

# For a Place in History: Explaining Greece's Revolutionary Organization 17 November

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Article abstract

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by  
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**ABSTRACT**

*The Revolutionary Organization 17 November (17N) conducted terrorist attacks in Greece for 27 years (1975-2002), making it the most durable of the militant Leftist revolutionary groups that emerged from the European radical milieu of the 1970s. 17N went to great lengths in its communiqués — and eventually in trial testimony — to position itself as the only authentic, progressive political force in post-Junta Greece. In spite of the absence of any demonstrable mass political constituency, 17N's leaders convinced themselves that they represented the vanguard of political change in the country. But 17N was never an authentic revolutionary group. Instead, it was a clandestine band of disillusioned armed militants with a flair for revolutionary rhetoric and symbolism for whom terrorism had become a way of life: a career. Its members lived in a closed, self-referential world where terrorism became a way of life from which it was impossible to walk away or to confront reality. Feeling themselves to be a genuine instrument of history, 17N leaders believed that it did not matter that there could never be a military victory as long as 17N, 'intervened' and 'resisted.' For their operational leader, Dimitris Koufodinas, and many of his comrades what was important was the act of 'resistance' itself and the notion that blood and death, even one's own, would carry the mission forward, ultimately securing 17N a place in history.*

**INTRODUCTION**

The long history of Revolutionary Organization 17 November (17N)'s terrorism in Greece ended on 5 September 2002, when the group's leader of operations, Dimitris Koufodinas, turned himself in to the police after two months on the run. Koufodinas pulled up at police headquarters on Alexandras Avenue in a taxi at 2.35 pm, dressed in jeans, a black T-shirt, sunglasses, and a jockey. "I am Dimitris Koufodinas and I have come to turn myself in," he told the stunned duty

officer before being taken to the twelfth floor of the anti-terrorism squad. Koufodinas had been on the run since 29 June 2002 when a bomb being carried by Savvas Xiros, a senior 17N gunman, detonated prematurely in Piraeus. Soon after, from his hospital bed and apparently fearing for his life, Xiros gave the prosecutor in charge of the anti-terrorism investigation critical information that fuelled a chain reaction of arrests, leading in less than a month to the dismantling of the group which had acted with impunity for 27 years.<sup>1</sup>

The capture of Koufodinas and his group marked the demise of the last and most stubborn of a generation of ideological terrorists whose campaigns caused serious political and security problems in Western Europe for more than a quarter of a century. 17N, often referred to as *organossi phantasma* or phantom organization, was named after the day in 1973 when the military junta used tanks to crush a student-worker occupation of the Athens Polytechnic. Fanatically nationalistic, the group was anti-Greek establishment, bitterly anti-American, anti-Turkey, and anti-NATO, and was committed to removing US bases from Greek soil, the Turkish military presence from Cyprus, and severing Greece's ties to NATO and the European Union. Acting as the armed vanguard of the working class and the defender of Greek national independence, 17N carried out more than 100 attacks, assassinating US officials, Greek politicians, magistrates, newspaper publishers, industrialists, and ship-owners; planting bombs underneath the cars of diplomats; and firing rockets against foreign embassies and businesses.<sup>2</sup> Astonishingly, in all this time not one 17N terrorist was either killed or injured in an operation or as a result of actions by the Greek security and intelligence agencies. Nor did any undercover agent ever succeed in penetrating the group. The astronomical rewards offered by the Greek and US authorities went unclaimed.

In December 2003, after a marathon nine-month trial<sup>3</sup> held in a purpose-built courtroom in Athens' largest maximum-security prison, a three-member tribunal convicted 15 members of the group while another four were acquitted due to lack of sufficient evidence. The court upheld the state prosecutor's recommendation for 21 life terms and a 25-year sentence for accused leader and chief ideologue Alexandros Giotopoulos while Koufodinas — the group's operational leader — received 13 life sentences and 25 years in jail. Other life plus 25 year sentences were handed down to hitmen Christodoulos Xiros (10 life terms), his brother Savvas (six life terms), Vassilis Tzortzatos (four life terms), and Iraklis Kostaris (four life terms).<sup>4</sup>

## The Early Years

17N emerged at a time when Western Europe was the most active terrorist scene in the world. The mid-1970s was a period of Red and Black terror, state-sponsored political assassinations, kidnappings, and indiscriminate public bombings. In theory, 17N's main aim was to change the pattern of Greek society and

move it toward a revolutionary situation. Like the Red Army Faction (RAF) in Germany, *Action Directe* (AD) in France, and the Red Brigades (BR) in Italy, 17N also used the argument that “if violence constitutes the most efficient and essential instrument without which the revolution cannot succeed, then it is desired, rational and justified.”<sup>5</sup> However, the group’s trajectory and organizational evolution had been considerably different from those other revolutionary groups.

