

‘Explaining the activist military: Greece until 1975’

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims at explaining the high degree of the military’s involvement in Greek politics over the course of the 20th century. It argues that focusing either on Huntington’s “professionalisation” thesis or the more sociological accounts of economic development represents an inadequate attempt to explain the Greek armed forces’ military interventions in political life in general and the 1967 coup in particular.

In contrast to such explanations, I suggest a context-based, historical approach centred on the Greek armed forces’ ‘dual character’ that draws on the political environment of the post-war era. The army’s tendency to intervene should be viewed as a result of two main factors: a) The co-existence of two antithetical syndromes in the self-perception of the officer corps and b) the army’s identification with the monarchy and the political Right post-1949 in the context of the Cold War.

For a very long period of time going back to its formation as a modern state, Greece had suffered from a series of interventions by the armed forces in political life. Though these interventions were in most part peaceful and executed at an elite level, thereby minimising the risk of wider social disruption, they nevertheless obstructed the country’s progress towards the consolidation of civilian democratic rule. The so-called ‘Colonels’ junta’ from 1967 to 1974 was the last example of intervention in the 20th century (Bermeo 1995: 444). Ever since, Greece has managed to consolidate its former fragile democracy: the new 1975 Constitution and subsequent legislation makes politicians solely responsible for decisions affecting national defence, assigning a secondary role to the chief of General Staff (Veremis 1982: 29). The old malaise of Greece, the politicisation of the army, has now been replaced with a ‘civilian culture’ that rejects all forms of officer involvement in politics.

The core objective of this paper is to explain military intervention in Greek politics. To do so, I will utilise Huntington’s ‘professionalisation’ thesis as well as the ‘sociological’ explanation and apply them to the Greek case. The main argument is that none of these theses can adequately explain the high level of military involvement in Greek political life; what is suggested is an approach focusing on the very specific constellation of forces that led to the very high levels of the army’s politicisation. This politicisation and interventionist tendency was the result of the armed forces’ identification with the political right and the monarchical forces after

the Civil war of 1949 as well as the co-existence of two antithetical tendencies in the self-perception of the officer corps, the 'pallikari' and 'managerial' syndromes. The second and third part of the paper will explain this point by outlining the historical trajectory of the army's role in Greek political life and offering a brief exegesis for democratic consolidation post-1975. Finally, the conclusion will summarise the main argument.

I. Preconditions for military interventions

Although the armed forces may choose to play different roles once they have intervened in the political process (from simply assuring the replacement of the current civilian administration with one of their liking to the monopolisation of political power) (Ball and Peters, 2000), whether they will in fact intervene or not seems to rely essentially on two different sets of variables (Danopoulos 1983:485).

On the one hand are the 'inward-technical' factors. These are related to the internal mechanisms of the armed forces and the way they structure their operational capabilities. The first crucial factor in this process is the level of professionalization that the army has acquired. For the purposes of this essay, military professionalism will be defined as a set of characteristics that include: responsibility, based on a framework of an ethically-inspired code of conduct, specialised theoretical knowledge and professional expertise and 'a high degree of corporateness deriving from common training and devotion to specific doctrines and customs' (Huntington, 1957). Professionalization is very significant for the armed forces, as it can reveal differences in organisational patterns, which, in turn may be closely correlated to the army's ambition to intervene in political affairs (Ball and Peters 2000:267). Aside from levels of professionalism, a series of closely linked factors are also crucial: the degree of specialization affects how the army relates to the government and whether it is capable of retaining its autonomy from the state. Also, the educational and social background of the officer corps may be influential; it has been suggested that, in case the composition of the armed forces reflects a large spectrum of society and is not drawn exclusively from one, usually elitist, social background, the chances of an 'active military' involvement in political affairs are reduced (Mouzelis, 2003)

The second variable relates to 'outward-historic' factors. These are correlated to the mode and extent of the state's socio-economic development. For instance, it is often suggested that early industrialization is negatively correlated to military intervention. The expansion of a middle class that sees itself as the beneficiary, and therefore main supporter, of civilian rule and the increased prestige the state enjoys in conditions of relative economic prosperity hinder the chances of military involvement in the political process and deprives the portrayal of democratic politics as a corrupt and inefficient operation by the armed forces.

