Faces of defiance: Newly unearthed photos document the 1944 Kaisariani massacre of 200 Greek Communists by the Nazis

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Upright, with a firm and determined gaze, a last song on their lips, the prisoners march in pairs to the Kaisariani execution ground in the east of the Greek capital, Athens. A non-commissioned officer of the German occupiers captures the scene with his camera.

There are 200 Greek resistance fighters who are executed by the Nazis on this May 1, 1944—predominantly members of the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) as well as 12 Trotskyists.

Most of them had previously been imprisoned for years in the notorious Akronafplia fortress prison on the Peloponnese peninsula and were then transferred to the Haidari concentration camp, run by the SS, in the northwest of Athens. Torture, hunger and forced labour were part of everyday life there. From the Haidari concentration camp, they were now brought in military lorries to the Kaisariani execution ground.

Arriving at the place of execution, they are made to line up in groups of 20 men side by side in front of a wall, eye to eye with the German shooters. Some have raised their fist in defiance. The faceless Wehrmacht soldiers, of whom only black boots, steel helmets and rifle barrels can be seen, open fire on the defenceless men. The brutal spectacle is repeated 10 times until all 200 prisoners are killed.

The photographs shown here were completely unknown until a few months ago. They belong to a series of 13 pictures that suddenly appeared on the internet in mid-February 2026 and make the Kaisariani massacre visible and tangible for the first time. It is one of the bloodiest and most grievous crimes committed by the Nazi occupiers in Greece, which they perpetrated just a few months before their retreat.

The photos are of outstanding historical significance. They document not only the course of the massacre from the arrival of the prisoners in Kaisariani to their execution but also give the victims a face. They show what was previously only known from anecdotes: the courageous and self-confident attitude with which these political prisoners expressed their resistance even when facing their death. After years of imprisonment, they had retained their fighting spirit right to the end.

The pictures now illustrate many descriptions, poems and songs that many a historian may have previously regarded as an exaggerated glorification of the communists. On May 28, 1944, a few weeks after the massacre, the Trotskyist newspaper *Diethnistis* (*Internationalist*) wrote of the attitude of the Trotskyists, who are said to have been part of the first group executed:

> The first group, with raised fists, holding their heads high, looking proudly forward—towards the life they had honoured so much—sang the hymn of the International: “Arise, ye starvelings from your slumbers…”. One began to speak in German to the German soldiers: “You are also slaves of capital, brothers. Down with the wars and the fatherlands of the capitalists. Long live the 4th International, which will realise the revolution…” He did not get to finish speaking. The machine guns mowed down the 20 heroic fighters of the world revolution for socialism…

The following nine groups, predominantly supporters and members of the Greek Communist Party (KKE), also stepped forward courageously one after the other, writes *Diethnistis*. However, they sang the Greek national anthem, in accordance with the nationalist orientation of the resistance movement under the influence of its Stalinist leadership.

The great resonance that the discovery of the photos has triggered is remarkable. It was not only historians and experts who spoke out. Families recognised their murdered relatives in the photos and published statements; workers and students shared their shock and sympathy on social media and at public events.

The photographs originate from the private property of Wehrmacht non-commissioned officer Hermann Heuer, which a Belgian collector and dealer had found and offered for sale on the eBay auction platform on February 14. There, members of the “Greece at WWII Archives” Facebook group discovered the pictures and shared them among their followers, from where they soon went around the world. After historians had examined the photos and classified them as genuine, a debate ensued as to what should happen with this important discovery.

Under public pressure, the Greek government under the right-wing New Democracy (ND) finally purchased the entire collection of 262 photos for €100,000. Culture Minister Lina Mendoni announced that a National Photo Archive would be established and the collection digitised. The photographs were given the status of a monument.

