How did Greece return to democracy following the 1967 coup d’état by the military junta?

PERSEPHONIE JAMONS

MHIS321 Twentieth-Century Europe

“Greece is being reborn, Greece will accomplish great things, Greece will live forever”. ¹ The coup d’état of 1967 and the military junta that lasted until 1974 was an attempt to ensure the political and cultural purity of the people of Greece, though the means by which the colonels attempted to achieve such goals resulted in a period of intense fear, distrust and political instability. The events that precipitated the coup d’état represented the fearful colonels and provoked them to act upon the growing international concern over communism and the instability of Greece’s foreign relations with Turkey. This essay will look at the national and international climate that caused the coup and the various events that occurred throughout the coup that had an impact upon the destruction of the colonel’s regime, which resulted in the eventual return to democracy in Greece and the establishment of a democratic system that has been one of the most effective in Greece’s history. The coup itself was a minor deviation from the democratic system in place at the time, and although was a severe dictatorship, resulted in the establishment of an extremely successful democratic regime. The illegality of the coup d’état, ‘whose decrees are invalid’², reflected the illegal means to which the colonels would achieve their ends. Their goals surrounding Greece and its protection from communism and impending war resulted in their downfall, and resulted in the restoration of democracy in a nation whose historical background was filled with coups and revolutions.

In order to understand the military junta and the following seven years of dictatorship that took place in Greece, one must be aware of the climate that precipitated the coup d’état that had a great influence upon the fall of the colonels. These factors aided in the

establishment of the junta, but also resulted in the demise of the regime and return to democracy, were both internal and external and reflective of the geopolitical position of Greece. Internal economical concerns such as low national income and lack of capital investment played into the establishment of the group of Colonels, also known as the Revolutionary Council, made up of Papadopoulos, Makarezos and Pattakos amongst others. However, it was socio-political concerns regarding one of the ‘most aggressive Communist Parties in Europe’ that drove the Colonels to stage their coup. The process of ‘saving Greece from an imaginary communist coup by establishing a dictatorship’ became the crux of their regime, as well as establishing a “Helleno-Christian” ideology based on purging the various modern influences seen to corrupt youth. The Colonel’s actions and beliefs mirrored those of their allies, such as the United States, influencing the perceived threat of international and national communists. Thus communist ideology, from both internal and external threats, was one of the major causes of the coup d’état and the rise of the colonel’s position.

Additionally, events taking place in the immediate geographical area surrounding Greece played a major role in the coup. Throughout history, the relations between Greece and Turkey have always been shaky. Thus, after the independence of Cyprus from the British in 1960, there was intense political tension between Greece and Turkey over the control and population of the nation. The political instability between Greece and Turkey regarding Cyprus played a major role in the establishment of the junta. It was one of the key factors that encouraged the Colonels to overthrow the democratic system. Thus, they conspired and partook on their coup on the 21st of April 1967. This action was an attempt to remove the threat of communism from Greece, solve the Cyprus problem and eventually make a return to democracy under the colonels. However, throughout the seven years of the junta, none of their aims came close to being achieved, particularly that of the Cyprus problem.

---

which precipitated their own defeat. The actions of the colonels reflected the inability of those inexperienced in politics to rule a politically unstable nation such as Greece effectively. The period of the military junta was one in which resistance activities resulted in pressure upon the regime and led to its downfall. The resistance was from both national groups with international ties, as well as governments from other European nations imposing strictures following claims of various crimes imposed by the junta. There were a number of nationally operated groups that formed to express disillusionment with the regime, and attempt to evoke both nationally and internationally their separation from the junta. One of the first anti-junta events that took place in Greece is the King’s Coup. The monarchy was useful to the Junta as it still had a steady following, and thus the Junta oftentimes exploited the King. This led the King to disassociate himself from the Junta, and work to establish further support for the monarchy after politicians such as Karamanlis expressed the importance of the Colonels to “withdraw from power and put themselves at the disposal of the Palace”.

