. These communities were highly endogamous, while antagonisms and violence were particularly common particularly among sedentary peasants of both faiths

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<sup>6</sup> Ioannis Kokolakis, *To Istero Gianniotiko Pasaliki: horos, dioikisi kai plithismos stin Tourkakrotoumeni Ipiro* [The late pashalik of Ioannina: space, administration and population in Ottoman Epirus] Kentro Neoellinikon Ereunon, Athens, 2003, p. 251.

<sup>7</sup> P. Giourgias, *Martiries kai Viomata* [Testimonies and experiences], Sbilias, Athens 2000, p. 122.

<sup>8</sup> *Ta zitimata margaritiou* [The issues of Margariti] in «O Kiriakatikos» 30 june 1935.

<sup>9</sup> V. Krapsiti, *I Istoría tou Margaritiou* [The history of Margariti], Self-Published, Athens 1982, pp. 71-72.

and Vlach pastoralists<sup>10</sup>. The ethnic puzzle of the region was completed after 1924 when several hundred Turkish-speaking refugees from Asia Minor settled in the region.

Greek and Albanian nationalists have often described the region as an ancestral homeland of their respective nations and pointed to the strong national sentiment of the local populations during the Ottoman period<sup>11</sup>. However, until the eve of the Balkan Wars and indeed long after the incorporation of the area in Greece national feeling was weak among the peasantry. A Greek educationist who visited the Albanian-speaking coastal region in 1909 was impressed both by the «Homeric hospitality» of the local population and their romantic outlook, most men were still dressed in kilt and went about armed and by the lack of national sentiment. He noted that the local Albanian-speaking Christians «used the word *kaur* which means Christian to describe themselves» instead of Greek «and they did not find this diminutive or insulting in any way». Accordingly Muslim peasants did not identify as Albanians-Shqiptar, but rather as Muslims-Myslyman in Albanian or Turks<sup>12</sup>.

Although nationalist feeling might have been weak among the local peasantry, local societies were seldom free from strife. Thesprotia was a notoriously violent society. Honour killings and feuds were common<sup>13</sup>. However, in most cases, land was the point of contention, rather than politics. The majority of the arable land in the region was owned by a handful of absentee Muslim landlords who owned approximately 90% of the arable land in the areas of Fanari and Paramithia, and more than 60% in Filiates. The situation of the Christian tenant farmers who cultivated these lands was deplorable, in that the landlord received half of the harvest, while the tenants had to pay the state tax while they could be evicted at any time with no notice. Land disputes created fertile ground for irredentist propaganda and the sympathies of the area's population had been shifting towards the newly-created Greek Kingdom since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>14</sup>.

The tensions that had been building in the area finally exploded during the Balkan War of 1912-1913. The war took the form of brutal guerrilla fighting, waged primarily by local civilians who were armed by the Greek and Ottoman governments. In the autumn of 1912, Muslim bands raided villages as far north as the area of Pogoni in Ioannina; resulting in hundreds of Greek peasants abandoning their homes and seeking shelter in Corfu and Arta. Atrocities were widespread and no prisoners were taken from either side. Greek irregulars responded in kind from January 1913 onwards<sup>15</sup>. The arrival of the Greek authorities did not stem the violence. Peasants refused to pay rent to the Muslim landlords, who were threatened and, in some cases, murdered by their tenants. The repeated protest of the Muslim peasantry finally convinced the liberal government

<sup>10</sup> Apo Filiati eis Grikohori [From Filiati to Grikohori] 25/03/1931 in «Thesprotia» 25 March 1931.

<sup>11</sup> Beqir Meta, *The Cham Tragedy*, Sejko, Tirana 2007, Vasilis Krapstis, *Oi Mousoulmanoï Tsamides tis Thesprotias*, Self-Published, Athens 1986.

<sup>12</sup> I Igoumenitsa opos tin eiden o Kirios Nitsos en 1909 [Igoumenitsa as seen by mr Nitsios in 1909] in *Thesprotia* 22 March 1933.

<sup>13</sup> V. Hristou, Igoumenitsa, 2008, Oral Testimony.

<sup>14</sup> M. Kokolakis, *Istero Gianniotiko Pasaliki* (1820-1913) Kentro Neoellinikon Erefnon, Athens 2003, p. 72.

<sup>15</sup> Mouseio Benaki/Eleftherios Venizelos Archive (EVA)/File 365/91/92/ Ekthesi pepragmanon ipo anexartitou miktou apospasmatos antisintagmatarxou pirovolikoï Anton.Th. Ipiti [Report on the activities of the independent detachment of artillery colonel Ant.Th.Ipiti].

to take stern countermeasures; peasant protesters were arrested while the gendarmerie was dispatched to break up land occupations and protect landlords while they collected the tithe<sup>16</sup>.

This policy was reversed after the catastrophic defeat of the Greek army in Turkey in 1922 which not only landed Greece with over a million destitute refugees, but also created a revanchist climate towards the Muslim population. In 1923, the Greek and Turkish governments agreed to a massive exchange of population, in the hope that this would end the animosity between the two countries and solve the burning nationality problem by creating ethnically homogenous communities. The Greek state put significant pressure on the Cham community to volunteer for the population exchange scheme in the hope of populating the area with refugees. Paramilitary bands and gendarmes threatened Muslim community leaders, who tried to rally their compatriots to resist deportation, while residences and houses were commandeered to house refugee families. Eventually, persistent Albanian and Italian lobbying deterred the Greek administration from deporting the minority<sup>17</sup>.

Nonetheless, tensions were not eased. The arrival of refugees forced the state to take radical measures to address the crisis. Private and Church estates were expropriated across the country and were used to settle refugees and landless peasants. The Cham minority was seriously affected, as they owned over 80% of the arable land in the region. Muslim community leaders protested vehemently, soliciting the help of the Albanian government, but the Greek administration rejected these pleas. The land expropriation was conducted in a thoroughly anarchic manner and grave injustices were committed against the Albanian community. The expropriation committees not only ignored the government directive that excluded privately-owned forests, pastures, groves, marshes and self-cultivations from expropriation, but also appropriated urban properties, leaving hundreds of Muslim families landless and destitute. Accordingly, the indemnities paid to landowners were only a fraction of their land's value<sup>18</sup>.

These events created a serious rift between the state and the Albanian community, the general governor of the region noted in 1930; «amidst these inhuman conditions we cannot certainly claim that the Muslim community is positively predisposed towards Greece». However, the same report noted that; «despite the frantic efforts of Albanian nationalists, the Muslims of Tsamouria have not espoused the Albanian national idea»<sup>19</sup>. The loyalties of the Albanian community were rooted in their faith and locality; it is characteristic that even during the 1940s, most Muslims did not describe themselves as Albanian «Shqiptar» but rather as Turks or Muslims and even though some Muslims

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<sup>16</sup> EVA/File 113/180/Tilegrafima tou Foresti me entoli tou genikou dioikiti pros ton E.Venizelo sxetika me tin ipostirixi ton Mousoulmanon Filiaton [Telegram of Forestis to E.Venizelos containing the decree for support towards the Muslims of Filiati]/15/10/1913.

