

Nikos A. Marantzides. *Under Stalin's Shadow: A Global History of Greek Communism.* NIU Series in Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies. Ithaca: Northern Illinois University Press, an imprint of Cornell University Press, 2023. xi + 281 pp. \$32.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-5017-6834-7.



Reviewed by Paschalis Pechlivanis (Utrecht University)

Published on H-Diplo (October, 2023)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

Nikos Marantzides's new book on the history of the Greek Communist Party (Kommounistiko Komma Ellados, KKE) is a much-needed addition to the often self-centered historiography of Greek communism. The stated ambition of the book is not simply to tell the story of a national communist party but rather to provide "a history of international Communism from the perspective of its periphery in southeastern Europe" (p. 12) through the case study of the KKE. It does so successfully. Based on a rich multiarchival and multilingual source pool from Greece, eastern Europe, and western Europe, Marantzides succeeds in presenting a fascinating story of a rather tragic nature in which ideology, dreams, ambitions, and ideals clashed with harsh realities, power dynamics, and more than often shrewd expediency. The narrative skillfully shifts from the international and regional levels of the Communist International (Comintern) and the Balkan Communist Federation (BCF) to the local and to personal stories, especially of the lesser-known pioneers of the communist cause in Greece.

The book covers the period from 1918 to 1956, examining the birth of communism in Greece during the interwar period and its subsequent evolution until the end of the reign of arguably the most significant leader in the history of the party, Nikos Zachariadis. The first part of the book examines how the party initially known as Socialist Labor Party of Greece (Sosialistiko Ergatiko Komma Ellados, SEKE) experienced a slow and at times painful process of Bolshevization in becoming the KKE. Marantzides explains how this process was anything but smooth and straightforward as several hurdles in resources and communication made the relationship with the center of revolutionary communism, the Comintern, rather problematic. Thus, the main way for the Greek communists to keep in touch with the ideological revolutionary developments went mostly through the BCF. Even though ideological debates were always there, often fierce ones, the predominance of the Moscow center was never questioned. In this early period, as Marantzides notes, the Greeks had an "insignificant status within the Communist world" (p. 29).

This was mostly attributed to the low level of Bolshevization of the Greek party at the time, their marginalization within the BCF decision-making process, and above all their low capacity in human and material resources. Eventually, after Moscow decided to seriously invest in the establishment of a proper party mechanism by training cadres and the future leadership in the Soviet Union, the path of the KKE to Stalinization, even if bumpy, followed a similar trajectory to the other Balkan communist parties.

One of the main themes that runs through almost the entirety of the book, sometimes in the background and sometimes at the forefront, is the effect of the Macedonian question on the development and the very identity of the KKE. Marantzidis engages with this sensitive issue—in Greek historiography and public discourse—in a lucid, informative, and sober manner. Early in its history, the KKE confronted a dilemma that was destined to haunt it for at least half a century: how to deal with the future of the historic multiethnic region of Macedonia that was partitioned between Greece, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria after the Balkan Wars (1912-13). That issue would plague the relations between the Balkan communist parties for years to come, culminating during the Greek Civil War, when promises for an autonomous or independent communist Macedonia served as a bargaining chip among the Balkan comrades. Ironically, despite the professed internationalism, Balkan communists could not shake off national(ist) considerations completely, as Marantzidis illustrates. Due to the Comintern's insistence on using the grievances of suppressed minorities with a view to fostering revolutionary conditions within the region, it was decided that the Balkan communist parties should support the creation of an autonomous Macedonia where the right to self-determination of the Macedonians would be respected. Despite the concerns and reservations of several parties, not just the KKE, this resolution be-

came the official position of the Comintern and the BCF in 1923.

In general, the first part of the book provides an excellent overview of the challenges and the processes that were necessary to turn a rather insignificant group of revolutionary-minded activists and intellectuals into a robust and disciplined party with potential under the auspices of the Moscow center. It also became clear to the Greek communists that this asymmetrical relationship would occasionally come at a cost, personal and political. The inclusion of short biographical stories of the period's main protagonists also provides a good map to the reader of the human geography of the party. Having said that, this first part would have benefited from a deeper discussion of the domestic Greek political context, especially after the so-called National Schism between liberal Venizelists and Monarchists. It would be interesting to see how the rest of the political world perceived this emerging political force to fully grasp the impact of this new revolutionary political movement. To be fair, Marantzidis does not neglect this completely, as he refers for example to the "Idionimo" law of 1929, which was designed with the communists in mind (pp. 79-80), but compared to the second part of the book there seems to be a slight imbalance.