Unlike the RAF, BR, and AD, 17N did not begin as a loose network of minor groupings that shared general extreme-left orientations. Both BR and AD originally emerged from various cells with names such as CPM (*Collettivo Politico Metropolitano*) and Clodo (*Comite liquidant ou detournant les ordinateurs*).<sup>6</sup> Conversely, 17N never attempted to expand its sphere of influence on the national territory, which partly explains the organization’s operational continuity and its remarkable resistance to infiltration. Another striking difference between 17N and other groups was its targeting strategy.

Most revolutionary communist groups on the European scene graduated from low-level bombings to more lethal attacks. It was almost four years before the AD progressed from minor bombings to the assassination of the French general René Audran in January 1985. The Belgian Communist Combatant Cells (CCC) had carried out twenty-six bombings before it even considered a lethal attack and Italy’s BR went through seven years and two major operational phases before its leaders decided to ‘raise its sights’ from kneecappings to assassinations.<sup>7</sup> 17N adopted a radically different approach: they started off by killing their targets.

17N used its first three attacks to gain public sympathy and galvanize left-wing extremists into action. From 1975 to 1980, 17N attacks were deliberately designed to identify the group with the concerns of the Greek masses and to capitalize on public perceptions of American complicity in the emergence of the military dictatorship in Greece and the Turkish invasion of Cyprus. The group targeted symbolic enemies of the Greek populace, such as the USA and members of the 1967-74 police apparatus, to demonstrate its ethno-patriotic credentials and to highlight the fact that the first post-junta government of Konstantinos Karamanlis had allowed “crimes committed against the Greek people” to go unpunished. After killing Richard Welch, the CIA’s station chief in Athens, 17N tried to link American hegemonism to long-standing domestic problems, arguing that the continuing US presence humiliated Greek people and disfigured all aspects of national life. Conveying its rage through the dramatized style of the communiqué, 17N declared that,

enough is enough. The American imperialists and their domestic agents must understand that the Greek people are not a flock of sheep. They must also understand that this time the people won’t swallow their lies, provocations and poisonous propaganda; they

have realised that the Americans have tied the [Karamanlis first post-junta] government's hand behind its back so it has no independence of action and thus can do absolutely nothing. The main slogan of the 1973 Polytechnic uprising 'out with the Americans' remains today unfulfilled. The Americans are not out and what is worse, the government allows even more to come on national soil: multinational monopolies have moved here from Lebanon and the CIA moved its Middle East headquarters from Beirut to Athens. For the Americans, Greece continues to be a xefrago ambeli like it was throughout the dictatorship. A Latin American Banana Republic in the Southern Mediterranean.<sup>8</sup>

Seeking to link political activism, class conflict, and the armed struggle, the group released in April 1977 its manifesto, entitled, *Appantissi sta Kommata kai tis Organosseis* [A Response to Political Parties and Organizations].<sup>9</sup> The 28-page text presented the group's analysis and interpretations of political realities in post-1974 Greece. As its title indicated, the manifesto was a polemical response against mainstream political parties, extra-parliamentary organizations of the left and intelligentsia, as well as a critique concerned with the prospects and obstacles of democratisation in post-junta Greece. 17N offered an analysis of a society that required violence in order to be changed. The group, in fact, saw its violence as a logical and inevitable political consequence of national and constitutional processes. Greece's recent historical experience, it explained, "had very clearly shown that there could be no peaceful transition to socialism."<sup>10</sup> According to 17N, "to even mention transition to Socialism via peaceful, parliamentary, democratic means is, for Greece at least, an idiocy."<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, 17N attacked all mainstream political parties, especially the two Greek communist parties (KKE). The group charged that the KKE and the KKE-Interior had become fully reconciled to the political institutions and practices of the post-1974 regime, and were continuing the work of the Karamanlis government by effectively sabotaging the dynamics of class struggle. 17N also devoted half of its manifesto to challenging the extra-parliamentary left's notion of them as utopia-driven militants. The main criticism by the extra-parliamentary left was that 17N-style terrorist violence was counter-productive; it could only provoke stronger state repression and have damaging consequences for the movement. Predictably, 17N dismissed that view as "a classic revisionist argument," arguing that its actions "shouldn't be seen as isolated acts of violence, but as parts of a long-term, multi-faceted revolutionary process."<sup>12</sup> The group advocated revolutionary violence as a response to right-wing pressure and declining working-class radicalism. A belief that the organized proletariat could shape history allowed 17N to view violence as legitimate, heroic, and politically effective, and thus the most vital instrument of social war against bourgeois democracy.