<sup>17</sup> D. Mihalopoulos, *The Moslems of Chamuria and the exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey*, «Balkan Studies» 27 (1986) pp.303-313, for a perceptive discussion of state policies in the inter-war period see E. Manta, *Muslim Albanians in Greece. The Chams of Epirus (1923 - 2000)* IMXA, Thessaloniki 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Archives of Contemporary Social History [ASKI] Milonas Archive/O Thorivos peri ta ktimata Tzamourgias Ipirou [The upheaval regarding the properties of Tzamourgia in Epirus]/1930/pp. 1-2.

<sup>19</sup> AEV/File 058/01/Ekthesi shetika me tin katastasi is mousoulmanikis meionotitas stin Ellada [Report on the situation of the Muslim minority in Greece]/15/10/1930/ p. 3.

toyed with the idea of immigrating to Turkey their foremost concern was «to retain as much of their property that they can. Their every move is dictated by this concern and Albania that is currently a small and impoverished state has no appeal to them»<sup>20</sup>.

Nonetheless, nationalist ideas were espoused by a minority of educated and affluent members of the landowning class, such as brothers Nuri and Mazar Dino and Musa Demi, and had some appeal among members of the Cham diaspora. However, nationalists were in turn divided between a pro-republican and a pro-royalist faction. Pro-Turkish clerics, like the muftis of Paramithia and Filiates, also exercised considerable influence. However, the majority of the peasants, «have [had, N.d.R.] a fluid consciousness and change[d, N.d.R.] sides according to their interest». The divisions between the various factions were affirmed in a subsequent report, which noted: «I believe that any rapprochement between the region's conservative Muslim element and the pro-Albanian faction is impossible» and added that «the mass of the peasantry had no clear national affiliation or national feelings»<sup>21</sup>.

The acrimony felt in the Cham community was further animated by the incompetence and corruption of the civilian authorities that had a detrimental impact on economic development. The regional infrastructure, which dated from the Ottoman period, had fallen into a state of complete disrepair, while sorely needed public works, such as dams and irrigation canals, were completely ignored. The profound negligence of the state led to a flight of capital and manpower as hundreds of able-bodied peasants, most of them Christians, left the region to seek their fortune in America. The remaining population were dependent on usurers who charged exorbitant interest – 200% in some cases – and managed to amass huge properties in the process<sup>22</sup>. The liberal government took active steps to redress these problems. In 1931, the parliament passed legislation that allowed Muslim landowners to appeal the decisions of the expropriation committees, permitted the direct payment of indemnification and returned all expropriated urban properties to their owners. It also reinstated to their owners all the farms, buildings and homes that had been requisitioned for refugees or occupied illegally by local Christian farmers and restored religious endowments to the control of the Muslim community<sup>23</sup>.

These changes had a very positive impact on the relations between the state and the minority; however, they failed ultimately to alleviate the social and economic turmoil that had been building in the area. The incorporation of the country into the Greek state not only changed the fortunes of the minority, but also altered the social and economic map of the area. Until the early 20th century, economic strength lay in the hands of the Muslim landowner class, many of whom were engaged in commerce and usury. This situation had been changing gradually since the mid-19th century as small numbers of individuals and later families from the province of Ioannina, settled in the principal towns of the region establishing business. By the 1920s, they were joined by local men who slowly came to constitute an elite that threatened to wrest economic control from

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> AEV/File 104/45/Ekthesi tou Achillea Kalevra pros ton Al.Karapano shetika me tin Alvaniki propaganda stin Tsamouria [Report of Achilleas Kalevras to Al.Karapanos regarding Albanian propaganda in Tsamouria] /19/01/1929/p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 14.

<sup>23</sup> AEV/File 058/01/Ekthesi shetika is mousoulmanikis meionotitas stin, p. 22.

the Muslim notables. The presence of these men led to a gradual Hellenization of formerly Albanian-majority towns, like Margariti and Filiates that was viewed with disdain by the Muslim peasantry<sup>24</sup>.

The ascendancy of these new local elites led to considerable social tensions. A characteristic case can be seen in the village of Grikohori, a large community located near the provincial capital of Igoumenitsa. Until 1912, this community was the fief of the Fetahaioi clan. The property of this family included several large pastures rented to nomadic Vlach shepherds, olive groves and corn fields. The expropriation deprived them of more than 2000 acres and initiated a bitter struggle between them and the notables of the Christian community. These events polarised the two communities to the extreme but also changed the balance of power in the area. Much of the Fetahaioi land was bought by the Liakos and Goulas families, both of whom were Albanian-speaking Christians. Before the war, both families were engaged in small-scale agriculture; however, after the exportation the heads of the two families forged an alliance and engaged in extensive usury and commerce. Their affluence challenged the pre-eminence of the Fetahaioi clan and led occasionally to violence. Social strife persisted in the village throughout the 1930s, resulting finally in a violent outbreak between 1942-3 that cost the lives of 30 of the 400 strong Christian community and almost wiped out the two families<sup>25</sup>.

However, such men were not necessarily anti-Albanian. The head of the Goulas clan was a vellam, a blood brother<sup>26</sup> to a local Muslim notable. Similar ties existed between the Pitoulis family, a rich pastoral clan from Igoumenitsa and the Dule family, a powerful Muslim clan from the village of Grava<sup>27</sup>. Commercial ventures between Muslim and Greek merchants were also far from uncommon. Indeed, between these diverse populations, the lines between the different ethnic groups were less rigid than suggested. Oral testimonies, travellers' accounts and local histories reveal the area's development of a rich syncretic culture that had been combining elements from both faiths since at least the 16th century, and had survived largely intact until the eve of the war. Christian and Muslim peasants shared notions of honour, feuds were ubiquitous among both communities, while their spatial and familial organisation yielded considerable similarities. The main social unit was the clan, «soi» or «fara», comprising several multigenerational families that lived in the same village quarter and traced their descent to a common ancestor. Property was often held collectively, while the clan undertook the material and social support of its members. Furthermore, the two communities shared religious and cultural practices. The feast day of Saint Spyridon, the patron Saint of the area, was celebrated by both communities<sup>28</sup>. Muslim peasants sometimes gave their children Christian

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<sup>24</sup> T. Stefanidou, Malakata, *Margariti Genethlia Gi* [Margariti my birthplace] Self-Published, Athens 2000, pp. 12-13.

<sup>25</sup> S. Papatsatsis/Igoumenitsa/Oral testimony 2009.