The Greek Army as a case in point

Beginning from the 'outward-historical' variable, conditions in Greece for a very long period of time favoured military intervention in politics. Industrialisation came to Greece only in the post-war period and became properly embedded in the country's changing socio-economic landscape in the 1950s. For a long period of time, the country's main source of economic growth stemmed from the agricultural sector and it was only when western capital was invested in the country after the war that signs of economic modernization (such as the creation of industrial conglomerates, rapid

urbanization etc.) took hold (Kourvetaris 1971:1053). By the 1950s, a sizable middle class had been formed and was increasingly involved in the political process. Therefore, the army's influence in politics could have been expected to gradually diminish. Despite this, the army did intervene in 1967 and remained active in political life until 1975.

In terms of the army's professionalisation, the picture is somehow more complicated and does not appear to verify Huntington's professionalization thesis. In the beginning of the 20th century and at a time of political and social turmoil caused by the country's geographic expansion and low levels of economic welfare, the armed forces' levels of professionalism, specialisation and military ethos that would distinguish them from the rest of society's interest groups, were very low. By contrast, by the late 1950s, all ingredients for a fully professional army were largely in place. As a result of its NATO membership in 1952, Greece had undertaken the obligation of reaching a level of military competence that would make it a reliable partner in the new context of participation in the western alliance (Hatzivassiliou, 1995:187-202). This process was already under way at that time but the external NATO factor accelerated its completion. The Evelpidon Officers Candidate School ('*Sholi Evelpidwn*¹') was offering specialised and general courses of education, enhancing the levels of general knowledge as well as expertise for the army's new recruits. At the same time, the selection process for the officer corps remained relatively open (as it had been before 1952) and new recruits displayed various social backgrounds. Evidence for that is to be found in that, despite the social and political atmosphere of post-1949 Greece that operated a 'limited democratic' regime, progressive and reform-minded officers continued to staff a part of the armed forces.² And yet, despite professionalisation and specialised expertise, the military did intervene in 1967 and retained power for 7 years.

It therefore appears useful to go beyond these two variables and examine the concrete and very particular case of the Greek Army as well as the specific conditions under which it intervened in 1967. It was a combination of the army's 'dual' character and the socio-political uproar originating from outside (the Cold War environment) and inside (the army's complete identification with the monarchy and the political right) factors that caused the army's predisposition to intervene up until 1975.

The dualist nature of the armed forces

As mentioned before, the self-image of the armed forces is important in understanding the willingness of the army to intervene in the political process and take matters in its hands.³ The Greek army has traditionally displayed a dual self-perception. On the one hand, there has been the self-identification with the homeland and the role of the army in securing the national sovereignty and independence of the polity. This syndrome, referred to by Kourvetaris as the 'pallikari-leventis-philotimo' syndrome, has been especially prominent during the early stages of the Greek state when professionalism and western influences on the army's operations were minimal (Kouvertaris, 1971:1046). The 'pallikari' syndrome is thus formed through the societal experiences of the armed forces and expresses a normative understanding of their role pertaining to values of the public. *Pallikari* is the man willing to sacrifice his life for the larger, national cause and fight for the 'sacred ideals' of the homeland, no matter how ill defined the latter may be. His understanding of social life is based on a rough egalitarianism that views the social body as a homogenous entity; the type of *Gemeinschaft* well articulated by Max Weber (ibid, p.1053) 'Leventis' is the man distinguished from his peers due more to his physical composure and stature, the type of army officer or simple soldier that, whilst sharing the normative underpinnings of

'pallikari; builds on his tough training and military discipline to acquire a prominent role in the armed forces' hierarchy. Also similar to 'pallikari', 'leventis' is distinguished by his pride in himself and the country, his self-reliance and his respect for authority. Finally, 'philotimo', literally translated as 'love for honour', shows in perhaps the clearest fashion how the army officer perceived himself in the Greek polity.

On the other hand and increasingly after Greece's participation in NATO, a second set of behavioural patterns was established. This is the 'technical-specialist-managerial' syndrome, developed primarily due to the exogenous influences introduced in the Greek army by the post-war period. Under this pattern, the officer learns to value the more technocratic aspects of his profession, such as specialist knowledge on military affairs, supreme organisational skills and the application of rational criteria for promotion in the military hierarchy. Greece's participation in the western bloc during the Cold War meant that operational capabilities and specialist skills were deemed very important as military officers had to compete with their colleagues from different countries for promotion and advancement. Nevertheless, the substitution of the more emotional 'pallikari' syndrome with the more rationalist understanding of the role of the armed forces was not completed as long as the Cold war environment and political instability inside the country made the armed forces wary of relinquishing their influence and abandoning their function as guardians of the status quo.