The Kaisariani massacre

The Kaisariani massacre was part of the policy of annihilation by the Nazis, who had occupied Greece in the spring of 1941 together with their allies Italy and Bulgaria. They left a trail of devastation on their campaign of conquest. Around 1,700 Greek villages were razed to the ground and their inhabitants massacred; 90 percent of the Jewish population of Thessaloniki, one of the largest Jewish communities in Europe, died in the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

Right at the beginning of the occupation, the Nazis introduced a quota in order to collectively punish the population for partisan actions: 50 dead Greeks for one German soldier killed. They also justified the Kaisariani

massacre as a reprisal for the killing of German soldiers in a partisan ambush. Three days before the execution, a unit of the Greek People's Liberation Army (ELAS) in the Laconia region had murdered German Major General Franz Krech and three companions. ELAS was the armed wing of the National Liberation Front (EAM), the resistance movement which was guided by the Communist Party.

Thereupon the occupiers published a leaflet in which they ordered a draconian reprisal: "The shooting of 200 communists on May 1, 1944. The shooting of all men whom the German troops meet on the road from Molai to Sparta outside the villages. Under the influence of this crime, Greek volunteers independently killed another 100 communists."

The "Greek volunteers" refers to the so-called "Security Battalions," anti-communist Greek units that collaborated with the Wehrmacht, committed numerous crimes and were integrated into the national police and army on a large scale after the war.

Who were the "Kaisariani 200"?

At least 620 Greek resistance fighters as well as 20 Italian and five German anti-fascists were murdered at Kaisariani during the Nazi occupation. The massacre on May Day 1944 was the largest mass execution in Athens, according to historian Menelaos Charalampidis.

To this day, not all the biographies of the 200 victims are known; often only sparse information has been handed down. Most came from the working class and had already been arrested under the dictatorial regime of Ioannis Metaxas, which was brought to power in August 1936. They had fought in large strike movements before the war, spending years in prison.

In April 1941, the Metaxas regime handed over about 2,000 left-wing prisoners to the Nazis, who held them as hostages. Most were supporters and members of the KKE, including the entire party leadership. In Kaisariani, leading member Stelios Sklavenas, who had played an inglorious role in the Stalinist Popular Front policy before the war, was murdered.

The short life of the 35-year-old communist Napoleon Soukatzidis also ended in Kaisariani. His story was adapted in the Greek film *The Last Note* (2017). The commercial clerk, who came from Asia Minor and had already been arrested by the Metaxas regime as a KKE member in 1936, mastered five languages, including German, which is why the Nazis used him as an interpreter in the concentration camp. When the execution was imminent, the camp commandant offered to spare him and send another prisoner to his death instead. Soukatzidis refused—and was executed.

The teacher and Trotskyist Giorgos Krokos had already been sentenced to prison in the early 1930s for "communist propaganda" and exiled to an island. He managed to escape to Athens in 1938 but was caught shortly afterwards and imprisoned in Akronafplia.

As he was transported to the Kaisariani execution ground on May 1, 1944, he threw his last farewell letter to his family out of the lorry: "I kiss you all. From the place of execution. Giorgos Krokos, May 1, 1944, morning. To be sent to: Anna K. Plakidi, Kampos, Ikaria." Athenian residents collected the prisoners' notes by the roadside and sent them to their relatives.

After the recent discovery of the photos, descendants of Krokos published an open letter in which they "reverently, moved and proudly" honoured the 200 executed men who "faced death with dignity, true to their convictions to the end." They demanded that the photos be handed over to the Kaisariani Museum and that a National Resistance Museum be established in Athens.

The 38-year-old Krokos was one of 12 Trotskyists murdered in Kaisariani. Some had previously been prominent members of Archeio-Marxism—a specific Marxist tendency in Greece that was admitted to the International Left Opposition in 1930, collapsed in 1934 and partly merged with the Trotskyist party of Pantelis Pouliopoulos.

Among them, for example, was the shoemaker Petros Andronis. He was brutally tortured by the Greek special police for eight days before being handed over to the Nazis. Other Archeio-Marxists were Georgios Papadimitriou, a cadre in Thessaloniki, the Jewish worker Anri Perachia and the shoemaker Christos Chatzichristos. According to a newspaper report from 1945, the 30-year-old baker Iraklis Mitsis from the Epirus region is said to have shouted before the shooting: "Down with Stalin. Long live the world revolution. Long live the Fourth International."[1]

With the targeted execution of political prisoners, the Nazis attempted to make an example of the resistance movement, which was gaining more and more support. The brutal war of the occupiers against the Greek civilian population had not limited the partisan struggle—on the contrary. Around 120,000 fighters joined the ELAS army; around 2 million people supported the EAM.