<sup>26</sup> Blood brotherhood was a popular custom in the Balkans, used to cement personal and clan alliances by creating a bond of ritual kinship. The blood brotherhood ceremony would often take place in a Church where the two men mingled and drunk each other's blood and gave vows of friendship in the presence of a priest. Robert Eslië, *The Dictionary of Albanian Religion, Mythology and Folk Culture* Hurst & Company, London 2001, pp. 41-42.

<sup>27</sup> I.T. Igoumenitsa/2008/Oral Testimony.

<sup>28</sup> F.W Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam under the Sultans* Vol.2, Oxford University Press 1929, Oxford and New York, p. 583.

names, wore crucifixes and amulets and even attended services<sup>29</sup>; meanwhile, Christian peasants used the services of Muslim clerics, some of whom had gained notoriety and wealth as practical doctors and soothsayers.<sup>30</sup>

The lack of religious animosity came as a surprise to many travellers who journeyed in the area during the 19<sup>th</sup> century «some of them are Turks, some Christians, but not strict, in either religion; intermarrying with each other, and boiling a piece of mutton and a piece of pork in the same pot for the wife and husband of different persuasions»<sup>31</sup>. Mixed marriages remained fairly common until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century particularly in the coastal Albanian-speaking communities; however, such unions became progressively scarce as clerics from both communities rallied against them. Nevertheless, the peasants managed to circumnavigate such boundaries through fictive kinship ceremonies, the foremost of which was blood-brotherhood<sup>32</sup>. Men and women from both communities used these ceremonies to cement local and familial alliances and business ventures, prevent or end feuds, and create ties across faith lines. Cross-religious adoption was also not uncommon. For instance, Loukas Dimitriou, an Albanian-speaking Christian from the village of Agia Marina, adopted the two sons of a deceased Muslim friend from the village of Ginovati, whom he raised as Muslims<sup>33</sup>. Conversely, many Christian families hired Muslim women as wet nurses; a relationship that created fictive kinship bond analogous to God-parenthood between the infant and carer<sup>34</sup>.

The presence and persistence of these practices, which endured well into the 1930s, clearly denotes that the boundaries of ethnicity and faith were much less profound than suggested. Despite the persistent efforts of the state and Church to nationalise the peasantry, the Christian and Muslim communities who lived in this region had not adopted the ethos and practices promulgated by the national elites on either side of the border, and were still members of a common «frontier society» whose shared cultural practices – feud, cross-faith marriage, blood-brotherhood and understanding of gender norms – placed them outside the national mainstream. However, while the deep cultural differences and national animosities evoked by some historians to explain the violence that erupted in the region are quite inadequate, it would also be imprudent to interpret the strife that erupted as the work of irredentist elites who sought to create and bolster an artificial enmity. Indeed, the persistence of practises, such as blood-brotherhood, underscores the importance and salience of cultural and religious differences between the two communities «that made such an institution necessary»<sup>35</sup>. Religious affiliation, which remained the fundamental organisational principle of this society, was used constantly and effectively by both sides in their conflicts over land, prestige and honour, and played a significant role in delineating and maintaining difference.

<sup>29</sup> L. Sofias, *I Grika Thesprotias [Grika in Thesprotia]*, Self-Published, Ioannina 2006, p. 16.

<sup>30</sup> S. Papamokos, *I Selliani xthes kai simera [Selliani in the past and today]*, Self-Published, Athens 1997, p. 126.

<sup>31</sup> J.C Hobhouse, *A journey through Albania and other provinces of turkey in Europe and Asia to Constantinople during the years 1809 and 1810*, M.Carey Philadelphia 1817, p. 135.

<sup>32</sup> S. Evangelou, *Simioseis mia zois [Notes from a lifetime]* (Unpublished personal collection), p. 45.

<sup>33</sup> M. Dimitriou/Agia Marina/2006/Oral Testimony.

<sup>34</sup> Stefanidou, *Malakata, Margariti Genethlia Gi*, p. 32.

<sup>35</sup> W. Bracewell, *Frontier Blood-Brotherhood and the triplex confinium*, in Drage Roksandic and Natasa Stefanec (eds) *Constructing border societies on the triplex confinium* Central European University, Budapest 2000, pp. 39-41.

The situation in the area changed drastically after the imposition of the Metaxas dictatorship in 1936 which took aggressive steps to assimilate the minority and curb its autonomy. The first step was the suppression of the Albanian language. Subsequently Muslim village presidents in mixed villages were replaced by Christians, while harassment from the gendarmerie became much more common and active<sup>36</sup>. The invasion and occupation of Albania by Italy in 1939 further exasperated tensions. In an attempt to appeal to disgruntled Albanian nationalists, the Italian authorities began an aggressive propaganda campaign that called for the incorporation of Kosovo and Thesprotia into a greater Albanian state. The Metaxas regime responded by intensifying the pressure on the Cham communities, and a number of Muslim notables suspected for irredentist activities were sent into exile. These events exacerbated issues between the two communities while fear of a wholesale uprising reached hysterical proportions, particularly among the Christian elite<sup>37</sup>.

### *War and occupation*

To some extent, these fears materialised during and after the Italian invasion of 28th October 1940. The Italian troops, who were escorted by a large number of Albanian troops and irregulars, engaged in looting and violence against Greek civilians while the provincial capital of Igoumenitsa was burned to the ground by Albanian militiamen who also murdered two Greek civilians<sup>38</sup>. A large number of Greeks from the town and the surrounding villages followed the army, while others fled to hills where they formed self-defence militias. Many Muslim villagers, especially in the area of Gropa, welcomed the advancing Italian troops and some even took arms and attacked the retreating Greek army, which suffered heavy casualties at their hands. Some authors estimated the number of Muslim peasants who took up arms at more than 1500. However, this is unlikely; a more accurate number would be between 300 and 400<sup>39</sup>. Even though a significant number of Muslim peasants played an active role in helping the Italian army, many communities abstained from such actions and disavowed the brutalities of their fellow-religionists. The Muslim inhabitants of Agios Vlasis refused to take up arms and sheltered their Christian compatriots from violence<sup>40</sup>.

The return of the army and the displaced population several weeks later incited a new cycle of violence. A number of Muslim peasants were court-martialled and executed, while in Igoumenitsa, the relatives of the murdered men broke into prison and lynched those arrested for murdering their relatives. Moreover, the government deported to southern Greece all males aged between 18 and 50. The absence of the adult male population deprived Muslim families of their more valuable workers and exposed them

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<sup>36</sup> Giourgas, *Martiries*, p. 137.

<sup>37</sup> V. Krapsiti, *To imerologio mou* [My diary] Self-Published, Athens 1991, pp. 16.

<sup>38</sup> P. Mitsis, *Osa Thimamai* [As much as I remember], Self-Published, Filiates, 2011, p. 29.