II. The 1909-1949 Period

Ten years before the first coup of the 20th century took place, in 1899, a development that seemed quite innocuous at the time proved decisive for the future not only of civil-military relations but for political stability as a whole. The PM of the day, George Theotokis, brought to parliament a Bill that established a Central Command for the army. More importantly and upon the request of King George I, Theotokis also submitted the proposal that heading the new central command should be the 'apolitical' and 'neutral' in political antagonisms crown prince Constantine (Papakosma 1977:21). The reaction from all political leaders was vociferous and one of them claimed that this decision would divide Greeks along monarchical and republican lines. From its establishment as an independent state in 1830, Greece had not managed to attain economic growth or political stability; corruption, nepotism and clientelistic practices permeated the body politic as politicians aimed at securing their short-term interests. 'Large landholders and regional magnates' (Papakosma 1977:37) dominated the political scene while descendants of the 1821 War of Independence protagonists held key positions in the armed forces. The monarch was already a controversial figure at that time due to his active political role and the authoritarian style of government that the first young king Otto had introduced upon arrival to Greece in 1834. Theotokis's proposal paved the way for further unrest as the powers awarded to the crown prince went beyond his constitutional prerogatives.

1909 was another year of economic sluggishness and public disappointment. The government's proposal for the army's reorganisation according to the German Model of permanent non-commissioned officers was met with great hostility from the latter that saw their chances of promotion beyond the rank of sergeant-general thwarted. The forces within the army supportive of the King were also lessening in numbers as the latter refused to back Crete's call for union with Greece. Soon afterwards the Military League was created⁴ and comprised representatives from both the army and the navy. Initial public support for a movement that called for the restoration of morality in public life was very high and independent associations, trade guilds and craftsmen backed its ill-defined agenda. In August 1909 a high number of officers,

soldiers and captains gathered in the Goudhi hill outside Athens, having submitted their list of demands for political, economic and military reforms to the PM. A large demonstration in Athens on September 27 confirmed the public's backing of the Military League (Papakosma, 1977:89). Having succeeded in their goal, the commanding officers of the movement ordered the army officers to return to their barracks. It was thought that military dictatorship would reduce the League's popularity and it would therefore be better to pressurise politicians for legislative action favourable to the organisation's interests. A year later and after the initial public support was curbed, the League's influence on legislative had been minimised.

Beyond 1909

Events in the next 40 years were largely characterised by the split of both the civilian population and the armed forces along monarchical and republican lines, each with its very different agenda and priorities. The strong influence of the 'pallikari' idea in the armed forces complicated things further and raised the stakes of the conflict. In 1917 the French and British forced the departure of King Constantine while the latter's fierce opponent, Eleftherios Venizelos, became PM and ruled the country by martial law for 3 years, purging the armed forces from officers loyal to the King (Papakosma, 1977:189). In 1920, however, the pattern was reversed when Venizelos was defeated at the polls, Constantine was enthroned again and officers sympathetic to him were restored to their positions. In September 1922, Colonel Gonatas became the first army officer to lead the government (ibid, p.185). Two years after and while in the meantime the elections of 1924 had once again reversed political fortunes, awarding the liberals a comfortable parliamentary majority which they used to install the '1st Hellenic Republic' ousting once again the King, General Pangalos executed successfully a coup d'etat. However, his government did not last long as a year afterwards General Kondylis masterminded his downfall aiming at reconciling the deeply split nation and forming a national coalition government.

As the 1920s were drawing to an end, the political and ideological divisions in the armed forces and society at large became more pronounced: the initial divisions between liberals and conservatives started extending to broader political categories. The liberals, communists and socialists on the one hand and conservatives, monarchists and fascists on the other constituted two highly polarised blocs. This schism played a high part in two further coups in 1933 and 1935, both unsuccessful. The latter was decisive in determining the fate of the flawed Republic. Venizelos had supported the 1935 plotters and the conservative government acted quickly to restore the monarchy; King George returned to Greece in November 1935. A year later and after he received the backing of the throne, Ioannis Metaxas became the country's leader and dictator until his death in 1941.