The role of the Greek Stalinists

Today's Communist Party of Greece, which currently has 21 seats in parliament, places itself in the tradition of the partisan movement and attempts to politically co-opt the memory of the Kaisariani massacre. In articles, at events and at a large concert at the memorial site, it has honoured the executed KKE members as its heroes and communist patriots. In 2016, it also opened a museum about the history of the EAM resistance movement in Kaisariani.

But to this day, the leadership of the KKE pursues an openly Stalinist programme, justifies the Great Terror in the Soviet Union, which claimed the lives of countless loyal Bolsheviks, and covers up the counterrevolutionary role that it itself played at decisive moments of Greek history. In fact, it bears a substantial share of political responsibility for the tragic fate of the heroic fighters and its own members who were murdered by the Nazis in 1944.

From 1935 onwards, the KKE pursued the "Popular Front" line of the Communist International, which led to defeats for the workers' movement across Europe, particularly in Spain and France. At that time, the KKE was just developing into a mass party and had gained significant influence during the tobacco workers' strikes in the spring of 1936. However, instead of steering the strikes in a revolutionary direction, its leadership desperately attempted to forge a "Popular Front" alliance with the bourgeois Liberal Party.

The working class paid a heavy price. The king and the Greek bourgeoisie responded to the strike movement by bringing the right-wing monarchist and former military officer Ioannis Metaxas to power. On August 4, 1936, he established a dictatorship, immediately banned the KKE and other workers' organisations, and intensified the anti-communist persecution.

In Akronafplia prison

Hundreds of workers, trade unionists, students and intellectuals were arrested and detained in various prisons or on remote islands. Among them were not only the leading figures of the KKE, but also numerous Trotskyists such as the former KKE leader Pantelis Pouliopoulos

(1900-1943), who had founded the Left Opposition to the Stalinist faction within the party. He was arrested in 1938 under Metaxas and imprisoned in Akronafplia, where he translated Leon Trotsky's work *The Revolution Betrayed* and engaged in intense discussions with fellow prisoners in an effort to unite the Trotskyist groups into a party of the Fourth International.

When the Nazis advanced on Athens in the spring of 1941, it was Pouliopoulos who proposed a collective prison breakout before the Wehrmacht could capture Akronafplia. Due to the prevailing chaos, the conditions for an escape at the time were very favourable, as former prisoners later recalled.

The Trotskyist Loukas Karliaftis (Kostas Kastritis, 1905–2003), who was himself imprisoned in Akronafplia at the time and survived the war, wrote in retrospect:

> The prison guards were in a state of sheer panic during the bombardments. They sought shelter in their bunkers and thought more of their own families than of us. No one knew what fate awaited us under the fascists. During an air raid, as the Nazis were crossing the Isthmus and capturing the Peloponnese, we were sitting in our shelter. Then, in a sudden moment of silence, we heard a voice. It was Pouliopoulos. Calmly and resolutely, he spoke:
>
> "We must decide here and now how we are going to escape. The guards are in a terrible panic and so disorganised that we can certainly succeed in fleeing. Otherwise, they will hand us over to the Nazis" ...
>
> The Stalinist leader Theos not only refused to even consider our proposal but actually attacked us: "Your proposal is a provocation. It is designed to endanger the collective." He explained to us that the commandant had given his word not to hand us over to the Germans and would release us as soon as the British had withdrawn.[2]

Karliaftis and other survivors were convinced that an escape would have had a high chance of success, and that the 600 communist prisoners could have disarmed the guards. There was no shortage of examples: in the 1930s and 1940s, the KKE had successfully carried out numerous large-scale prison breakouts.