After disassociating himself, King Constantine sought to stage a coup with support of the navy, and overthrow the illegitimate regime in place in December 1967, only eight months following its establishment. Through lack of support, inability to broadcast the announcement of the coup in major centres such as Athens and Thessaloniki, the lack of discretion in planning, as well as the military stronghold over Greece at the time, the King’s attempt at regaining control over Greece, to return to democracy in the early stages of the coup, was thwarted. His reaction to the coup resulted in his self-imposed exile from Greece. The King’s lack of support for the regime played into anti-junta movements throughout the coup, although he was unsuccessful himself to overthrow the Colonels. However, the Colonels did not disassociate themselves from the monarchy, instead blaming the counter-coup upon ‘disloyal officers’.

---


10 Ibid, p. 44.


Intellectuals, celebrities and other notable figures in Greece formed national groups alongside civilians to exact an amount of internal pressure upon the regime. Groups such as Panhellenic Liberation Movement (PAK), Democratic Defence (DA) and Patriotic Anti-Dictatorship Front (PAM) amongst other were formed during the period to oppose the regime.\textsuperscript{14} Amongst these groups, PAK became the most successful, evolving in the post-junta period to become PASOK, the Greek socialist party. These groups evoked resistance tactics that became borderline terrorism and had international connections from British, German and French groups who opposed the regime and their government’s nonchalance toward the junta, to both fund, provide ammunitions and support the anti-junta organisation in Greece.\textsuperscript{15} The implications of such resistance resulted in the spread of propaganda, but also alerted the perpetrators of the junta to the underground movements and resulted in the arrest or suppression of prominent celebrity figures such as Mikis Theodorakis and Melina Mercouri.\textsuperscript{16} These prominent figures were safe in their opposition due to their status. But the actions of lesser-known supporters of the resistance were often met with arrest and torture.

The internal resistance and the justice system in Greece led to the involvement of other international bodies in the resistance movement, imposing political threats upon the junta by exposing their inhumanity. Greece was a part of NATO and also the Council of Europe. Their membership in these two political organisations did have an impact upon the strength of their decisions. Particularly, as Council of Europe members became aware of their use of torture, destruction of civil liberties and lack of civil rights clauses in their constitution during the junta, there was a concern in the legitimacy of Greece as being part of the Council.\textsuperscript{17} Additionally, due to reports of torture in the Greek justice system, there were trials taking place through the Council of Europe, which resulted in the criticism of the


junta’s disregard for human rights.\textsuperscript{18} Though there was retaliation to the international resistance by the junta, the ultimate pressure put upon them resulted in their planned expulsion from the Council of Europe – which they withdrew from prior to their expulsion – and highlighted international displeasure of the junta regime.\textsuperscript{19} However, the effect of international resistance was diminished by the lack of support from NATO, which continued to support the junta due to their strong anti-communist rhetoric. The British, French and primarily the USA’s support of the Greek regime upheld the support of NATO.\textsuperscript{20} Although there was a ban imposed under the Johnson administration of supplying military aid, the ban was lifted under Nixon. This move was not one of political clout, however demonstrated the geopolitical importance of Greece, through its positioning in the Mediterranean in the Cold War period.\textsuperscript{21} Thus, it was through not only national but also international support of the anti-junta movement that there was a possibility of overthrowing the regime.

The failure of the colonel’s regime became obvious in its final years. In the period leading up to the turning point of the junta in 1973, Colonel Papadopoulos held a referendum to declare Greece a ‘presidential parliamentary republic’ after deposing the king.\textsuperscript{22} In November 1973, the student revolt at Athens Polytechnic played into the demotion of Papadopoulos and the demise of the regime. From the beginning of the junta, there was much focus upon the students and their activities. The Colonels showed benevolence to the students by providing free textbooks, increased student intake and increased expenditure on education.\textsuperscript{23} However, student activists protested the military dictatorship and its aims, but the ringleaders were swiftly arrested and opposition was silenced.\textsuperscript{24} The events of the polytechnic exploded into a major political affair. After being denied the promised re-elections of student governing bodies in 1972, the student bodies of all the major institutions in Athens applied to the courts to have the mandated elections held.\textsuperscript{25} In early 1973, due to the increased tensions toward the junta, students began boycotting classes and staging demonstrations, which ultimately resulted in fights with the police. This trend