III. 1950-1975

During the country's Nazi occupation, national divisions were never overcome. The end of the occupation in 1945 found Greeks as divided as ever in terms of their political loyalties. This had a huge impact on the army.

'The military now became identified with the royal house and the American alliance. The officer corps was put on a new pedestal and was showered with official prestige and material benefit. It was bitterly opposed to Papandreou and the liberals in the 1960s and many Greeks, as well as foreign observers, considered it only a matter of time before the army again interfered massively in the political process.' (Brown, 1992:46)

After the Nazi occupation ended in 1944 and in tandem with the purging of all Republican military personnel, aspiring officers would have to undergo a 'nationalism' test in which they would have to prove reliable enough for the new army. Thus, they would have to demonstrate undeniable loyalty to the King and 'steadfast opposition to communism and anyone having anything to do with it' (Zaharopoulos, 1972:21). The Civil War of 1946-49 confirmed the trend that had begun under Metaxas (Makris, 2000). The anti-republican forces emerged triumphant and, in accordance with the pattern set because of the Cold War, were allowed to prosecute, purge and sent to exile thousands of communist sympathisers.⁵

Despite all these, however, Greece in the 1950s met for the first period in decades with relative political stability and steadfast economic growth (Crompton, 2002). At the same time and as discussed earlier, the armed forces underwent a period of modernization and professionalization unprecedented in their history. According to Huntington's thesis, this should have lessened their predisposition towards military intervention in political affairs. However, in April 21st 1967 a group of colonels and lieutenant colonels ordered the tanks out of their barracks, suspended political freedoms and imposed a military dictatorship. How is this to be explained?

It is important to underline that by the early 1960s political stability had been once again shaken. Centrist and centre-left political forces were becoming increasingly powerful in electoral terms and the 1961 elections proved decisive in reinforcing their criticism of the established status quo (ibid, p.211). They were adamant in their opposition to the existent 'cautious democracy' and some of them questioned the desirability of Greece's alliance to NATO and the western bloc. Huge protests shook Athens and other cities forcing new elections in 1963 from which the centre-left emerged triumphant. Then in April 1965, when the new PM George Papandreou attempted to sack his Minister for Defence, the King rebuffed his request by arguing that it would be inappropriate for the PM to overtake this role at a time when his son, Andreas Papandreou, was accused of connections with the left-leaning *Aspida* group.⁶ In the summer of the same year a group of MPs orchestrated the downfall of Papandreou's government and for the next two years, the King appointed short-lived governments that did not enjoy popular support or political legitimacy.

Papandreou's aim in 1965 was to reorganise the armed forces along lines more sympathetic to his government and encourage the promotion of low-rank officers that were disadvantaged by the political conditions prevalent post-1949. He also wished to restructure the army's intelligence services that were operating in a more or less autonomous fashion, independent from the state. Many paramilitary groupings, such as the Battalions of National Security (ETA), retained some degree of collaboration with the state, but their operation does not seem to have been approved by the government.⁷ His attempts, however, were viewed suspiciously by the top echelons of the armed forces that saw in Papandreou's attempts a threat to Greece's commitment to the anti-communist bloc as well as their personal prerogatives within the army establishment. Undoubtedly, some of them also genuinely believed that the political upheaval caused by this turmoil prepared the ground for a communist insurrection similar to the one of 1946 (Zaharopoulos, 1972:29). The still existent 'pallikari' conception was by now interpreted along exclusively nationalist lines and increasing professionalisation was dependent on the consolidation of the political and military status quo. Papandreou appeared to challenge this continuity, inviting a rethink of the country's post-war direction. This was interpreted as a direct challenge to the prerogatives of the armed forces.

It is therefore imperative to keep in mind that the 1967 coup was not a product of any one factor but the combination of multiple causes such as Greece's post-war political development, the network of collaboration comprising extremist right-wing elements

in the Palace, the army and paramilitary organisations established during the second World War and finally the political instability caused by the friction between Papandreou and the King (as well as Karamanlis and the King) that appeared dangerous to some military officers.

