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The Authoritarian Past and Contemporary Greek Democracy
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PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE
In Greece after the 1974 democratic transition the Karamanlis government prioritised political stability and foreign policy issues over transitional justice. The punitive process in the army was extensive, while in the police, the gendarmerie, the justice system and the universities the process was less comprehensive. Greek socialists demanded a more thoroughgoing ‘cleansing’ of the state apparatus than some Greek communists. In the following decades, public opinion research showed a variety of responses towards the junta of 1967–74, including confusion about the facts of the authoritarian period and a decline in the rejection of authoritarianism.

Keywords: Transitional Justice; Authoritarian Legacies; Democratic Transition; Political Parties; Collective Memory; Greece

Compared with Portugal and Spain, which embarked on the transition to democracy at approximately the same time (mid-1970s), Greece has had a different experience of transitional justice and authoritarian legacies. With respect to transitional justice, the trials and purges of the Greek junta’s leaders and collaborators lasted for a relatively short period (autumn 1974 to late 1975). These actions were comparatively extensive, since the ‘cleansing’ of state institutions included the army, the police, the gendarmerie, the universities and the justice system as well as central and local government. From a comparative perspective, the sanctions imposed on the protagonists of the breakdown of democracy were severe, even though accomplices, such as members of the authoritarian cabinets between 1967 and 1974 and the junta’s rank and file—including torturers—received mild treatment from the courts.

In terms of authoritarian legacies, in post-dictatorial Greece—unlike in Portugal and Spain—the King and the armed forces were completely excluded from national politics very soon after the rupture of July 1974. In Spain the King continued to play a major role in democratisation, even after the first phase of the transition ended (1975–77), while in Portugal the role of the army during the first five years of the transition that began in 1974 cannot be underestimated. In Greece, the referendum of December 1974 led to the abolition of the monarchy and the instauration of a republic. The army was
delegitimised, not only because of its role in bringing down democracy in April 1967, but also because of its humiliation in the Cyprus debacle of July 1974, when war mobilisation and resistance against the Turkish invasion of Cyprus proved impossible.

In addition, the government of national unity led by the conservative Prime Minister, Constantine Karamanlis, dealt with pro-junta army officers in an efficient way that resulted in the Greek armed forces returning to the barracks for good. Clearly, the new role of the armed forces was prescribed by the very tense relations between Greece and Turkey throughout the transition and consolidation period (1974–81). The authoritarian legacies in the Greek party system were weak, and the constellation of political parties after 1974 did not include any extreme right-wing political party that was supportive of the ousted regime. There were two short-lived exceptions—the National Democratic Union (EDE—Ethnike Demokratike Enosis), which dissolved after it obtained only one per cent of the vote in the 1974 elections, and the National Front (EP—Ethnike Parataxis), which dissolved after obtaining seven per cent of the vote in 1977. The other political parties—ranging from the centre-right to the communist left—were firmly against the Colonels’ regime. The majority of these parties adopted a moderate stance on the issue of transitional justice, the processes of which were initiated by individual citizens and later by the Karamanlis government (1974–77). Resistance organisations and the left-wing press demanded ‘de-juntification’. In other words, during the transition Greek society pressed for the administration of transitional justice and the conservative government followed suit.

Nevertheless, authoritarian legacies in the collective memory seemed to evaporate quickly. According to public opinion research in 1985, conducted a decade after the purges and trials, Greeks were shown to have a short memory of history. In the eyes of the public, the rejection of the Colonels’ regime was not wholesale and, as we will see below, a share of the sample could not remember major facts and figures of the 1967–74 period. These trends were intensified in the 1990s, as a second survey demonstrated, and there was a gradual effacement of the collective memory of the junta particularly among the younger age groups and conservative voters (Kafetzis 1999).

Here I shall first discuss the peculiarities of the Colonels’ regime, stressing the conditions under which it fell from power. I will then focus on how transitional justice was implemented and how political parties reacted to it, before finally presenting findings of surveys on the Greek collective memory with respect to the regime. Data have been collected from archives of three Athenian newspapers (Ta Nέa [The News], H Αυγί [Dawn] and Ρεύσσια [Radical]) and the available secondary literature in Greek and English, including published survey data. Use has also been made of open-ended interviews with two members of the left-wing resistance to the junta who participated in the 1973 student uprising.

The Colonel’s Regime and Transition to Democracy

While the 1974 transition to democracy in Greece shared with the Portuguese and Spanish transitions typical problems of democratisation, such as how and to what
extent to distribute transitional justice and to impart political legitimacy to the new
democratic regime, the context of transition was different. Although the breakdown of
Greek democracy in April 1967 can be compared to similar developments in other
parts of the world at approximately the same time (Brazil 1964, Argentina 1966, Chile
1973), the Greek coup d’état of April 1967 was not initially accompanied by violent
conflict and did not result in a long-lasting dictatorship. The death toll in the days
immediately following the military intervention remains unknown, but it must have
been relatively low.