\begin{enumerate}
\item Woodhouse, C.M. \textit{The Rise and Fall of the Greek Colonels} (New York: Franklin Watts, 1985), p. 51.
\item Ibid, p. 52.
\item Ibid, p. 103.
\item Woodhouse, C.M. \textit{The Rise and Fall of the Greek Colonels} (New York: Franklin Watts, 1985), p. 117.
\item Ibid, p. 126.
\item Ibid, p. 126.
\item Ibid, p. 127.
\end{enumerate}
continued throughout 1973, which resulted in the arrest of 17 students at the commemoration of centrist politician George Papandreou’s funeral. These students were swiftly placed on trial, though the end of the trials also resulted in yet another unplanned demonstration taking place, which was centred at the Athens Polytechnic. This particular situation was not only staged by students of the polytechnic, but by students of other institutions, workers, civilians and ex-students who all joined in the protest, all of whom were encouraged to ‘descend upon the streets of Athens’. Although a peaceful protest inside the polytechnic, with the students demanding free elections of their governing bodies, protestors outside incited violence and attracted further attention from the junta. The rhetoric of the students and their aim to be heard internationally became a serious problem for the junta. They made clear through their broadcasts [Appendix 1] that they were fighting for the rights of all Greeks, that bringing down the junta was ‘now or never’. Their constant reference to the ‘free struggling students, the free struggling Greeks’ in the majority of their addresses reflected their desire for the dictatorship to be overthrown and democracy to be restored in Greece. They completely broke the stringent restrictions on anti-junta propaganda.

Thus after just two days of protests, the decision was made by Colonel Papadopoulos to send tanks to the university. Throughout the evening, it became clear to the students that the military was exacting force upon them. They pleaded to their ‘soldier brothers, please do not kill us’ and remarked that the ‘junta is just sending tanks to evoke fear’. The intense force imposed by the police and the military, by both the use of the tanks and the use of violence resulted in numerous deaths and countless injuries. The exact numbers of dead and injured still remain unknown, with many people refusing to attend hospitals for fear of brutality. The inclusion of the military on an issue that was being dealt with by the police resulted in many questions being raised internationally. Though the tragedy of the event still lingers in Greece, it was later used as a successful tool in the conviction of the Colonels.

---

26 Ibid, p. 130.
28 Ibid, p. 70.
30 Ibid, p. 75.
in their trials in 1975,\textsuperscript{32} and thus brought about a swift return to democracy as a tool of justice, thus justifying the sacrifices of the students murdered at the university. Additionally, it also resulted in the removal of Papadopoulos from leadership, and Lieutenant General Phaidon Gizikis being sworn in as president of Greece,\textsuperscript{33} though for a very limited term of 8 months, as the junta was close to collapsing.

Although the various resistance efforts that were taking place in Greece and internationally had a major impact upon the fall of the junta, the Cyprus situation became the final turning point in the Colonel’s regime. As one of the main events that precipitated the coup, it ironically also led to the fall of the Colonels from their positions in power. One of the main goals of the coup was enosis, which was to be a union of Cyprus with Greece.\textsuperscript{34} Throughout the regime, enosis became an issue between the Greek Colonels and the Turkish government, as they consistently came to heads about the occupation of the island. As Greco-Turkish relations have never been amicable, the situation in Cyprus oftentimes brought the two nations to come close to war. Though both nations were a part of NATO, there was never much support in resolving conflicts between the two. After causing issues in Cyprus through Colonel Ioannidis’ coup against the Cypriot President on the 15\textsuperscript{th} of July 1974 – which involved the imposition of the Greek National Army and political figureheads who murdered Turkish Cypriots – Turkey invaded Cyprus to regain control of the island.\textsuperscript{35} The Greek response was destroyed by the Turks, and with no support from NATO or America, the Greeks were forced to withdraw from the disastrous intervention. Turkey took control of 37 per cent of the island, resulting in the displacement of both Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots fleeing their opposing regimes.\textsuperscript{36} Due to the fear of outbreak of war with Turkey, the junta was overthrown, and Greece looked to return to democracy.

