



When Intelligence Made a Difference

— POST COLD WAR —

Dismantling of 17 November

by Maria (Mary) Papageorgiou

Intelligence is essential to the national security of any country against both internal and external threats. After the fall of the USSR and the end of the Cold War, however, the role of intelligence services has often been questioned.¹

Following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the exchange of intelligence took on an international character, and bilateral intelligence-sharing relationships were even established between countries that were not traditional allies.² The terrorist attacks in Spain in 2003 and the UK in 2005 put pressure on national intelligence services to adjust to the new threats.³ As this evolved “a strategic mismatch between American and European approaches to counter-terrorism” was revealed.⁴ Small state’s security policies depend largely on domestic conditions.⁵ Therefore, the intelligence services and counterterrorism structures of a small state may fall behind global “standards” due to a lack of political will or resources, to different views on national security, and the absence of a universally accepted legal definition of terrorism.

Evolution of the Greek Intelligence Service

The Greek national intelligence service cannot be compared with its counterparts in countries such as the US, China, Russia, or Britain. Throughout its history, its practices were mainly driven by the interests of Greek political parties. The first security

department in Greece was established in January 1926 and was known as the State Security Branch-Geniki Asphalia.⁶ Its successor, the Greek Central Intelligence Services (CIS-KYP), was officially formed in 1953 and “was organized based on military standards with the help of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).”⁷ KYP was strongly influenced by the CIA station in Athens and even acted as a “stay-behind” force monitoring any possible communist rebellion.⁸ This organization reported to the prime minister and was tasked with defending national security, armed forces security, and public security. In its first years, its role was limited and mainly associated with internal issues, such as fighting communism and threats from Turkey. A 1986 Presidential Decree (N.D. 1645/1986)⁹ upgraded the KYP to a self-standing civil agency directly responsible to the Prime Minister with the Minister of Order as its political head and was renamed to National Intelligence Service (NIS-EYP). The role and powers of EYP were limited due to a lack of consensus between the two major political parties on how to define terrorism¹⁰ as well as by the media’s tolerance and publishing of the terrorists’ communiqués. At that period, according to academic and security specialist Mary Bossi, “the Governments, both left and right, generally agreed that it was much safer to keep the secret services faction-riven, inefficient and dependent on political control and patronage than to modernize them into a powerful intelligence apparatus.”¹¹

However, the EYP’s contribution and involvement in the dissolving and arrests of the 17 November terrorist group and securing the Olympic Games were considered extremely successful and drew favorable attention from the media and citizens bringing the National Intelligence Service into the spotlight.

“17 November” Revolutionary Terrorist Group

17 November was a radical leftist group established in 1975, which identified itself as a Marxist and anti-imperialist group with strong anti-American proclamations. It carried out the assassination

1. Hughes, G. (2011). “Intelligence in the Cold War.” *Intelligence and National Security*, 26(6), 755-758.
2. Reveron, D. S. (2006). “Old Allies, New Friends: Intelligence-Sharing in the War on Terror.” *Orbis*, 50(3), pp. 453-468.
3. Nomikos, J. M. (2008). “Greece’s Intelligence Community Reform and New Challenges.” *American Intelligence Journal*, 26(1), pp. 45-49.
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5. Thorhallsson, B., & Steinsson, S. (2017). “Small state foreign policy.” In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*.

6. Nomikos (2008).
7. The Intelligence Service history (in Greek) is available at <http://www.nis.gr/portal/page/portal/NIS/>.
8. Murtagh, P. (1994). *The Rape of Greece: The King, the Colonels and the Resistance*. London: Simon & Schuster.
9. Newspaper of the Greek government available at <http://www.et.gr>.
10. Karyotis, G. (2007). Securitization of Greek Terrorism and Arrest of the Revolutionary Organization November 17’. *Cooperation and Conflict*, 42(3), 271-293.
11. As found on George Kassimeris, *Europe’s Last Red Terrorists: The Revolutionary Organization 17 November*, New York University Press, 2001, p. 82.

of the CIA station chief in Athens, Richard Welch, in December 1975. Until its dissolution in 2002 the group committed 23 murders, numerous bombings, and a series of robberies. It was considered to be the country's premier terrorist organization and among Europe's longest-running.¹² Interestingly, 17 November operated solely in Athens where the revolutionary self-proclaimed group had gained a lot of sympathizers in the left and had promoted "a Robin Hood image."¹³ The domestic responses to the terrorist acts of the group since 1975 were ineffective (even negligent, given that for 27 years no member of the terrorist group was arrested, thus missing many opportunities to follow the leads).¹⁴

During the period "October 1981 to November 1983, 17 November did not perpetrate any terrorist activities or release any documents, leading the intelligence services, the police, and the mass media to presume that the organization had dissolved."¹⁵ In addition to that, the official response of the National Intelligence Service in 1982 was stating "17 November is likely to be a 'phantom organization' that possibly does not exist, but is simply a loosely organized group of isolated anarchists that share a common belief in armed struggle."¹⁶