In the beginning the junta was probably tolerated rather than supported by the
middle and upper strata that had in the past identified with the anti-communist
political class who had ruled the country since the end of the civil war in 1949.
However, as the years passed after 1967 the number of people imprisoned or exiled—
particularly from among left-wing voters—rose above 7,000. The final count of the
victims of the Polytechnic School uprising of November 1973 is also unknown, as is
the number of those tortured by the military police, the civil police and the
gendarmerie. This student uprising against the junta in 1973 did not cause the fall of
the Colonels’ regime, but did contribute to its delegitimisation. In November 1973,
immediately after the events of the Polytechnic School uprising, a coup took place
within the junta (with the fall from power of Colonel George Papadopoulos and rise of
Brigadier Dimitrios Ioannides). The new junta hardened oppression and alienated any
remaining conservative supporters of the regime (Danopoulos 1984; Meletopoulos

The fall of the regime was due to failure in war. In July 1974 the Greek junta
attempted to install a military regime in Cyprus. The Turkish government, arguing this
would endanger the Turkish Cypriot minority on the island, invaded. The military
conflict was brief, as the Greek armed forces were unable to react, and soon the Turkish
army had occupied 40 per cent of the island. As a result of the Cyprus debacle the junta
in Athens called in conservative politicians to save the situation. These conservatives
then invited Constantine Karamanlis to return from exile in Paris. The former leader
of post-war conservative executives formed a government of national unity that ruled
from July to November 1974 (Psomiades 1982; Diamandouros 1986). This transition
government consisted of ministers from the conservative and centrist parties of the
pre-1967 period—the National Radical Union (ERE—Ethnike Rizospastike Enosis)
and the Centre Union (EK—Enosis Kentrou)—as well as younger cadres selected from
among the members of the resistance that had rallied around the social democratic
New Forces (Nees Dynameis).

One of the new government’s first moves was to legalise the Communist Party of
Greece (KKE—Kommunistiko Komma Elladas), which had been outlawed since the
civil war. General elections to the parliament took place just a few months after the
turnover, and in November 1974 Karamanlis won a landslide victory with his newly
founded centre-right party, New Democracy (ND—Nea Dimokratia). A referendum
that led to the abolition of the monarchy was held the following month, a new
constitution being passed in June 1975. During the years immediately following the
transition, Karamanlis’s government, which was preoccupied with foreign policy and defence issues, such as the conflict with Turkey and preparations for the country’s accession to the European Community (EC), highly valued the stability of the new democratic regime (Diamandouros 1986; Voulgaris 2001). These priorities go some way towards explaining the rapidity of the Greek transition, which was particularly underscored by the initially hesitant but then swift evolution of developments on the transitional justice front.

The Administration of Transitional Justice in Post-authoritarian Greece

At first the Greek government was reluctant to begin any transitional justice process (Alivizatos & Diamandouros 1997, pp. 37–39). The reluctance to administer transitional justice against segments of the military in a period in which war with a neighbouring country could break out at any moment can be understood in the context of tense Graeco-Turkish relations. In addition to the priorities outlined above, the government also had to consider the possibility of a reaction from the armed forces, within which the junta still had pockets of support, in the event of a purge, and this fear held the new democratic government back.

To these reasons for the initially hesitant ‘cleansing’ of the state apparatus of personnel who had served the Colonels, one has to add the erstwhile ideological affinity between some members of Karamanlis’s post-1974 cabinets and the junta’s military officials. The former, that is, the traditionalist ministers, had been cadres of the pre-1967 conservative political elite, represented by Karamanlis’s post-war conservative National Radical Union (ERE—Ethnike Rizospastike Enosis). The Colonels had risen through the military hierarchy during the post-civil-war period (1949–67), during which time the conservative political class, the army, the security forces and the King shared a strongly nationalist and anti-communist ideology and closely monitored the parliamentary regime (Mouzelis 1978; Alivizatos 1979; Fleischer 2006).