The Cyprus situation not only resulted in the continuation of the strained relations between Turkey and Greece, but also resulted in the fall of the colonels, thus making it the deciding


factor that toppled the junta and made democracy a possibility. On the 22nd of July 1974, very swiftly following the failed Cypriot invasion, powerful army officers signed a petition ‘demanding the formation of a ‘National Salvation’ council’ to be headed by Karamanlis.37 After the threat of war, the decision was made for former Prime Minister Karamanlis to return to his position to reinvigorate the Greek political system and make progress toward democracy. He was sworn in to office at 4am on the 24th of July with his New Democracy party, and immediately moved to reinstate democracy.38 Karamanlis had four objectives in his return to power: facing the ‘national crisis’ of Turkish invasion of Cyprus, the reestablishment of democracy, the development of a strong government and to make ‘a powerful moderate party a force in Greek politics’.39 Karamanlis partially withdrew the Greeks from the military wing of NATO,40 claiming that there was ‘little value for Greek security if it was not capable of preventing an armed clash between two of its members’.41 However, the possibility of reconciliation with Turkey was not feasible in the climate immediately following the junta due to the intense political mistakes made in the Cyprus situation.

Though relations with Turkey were still strained, returning to democracy was a simpler process. The restoration of democracy in Greece was aided by the previous democratic system that was in place in Greece. As there was a workable system by which to temporarily use following the junta, Karamanlis was able to reinstate the 1952 constitution after declaring the 1967 constitution implemented by Papadopoulos null and void.42 Karamanlis also legalised the Communist Party, and revoked the ‘emergency measures’ of the junta that prevented freedom of speech and the press.43 This provided a background to moving toward a new constitution and new form of government. On the 17th of November 1974, Karamanlis won the first elections held in Greece in over seven years. His election also resulted in a referendum to decide whether Greece should retain its monarchy.

---

42 Ibid, p. 171.
43 Ibid, p. 171.
referendum resulted in the collapse of the monarchy and the establishment of an official republic. 44 Such a move abandoned ‘decades of conservative rule’ 45, and enabled democracy to be restored in Greece, and thus new approaches to internal and international relations. Through the establishment of a new government, there was a progression to also an ‘independent foreign policy within a Western framework’ that would enable relations with Turkey to be addressed, though not restored.46

In addition to the early movements of Karamanlis’ New Democracy party to restoring democracy, there were two major events that aided in and asserted that democracy in Greece was workable. One was the Colonels’ Trials in 1975, and the other was the election of PASOK, the derivative of resistance group PAK. Firstly, the trials of the Colonels in 1975 provided closure to many Greeks and reassured them that there was no leniency for the illegal actions of the Colonels The three main perpetrators were tried and convicted for high treason. However, their trial included questioning over torture against citizens, inhumane legislation as well as the events of the Polytechnic, with all of these serving to ensure a heavy sentence of the death penalty, which was reduce to life imprisonment.47 These trials showed the public that there was justice in Greece, and that those responsible for the seven years of economic decline, political unrest and social destruction would be held accountable. However, it was the rise of PASOK that confirmed that Greece had returned to an economic system that was capable of being sustained. By employing a multi-party system in 1974 after the fall of the junta, there was evidence of considerable transition of the Greek parliamentary system.48 The Greek socialist party PASOK rose triumphantly to power in 1981, winning the election with 48.1 per cent of the vote.49 This was possible due to the deliberate organisational and ideological traits that separated it both from other political parties in Greece at the time, but also other socialist parties in Europe. The capability of PASOK, the first socialist government to be elected in Greece, rested in its approach to

46 Ibid, p. 56.
politics that attracted people from immensely different social groups and political inclinations.\textsuperscript{50} The possibility that Greece was able to elect a socialist party to government after the terrible events of the junta was a reflection of the political progress that was made by the country and clearly highlighted the movement from repression of the left in Greek politics.

The transition to democracy from dictatorship in Greece was relatively quick. The fall of the colonels was impacted by events that occurred throughout the junta, and highlighted that a democratic system was the only possible style of government in Greece that would best serve its people. From assessing the climate in which the junta was established, there was no possible way that period of military dictatorship would last or provide a solution of longevity in Greece, as was one of their main aims. Greece would indeed be reborn under the junta, but instead of being subject to the strictness of the Colonel’s regime, would rebuild itself as a democratic nation. The way in which the colonels dealt with issues throughout the junta was representative of their inexperience and brash approach to politics. Yet, this approach also led to their failure. Greece was able to return to democracy due to the actions of the colonels. Though, it was through their misinterpretation of Greek society and politics, as well as the international climate that Greece was once again democratic. Without the colonels, there would have continued to be a democratic rule under the monarchy that was reflective of old-style Greek politics and old-world views. Though the colonels attempted to retain the Hellenism of the country, it was through their strict anti-modernism regime that Greece was able to progress into a political structure that reflected the changing international climate.