<sup>39</sup> K. Antoniou, *Istoria Horifilakis* [A history of the gendarmerie] (1833-1967) Volume.2 N/A Athens, 1964, p. 77.

<sup>40</sup> K. Oikonomidis/Igoumenitsa/Oral Testimony/2010.

to local criminal elements and vengeful peasants who broke into Muslim homes stealing everything they could lay their hands on and savaging those who resisted<sup>41</sup>. However, such actions were not condoned or supported by the majority of the population and, in many cases, Greek peasants protected their Muslim neighbours by outside predators, offered financial help while many families were hosted by their Greek blood-brothers<sup>42</sup>.

The arrival of the Italian army in April 1941, this time as an occupying force, and the return of the Cham exiles did not lead to the sudden descent into violence described by some conservative authors. The Italian troops were welcomed by a part of the Muslim population while minority leaders campaigned aggressively for the expulsion of Greek civil servants and the gendarmerie. However, their demands were not heeded by the Italian military authorities, who were wary of a Greek backlash. Despite the persistent Albanian lobbying they decided to discontinue the «separatist pro-Albanian policy»<sup>43</sup> and they retained both the Greek authorities and the gendarmerie, albeit poorly armed and with diminished force.

However, Italian policies were far from impartial and while they did not encourage violence against Greek civilians they turned a blind eye when such acts were committed. Tensions began to escalate from the second half of 1941. The first serious episode occurred in the town of Filiates on 26 October 1941 when a riot broke out after a local Muslim was taken into custody on suspicion of the murder of a Christian peasant in the village of Palaioklisi<sup>44</sup>. Violence spiralled further in the following weeks. Emboldened by the lenience of the Italian authorities, Muslim peasants began to carry weapons openly and use them to settle scores with their Christian compatriots. Post-war accounts have often suggested that violence had a clear political motivation throughout the occupation, while victims have been presented casually as «freedom fighters» and «martyrs». However, the causes and nature of the violence were much more complex. Violence during the occupation can be categorised generally into three spheres: military violence, which included operations against military targets; guerrilla warfare, sabotage etc, political violence, which included the harassment and murder of political opponents, and criminal violence, encompassing robbery, theft and acts of private revenge. However, the line between these categories was never clearly defined, as different actors, peasants, brigands and militiamen, engaged in such actions. Often the difference between militia-men and bandits was quite unclear, as were the motivations of the various actors.

Disentangling the motivation of the various violent actors is challenging; however, the available evidence suggests that most violence was related to personal agendas, land rivalries and disputes over prestige and honour. Historians may disregard such motivations, but, oral testimonies and memoirs testify to their ubiquity. The first person who was murdered in the village of Agios Vlasias in the summer of 1941, Prokopis Giannakis, was a former rural guard and an avid gambler with a violent temper. In 1935, Giannakis had murdered a Muslim fellow villager who accused him of cheating during a card game.

<sup>41</sup> Mitsis, *Osa thimamai*, p. 40.

<sup>42</sup> I. Tsoutsoubis/Igoumenitsa/Oral Testimony/2010.

<sup>43</sup> Davide Rodogno, *Fascism's European empire: Italian occupation during the Second World War*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006, p. 107.

<sup>44</sup> ELIA/Archive of the Bulgarian Occupation [ABO]/File 2/2.3/07/11/1941, p. 1.

His political connections enabled him to escape with a light sentence and he returned to his village three years later. Giannakis ignored the repeated calls of his family and friends to abandon the village, claiming he had no fear of his victim's family. However, he was wrong; in June 1941, he was ambushed by the brothers and uncles of his victim who dragged him into a barn and stabbed him to death<sup>45</sup>. In the adjoining village of Kastri, the first victims was Spiros Zonios who was killed by the kinsmen of a Muslim peasant from of Spatari whom he had murdered a few years before over land differences<sup>46</sup>. In the nearby village of Grikohori «Sotiris Liakos had killed a shepherd, a kinsman of Abedin Idriz, now Abedin wanted to shed his blood... so he went after his brother Kostas, and after Kostas escaped, he killed Kostas' his father Padelis and his daughter Amalia»<sup>47</sup>. Vangelis Grekos, a farmer from the village of Argirotopos, was «murdered because ones of his uncles had murdered the son of a local Muslim and then fled to the guerrilla bands and since they were unable to reach him the Turk who lost his son said, since I can't find the man who killed my son I will kill his sister's son instead»<sup>48</sup>. Similarly, in the village of Foiniki, «one Albanian had a grudge with Spiros Varaggoulis, a gendarme who retired and settled in the village, he broke into his home and executed him right where he found him sitting»<sup>49</sup>.

However, fictive kinship ties and regional loyalties played an important role in limiting violence and deterring conflict. In many cases, Greek peasants were informed by Muslim blood brothers of their impending arrest. Hristos Hristou, an affluent farmer from the village of Pestiani, was able to evade an assassination attempt following a warning from his wife's blood sister<sup>50</sup>, while in two cases Muslim peasants from the village of Plataria prevented a raid in the Christian quarter of their village, threatening with reprisals everyone who would take part: «they all went out armed and told them turn back by God because there will be bloodshed»<sup>51</sup>. Often, peasants whose lives were in danger were sheltered in Muslim homes until they were able to return to their villages or were escorted to the guerrilla bands by Muslim blood brothers to whom many entrusted the safekeeping of their families while they were away<sup>52</sup>.

However, it would be off the mark to regard these acts as ones of resistance or support for the Greek cause. Indeed, it was not unusual for a person or clan to act in solidarity with a Greek neighbouring family while engaging simultaneously in violence against the Greek inhabitants of an adjoining district. For instance, the Muslim Fetahoi clan of Grikohori engaged in a lethal feud with the Greek hamlet of Katouni, but retained cordial relations with the adjacent villages of Ladohori and Grava and protected their inhabitants from the depredations of Muslim militiamen. These attitudes underlined the inadequacy of terms, such as resistance and collaboration, to explain the behaviour and

<sup>45</sup> Oikonomidis/Oral Testimony.

<sup>46</sup> I.K./Oral Testimony/Igoumenitsa 2009.

<sup>47</sup> Papatsatsis/Oral Testimony.

<sup>48</sup> Evangelou, *Simioseis*, p. 60.

<sup>49</sup> Mitsis, *Osa thimamai*, p. 46.

<sup>50</sup> Hristou/Oral Testimony.

<sup>51</sup> Evangelou, *Simioseis*, p. 67.

<sup>52</sup> Dimitriou/Oral Testimony.

choices of the minority<sup>53</sup>. Ultimately, the attitudes of Muslim peasants were not shaped by politics, but rather by personal and regional concerns and an intense honour culture. This was common in many frontier Balkan societies, characterised by «a strong fixation on the family...distrust towards those who are not one's kin; a strong pressure to protect the family's integrity and to avenge infringements» in such societies «loyalties beyond one's own family are highly unstable, changeable and fluid»<sup>54</sup>. The priority of the Muslim peasants and the majority of notables was the protection of clan and community not the implementation of a nationalist agenda.