In other words, the post-1974 Karamanlis governments were in no hurry to pursue the administration of transitional justice. Nevertheless, once the first lawsuit against the Colonels was launched by a private individual in September 1974 and particularly after an aborted military putsch in February 1975, the government followed suit. This policy shift may be explained by the fact Karamanlis realised that without purging the armed forces his hands would be tied for a long time. It may also be explained by the public outcry about the fact the junta’s ringleaders had not been apprehended in the wake of the Cyprus debacle. Karamanlis was a conservative politician, but he could sense the tide had turned to the left. In contrast to his earlier term as prime minister (1955–63), he now became more responsive to the dominant trends in society. Indeed, for a long time after 1974, and despite the majority of the electorate voting for the conservative ND in the November 1974 elections, left-wing and anti-Western political ideas dominated Greek society well into the 1980s. Initiating the process of transitional justice was a complicated task containing moral and practical aspects.
Between 1967 and 1974 large segments of the armed forces, civil service, universities and the justice system acquiesced rather than collaborated with the regime. In this respect Greece was no exception to the pattern that had emerged in other countries under authoritarian rule. As a consequence, the post-1974 regime faced three challenges that were common to all post-authoritarian regimes.

Firstly, it was not evident how wide the circle of people implicated in punitive processes would be. In addition to an unknown number of top- and middle-ranking military and police officers, gendarmes, cabinet ministers, prefects, mayors and managers of public enterprises, one has to think of the rank and file who actively participated in the seizure of public buildings, such as parliament, and who tortured opponents of the junta. Secondly, in some instances of wrongdoing no specific criminal law had been transgressed. For example, given the legal principle of *nullum crimen nulla poena sine lege* (no crime, no punishment without a previous penal law), it was problematic to prosecute torturers if torture was not specifically included in the provisions of criminal law. Thirdly, when those implicated were found guilty by the court, it was difficult to draw a line distinguishing between more and less severe sentences for those convicted. Since for the victims the pain, loss and humiliation inflicted by the junta were immeasurable, no penalty could compensate for what they had experienced.

The Karamanlis government decided on the swift and measured administration of transitional justice (Sotiropoulos 2007). Even though the justice system was formally independent from the executive branch of government, it soon became clear that the government was able to set the tone of the punitive processes and, as we shall see below, even to amend the sentences imposed. The combination of three variables—Karamanlis's own priorities with regard to the Graeco-Turkish conflict, political stability and the country's accession to the EC; the periodic, underground stirring of pro-junta elements in the military which lasted from August 1974 to February 1975; and the lenience of the judges in most trials—all resulted in a significant proportion of possible culprits being left unpunished, the remainder being dealt with somewhat less than harshly. In August 1974, less than a month after the transition, the government of national unity retired the head of the joint chiefs of staff and the head of the army—the two most senior officers in the army—and the junta's strongman, Brigadier Ioannides. In September the government issued legislation that affected the junta's collaborators in the universities and the justice system. Professors who had been hired in the period 1967–74 to fill the posts of academics who had been fired by the junta were to be screened by a committee established by the Ministry of Education for this purpose. In the following months, sanctions were imposed on 92 professors (39 of whom eventually lost their positions), while judges who had been purged by the junta because of their democratic beliefs were reintegrated into the judiciary. A total of 23 judges who had collaborated with the junta were punished, either by being demoted or by being forced into retirement (Pikramenos 2002, p. 306).

The purges also proceeded in other institutions. During September 1974, 17 police officers were dismissed and all mayors who had been appointed to the municipalities
by the Colonels were removed from office, as were lawyers who had been appointed to
directorships within the bar associations, directors of state-run media and managers of
public enterprises and agricultural cooperatives (Woodhouse 1985, p. 170; Hadjivassiliou 2000, p. 302). In October 1974, five of the junta’s top military
officials—the three protagonists of the April 1967 coup, George Papadopoulos,
Nicolaos Makarezos and Stylianos Pattakos, and two prominent junta officials, Ioannis
Ladas and Michael Roufogales—were arrested and deported to a small island off the
east coast of Attica. In the same month a presidential decree was issued stating there
would be no amnesty for the criminal offences, such as high treason, committed by
those involved in the 1967 coup. The ringleaders were prosecuted the following
month; however, it should be noted that these actions only came about after a lawyer
had taken the initiative on 9 September to sue 15 of the junta’s top cadres, including its
three leaders (Woodhouse 1985, p. 168).

In the wake of the aborted coup of February 1975 the government changed its
previously cautious attitude towards the armed forces (Danopoulos 1991). While only
36 military officers had been decommissioned by September 1974 (Hadjivassiliou 2000,
p. 302), about 200 officers were forcibly retired in February 1975. Some sources even
claim that between 500 and 1,500 officers were dismissed—as much as ten per cent of
the officer corps at the time (Sotiropoulos 2007). In July 1975 the highest civil court
(Areios Paghos) decided that, with the exception of military officers, the members of
the junta’s governing elite were not to be tried for high treason for their part in
overthrowing a democratically elected government and sustaining an oppressive
political regime for seven years. The court decided high treason was committed only
‘momentarily’ on the night of 20–21 April 1967 rather than continuously over a
seven-year period; therefore, only those officers who participated in the seizure of
power in 1967 could be tried for treason. The court’s ruling reflected the view of ND’s
Minister of Justice, Costas Stefanakis, who believed prosecuting large numbers of junta
supporters in open court would lead to chaos (Ta Nea, 3 July 1975, p. 1).