I argue that, among other factors (such as EEC entry in 1981 that reduced the influence of the Cold War rivalry in the domestic arena by tying Greece firmly to one camp), two crucial factors are largely responsible for the successful consolidation of democracy in Greece after 1975. These can be divided into short- and long-term causes. The first is the new constellation of political forces unleashed after 1974 and the creation of an entirely reconstructed political system, characterised by the formation of new political parties and the dismantling of the old establishment, as well as the widespread consensus within the political elites of the desirability of a genuinely democratic political system. The second reason dates back to the period of economic modernisation that began in the post-war period and, crucially, was not significantly interrupted under the Colonels' regime (Bermeo, 1995:438-442). The economic and political orientation of post-1945 Greece diversified societal interests and pluralized the socio-economic and political scene. After a period of confusion and uncertainty in the 1950s and 60s, reinforced by the prevailing political climate, this diversity found a political expression in its support for participatory politics and the inclusion of all social strata in the democratic process (Danopoulos, 1991:38). The new normative underpinnings pushing society towards democracy have influenced the military's framework of operation as well, since the armed forces are an integral part of society, if not its most representative social group.⁸ The 'pallikari' syndrome in other words, though weakened, has not ceased to exist within the officers' ranks due to increasing professionalisation. Rather, it has been reshaped and reformulated as a result of a new social consensus advocating democracy and political pluralism. This is not to suggest that this change has come about solely as a result of a structural, long-term transformation: the purging of the military from its most fervent anti-democratic elements after 1974 has been instrumental in fortifying the pro-democracy consensus.

IV. Conclusion

This paper has explored the relationship between the army and politics in Greece from the beginning of the 20th century to the present. It has argued that, within the army, two antithetical tendencies and codes of behaviour have co-existed for a very long time: the 'pallikari' and 'technocratic' understandings have, in different points in time, tilt the balance in favour of the one (military intervention) or the other (non-intervention) outcome. In terms of the 'professionalisation' argument and in the face of its apparent repudiation by empirical facts in Greece, I have maintained that levels of professionalism *per se* cannot account for the army's decision to intervene in 1967. What is therefore needed is an approach that will combine the long-term, structural effects of professionalisation with the corresponding developments in the societal and economic level (pluralisation leading to an eventual acquiesce with democratic values). Further, and despite the usefulness of such a structural approach, it remains true to say that the shifting attitudes of the armed forces to the question of intervention have also been influenced by much more contingent factors, specific to Greek history. These have been the constellation of power in the political /party system, the political divisions prevalent ever since the early 20th century that also split the army along a republican-monarchical axis and the explicit identification of the army with the monarchical forces after the end of the civil war and in the context of intense Cold War rivalry.

¹ The Evelpidon Officers Candidate School dates back to the late 19th century when it was offering predominantly theoretical courses on mathematics and theoretical knowledge on war fighting. See Papakosma 1977:20

² One of the justifications used by the Colonels for the execution of the coup d'état on April 21st 1967 had been the alleged conspiracy organised by left-wing officers in tune with the Centre Union Party MP Andreas Papandreou. The accuracy of this accusation has of course never been proven but the fact that there was indeed an organisation in the army called 'ASPIDA' ('Shield') that was sympathetic to an anti-royalist course reveals that some degree of ideological/political diversity within the armed forces did exist. See Zaharopoulos 1972:25

³ The following part draws mainly from Kouvertaris, 1971.

⁴ The Young Turks movement that began a year earlier in Salonica and called for the restoration of the 1878 Ottoman Constitution was a primary source of inspiration for the Military League and its founders. Indeed, popular support for the Young Turks was widespread and the Greek press was for a while filled with Turcophile pieces. See Papacosma S.V. (1977): *The Military in Greek Politics...* p.39

⁵ Although the Greek Communist Party never became a formidable electoral force in the years prior to the Second World War, it nevertheless comprised the core of EAM (National Liberation Movement), the biggest anti-Nazi movement in during the occupation years (1941-44). After the country's liberation, the popularity of EAM had reached very high levels indeed.

⁶ See ftn.14

⁷ Zaharopoulos (1972) p.24. For instance, the assassination of Grigoris Lambrakis, MP for the United Democratic Left Party in Salonica in the summer of 1963, has been seen as the act of the military police in collaboration with paramilitary groupings. Karamanlis' government does not appear involved in the operation.

⁸ See Zaharopoulos G.: 'Politics and the Army...' pp.18-19 for a theoretical discussion on the issue of the army's 'interest group' status.

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