Muslim communities changed their allegiances constantly between the different factions and it was not unusual for a community or clan to include a pro-Greek and a pro-Albanian faction at the same time. For instance, both sons of the headman of the village of Niohori were leaders of a left-wing band in Albania that collaborated with the Greek left-wing resistance organisation of ELAS, while their father was leading a large group of pro-German militiamen<sup>55</sup>. The Muslim community of Perdika formed a neutrality pact with the neighbouring village of Agia while continuing to raid the areas of Fanari and Margariti<sup>56</sup>. Personal animosities played an equally important role in the formation of allegiances. The Muslim village of Menina, for example, remained largely neutral throughout the occupation, since the local notables had a longstanding grudge against the Dino clan, which was leading the pro-German faction and repeatedly assisted the nearby Greek communities<sup>57</sup>. This constant fluctuation has perplexed many authors who attributed it to Albanian perfidy; however, as a British officer who took part in these events noted, «the whole war is viewed by the Greeks and Albanians from a parochial standpoint with the result that their actions are often controlled by the value of the belligerents to the local cause»<sup>58</sup>.

These complexities are encapsulated by the career of Ismail Haki, one of the most prominent Cham military leaders. In 1942, Haki formed a band that «remained neutral in the mountains of South Albania». Despite being on friendly terms with both ELAS, a left-wing military group and the Albanian partisans, he «never fought an action against the Germans» and never officially joined either. In December 1943, Haki and his band moved into Greece and fought alongside ELAS during the civil war with the right-wing EDES. A few weeks later, following an impressive about-face, the band «was found collaborating with the Germans and raiding Greek villages north of Filiates with German support». The case of Haki, which was far from unique, underlines the complexity of a situation «where groups of people in the same small village were apparently in one case fighting and in the other assisting the Germans without betraying each other but whose code of honour did not extend outside their own circle»<sup>59</sup>.

<sup>53</sup> Papatsatsis/Oral Testimony.

<sup>54</sup> G. Duijings, *Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo*, Hurst Publishers, London 2000, p. 6.

<sup>55</sup> V. Pavlidis, *Oi Albanotsamides tis periohes Paramithias* [The Albanian Chams of the Paramithia region], Self-Published, Athens, 2009, p. 80.

<sup>56</sup> N. Ziagos, *Ethniki Antistasi kai Agglikos Imperialismos* [National resistance and English imperialism] Vol.4 Self-Published, Athens 1980, p. 199.

<sup>57</sup> Pavlidis, *Oi Albanotsamides*, p. 68.

<sup>58</sup> National Archives [NA]/WO/204/9348, Greek-Albanian relations: Albanian minorities in Greece, p. 5.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, p. 4.

However, violence progressively narrowed allegiances, rendering acts of solidarity scarcer as civilians from both sides were asked to make definitive choices. This situation led to a progressive sectarianisation of social life. In mixed communities, villagers were prohibited from speaking Greek in public. Muslim men who had married Christian women and vice versa were forced to divorce and were in some cases murdered, while a small number of Muslims who had converted during the pre-war period were given a choice between reconverting to Islam and being ousted from their villages. A peasant from the Albanian-speaking village of Plataria noted in his unpublished memoir; «from 1942 things had become very difficult, nobody could help you even if he was a Turk. One Turk who had taken a Christian into his home and tried to protect him was attacked by other Turks who broke into his home and killed the Christian. What could he do? He could not take revenge, although he loved his friend very much the situation was impossible»<sup>60</sup>.

The emergence of several bandit gangs during the same period made the lives of Greek peasants even more difficult. Many were forced to seek the help of powerful Muslim notables who agreed to protect them from local predators in exchange for money or produce. The appearance of these gangs coincided with a wave of land occupations undertaken by Muslim farmers who believed they had been wronged during the expropriation. A few weeks after returning from exile, the Fetahoi clan drove away the Greek farmers who had bought their estate in Gonea and began to cultivate it themselves<sup>61</sup>. During the same period, many Muslim peasants took advantage of their newly found power to establish a presence in Greek villages and enhance their own properties. In December 1942, Muslims from the village of Parapotamos murdered three Greek farmers from the village of Kastri and proceeded to occupy several properties in the plain of Rai, one of the few lowland regions owned by Greek farmers even before the Balkan Wars. Similar violent episodes took place across the area<sup>62</sup>.

The creation of Keshillia, a pro-Italian paramilitary organisation in mid-1942 both accelerated the violence and gave it a more political character. On 19 February 1942, militiamen murdered the local nomarch, Giorgos Vasilakos. This murder was followed by the assassinations of two civil servants, G. Dousias and P. Oikonomisis, and the murder of Andreas Papanderou, a notable and priest from the village of Karteri<sup>63</sup>. These actions had a twofold aim; to drive out the Greek civilian authorities and to deprive the Greek community of its natural leaders. However, even during this period, hostilities remained largely local and uncoordinated despite the efforts of Cham notable Keshillia what remained was a loose conglomeration of militias that differed little from bandit gangs and was mostly occupied with mounting raids against Greek communities. Oral testimonies describe this period as a small-scale civil war where clan fought against clan and village was pitted against village with increasing alacrity, «one village was turning

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<sup>60</sup> Evangelou, *Simioseis*, p. 50.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>62</sup> I.K./Oral Testimony/Igoumenitsa 2009.

<sup>63</sup> Krapsitis, *Oi Mousoulmanoï Tsamides*, p. 70.

against the other, Ginovate against Agia Marina, Siuriza against the Christian quarter of Grikohori, Salitsa fought with Pestani»<sup>64</sup>.

This situation led to a gradual flight of the Greek population from the lowlands. By late 1942, hundreds of Greek and Albanian-speaking Christians had fled for the areas of Parga and Fanari where they lived in deplorable conditions and many perished as a result of hunger and disease. The properties of the Greeks who fled were distributed among the clients and retainers of the various notables and gang leaders, who used them to augment their status and generate rappings, especially among the poorest Muslim element who benefited from the ousting of the Greeks<sup>65</sup>. Highland communities were also affected. Many villagers relied on seasonal work and trade with the lowlands to supplement their income; however, the presence of Muslim gangs and militiamen precluded these options and threw the local economy into disarray.