In 1975 many trials took place. The first was the trial of military officers who had
staged the 1967 coup. This was followed by a second trial of the junta’s three leaders
and the high- and middle-ranking officers who led the suppression of the Polytechnic
School uprising, during which a tank smashed the school’s gate to allow soldiers to
enter the campus. Crimes committed included the manslaughter of bystanders and
some of the students who had occupied the campus.

This trial was followed by a series of trials in several cities, some of which continued
beyond 1975. These proceedings sought to secure the conviction of middle- and
low-ranking officers and soldiers in the military police, the civilian police and the
gendarmerie who were accused of torturing people who had been imprisoned after
having been arrested for resisting the junta. There were a total of 41 trials of alleged
torturers. In the largest, 32 military officers and military policemen were prosecuted
on the basis of the testimonies of 128 torture victims (Ta Nea, 6 August 1975, p. 1).

A further trial was announced, but never took place. This would have implicated
officials who had engineered the July 1974 coup against the government of
Archbishop Makarios in Cyprus. The government periodically postponed this trial, presenting vague excuses for the delays (e.g. proceeding with the trial was against the interest of the nation). It won the consent of the opposition parties in a case in which apparently more than one national government—as well as diplomatic and secret services—played a part. In the trial mentioned above against the protagonists of the 1967 coup, the three leaders received the death penalty, eight of their followers were sentenced to life imprisonment, seven others were sentenced to between five and 20 years and two were found not guilty. In the second trial, in addition to the sentences imposed on the junta’s three leaders, Dimitrios Ioannides (who overthrew Papadopoulos in November 1973) and Nicolaos Dertilis (the officer in charge of suppressing the student occupation of the Polytechnic) both received long sentences. Penalties imposed on those found guilty of torture were much shorter, often amounting to little more than a few months in prison. Table 1 shows how the proportion of officials convicted varied by sector (military, police and gendarmerie).

**Greek Political Parties and Transitional Justice**

The political forces of the transition period (political parties, resistance organisations) had experienced oppression by the Colonels in a number of ways. The severity of oppression differed by political party. While the junta was particularly hard on members of the communist resistance, it had not spared other resistance members whose political origins were of the centre or the centre-left, such as party cadres and intellectuals who had been associated with the EK before the 1967 coup. The junta also persecuted royalists who had sided with King Constantine, who had been behind an abortive counter-coup in December 1967 before fleeing. Greek political parties did not adopt a consensual view on transitional justice. Even though issues of transitional justice were not at the forefront of their electoral agenda, all of the parties reacted to developments in the trials as they jockeyed for positions in the post-1974 party system. For the political parties, short-term electoral considerations rather than clearly formulated principles prevailed on matters of transitional justice.

As noted above, in the first post-authoritarian elections Karamanlis participated as the leader of the new centre-right party, the ND. The EK and the New Forces participated in the elections in a common list (EK-ND), while the same happened with

| Table 1 Absolute number and proportion of police, gendarmerie and military staff prosecuted and convicted in Greece after the 1974 transition to democracy |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|------------------|
| Police | Gendarmerie | Armed forces | Total |
|Prosecuted | 58 | 34 | 99 | 191 |
|Subsequently tried | 56 (97%) | 33 (97%) | 95 (96%) | 184 |
|Convicted | 32 (57%) | 24 (73%) | 57 (60%) | 113 |

*Source: Sotiropoulos (2007, p. 124). The figures were calculated on the basis of data provided in Kremmydas (1984).*
the pro-Soviet communists (KKE) and the Euro-communists (KKE-Interior) and the United Democratic Left (EDA—Eniaia Dimokratiki Aristera). The two wings of the Communist Party had split in 1968, but in 1974 they presented a common electoral ticket, the United Left (EA—Enomeni Aristera). A totally new party was created by Andreas Papandreou, son of former Prime Minister George Papandreou, who governed from 1963 to 1965. In August 1974, Andreas Papandreou and younger centre-left politicians, including Costas Simitis, founded a left-wing socialist party, the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK—Panellinio Sosialistikó Kinima). Minor parties, including the extreme right EDE, also participated in the general elections of 1974, but failed to elect deputies. As Table 2 shows, Karamanlis’s ND won a landslide victory, with the centrists coming second, the socialists third and the communists fourth. The election results show not only the conservative party’s dominance, but also the fact that the electoral system—traditionally shaped to facilitate the formation of majority single-party governments—disproportionately favoured the winner of the elections. ND obtained a little more than half of the votes cast (54.4 per cent), but enjoyed a comfortable majority in parliament with 72 per cent of the seats (216 of 300).