### **The Only Road to a Socialist Greece: 17N in the 1980s**

After the electoral landslide of socialist PASOK in October 1981, 17N disappeared for two years. However, the assassination of US Navy Captain George Tsantes, head of the Joint US Military Advisory Group in Greece (JUSMAGG) naval division, and his Greek driver in November 1983 heralded the transition of revenge terrorism to a full-scale terrorist campaign. After the attack, 17N attacked Socialist premier Andreas Papandreou for renewing the US base agreement and breaking his pledges to pull out of both NATO and the European Community (EC). In 17N's eyes, Papandreou's 'betrayal' was a strong and sufficient justification for terrorism and became the ideological catalyst that confirmed the group's view that 'popular revolutionary violence' and not parliamentarianism was the only road to socialism.

Less than five months after the Tsantes hit, in April 1984, 17N attacked but failed to assassinate JUSMAGG Master Sergeant Robert Judd in a fresh attempt to draw attention to the continued operation of the US bases in Greece. The group used the attacks as an occasion to declare war against the Americans, inaugurating a campaign of violence to remove them from Greece. It is characteristic that both the Tsantes and Judd communiqués opened with identical paragraphs: "The bases will not leave with either elections or with parliamentary methods. . . . Only dynamic mass struggle and justified revolutionary violence will force them out."<sup>13</sup> The core argument of the communiqués was that "imperialist dependence is the main problem of the country."<sup>14</sup> 17N argued that decades of Western imperialist exploitation and oppression had deformed national political life and blocked the country's economic system. Adapting a classic Marxist-Leninist analysis of imperialism, the group also pointed out that this "specific model of economic development imposed by the American-led imperialist *katestimenó* (establishment)" had durable consequences for the development of both social relations and the productive forces in the country.<sup>15</sup>

By 1984, it was clear that 17N was determined to use any operational tools and military tactics to achieve a complete removal of the "US occupation forces" in Greece. The group became convinced that a constant level of military activity would eventually lead to the complete paralysis of American military forces in Greece. Following the basic mechanisms of the Provisional IRA strategy in Northern Ireland and the RAF in Germany, 17N attempted to use its limited resources to wage a war of psychological attrition against Americans stationed in Greece.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, vitriolic attacks on the PASOK government continued unabated. 17N charged that in spite of their messianic rhetoric the Socialists in office had come to emulate New Democracy governmental ethics and practices. Convinced that PASOK was "now working for the Right, which explains why it has yet to be overthrown,"<sup>17</sup> 17N took the view that there was no alternative but to widen the struggle through maximum coercive pressure on the Greek government.

17N's determination to "participate" in the political process culminated in the assassinations of the "main representatives" of the LMAT or "lumpen big bourgeois class."<sup>18</sup> The group devoted thousands of words to giving substance to the view that the country's plutocrats, the LMAT, were responsible for the deep polarizations running from top to bottom of Greece's inequality-riven society. By attacking the key representatives of the LMAT, 17N believed it was attacking deceit, self-interest, the scandalous privileges of tax exemptions, capitalist exploitation, and corporate greed, which were the root causes for the country's economic decline, de-industrialization, total stagnation, and miserable working-class living standards. Combating LMAT-led capitalist exploitation was also the alleged motivation for the bomb attacks against several tax-revenue offices that year. Describing the country's taxation system as "a mechanism of robbing the people's income," 17N used the bombings as a device to bring to wider attention what it saw as blatant provocation.<sup>19</sup> The group charged that "the swindler-state" used taxation to "steal from the working people to give back to the sharks of LMAT and international imperialism."<sup>20</sup> 17N believed that Greek society should no longer tolerate tax evasion on the present massive scale. To make the point clearer still, 17N said that more than "450 billion drachma [US\$ 1.45 billion] in tax revenues flew abroad each year" with disastrous effect on the population's living standards, as it undermined "the provision of essential public services such as education, health, welfare, infrastructure and national security."<sup>21</sup>