Work scarcity and violence led many Greek peasants to form armed groups. The first band to appear in the region was formed by Vasilis Baloumis, a rough illiterate shepherd from the Albanian-speaking village of Spatharati. Baloumis had a reputation for violence. In early 1941, he stole several hundred sheep from the Muslim village of Mazarakia and murdered a shepherd boy who tried to call for help. A few weeks later, Baloumis' herd was stolen, probably as a payback for his previous action. Baloumis retaliated by killing one of the rustlers who, in turn, murdered the son of one of Baloumis' accomplices. The feud spiralled out of control forcing Baloumis and his men to depart the area and seek refuge in his wife's village of Koronopoulo in Fanari. There, Baloumis recruited some relatives of his wife's as well as several local desperadoes like Markos Oikonomidis – who had fled his village after killing a Greek fellow-villager –; Stavros Kardanis who had murdered his father after a scuffle over land, Miltiadis Vasileiou, an infamous rustler and Tsavos Tsanis who had murdered his wife. Baloumis' band was not unique and by late 1942 at least six bands comprising a little over 50 men operated in the area<sup>66</sup>.

Organised resistance appeared considerably later. The first civilian nuclei of the left wing EAM/ELAS were formed in the winter of 1942; however, no guerrilla bands were fielded until January 1943. Accordingly, the first EDES band was not formed until March 1943. EAM/ELAS tried to reach an understanding with the local Muslim community. On March 1943 EAM created a «Cham bureau» whose purpose was to enter talks with minority leaders and convince them to defect. ELAS bands made several tours of the areas Muslim villages, but the results were disappointing. It is indicative that the notables of Liopsi the principal Muslim village of the area «told us that they might collaborate with the Albanian partisans, but there was no chance so they collaborated with the Greeks»<sup>67</sup>. EAM/ELAS repeated these efforts, eventually coming to an agreement with the Albanian left-wing partisans<sup>68</sup>. This entailed the creation of mixed guerrilla bands in

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<sup>64</sup> Papatsatsis/Oral Testimony.

<sup>65</sup> Evengelou, *Simioseis*, p. 65.

<sup>66</sup> G. Naskas/Oral Testimony/Katavothra 2009.

<sup>67</sup> Mitsis, *Osa Thimamai*, p. 56.

<sup>68</sup> ASKI/The Communist Party Archive/493/Φ-30/1/38.09.07.43.

the region under a joint headquarters; however, they were unable to recruit more than 30 recruits from the minority, most of whom deserted ELAS during the winter of 1943<sup>69</sup>.

Furthermore, EDES approached the Cham community in May 1943. This tactic failed, but talks were rekindled during July 1943 and resulted in a brief ceasefire between EDES and the Chams in the area of Paramithia. An order dispatched to all regional EDES units advised the local military commanders, «we are currently trying to disrupt the collaboration between the Italian and the Muslims whose morale has completely plummeted and are currently pleading for an alliance with us»; adding that «it is imperative that you desist from provoking them. You should inform all the guerrillas and the civilian population about this and make them predisposed toward accepting this»<sup>70</sup>. The British Military Mission also attempted to broker an agreement between the resistance groups and the Cham community after the Italian capitulation that was rejected by the Muslim notables, who «listened to Captain Anderson and at the same time sent a runner to advise the Germans, who had just arrived in the area of his presence»<sup>71</sup>.

The Italian capitulation and the consequent arrival of the Wehrmacht 1.st Geb. Division put an end to negotiations and led to a resumption of hostilities. The purpose of this unit was to clear the coastal area of Greek guerrillas that might threaten German lines in the event of an Allied landing<sup>72</sup>. Being sorely short of manpower, the German command tried to win over the minority by offering money, supplies, guns, uniforms and promising a union with Albania in the event of an Axis victory. Albanian auxiliaries had been previously used by the Italian army to combat the independent bands and later the bands of ELAS and EDES<sup>73</sup>. However, Germans made much more wide and effective usage of these auxiliaries. The cooperation between the Wehrmacht and the Chams began during Operation Augustus, which took place between 8 and 12 August 1943 across Epirus. Approximately 300 Chams took part in a series of anti-guerrilla sweeps in the areas of Filiates, Souli and the plain of Fanari, where the brunt of the fighting and destruction was carried out. Within four days, 150 people were murdered, while hundreds more were taken hostage and transported to prison camps in Ioannina. The operations continued well into the autumn when the villages of Eleftherohori, Plaisio, Zervohori, Sagiada, Xirolophos and Seliani were burned by a joint Cham-German force, culminating in the executions of 49 notables of the town of Paramithia as reprisals for a guerrilla attack<sup>74</sup>.

These operations dealt a striking blow to the operational capabilities of the resistance organisations and led to a plummeting of civilian morale. The presence of the Germans also encouraged the Chams to organise a parallel state, which progressively replaced the Greek authorities across the region. On the 20<sup>th</sup> of December 1943, a meeting of notables presided over by Mazar Dino decided that hereafter the Muslim communities would stop cooperating with Greek authorities, and approved the election of a Muslim

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<sup>69</sup> I. Reggas, Anamniseis [Memories] (Unpublished, personal collection), p. 117.

<sup>70</sup> Directorate for Army History [DAH]/Mavroskotis Archive/File/1/1-101/Diatagi Peri Mousoulmanon [Decree regarding the Muslim minority] /07/07/1943.

<sup>71</sup> NA/WO 204/9348, Greek-Albanian relations, p. 3.

<sup>72</sup> M. Mazower, *Military violence and the national socialist consensus: the Wehrmacht in Greece 1941-1944*, in H. Heer, K. Nauman (eds.) *War of Extermination: The German Military in World War II, 1941-1944*, Berghahn, New York 2000, p. 151.

<sup>73</sup> Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire*, p. 325.

<sup>74</sup> Pavlidis, *Oi Alvanotsamides*, p. 140.

committee that would serve as a de-facto civilian authority in the Paramithia region. Moreover, Dino sanctioned the executions of civil servants and gendarmes who objected to the regime change<sup>75</sup>. These efforts were accelerated over the following months as the Albanian notables began pressuring the Greek peasantry «to accept the Albanian administration and oust the Greek authorities from the region. In order to achieve this, the notables appointed their own council presidents, militia men and rural guards, and imposed a compulsory tax on the agricultural products and any transactions»<sup>76</sup>. The constant harassment, the beatings and imprisonments of notables and peasants who resisted these efforts had a detrimental effect on the Greek population for example by the spring of 1944: «have rendered the stay of the Greeks in their villages very problematic...the Greek peasants have become desperate and if these pressures persist it is likely that they will abandon their villages and flee to the mountains»<sup>77</sup>.