Traditionally in Greece the government in power is able to influence the selection of senior judges (Pikramenos 2002; Magalhães, Guarnieri & Kaminis 2006). In fact, the incumbent cabinet normally appoints the senior judges, who, in turn, select judges at the middle and lower ranks. In other words, the judicial branch is dependent on the executive branch. If one remembers that the latter was completely dominated by the governing party, then the conclusion is that all branches of government were subservient to the incumbent governing elite. Such an institutional arrangement meant that after the 1974 regime change the scope, pace and degree of thoroughness with which transitional justice was administered rested in the hands of the governing party. More precisely, since ND was a personalist party, founded and managed by Karamanlis, the whole process was effectively a one-man show. After the 1974 transition there was some debate concerning why the government had not proceeded to implicate more military and police officials and senior civil servants (who had

Table 2 Share of votes and parliamentary seats in the first post-authoritarian elections (November 1974) (per cent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Votes</th>
<th>Seats in parliament</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ND</td>
<td>54.4</td>
<td>72.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EK-ND</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PASOK</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EA</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDE</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Pappas (1999, p. 58).
clearly played a role in sustaining the authoritarian regime) or the regime's ministerial elite. As already noted, the hesitation of ND and its leader to proceed with a thorough purge of the military can be explained by the constraints imposed as a consequence of Greece’s tense relations with Turkey. The possibility of war could not be excluded, and military officers were badly needed. In this context, the dismissal of hundreds of officers following the attempted coup of February 1975 was a bold step.

As for the members of the ministerial elites, senior police officers and top civil servants, the ND government spared them from punishment for two main reasons: first, Karamanlis understood the destabilising effects of punitive policies when it affects large numbers of people; and, second, he was aware that—at least until 1973—most Greeks had not resisted the authoritarian regime. Had he opted for a more far-reaching purge, then it would have been difficult to establish the difference between those who actually collaborated with the junta and the majority who had remained passive, carrying out their duties as usual. Karamanlis allegedly expressed his view on the subject as follows: 'as for the demands for a more widespread purge . . . half the Greek population would be in jail if I had not stood out against it' (Karakatsanis 2001, p.153). The ND, completely dominated by its founder, rallied behind this view of transitional justice—its leader had established the tone and extent of punitive measures. This became evident in August 1975 when the Athens appeal court, which had tried the junta’s leaders for high treason and mutiny, found them guilty and sentenced them to death. Within hours of the sentences being passed, the government announced its intention to commute them to life imprisonment. Karamanlis responded to the ensuing public outcry by saying, 'when we say life imprisonment we mean life imprisonment', and had the Ministry of Justice implement the government’s decision (Τα Νέα, 30 August 1975, p. 12).

The opposition parties had different views. The EK-ND opposition disagreed with the procedure through which the death penalty was commuted to life imprisonment. The party did not openly state that the death penalty should have been imposed; in general, EK-ND believed a new and independent judicial institution should have managed transitional justice and that all of the trials should have begun earlier and finished as soon as possible. The EK-ND’s leader, George Mavros, argued Greece was facing major domestic and foreign policy problems and that the government should have completed the punitive processes more rapidly. However, it seems that because of constitutional constraints the proposal to establish a new institution fell through, while the argument about the delay in the government’s involvement in the process was probably correct and had also been aired by other parties.

PASOK vehemently criticised the government, not only for delaying the punitive process, but also for not taking punitive enough measures against the junta’s staff. In August 1975 Papandreou demanded the death sentence on the junta’s leaders be implemented, dismissing the government’s argument that all opposition parties were, in principle, against the death penalty (Η Αυγή, 26 August 1975, p. 7; Ρέοσπαστής, 26 August, p. 7). Papandreou called for general elections, since in his view the
government’s decision to commute the death sentences was symptomatic of a much wider political crisis.