However, the Stalinist leadership, which played a leading role among the prison inmates, rejected the planning of a breakout as "adventurism" and prevented prisoners from escaping from Akronafplia. KKE functionaries Ioannis Ioannidis, Vasilis Bartziotas and Kostas Theos instead trusted the camp commandant, who had given his "military word of honour" to release them when the Germans reached the peninsula. But he broke his word, writes Bartziotas in his memoirs. "The traitors have no military honour whatsoever," he comments indignantly—as if there had been even the slightest reason to trust a Greek commandant who held them prisoner in the interests of an anti-communist regime.

Thereupon their prisoners' committee had turned to the British commander-in-chief on the Peloponnese peninsula as well as a Greek general—but in vain. This description by the Stalinist functionary is quoted today by the KKE newspaper *Rizospastis* to "prove" that the KKE in Akronafplia did indeed strive for the liberation of the prisoners.[3]

Instead of taking Pouliopoulos' proposal seriously and jointly planning a prison breakout, the Stalinists begged the Greek and British bourgeoisie in vain for their release. Furthermore, they stoked illusions in the mercy of the Nazis.

At this time, April 1941, the Hitler-Stalin Pact was still in effect. The agreement between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union was a catastrophic blow to the Comintern throughout Europe. From 1939 to 1941, the Communist parties had to cease their anti-fascist propaganda and activities. Only when Hitler invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, and thus broke the pact, did the Comintern change its tactics. In Greece, this meant that the resistance movement EAM was not founded until September 1941, although the Nazis had already occupied the country for almost five months.

In Akronafplia, the Hitler-Stalin pact caused great confusion. The leading Stalinists lined up behind the new line and considered it a clever move by Stalin, as KKE functionary Ioannidis himself later recalled. They now claimed that the German occupiers would not bomb and attack the prisoners of Akronafplia because they were communists and stood on the side of the German ally, the Soviet Union.

Former Akronafplia prisoners have retrospectively condemned this fatal policy in their memoirs. Giannis Manousakas, himself a member of the KKE, denounced the incompetence of the party leadership, which was responsible for the fact that the prisoners could not escape before the Germans arrived: "Ioannidis and the other leading members knew exactly that the camp commandant was lying. ... But this lie of the commandant served their already made decision that we should stay inside."[4]

The Stalinists in Akronafplia had thus prevented the possible rescue of hundreds of prisoners from the Nazis—they themselves, however, escaped and survived the war. In their case, the KKE Politburo ordered well-prepared liberation operations. Dozens of selected Akronafplia prisoners, including leading Stalinists Theos, Ioannidis and Bartziotas, were transferred to sanatoriums in 1942-43 as real or alleged tuberculosis patients and were able to break out of custody from there with the support of the partisans. Once free again, all three functionaries occupied leading positions in the resistance movement. Ioannidis, together with Giorgis Siantos, effectively led the KKE because General Secretary Nikos Zachariadis was imprisoned in the Dachau concentration camp until the end of the war.

The vast majority of the rank-and-file KKE members, and the Trotskyists, however, remained in captivity—their deaths were sealed. Over 100 of them were shot by Italian occupiers in the mass execution of Kournovo near the city of Larissa on June 6, 1943, also a reprisal for a sabotage action by the partisans. Among the victims was Pantelis Pouliopoulos, the most important figure of Greek Marxism.

One year later followed the murder of the 200 prisoners in Kaisariani.

The suppression of a revolutionary policy

But the terror perpetrated by the occupiers could not break the resistance. When the Wehrmacht was forced to withdraw in the autumn of 1944, the partisan movement controlled almost the entire country. As in other European countries, the possibility of a revolutionary development opened up in Greece at the end of the war in 1944/45. It was the Stalinist KKE leadership that prevented this powerful movement of the masses from taking the path of social revolution.

Ever since its foundation, the resistance organisation EAM, under the influence of the KKE, pursued not a revolutionary but a bourgeois-nationalist programme. In accordance with the foreign policy orientation of the Soviet Union towards its pact with the Allies, it limited its goals to national liberation and independence.