These activities were replicated by the resistance organisations that tried to militarize the local independent bands and impose a semblance of order to the chaotic situation that prevailed in the highland regions. Until April 1944, between 10 and 15 semi-independent bands numbering more than 300 men operated in the area. Most of these bands were organised around extended clans, operated locally and paid only a nominal allegiance to their «parent» organisations, switching their loyalties according to circumstance. Baloumis, who had started as an independent band leader, joined ELAS in January 1943 and defected to EDES in May 1943; however, as one of his former comrades noted, «Baloumis had only nominally joined EDES, in reality he was indifferent to any ideology, aims and intrigues of either organisation, he only left his region for two days at the most each month to pick up money and supplies for his band»<sup>78</sup>. The situation was similar among the other band leaders who arranged local truces often in defiance of their superiors, requisitioned food at will, sold each other guns and ammunition and fluctuated constantly between the ELAS and EDES in search of promotion, better pay and prestige. Despite these problems, both ELAS and EDES deferred from taking any disciplinary measures since they were afraid that, if they did so, the guerrillas would promptly defect or even raise their own banner and revert to banditry as often happened<sup>79</sup>.

The majority of these bands were eventually absorbed in the EDES X Division, which was formed in the area of Souli in April 1944 and led by Colonel Vasilis Kamaras, who was described by a British Liaison officer as «conceited and self-seeking to the extent... of disobeying orders in order that his men break into new territory to gain booty. He has some disgraceful officers. He has been disloyal to Zervas and his main objective appears to be the enhancement of one Lt Col Kamara»<sup>80</sup>. This unit that was only loosely controlled by EDES was riddled with disciplinary problems from the very begging and

<sup>75</sup> ABO/ File 2/ 2.3/20/12/1943.

<sup>76</sup> ABO/File 2/2.3/22/01/1944.

<sup>77</sup> ABO/File2/2.3/11/03/1944.

<sup>78</sup> Giourgas, *Martiries*, p. 145.

<sup>79</sup> DAH/Mavroskotis Archive/File/1/702-844/Peri Egekataleipseos ton taxeon stratou [Regarding the desertion of army ranks]/23/8/44.

<sup>80</sup> NA/HS5/695/ Lt Col Barnes NZE/Report on Zervas Andarte Movement/Epirus HQ/Aug 14, 1944, p. 1.

was distrusted by the EDES leadership who were fearful that Kamaras would mutiny and start his own private resistance army<sup>81</sup>.

### *Liberation and reprisals*

Operations in the area resumed after EDES was instructed by the British Mission to create a bridge head in the coastal region in June 1944. However, these operations presented serious problems from the outset as officers and guerrillas failed to follow orders and engaged in widespread looting and atrocities against the Muslim population, «the officers were not the best that Zervas had and there is little doubt that they had very little control over the activities of their men as the advance proceeded»<sup>82</sup>. Discipline broke down completely after several elements of the X Division entered the town of Paramithia, despite being ordered otherwise, and engaged in one of the worst massacres of the period. The violence that ensued in Paramithia between the 26th and the 27<sup>th</sup> of June 1944 has been either ignored or presented as an act of justifiable popular rage, while the number of victims and the implication of the guerrilla forces in them has been constantly downplayed.

Civilian participation in these atrocities is undeniable; the guerrillas were followed since the beginning of the operations by a large number of civilians who looked for loot and revenge<sup>83</sup>. Even though there were cases when Greeks tried to help Muslim neighbours, it seems that violence was condoned by a large part of the civilian population who saw the Muslim community as collectively guilty for the crimes committed by their fellow religionists. A few weeks before the massacre, a local schoolteacher noted; «the entire Muslim community in Thesportia is responsible for these crimes...and I don't believe that even a few would be able to prove their innocence»<sup>84</sup>. However, revenge was not the sole motivation for these civilians since many, particularly the small cultivators from the Fanari area and the peasants from the mountainous regions, saw the arrival of the guerrilla groups as was an opportunity to be rid of the entire Muslim community and quench their poverty and hunger for land.

However, the majority of violence was perpetrated by guerrillas. The first murders were committed by a group of guerrillas led by Kostas Georgiou, who arrested three Muslims on suspicion of murdering his father in December 1943<sup>85</sup>. They were executed on the spot. News of the executions spread like wildfire among other bands who began to break into Muslim homes, seizing and murdering civilians. The majority of killings was undertaken by the men of the Lefteris Strouggaris platoon whose brother was executed by the Germans during September 1943. These men were soon joined by guerrillas from other units stationed near the town and guerrillas who «had turned to a vengeful mob,

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<sup>81</sup> GSA/Miridakis Archive/197/15, p. 16.

<sup>82</sup> NA/WO 204/9348, Greek-Albanian relations, p. 5.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>84</sup> Krapsitis, *Imerologio*, p. 40.

<sup>85</sup> Pavlidis, *Oi Alvanotsamides*, p.140.

for two days the guerrilla organisations had lost all control of the situation»<sup>86</sup>. Kranias (the second in command of the division) who tried to impose some orders was shot and wounded, fights broke out between guerrillas who in their frenzied search for loot came to blows, while the few Greeks who tried to help their Muslim compatriots were savaged. Within 48 hours, a total of 328 men and women were killed in Paramithia and Karvounari. Violence only stopped after the EDES GHQ dispatched the 3/40 regiment, which drove out the local guerrillas and moved the surviving Muslims into camps outside Paramithia. Here, they were held under guard to prevent further retaliations<sup>87</sup>. None of the guerrillas who took part in this pogrom was penalized.

The liberation of Paramithia was followed by several weeks of inactivity, during which both groups recruited frantically and raided enemy regions. During the same period, most Muslim families from the areas of Igoumenitsa and Margariti were relocated north of Ioannina under German instructions. In late July, Muslim notables made approaches for armistice to EDES. However, negotiations between EDES and the Muslim community broke down as both sides were mistrustful of the other's intentions. Muslim notables were afraid to surrender, lest they end up like their fellow religionists in Paramithia. Moreover, the EDES local leadership suspected that these negotiations were a ploy to help them augment their forces with recruits from Albania<sup>88</sup>. During the same period, talks were held by individual Muslim and Christian clans in the area of Margariti. Several Greek notables and bandleaders promised safe passage and offered to host all those who would abandon the German camps; «my father and Nasi Bakas», noted an EDES veteran from the village of Eleftheri, «promised to keep them safe, take your families and stay here with us they said and do not be afraid since we have people who back us... they thank him but they said that it was too late for them». Such negotiations were often held clandestinely, since «you were afraid of all sides, both them and us»<sup>89</sup>. In this polarised situation, any attempt for negotiation and clemency was viewed by many as nothing short of betrayal. Despite the danger inherent in such negotiations, it seems that such activities were very common, leading the Cham leadership to underscore in a circular dispatched to all communities that «in this sacred struggle of Tsamouria personal friendships as well as every family bond must be set aside and everyone must unreservedly pledge himself to the service of the fatherland, our honour and the salvation of Tsamouria»<sup>90</sup>.

Operations resumed in early August and the clashes continued with various intervals until mid-October. Looting was again widespread, while the retreating Chams were harried by peasants who attacked stragglers and stole pack animals. However, violence was not restricted to EDES supporters. The EAM/ELAS leadership strongly criticised EDES but had no control over its own rank and file. A few weeks before the Paramithia events, one ELAS local commander proclaimed to a group of EAM supporters in the Souli area, «we do not care what they [EDES] would do with them and we'll frankly be happy if

<sup>86</sup> Ziagos, *Ethniki Antistasi*, Vol.4, p. 259.