The communist left also rejected the government’s decision; however, it was not as steadfast as PASOK in its reactions. While KKE and KKE-Interior demanded the court’s decision against the three ringleaders be carried out, both explained in their public statements that the penalty should be placed in the context of preventing the breakdown of democracy in the future. In fact, the KKE was strongly critical of the government, accusing it of holding a ‘compromising stance towards imperialism’. By contrast, the Euro-communist party insisted on procedural matters, particularly on the fact the government had not consulted the other parties before commuting the death penalty, that it had not waited for the decision of the Ministry of Justice and that it should reconvene parliament, which was not in session at the time (Ta Nea, 26 August 1975, p. 10). However, throughout the evolution of trials against the junta, the left was not as determined as PASOK to impose the most severe sentences possible against those involved in the 1967 coup, the suppression of the 1973 uprising and the torture of resistance members. Some of the left-wing cadres who had suffered in 1967–74 did not even press charges against their torturers, while others did not show up at the trials.

In 1967–74 Papandreou and most of his political associates lived abroad, and when they came back after the junta’s fall they founded PASOK, which in terms of the usual left–right scale was to the right of the communists. The latter, albeit split into two autonomous factions, spent most of the seven-year authoritarian period either underground or in prison, and suffered the junta’s oppression. (This was true particularly for the members of the KKE-Interior who had stayed in the country, while many members of the party’s central committee and other party cadres had remained in socialist-dominated Eastern Europe.) Yet, after the overthrow of the regime in 1974 the communists, and particularly KKE-Interior, did not react as fiercely as PASOK against the government and the justice system as far as transitional justice was concerned. How can this paradox be explained?

It seems that at the beginning of the transition there was no party line among the communists on how deep in the military and police hierarchies purification should go, or on how severe the sentences should be in the case of military officers tried for suppressing the Polytechnic School uprising, or on what to do with torturers. By contrast, PASOK, whose ranks included people from the pre-dictatorship centre and centre-left, as well as a younger generation of socialists, was more vocal in demanding justice and used inflammatory rhetoric in that respect: for example, Papandreou claimed that the former king should have been tried for high treason along with the junta officials (Ta Nea, 6 August 1975, p. 1). There was a major reason for the communist left adopting a different stance to that of the socialists: the communists were more keen to see the re-instauation of democracy, this time without the constraints of the 1949–67 period, than they were to press for the administration of transitional justice against supporters of the Colonels’ regime. In other words, for the left the safe establishment of a functioning parliamentarism was probably a higher
priority than the enlargement of the circle of prosecuted junta supporters who could be tried and sentenced for their criminal actions during 1967–74. The middle-aged and old left-wing members of the resistance against the junta had been through the traumatic experience of the ‘disciplined’ or ‘guided’ democracy that was the post-war constitutional monarchy, which discriminated against the left and curtailed the rights and freedoms of left-wing voters (Mouzelis 1978). From the latter’s point of view, the prospect of letting the heads of security forces and torturers who had served under the junta escape punishment was disheartening, but the risk of a reversal of transition to democracy due to military intervention in politics was even more alarming.

By contrast, members of the old EK’s left wing and younger socialists had enjoyed the limited freedoms of the ‘disciplined’ post-war democracy. The cadres, who before 1967 belonged to EK (in power in 1963–65) or were too young in the early 1960s, came to experience severe political oppression only after 1967 when they put up resistance against the junta. Compared with the communists, their experience of imprisonment and torture was quite a new—if not unexpected—and painful one. In that respect, it was not surprising that after the junta’s demise they were more vehemently supportive of any measures taken against their oppressors than the communists. There was a second reason why the Greek socialists were so insistent on the administration of transitional justice against the Colonels and their collaborators. Guided by Andreas Papandreou—a charismatic leader, skilled orator and polarising politician—PASOK opted for the short march to power (Spourdalakis 1988). This meant PASOK opened its ranks to socialists and non-socialists alike and chose an electoral strategy aimed at winning elections as quickly as possible and obtaining as many votes as possible—particularly votes from the left. In order to achieve this, PASOK capitalised on the wide anti-American and anti-Western attitudes of the Greek population. In the mid-1970s, many Greeks believed that in 1967 the West, and specifically the United States (US), had tolerated—if not facilitated—the imposition of the dictatorship, and that in July 1974 neither the US nor the United Kingdom (UK) did anything to prevent Turkey invading Cyprus. Similar patterns were observed as recently as the late 1990s, when in an opinion poll a large proportion of respondents (26 per cent) claimed the Americans were to blame for the 1967 coup (Kafetzis 1999, p. 300). In other words, during the mid-1970s PASOK chose to be much more radical—in comparison not only with the EK-ND, but also with the communists. Part and parcel of this strategy—which indeed proved fruitful, with PASOK winning the 1981 elections—was to require the most thorough and severe punishment for those who led and supported the Colonels’ regime.