The national health service, in particular, was a 17N central concern: the group held that Greece's health system was a disgrace. Public expenditure on health was extremely low and the quality of services dismal. Health professionals and managers, according to 17N, were primarily responsible for the poor quality of care and shambolic services. Instead of delivering decent health care to patients, 17N declared, doctors ruthlessly exploited them. The kneecapping attack on Zacharias Kapsalakis, well-known neurosurgeon and owner of *Engefalos* medical centre, in February 1987 was both "an act of protest and dynamic resistance" against dehumanization and "a warning to all those doctors — big and otherwise — pocketing brown envelopes from desperate patients in public hospitals and private clinics."<sup>22</sup> The Kapsalakis communiqué closed with 17N demands for universal and equal health-care provision and "modern, clean and comfortable hospitals."<sup>23</sup>

Increased tension in the Aegean between Greece and Turkey over oil-drilling rights and other territorial disputes absorbed most of the group's attention during 1987-88. Its response to the *Sismik-I* crisis in March, which brought the two NATO allies close to war, was to attack US military targets in Athens. Holding NATO, and the United States in particular, responsible for the crisis, 17N bombed two US military buses in the space of four months. 17N believed that the US was behind "expansionist Turkish militarism." Referring to the *Sismik-I* episode, the group claimed that Washington was deliberately instigating

Turkey's expansionist designs in the Aegean and in Cyprus to increase Greek reliance on American military protection.

Opposition to US imperialism and impending Greek-American talks over the extension of the 1983 US military bases agreement in Greece motivated a barrage of 17N attacks. The 17N leadership assumed that a consistent level of military activity against American targets would put pressure on the US and Greek governments. From April 1987 to the end of June 1988, five of the group's six attacks were against American and Turkish targets. 17N declared that Greek national sovereignty was non-negotiable and warned that it "would not allow any Papandreou to sell it off."<sup>24</sup> Until the Papandreou government closed all American bases, removed the 164 nuclear warheads, and took the country out of NATO, 17N was determined to continue at all costs its battle against "the murdering American imperialists" stationed on Greek soil.<sup>25</sup>

In 1988, corruption became the focus of attention for the group. Having reached the conclusion that Greek politicians on all sides had cheating in their bloodstream, 17N argued that the Bank of Crete scandal was symptomatic of a society in a serious crisis. The collapse of the Socialist government and prosecution of Papandreou and four of his senior ministers on corruption charges related to the multi-billion drachma Bank of Crete embezzlement and illegal phone-tapping confirmed the group's belief that Greek democracy was deeply flawed. The Bank of Crete scandal, 17N explained in a communiqué, was symptomatic of "a society in a political, financial, cultural and moral crisis."<sup>26</sup> Greece, 17N argued, was in desperate need of catharsis but "effective catharsis and corruption-cleansing had to go hand-in-hand with the wholesale change of its political and judicial world."<sup>27</sup> Before 1989 was out, 17N had targeted two state magistrates, a former PASOK minister (one of the four ex-ministers indicted on bribery charges), and New Democracy's chief parliamentary spokesman, and son-in-law of the party's leader, Pavlos Bakoyiannis for their alleged involvement in the scandal. The aim of 17N's intensive military activity was to keep popular attention focused on the underlying political causes of the crisis and unmask the key figures responsible for the "looting" of the Bank of Crete. These attacks were also intended to destabilize further the state and dictate the course of events. 17N used the Bakoyiannis assassination in particular to send a clear warning against the "corrupt and rotten establishment."<sup>28</sup> Soon afterwards, the cabinet, in an emergency session, increased the information-reward to 200 million drachma, changed the entire police leadership, announced a new set of counter-terrorism measures, and a serious hunt for 17N militants began.