<sup>87</sup> Pavlidis, *Oi Alvanotsamides*, p. 140.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, p 145.

<sup>89</sup> I. Vasileiou/Oral testimony/Eleftheri 2009.

<sup>90</sup> NA/FO/371/48094/circular/Tsamouria command/direction of operations.

they butcher the whole lot of them»<sup>91</sup>. On the night of 28 August 1944, a group of ELAS guerrillas led by Thanasis Giohalas arrested 40 Muslims in the town of Parga and executed them in the town's Venetian castle. The remaining women and children escaped a similar fate after an EDES detachment scattered the local ELAS and executed Giohalas on the spot<sup>92</sup>. The final outbreak of violence occurred in the town of Filiates in late September, when approximately 100 Chams were murdered by guerrillas and civilians<sup>93</sup>.

In December 1944, ELAS attacked and dispersed EDES; thereby allowing 800-1000 Muslims to return to the region. However, the Chams did not linger for long. After ELAS signed the Varkiza armistice in February 1945, demobilised EDES guerrillas began to return to the district and started persecuting Muslims and EAM supporters. Some scholars have suggested that these actions were sanctioned by the government and EDES leadership; however, this does not appear to be the case. According to a British officer who was otherwise critical of EDES and the Greek administration; «actions, particularly those in March 1945, were taken against all orders by General Zervas and others in authority»<sup>94</sup>. Neither the government, which during the period had almost no armed forces at its disposal, nor the EDES leaders, most of whom were located in Athens scrambling for political office, had any sway or influence over the host of gangs of peasants and demobilised guerrillas who roamed this region armed to the teeth<sup>95</sup>.

However, the participation of EDES veterans in the atrocities is undeniable. The bulk of killings was perpetrated by two groups of former EDES guerrillas; one led by Ilias Katsios and the other by Zois Padazis. Individual peasants were also involved in atrocities. It is difficult to discern whether this violence was coordinated centrally and it seems that much of the violence occurred in a completely anarchic way. One of the men who took part in these events recalled; «we have crossed the Kalamas and were near Sideri when we came across a Turk who was carrying provisions, we seized him and started beating him up when a women approached us, she said 'kapetanie let me kill the dog» we were amazed, she told us that the Turks had killed her husband, Zois said «fair enough, here's my sidearm» she took the pistol and shot him in the back of the head<sup>96</sup>. This was not an isolated incident, as several reports suggested, «The anti-Albanian feeling in this area is general and not sponsored by any political organisation»<sup>97</sup>. Violence reached a climax on March 6 1945, when former guerrillas and locals attacked the few Muslim families who had returned to the town of Filiates murdering at least sixty persons<sup>98</sup>.

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<sup>91</sup> DAH/Mavroskotis Archive/File3/1-32/II/24 regiment/Anakoinosis pros tas oikogeneias ton ektelesthenton tis Paramithias, tou Fanariou, tis Dragoumis kai olis tis Tsamourias pros tous Ipeirotas kai olon ton Elliniko Lao [Circular to the families of those executed in Paramithia, Fanari, Dragoumi and the entire Tsamouria and the population of Epirus and all the Greek people].

<sup>92</sup> Giourgas, *Martiries*, p. 185.

<sup>93</sup> K. Antonopoulou, *Ethniki Antistasis* [National Resistance] Self-Published, Athens 1965, pp. 1684-1685.

<sup>94</sup> NA/FO/371/48094/note on conversation with Lt.Colonel Palmer British Military Mission Albania 13. April. 1945, p. 1.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*, p. 1.

<sup>96</sup> E.Haliatsos/Oral testimony/Igoumenitsa/2009.

<sup>97</sup> NA/FO/371/48094/The Albanian minority in Thesprotia/18/04/45, p. 1.

<sup>98</sup> NA/FO/371/48094/report by Lt. Col. C.A.S. Palmer on visit to northern Greece 9-14 April 1945.p. 3.

## Conclusion

Historians have explained the clashes between the two ethnic groups as the outcome of deep divisions shaped by political and cultural differences. Even though such reasons are quite important, understanding the cause and patterns of violence and collaboration is preconditioned in a careful exploration of the micro-dynamics of violence. Despite their religious and linguistic differences, the two groups were much less different than suggested by scholars. Greeks, Vlachs and Albanians worked and lived together and shared common cultural traits and, while violence was far from unusual, it more often than not took the form of feuds while clashes involved a fraction of the two populations. Friction was not uncommon, especially after the land expropriation of 1923 which resulted in deep rifts between the two communities; however, it is safe to assume that these differences did not translate into support for a certain national agenda. This was especially true for non-Greek-speaking ethnic groups, which remained highly endogamous and mistrustful both of the Greek administration and the Greek-speaking community.

Violence was present from early on in the occupation; however, until 1942, most violence was related to personal grudges and local differences while only a small number of the population was involved in direct violence. However, the increased involvement of outside actors from mid-1943 - the Wehrmacht, ELAS, EDES and the British Military Mission - led to an increase in violence and the «rapid ethnification» of the conflict. As the conflict heightened; «violence...endogenously generated additional waves of violence and further polarization, through the mechanism of revenge; this process consolidated, magnified, and hardened ethnic identities».<sup>99</sup>

The gradual sectarianisation of the conflict facilitated the massacres that took place during the liberation of the region and the consequent violent expulsion of the Muslim minority. It has been often suggested that these atrocities were centrally coordinated; however, this seems highly unlikely as is evidenced both from the anarchic and haphazard patterns of ethnic persecution and the widely different policies followed by different communities and factions within the resistance organisation. Nevertheless, it would be also wrong to see the violence either as senseless, primeval revenge or the work of a few unruly elements. It is evident that the expulsion of the Muslim minority was desired by a large number of the local population who looked forward to material benefits. Neither the EDES leadership nor their British backers encouraged such atrocities; indeed, there is strong evidence that they disapproved of it quite strongly, in private at least. However, they are far from irreproachable as, ultimately, it was the unwillingness of EDES to persecute the men responsible for these atrocities, probably because its leadership was fearful that punishments would result in defections to the other side and a serious drop in support – that enabled their enactment and perpetuation since. Ultimately, these atrocities were not part of a careful ploy, but rather the outcome of «mutual connivance» dictated by the structural inadequacies of EDES.

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<sup>99</sup> S. Kalyvas, N. Sabanis, *Bosnia's Civil War: Origins and Violence Dynamics*, in P. Collier and N. Sambanis (eds), *Understanding Civil War: Evidence and Analysis*, Volume 2, Washington, DC: The World Bank 2006, p. 216.