Çekiç Ile Örs Arasında (Between a Rock and a Hard Place)\(^1\)

7.1 Introduction

Civil wars necessitate recruitment and propaganda to execute the conflict and gain supporters. The strategies deployed in these respects display how the conflict is conceived and who it embraces. This chapter explores the local operations of the conflict and considers how they were structured by the wider national context. In doing so, it locates the Muslims of Western Thrace in the strategies of both sides of the civil war and outlines how the Muslims responded to them.

The onset of the civil war in Western Thrace denied absolute control to either the Communist forces (the DSE) or the National Army (EES). The Muslim community was faced with adapting to a contest that saw both sides, in turn, demanding their compliance and help, then later raiding their resources and violently imposing their respective wills upon them. To explain how these actions occurred requires an analysis of the operational and strategic actions of the two warring parties in the region.

The Communist campaign of the civil war would display both continuity and change from the pattern established under the Axis occupation. The consolidation of Communist regimes to the north of Greece provided the Communist insurgents with additional resources and options. Yet, the decision of the KKE leadership to set-up a state-like apparatus (in both civilian and military terms) in the areas it controlled demanded a heavy price from the local population. In the Rhodope Mountains, few were prepared to pay it. KKE’s efforts to appeal to local Muslims had been both inconsistent and late. The arrival of an ‘imported’ Muslim leader (Mihri Belli) and the creation of a DSE ‘Ottoman Battalion’ failed to galvanise widespread support. Soon, the DSE’s contact with the Muslim community was engulfed in fear and intimidation.

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\(^1\) Editorial in *Trakya*, 23 June 1947.
For its part, the Greek government integrated the Muslim community into its anti-Communist campaign through a variety of means, including conscription to the EES and membership of paramilitary groups. As the conflict evolved, the compulsory evacuation of Muslim villages in the Rhodope Mountains also became a strategic asset in the hands of the government forces. Although at no point during the civil war did the Muslim community appear to embrace the conflict as ‘its own’, the government’s anti-communist agenda found a naturally sympathetic audience among the conservative local Muslims, a community whose Ottoman inheritance contained fiercely anti-Russian historical narratives. At the same time, however, the local state authorities proved unable to resolve their own conflicts of attitude towards the Muslim community. To them, the minority continued to be treated as the ‘other’, warranting suspicion and caution.

7.2 Muslim soldiers of the Proletarian revolution

As the Greek civil war began, the principal strategic aim of the DSE became ‘the creation of a free territory in the area of Macedonia and the liberation of the entire Macedonia-Thrace region with Thessaloniki at its centre’ (Iliou 2005: 207). The realisation of this objective would enable the DSE and its patron KKE to build the foundations of ‘new Greece’ and assume the status of a legitimate government. In this context, the support pledged by Greece’s Communist northern neighbours (Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and Albania), became an essential precondition for the insurgents’ survival. Maintaining open channels with these countries ensured the uninterrupted supply of arms and ammunition to the Greek Communists as well as access to medical care for injured soldiers. Greece’s northern neighbours also provided a safe haven during periods of protracted offensives by the Greek EES.

Between the spring and summer of 1947 there was a massive expansion of the DSE forces throughout the country, reaching an estimated manpower of 15,000 fighters (Margaritis 2001: 337, Vol. I). In response, the EES launched Operation Terminus (Επιχείρηση Τερμίνος) in April 1947. For Eastern Macedonia and Western Thrace, in particular, the operation envisaged the total defeat of all DSE forces in the area by November 1947. In the meantime, the operation prioritised the cutting-off of Western Thracian communist insurgents from the main body of DSE forces in Eastern Macedonia. For this purpose, the EES conducted a series of mopping-up operations, in Evros (Operation Falakro/Επιχείρηση Φαλακρό, early June 1947) and north-east of Komotini (Operation Rhodope/Επιχείρηση Ροδόπη, early July 1947)\(^2\) along with some additional activity in the area north of Xanthi. Despite its

\(^2\) The main operations were conducted in the area Chloe-Smigada-Sarakini-Kato Drosini-Ragada.