

Two officers convicted for killing 15-year-old Greek student

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On Monday police officer Epaminondas Korkoneas was found guilty of murder with direct intent, for killing 15 year-old student Alexis Grigoropoulos on December 6, 2008. Grigoropoulos was killed by a shot to the chest during an evening patrol by the police in the Exarchia district of Athens.

Korkoneas, who was part of the armed Special Guard police unit, was sentenced to life imprisonment. Also charged was co-defendant and fellow officer Vasilis Saraliotis, who received 10 years as an accessory to the murder.

Alexis' killing sparked the worst unrest Greece has seen in over 30 years. Several weeks of protests, including widespread rioting, took place against the police and the then-New Democracy government in Athens and other major cities.

On the first anniversary of his death last December, further smaller scale protests were held.

The sentence, after a six-month trial, is more severe than the original charge of murder with possible intent.

The 4-3 majority verdict was delivered by a mixed panel of three regular judges and 4 jurors, as prescribed by the Greek judicial system, with three jurors and one judge voting in favour.

The verdict was delivered as a result of evidence that established beyond reasonable doubt that Alexis was the victim of police murder. Contrary to media reports at the time that the fatal shot was fired into the air as a warning and had ricocheted, Coroner Simeon Mesogitis told the court in June, "The culprit's hand was aimed at the crowd when he fired. It was neither up nor down."

In a sign of desperation, defence lawyer Alexis Kougiass attempted to issue a plaint (a written statement of complaint to the court) against the coroner, on the grounds that the witness lacked credibility as a scientist.

Monday's proceedings were also marked by an extraordinary incident. Alexis' grandmother began arguing with Saraliotis' mother, as the latter was giving evidence as part of her son's application to postpone his sentencing. A police guard on duty in court then shouted at his colleagues to throw the grandmother out. This caused an outburst by defence lawyer N. Kostantopoulos, who demanded of the guard, "Is justice yours to take by force?" The police guard in question was later relieved of his duties until the trial was over.

During the trial, Korkoneas' defence team had attempted to portray Alexis as a troublemaker.

Following the trial, Grigoropoulos's mother, Gina Tsalikian, supported the convictions and spoke out against the lies of the police. "For us, his family, today marks the end of a terrible show that attempted to blacken and insult the memory of our innocent child, with the perpetrators of this crime and the lawyer representing Epaminondas Korkoneas [Alexis Kougiass]," she said.

"I feel completely vindicated by the court's decision that was the result of a painful procedure for me during which light was shed on many aspects of this crime. What was proven is that a cold blooded murder was carried out for no reason against an innocent 15 year old boy, Alexis Grigoropoulos—my son."

A spokesman for the family told the BBC, "Of course, Alexandros is not coming back, but at least what is important for the family is that his good name has been restored."

A guilty verdict of murder against a policeman is an extraordinary event, not least given the fact that, according to Amnesty International, human rights violations by the police are commonplace in Greece.

The trial took place as savage austerity measures

began to be imposed on Greek workers by the social democratic government of Prime Minister Georgios Papandreou, at the behest of the International Monetary Fund and the European Union.

From the moment it occurred, the murder of Alexis was an explosive issue. The potential for a bitter reaction to the acquittal of the two officers, particularly if the judges had over-ruled a majority verdict by the jurors, has not lessened in the intervening period.

Indeed such was the fear in ruling circles that the trial would lead once again to mass unrest that it had to be held in the town of Amfissa, 120 miles northwest of Athens. The authorities claimed this was necessary due to the fact that an “extremist group” had threatened to kill the officers.

In reality, the decision to move the trial was tied to the fact that the mass of the Greek population is today far worse off economically than it was in December 2008 when Alexis was killed. In this context, from the ruling elite’s standpoint, it was preferable to allow the two policemen to be called to account, in order to prevent Alexis’ killing from becoming a rallying point for oppositional sentiment.

With protests against the unprecedented cuts diverted into harmless channels by the trade union bureaucracy, a verdict in favour of the police officers would have undoubtedly destabilised this situation.

Despite the verdict, the ruling class has no intention of curbing police violence. Rejecting persistent calls, including from many who live in the Exarchia district, the government has refused to disband the widely-hated Special Guard.

Manos Koufoglou, the chair of the residents association of Exarchia, told the BBC, “Police violence goes on. The government has not done enough to reform the police. There will be a demonstration to mark the anniversary of the murder. We will not forget.”

In the coming period, the police and the repressive forces of the state will be called upon to further suppress opposition to the effects of the austerity measures. Over the past year, riot police have been a virtual permanent presence in Athens. In August the government mobilised the army and imposed what was effectively a state of martial law in order to break a nationwide truckers’ strike. Recently a meeting of Papandreou’s new cabinet members in Thessalonica

had to be protected by around 5,000 riot police and security staff.

This week riot police were once again used against striking workers in Athens. Yesterday a squad of police stormed the Acropolis to break up a protest by culture ministry staff. The workers were striking for a second day to protest plans by the government to dismiss 320 fixed-term employees whose contracts expire at the end of the month. The workers are also demanding unpaid salaries that total some €5 million over a two-year period.

The riot police smashed through the monument perimeter and also used tear gas to disperse media covering the demonstration. Despite the police brutality the workers refused to leave and the strike continued, with the ancient monument remaining closed to visitors.

Korkoneas and Saraliotis have appealed against the verdict, and there is speculation that Korkoneas’ sentence will eventually be reduced. Such a scenario is not without precedent. Athanasios Melistas’ manslaughter conviction for shooting a student during a demonstration in 1985 was overturned by court of appeal in 1990.



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