The book is at its strongest in the second part, where Marantzidis masterfully brings to the fore the international implications and complications of the KKE's activity in Greece. In a period densely packed with historical events, the author guides the reader through the Second World War, the resistance against the Nazi (and Italian and Bulgarian) occupation forces, and the Greek Civil War. He convincingly shows that during those crucial times nothing was predetermined and that the eventual outcomes were the results of a complex constellation of factors spanning from intracomunist rivalries and geopolitical shifts to personal agency. Furthermore, it was during the decade of the 1940s that the KKE became a special case with-

in the Balkan communist family. It was the only communist party in the region that did not manage to come to power, in contrast to its Balkan comrades, despite waging a full-fledged civil war. Marantzidis's main and most important contribution to international historiography lies exactly in this part. He shows how the international communist factor was crucial in making the armed bid for power possible. The solidarity expressed by the fraternal parties was pivotal in sustaining the insurgency despite the lukewarm stance of the Soviets and Joseph Stalin personally. The author portrays vividly the frustrations and the shattered hopes of the Greek communists when they realized that the broader geopolitical considerations of Moscow, with the advent of the Cold War in sight, would prevent them from achieving a complete takeover of Greece. Whether a consequence of the Soviet troops' refrainment from entering Greece in 1944 or the Tito-Stalin split and its broader repercussions, the fatal blow to the war effort of the KKE fighters came when their allies cut off their streamlined support toward the end of the Civil War in 1948-49. As Marantzidis very eloquently puts it: "the story of the DSE armed struggle appears to be a chronicle of a defeat foretold" (p. 180).

The book concludes by focusing on the tragic fate of the defeated communists who as political refugees found shelter in the fraternal socialist states scattered throughout Eastern Europe, thus signifying a new phase in the life of the party and its followers. The total dependence on their comrades and the distance from Greece and its realities in the post-Civil War period took their toll on the higher levels of the party, too. With the death of Stalin and the ensuing destalinization process that swept the communist world, the KKE inevitably went through its own turbulent period, with the demise of General Secretary Zachariadis being the symbolic and substantial apex as illustrated by Marantzidis.

On a more critical note, regarding the scope of the book, it is not very clear why the chosen period under examination ends in 1956. The narrative stops somewhat abruptly, and one would have expected the story to continue at least until 1968 when the KKE went through an official split, resulting in two KKEs (KKE and KKE-Interior)—a development that had to do a lot with broader changes and shifts in international communism, especially with the advent of Eurocommunism, and that would have fit perfectly with the declared ambition of the book. Instead, these developments are only touched upon in the short epilogue.

Nonetheless, a review is about the book that was actually written and not about what the reviewer would like to read. Marantzidis has written an important and necessary book. His sober, detailed, and perceptive analysis offers a superb introduction to the history of the Greek Communist Party and its place within the broader communist world until the mid-1950s. What makes this book stand out is that Marantzidis is both critical and sympathetic toward the history of the Greek communists. Critical because he does not shy away from stressing the errors in judgement, mistakes, and weaknesses of the party's leadership. At the same time, he also sympathizes with the challenges and the occasionally inescapable conditions that his protagonists had to face in the long and tumultuous history of Greek communism both in Greece and internationally. Hopefully, this perceptive and excellently researched book will pave the way for an increased international interest in the history of Greek communism, beyond the often polarized domestic public discourse on the topic.

Paschalis Pechlivanis is assistant professor of the history of international relations at Utrecht University and co-coordinator of the Cold War Research Network in the Netherlands. He is the author of America and Romania in the Cold War: A Differentiated Détente, 1969-80 (Routledge, 2019).

His research focuses on US foreign policy, the Cold War in the Balkans, and on the field of new diplomatic history.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

Citation: Paschalis Pechlivanis. Review of Marantzides, Nikos A, *Under Stalin's Shadow: A Global History of Greek Communism*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. October, 2023.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=59292>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.