Intelligence Reform

The cooperation of NIS with CIA from the mid-1970s had not produced any results. Later attempts, such as the operation called "Diver" in November 1998,¹⁷ that was designed to sell to 17 November "smart rockets," capable of hitting with millimeter accuracy, was not successful and did not provide any substantial information on the group's activities or its hideouts. During that period EYP, according to its former director, "has tried to forge closer cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and to enhance its international cooperation with other Services. It has recruited new qualified staff and renewed its equipment, moving to the computer age and training its personnel."¹⁸

12. Kassimeris, G. (2013). Greece: the persistence of political terrorism. *International Affairs*, 89(1), 131-142.

13. Smith, H. (1999). "Terrorists hold Greece hostage." *Guardian*. May 27.

14. Kassimeris, G. (2001). *Europe's Last Red Terrorists: The Revolutionary Organization 17 November*. NYU Press.

15. Banoutsos A. (2008). "Mapping the development of anti-terror legislation in Greece in the aftermath of 9/11." Research Institute for European and American Studies (RIEAS), research paper no. 120.

16. Papachelas, A., & Telloglou, T. (2002). *Fakelos 17 Noemvri 17* (The 17 November Dossier). Athens: Estia Publications (in Greek). p. 122.

17. Chatzidis. K. "Diver: The Operational Trap That Ended in the Trash." *Ta Nea*. January 27, 2001.

18. Apostolidis, P. (2007). "Intelligence services in the national securi-

However, it was the assassination of British Defense Attaché Stephen Saunders in Athens on the 8 June 2002 by members of 17 November that put a lot of pressure on the Greek government, fearful of the country's reputation prior to the 2004 Olympic Games as "its inability of effectively dealing with terrorism was damaging the country's international image."¹⁹

The Greek government demonstrated a new determination to deal with terrorism immediately and effectively as reflected in Prime Minister's Costas Simitis' and the Minister of Foreign Affairs' speeches and statements. This Greek political discourse was considered by researchers²⁰ as the securitization act that elevated terrorism in Greece to a matter of national importance that justified the use of extreme measures according to the Copenhagen school theory on security.²¹ Subsequently, it was supported by a new antiterrorist law (2928)²² that provided both the intelligence service and the police greater powers, while introducing a witness protection program and amnesty for those members of terrorist groups who would cooperate with authorities and provide information.

The securitization of terrorism in Greece along with new measures it initiated – a cohesive policy against terrorism and an effective intelligence system – proved essential for the arrest of 17 November members. The country's intelligence services procured advanced technologies and specialized training with more resources and more technical cooperation with foreign intelligence services, mainly the British and American. That led to the introduction of new surveillance techniques, such as wiretaps, extensive training, and a computerized crime management system.²³ This cooperation prompted a gradual reappraisal of policies in the pursuit of 17 November.

The efforts of the EYP, along with the Greek police and its Counter Terrorist Unit, in that period became more coordinated, collating personal information from various sources, such as telephone conversations and the videotaping individuals identified as suspects, while a new round of investigations was initiated.

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19. Nomikos, J. M. (2007). "Terrorism, media, and intelligence in Greece: Capturing the 17 November group." *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, 20(1), pp. 70-1.

20. Nomikos (2007) and Karyotis.

21. See Holger Stritsel. "Toward a theory of Securitization: Copenhagen and Beyond." *European Journal of International Relations*.

September 1, 2007 at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1354066107080128>.

22. Newspaper of the Greek government, available at <http://www.et.gr>.

23. Karyotis (2007).

It was the premature bomb explosion on June 29, 2002, at the port of Piraeus that led to the first arrest of a 17 November member, Savvas Xiros. From then on, through a massive archive research on the manifestos, media communiqués and the information that arose after the accidental bomb detonation, EYP, along with the Greek Police's Counter Terrorist Unit, connected older, unexploited evidence to the new facts that unraveled the location of two of the group's hideouts that contained weapons, files, banners, missiles, and bombs. Nineteen suspected members of 17 November were arrested and prosecuted, among them the group's leader, Alexandros Giotopoulos. The statements of the suspects and the findings in the hideouts generated new information that further led the EYP and the police to identify and arrest the members of another Greek terrorist group acting in the same period, the Revolutionary Popular Struggle (ELA).

The efforts and success of the National Intelligence Service in the dismantling and imprisonment of the 17 November terrorist group were praised both in the political world and the media that devoted several headlines on the day to day developments. This restored the agency's credibility.

After the full dissolution of the 17 November group, a Presidential Decree (N.D. 255/2002)²⁴ adopted on September 25, 2002, assigned the National Intelligence a broader agenda and a new operational framework to improve significantly its electronic surveillance and organization to face the new challenges of internal and external threats arising in the 21st Century.²⁵

Maria Papageorgiou is a PhD candidate at University of Minho in Portugal.

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