\textbf{Bibliography}

\textbf{Primary Sources:}


Secondary Sources:


Appendix 1: A selection of 3 broadcasts of the Polytechnic Students and their translations.


Extract 1:

Πρόσκληψη των δημοσιογράφων:

Εδώ πολυτεχνείο... Εδώ πολυτεχνείο... Σας μιλά ο ραδιοφωνικός σταθμός των ελεύθερων αγωνιζομένων φοιτητών, των ελεύθερων αγωνιζομένων Ελλήνων.

Η Συντονιστική Επιτροπή των φοιτητών που βρίσκονται στο πολυτεχνείο καλεί όλους τους δημοσιογράφους των Αθηναικών εφημερίδων σε πρές κόμψαμες που θα δώσει μέσα στο πολυτεχνείο στις 3.30 το μεσημέρι. Παρακαλείται η Πύλη και τα μεγάφωνα του Πολυτεχνείο να μεταδώσουν την παραπάνω ανακοίνωση.

Invitation to Journalists:

Polytechnic here... Polytechnic here... This is the radio station of the free struggling students, the free struggling Greeks.

The Co-ordinating Committee of the students who are in the polytechnic invites all the journalists of the Athenian newspapers to a press conference that will be given inside the polytechnic at 3:30 in the afternoon. Please use the gates and the megaphones of the polytechnic will give further instructions.

Extract 2:

Γενική Έκκληση

Εδώ πολυτεχνείο... Εδώ πολυτεχνείο... Ελληνικέ λαέ, η νική μας είναι κοντά.. όλους ο λαός να κατέβει στους δρόμους της Αθήνας.. Γενική κινητοποίηση... Πρέπει να νικήσουμε. ‘Η τώρα ή ποτέ. Εμπρός λαέ την Αθήνας. ‘Η τώρα ή ποτέ...

Εδώ πολυτεχνείο... Εδώ πολυτεχνείο... Λαέ της Αθήνας. Δείξε τη δυναμή σου. Αγωνίσου για την λαϊκή κυριαρχία. Κατεβά στο δρ’όμο... Τα ελπιδοφόρα μνήματα μας έρχονται απο παντού... είμαστε όλοι εδώ στο πολυτεχνείο, ψυχραίμοι... όλοι αποφασισμένοι να
αγωνισθούμε μέχρι να νικήσουμε. Λαέ της Αθήνας, με ψυχραμία και πρεμία κατεβά στους δρόμους για να αγωνισθείς.

**General Announcement:**

Polytechnic here... Polytechnic here... People of Greece, our freedom is near. All of the people must descend on the streets of Athens. General mobilization... we must win. It’s now or never. Hello people of Athens. It’s now or never.

Polytechnic here... Polytechnic here... People of Athens. Show your strength. Fight for popular control. Descend on the streets. Our freedom messages come from everywhere.. We are all at the polytechnic, collected... all determined to fight until we win. People of Athens, with coolness and peacefulness, descend on the streets of Athens to fight.

**Extract 3:**

Μη μας σκοτώσετε...:

Αδέλφια μας στρατιώτες, μη μας σκοτώσετε. Είμαστε αδέλφια. Πώς είναι δυνατόν να πυροβολήσετε; Αυτή τη στιγμή εγώ ο ίδιος αρχίζω τον Εθνικό Ύμνο, το σύμβολο της Ελευθερίας. Τα παιδιά σου, ελληνική λαε, βρίσκονται στις επάλξεις της ελευθερίας. Ελληνική λαε, τα παιδιά σου δεν πρόκειται να χτυπήσουν. Η Χούντα στέλνει τανκς για φοβέρα.

Please do not kill us...:

Our soldier brothers, do not kill us. We are brothers. How is it that the stronger will shoot us? This moment, I the same as you, begin the National Anthem, the symbol of Freedom. Your children, fellow Greeks, find themselves in the battlements of freedom. Fellow Greeks, your children don’t want to fight. The Junta is just sending tanks to evoke fear.