Despite police pressure, 17N raids against an Athens police station, a military warehouse, and the National Museum expanded the group's arsenal considerably, and suggested the lengths to which 17N was prepared to go in order to influence everyday political discourse. A solid mixture of ideological absolutism and militant 'vanguardism,' which soon degenerated into cold-blooded extrem-



ism, led the group to assert that its armed struggle was crucial. 17N began to claim that its 15-year armed struggle was “the only remaining legitimate and moral struggle against the homicidal and barbaric political regime.”<sup>29</sup>

During the same period, 17N’s ideological antipathy toward the new New Democracy government was fortified by Konstantinos Mitsotakis’s near-dogmatic free-market approach. The then premier’s determination to privatize or close 40 heavily indebted state-controlled industries infuriated the group. Although these companies had been draining state resources for years, 17N saw New Democracy’s economic policy as a sustained assault against the labor force and public sector. At an ideological level, 17N believed that New Democracy’s conservatism with its neo-liberal, integrationist policy served the interests of foreign capital and multinationals, and aided American global economic hegemony. Having reviewed New Democracy’s economic policy stance, the group concluded that the main motivation behind the sale of assets and industrial relations legislation, presented by the Mitsotakis government as part of a plan to revive and modernize the Greek economy, was an attempted structural rejuvenation of Greek capitalism.

### **Nihilism, Exhibitionism, and Conspiracy-Theorizing: 17N in the 1990s**

17N opposition to EC financial arrangements and the US-led Operation *Desert Storm* in the Persian Gulf motivated a wave of attacks on ‘European’ and ‘Atlanticist’ targets throughout 1991. Strikes on British and American banks, the British Petroleum (BP) offices, and the French military attaché maintained an astonishing momentum and expressed the group’s angry reaction against Western military intervention. 17N saw the 1990-91 Gulf War against Iraq as a classic case of military aggression by the American imperialist machine. The symbolic assassination of US Air Force Sergeant Ronald Stewart in March 1991 confirmed this view. 17N used the attack on Stewart to underline the fact that the Kuwaiti crisis “had nothing to do with respect of international law and everything to do with the imposition of an American-dominated ‘new world order’ in the region.”<sup>30</sup>

After the war, US President George Bush became a particular focus for denunciation by the group. America’s ideological triumph in the Cold War and its emergence in the early 1990s as the sole superpower was greeted with deep disdain. The July 1991 US presidential official visit in Athens aggravated 17N’s resentment for “Bush and American imperialism” and its “self-serving” globalist vision of a ‘New World Order.’ The group tried to use the Bush visit to force the ‘Cyprus issue’ to the forefront of national debate. After targeting three Turkish diplomats, 17N declared that Bush had come to impose (through “the agent government of petty Mitsotakis”)<sup>31</sup> a partition-confederation solution to Cyprus problem, “which does not include full withdrawal of the Turkish occupation troops and the return of all Greek Cypriots refugees to their homes.”<sup>32</sup>

Comparing Saddam Hussein's attack on Kuwait to the Turkish invasion of Northern Cyprus, 17N accused the Euro-Atlantic community of double standards in the application of international law.

After 1991, 17N's attitude toward the practice of violence changed. The failed rocket attack in July 1992 against New Democracy Finance Minister Yiannis Paleokrassas in the rush hour of Athens' city-centre, which resulted in a civilian death and numerous casualties, signalled an apparent inability to impose control over the military instrument. Persistent efforts by 17N to defend its action and transfer blame for the casualties onto the police authorities also revealed a growing detachment from reality. Attacked by the media for blind, indiscriminate terrorism, 17N argued that the police authorities deliberately left the 20-year-old student, Thanos Axarlian, to bleed to death in a crude attempt to use the incident against the group. However, the kneecapping of an inconspicuous New Democracy backbencher, Eleftherios Papadimitriou, four months later for supposedly endorsing his "leader's policy of selling off public property"<sup>33</sup> offered additional evidence of the group's confused thinking and nihilistic mindset.