The Retrogression and Effacement of Greek Public Memory about the Colonels’ Regime

Already in the late 1970s, and certainly after PASOK took power in 1981, issues of transitional justice took a back seat and the polarisation of political life took precedence: for many Greeks the fate of the protagonists of the Colonels’ regime and
their collaborators ceased to be an important issue. People seemed content that the junta’s leaders would spend the rest of their life in prison, and were possibly ready to forget about the rest. This trend came out in two opinion surveys. The first, conducted in 1985, was part of a four-country survey of political culture in Southern Europe (Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain). The second survey, conducted in 1997, repeated some of the questions of the 1985 survey (Kafetzis 1999). In 1997, when asked to name resistance organisations, 42 per cent of respondents said they did not know any, 16 per cent said they knew them but could not remember names and two per cent did not answer the question. The resistance organisations most commonly named by respondents were, in descending order: the Panhellenic Liberation Movement (PAK—Panellinio Apeléfherotiko Kinima, a precursor of PASOK); the student movement in general; the KKE; Righas Feraioú (KKE-Interior’s youth movement); and the Polytechnic School (although it was an educational institution and not a resistance organisation). Not all respondents had the same recollections and the memory of resistance declines as the respondents get younger and less well educated. Men remember resistance organisations more than women, while there seems to be no noticeable difference between the responses of the rural and urban populations (Kafetzis 1999, pp. 289, 294–299).

The 1985 survey included a question on the degree of harm caused by authoritarian rule. The question was repeated in the 1997 survey, and the comparative results are revealing. Among Greeks, in 1985 about one-third of respondents thought the Colonels’ regime had both beneficial and harmful consequences for the country, while the majority (sixty per cent) believed the regime to be only harmful. Slightly more than one-third of the Italian respondents believed Mussolini’s Fascist regime was only harmful and, by contrast, the share of Spaniards and Portuguese who believed the same of the Franco and the Salazar regimes, respectively, was less than one-third of the total. When the same question was repeated in Greece 12 years later, things had changed: this time almost five out of ten Greeks (compared with three out of ten in the 1985 survey) thought the Colonels’ regime had both beneficial and harmful consequences. In fact, 11 per cent of respondents in 1997 (compared with six per cent in 1985) thought the junta had only beneficial effects, and only four out of ten (compared with six out of ten in 1985) considered the regime harmful (Ethniko Kentro Koinonikon Erefnon [EKKE—National Centre for Social Research] 1988; Kafetzis 1999, p. 324).

In the 1997 survey respondents were asked when exactly the coup of 21 April 1967 took place. While 64 per cent remembered the date correctly, 19 per cent did not, almost seven per cent admitted not remembering and almost 11 per cent admitted not knowing. Recollection of the correct date increased with age, was more frequent among men than women and increased with educational level and among those who placed themselves on the left. Again, there was no difference between the urban and rural population. Most incorrect or ‘don’t know’ answers were given by ‘apolitical’ respondents: that is, those who had not voted in the last election, who refused to place
themselves on the left–right scale or who claimed that their political ideology was not relevant at all (Kafetzis 1999, pp. 278–282).

For a long time the dominant opinion in Greece has been that domestic actors were less culpable than foreign ones for the breakdown of democracy. Another view common among voters of the right and centre-right is that only some officers were to blame. Political parties of the left and the centre-left generally supported the dominant opinion, which was also shared by the popular newspapers. In the 1997 survey, respondents were asked who was to blame for the 1967 coup. As noted above, 26 per cent blamed the Americans; however, this opinion was not equally shared among right- and left-wing voters, 34 per cent of the latter and 21 per cent of the former blaming the US. A total of 16 per cent of respondents blamed some military officers, while 11 per cent blamed the political class as a whole and ten per cent blamed the army as an institution, while around seven per cent blamed the King, the right in general or the centrist members of parliament who, in 1965, had sided with ERE to bring down the EK government. All of the last three options were selected by left-wing respondents, while conservative voters generally placed the blame on either a few military officers or the political class as a whole (Kafetzis 1999, pp. 300–303).

In sum, memories of the Colonels’ regime among the general population faded rather quickly in the decade after the transition from authoritarian rule, i.e. in the 1980s. The blame for the breakdown of democracy was put on external actors (the Americans) and a group of military officers. One decade after the 1974 turnover only a minority of respondents believed that the deposed authoritarian regime had some beneficial effects for Greece; however, two decades after the transition, memories of facts and figures had become dim, and an increased proportion of the population had a somewhat more positive opinion of the effects of the junta. The way transitional justice was managed by the incoming democratic elites may have also played a role in the aforementioned opinion shift: trials were short in duration and—with the exception of the junta’s ring leaders—the punishments meted out were lenient. It looked as if transitional justice was administered in haste and the whole affair was in a sense minimised.