Although the EAM appealed above all to patriotic feelings with concepts such as "the Greek people" and "defence of the nation," the first months of Nazi occupation had already revealed the social character of the burgeoning resistance. The broad opposition was not primarily ignited by national considerations, but by the catastrophic social conditions,

especially the issue of supplies. In the spring of 1942, workers in Athens organised a first strike against the occupiers. By the end of the war, the radicalisation took on enormous proportions, although the EAM leadership tried to suppress revolutionary moods and demands within its own ranks.

Those who advocated a revolutionary perspective—the Greek Trotskyists—were not only persecuted by the Nazis. The KKE's security police, the OPLA (Organisation for the Protection of the People's Struggle), murdered about 80 Trotskyists in 1944/45 because they rejected the KKE's adaptation to the bourgeois government and Greek nationalism and fought instead for the programme of the world socialist revolution.

Moscow pushed for cooperation with the Allies and the Greek bourgeoisie. In 1944, Stalin secretly agreed with Prime Minister Winston Churchill to leave Greece to the British sphere of influence. He rejected a seizure of power by the EAM—and the KKE leadership implemented this line. After the withdrawal of the Nazis, it campaigned for law-and-order and entered the bourgeois government of "national unity."

British and Greek government troops violently forced the working class, which had been mobilised by the war, to its knees. On December 3, 1944, soldiers shot at peacefully protesting workers in Athens—the "Dekemvriana" bloodbath. The ensuing fighting ended in January 1945 with the disarming of the resistance army, to which the KKE agreed in the Varkiza Pact. Two years later, the Greek Civil War (1946-1949) began, which ended with the complete defeat of the KKE.

Years of anti-communist persecution followed, which lasted until the end of the military dictatorship in 1974. Thousands of KKE members and their families had to flee abroad and lost their citizenship. Anyone who had a communist in the family was considered a suspect.

The relatives of the 200 victims of Kaisariani received no justice—on the contrary. The Nazi war criminals and their collaborators who had rampaged in Greece were able to make careers undisturbed. Their atrocities disappeared under a blanket of silence for decades.

Conclusion

The photos' discovery brings these profound historical experiences back into public consciousness. In a radio broadcast, Greek historian Antonis Liakos remarked of the Contemporary Social History Archives (ASKI) that the visualisation of the massacre enabled a connection to the present, "and indeed in a difficult epoch in which murder and genocide continue, an epoch in which fascism rears its head with its many faces—whether with Trumpism or in the form of the extreme right in Europe."

The pictures do not tell a story from afar but speak to a generation that is once again facing the horrors of war and fascism and is searching for paths of resistance. They show the upright posture of the victims of Kaisariani. These people knew what was coming to them, and yet they did not bow. It is precisely for this reason that the photos raise questions that go beyond the massacre itself: Why were these courageous people not saved, although an escape would have been possible? Why was the powerful movement that they had helped to build disarmed and betrayed after the war?

The reasons must be sought in the devastating role of Stalinism in Greece. What these victims of fascism did not have was a political leadership that fought for a revolutionary conquest of power by the working class. When today's KKE claims the memory of the "Kaisariani 200" for itself, it conceals the fact that it is continuing the same Stalinist policy that led tens of thousands of courageous resistance fighters to defeat 80 years ago.

Biographical information on the Trotskyist victims can be found in contemporary reports of Trotskyist newspapers, which are collected here: https://arxeiomarxistikesmnimes.wordpress.com/martires/.

Loukas Karliaftis, "From Acronauplia to Nezero. Greek Trotskyism: From the Unification Conference to the Executions," Part 2, https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/revhist/backiss/vol3/no3/acrocamp2.html.

Thanasis Lekatis (Member of the History Department of the CC of the KKE), "Viografika sto apospasma kai avtoviografies sti laspi," Rizospastis, 14/15 March 2026.

Giannis Manousakas, Akronafplia (Thrylos kai pragmatikotita), Athens 1978, p. 176.

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[3] Thanasis Lekatis (Member of the History Department of the CC of the KKE), "Viografika sto apospasma kai avtoviografies sti laspi," Rizospastis, 14/15 March 2026.

[4] Giannis Manousakas, Akronafplia (Thrylos kai pragmatikotita), Athens 1978, p. 176.