

SAVING A CONTINENT

THE UNTOLD STORY OF
THE MARSHALL PLAN

CHARLES L. MEE, JR.





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PART ONE



1

THE OPPORTUNITY

IN JANUARY 1947, high above the Mediterranean, in the wild and barren mountains of northern Greece - near Mount Olympus, the legendary home of the gods - ragged, armed gangs of outlaws had managed to harass the Greek government almost to the point of collapse. The outlaws, who called themselves rebels (*antártēs*), were holed up throughout the northern and central parts of Greece, along the Piniós River, in the Pindus Mountains - where they fought by night and disappeared during the day. The cities of Greece belonged to the central government, and the countryside belonged to the *antártēs* - a situation that during the next several decades would become the very model of the modern polity in much of the world.

Subhi Sadi, the Middle Eastern representative of the Chase Bank, reported to his home office in New York: "Actually there are two Greeces: cities such as Athens, Piraeus, and Salonica where the government is in control but with the help of strong security forces - especially in the working people's quarters; and the countryside where the government is not in control except where the Armed Forces operate."

The *antártēs* were, by 1947, reduced to subsistence. They had few medicines, no aspirin or sulfa drugs, little salt, cloth, shoes, oil, flour, or cigarettes. But they did have corn bread and goat cheese, and, like guerrilla fighters everywhere, they needed not so much to win as to persist until the will of the governors was exhausted. And the aim of the *antártēs* was aided by general economic conditions in Greece. American diplomatic reports (touchingly classified secret and top secret) mentioned, "Food prices up 4 percent this week, Govt deficit hit new high for last reporting period, imports were trickle, food supplies about exhausted. This has resulted in widespread unrest . . . demands of merchant seamen for 110 percent wage increases, Piraeus dock workers for double present wages, threatened strike textile mill workers."

Britain had long supported the uncertain Greek government. Greece had been Britain's ally during the war, and when the Greek king had had to flee the Nazis, the British took him in. After the war, the British had a natural affinity for the government of Greece, and in the memoranda and cables he sent home, Richard Windle, a British representative to an economic commission in Greece, was constrained to acknowledge that the

situation was “sticky.”

The antártes had been spawned by the [EAM](#), the National Liberation Front, a large and popular political movement with a membership of about 700,000. Drawn primarily from the working class and the peasants, the EAM was generally leftist, with a somewhat disorganized, largely Communist leadership. During the course of World War II, the EAM had brought together a substantial military force, the [ELAS](#), which had become the most effective guerrilla band in Greece. By the time the Germans had been compelled to withdraw from Greece, in the autumn of 1944, ELAS had come to control most of northern Greece, and EAM, meanwhile, had carried out a mixed program of terror, reform, vendetta, modernization, and slapdash justice that had earned it broad popular support.

Then, in December 1944, government police forces fired on an EAM demonstration in Athens. Civil war threatened. The Russians remained pointedly distant from the Greek Communists. British troops intervened on the side of the government, and the government’s forces defeated EAM.

The British gave full support to the government even though British diplomats frankly considered the regime corrupt; for, just as EAM had shown itself ready to engage in vendetta and terror, so too had the government customarily used terror, arrests, beatings, deportation, and murder in order to have its way.

Former EAM/ELAS men retreated to the mountains, and the country did dissolve in civil war. “There is really no state here,” an American Foreign Service officer cabled Washington, “in the Western concept. Rather we have a loose hierarchy of individualistic politicians, some worse than others, who are so preoccupied with their own struggle for power that they have no time, even assuming capacity, to develop economic policy.”

By January 1947, however, the British were no longer able to support their friends in Greece. The government needed both economic and military aid in order to hold out against the antártes, but the British, so devastated by the Second World War, had no more money or credit or arms to offer.