Conclusions

The collective memory of the Greek dictatorship depends on party-political affiliation and age, and obviously becomes less accurate with the passage of time. Left-wing respondents seem to have a clearer and more accurate view of what happened during the 1967–74 regime than their conservative peers. The same is true of middle-aged respondents compared with younger age groups. Perhaps for middle-aged Greeks, and certainly for left-wing voters, the breakdown of democracy in 1967 and the dramatic events that followed—including the student movement of 1973 and the Cyprus debacle of 1974—were cornerstones of their political identity. This was not the case for conservative voters or those belonging to younger or older generations. Nevertheless, in Greece there was complete rejection of the authoritarian past at the public attitudes
level. This was not so much the result of democratic views—the rejection of authoritarianism was not so much based on principle as on the grounds of actual political performance. Greeks seem to have rejected the Colonels’ regime because of the Cyprus debacle, the suppression of the student uprising and the torture that was practised against the regime’s opponents.

The mixed stance evident in the attitude of the masses found its counterpart in the attitudes of the political elite. During the 1974 transition, the Karamanlis government’s initiatives were restrained by other priorities in the domain of foreign affairs and by the high value placed on political stability. This came as no surprise given the traditional and very conservative position of Karamanlis’s governments in the past and again after 1974 in several domains (policy and internal security, education, culture, industrial relations and mass media). Among the opposition parties PASOK held a not at all consensual, but evidently polemical, position on transitional justice, to the extent that it superseded sections of the communist left in terms of radical political rhetoric. However, the Karamanlis government did not give in and administered transitional justice in a swift and measured manner. Until the end of 1975—within one-and-a-half years after the regime’s overthrow—most transitional justice issues had been settled: the compromise was that many of the junta’s collaborators were not affected at all by the punitive process. Overall, in the early phase of the transition to democracy in Greece the democratic elites were reluctant to take any substantive measures against politicians, military and security officers and others who had served the Colonels’ regime. Tensions with Turkey were too recent and too acute to permit treating the Greek military in any other way and to start punitive processes that may have proven divisive for society. However, this policy was changed. Private initiatives to sue the junta’s leaders and the aborted coup d’etat of February 1975 led the transition government to engage in a swift, measured and circumscribed administration of transition justice.

A first hypothesis, informed by the study of the Greek case, is that under certain circumstances—such as challenges from external actors or threats to national sovereignty—the administration of transitional justice can be delayed and the purge of the military may be avoided in view of considerations of national defence. By contrast, any risks to the consolidation of democracy posed by armed and/or by security forces that should have been subjected to investigation for their role during authoritarian rule probably accelerated the decision of incoming democratic elites to go ahead with a variety of measures against pro-authoritarian groups lingering in the state apparatus.

The conservative party (ND, in power in 1974–81) hesitated before initiating the process of transitional justice, but then went ahead with it. ND encountered more criticism from PASOK than it did from either of the two communist parties (KKE and KKE-Interior). The more reserved stance of the communist parties may be accounted for by their experiences with political oppression after the end of the Greek Civil War and by the legalisation of the KKE immediately after the 1974 transition. The communists’ priorities lay with operating legitimately within the new democratic
regime. Memories of almost three decades of political exclusion played a role in the stance taken by the Greek left. PASOK cadres and their leader by contrast had no such memories. Their priorities lay with carving a new and recognisable niche in the post-authoritarian party system, pursuing a strategy of attracting votes from the left. Their purpose was to achieve power as quickly as possible, which they succeeded in doing in 1981. A second hypothesis emanating from this case study is that on the issues of severity and extent of punitive measures against collaborators of the authoritarian regime, it is not an inescapable conclusion that the further to the left on the left–right political spectrum a party is, the more pressing and demanding it will be. Past experiences of the parties concerned and their electoral strategies impact on their stance on dilemmas related to transitional justice.

Finally, in the eyes of the Greek public, the image of the Colonels has changed over time. Some of the people who remember the Greek junta feel it had a few positive effects on Greece, while others—mostly the younger ones—lack an informed view of the junta. The speed and measured character of the Greek model of transitional justice may be related to such attitudinal shifts or lack of accurate perceptions. Drawing on the case of Greece, a third hypothesis may be that the more rapid and the more measured the process of transitional justice is, the greater the chances are that memories of authoritarian rule will fade sooner rather than later and that this rule come to be seen in a more positive light than it was at first.

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Notes

[2] For example, by torturing members of the resistance.
[3] Ioannides and Dertilis were still in prison in January 2010, while the other condemned junta officials had either been freed after many years of imprisonment or had died.
[4] Personal interviews with two members of the left-wing resistance, Athens, May and June 2009.
[5] In Greece the survey was conducted by EKKE (EKKE, 1988).

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