The release on 17 November 1992 of a document entitled, *Manifesto 1992*, confirmed that the assaults against Paleokrassas and Papadimitriou were part of a radical shift in the group's attitude and focus. A mixture of political analysis, social commentary, and polemical hyperbole, *Manifesto 1992* represented a 17N attempt to display its revolutionary optimism and ideological continuity.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, the 15-page document was organizationally ordered to explain and justify the group's continuing presence on the post-1974 political scene. Attacking parliamentarianism, capitalist democracy, and reformism, 17N reaffirmed its ambition to organize working-class resistance and sustain "the popular movement" in its revolutionary mission. Despite the confident rhetoric of *Manifesto 1992*, 17N no longer seemed to have a coherent political strategy. At the same time, the group's language became insistently bombastic, repetitive, and sententious in tone.

17N pledges to sustain a consistent level of military activity failed to materialize as the rate of violence continued to decline. By 1995, the annual level of 17N attacks had fallen to one, down from a peak of 22 in 1991. At the same time, 17N motives became more difficult to decipher. The mortaring of MEGA TV studios in March 1995 during the station's main evening news confirmed the impression that 17N's attachment to unregulated violence had become the only way for the group to maintain its ideological identity and preserve its *raison d'être*. Claiming credit for the attack, 17N tried to deflect criticism and vindicate its extremism by suggesting a CIA-FBI-Greek media conspiracy plot against the group.

During that time, 17N began to systematically attack the new Socialist premier, Costas Simitis, for his attempts to normalize relations with Turkey and

bring Greece closer to the Euro-Atlantic community. Simitis outraged 17N in 1996 when, in a speech in the Greek Parliament hours after the Imia crisis was defused, he thanked the US government for their diplomatic intervention. 17N saw the Imia incident<sup>35</sup> as a disgraceful politico-military defeat for Greece (“the Greek Waterloo” in the group’s words) and denounced Simitis for his handling of the episode. The group portrayed the Greek premier as a stooge of the Americans, the EU, and the LMAT — “the best available after Papandreou’s resignation.”<sup>36</sup>

The group always saw the application of violence as the most effective form of political pressure against a US-run “world-disorder.” 17N’s reaction to NATO’s strategy toward the Balkans led to the assassination of Brigadier Stephen Saunders, the British military attaché in Athens, its last hit before the arrests of summer 2002. 17N justified its act as a response to “a murderous imperialist war.”<sup>37</sup> NATO’s military campaign in Yugoslavia, the group declared, was never a humanitarian mission in the region but an attack on a sovereign state in blatant violation of long-standing international agreements and conventions. Presenting the NATO leaders as a self-constituted posse of international vigilantes, 17N further argued that NATO’s strategy toward the Balkans had been shaped by the United States’ strategic interests and geo-political ambitions in Europe rather than the local needs for conflict resolution and peacekeeping. According to the group, the West’s failure to seek authorization from the UN Security Council for the 78-day bombing campaign against targets in Kosovo and Serbia represented the spirit of the new globalized international conscience. By attacking Stephen Saunders, 17N thought it attacked the inbred arrogance of the Anglo-Saxon political and military establishment, and its “deeply-rooted belief that they are superior people and therefore legalized to annihilate” through sanctions and bombardment “pariah nations,” bringing misery, disease, and death upon innocent people.<sup>38</sup>

### **Fighting for Revolution?**

Throughout its long campaign, the group maintained an extremely one-dimensional view of a world peopled by heroes and villains. Combining ideological rigidity, fanatical nationalism, contempt for the existing order, and a cult of violence for its own sake, 17N stubbornly refused to accept that its eclectic belief system was incompatible with modern democratic principles.

In the Korydallos court, Dimitris Koufodinas<sup>39</sup> argued that from a historical perspective and given the revolutionary movement’s course in Greece, the end of 17N’s story [had] yet to be written.<sup>40</sup> He believed that 17N alone continued to represent in Greece a pure and undefiled Marxist-Leninist faith, dismissing the universal designation of them as terrorists and their actions as terrorism. Challenging the court’s tendency to depict their acts as senseless barbarity devoid of any serious political content, Koufodinas asserted that, “this present

could not put 17N on trial for what 17N really was.”<sup>41</sup> In his view, 17N “was, as the group had persistently stated from the very beginning, an organization of simple, popular fighters. And since it came from the guts of the populace, it was the populace’s voice that 17N listened to, and it was the populace’s own interests that it tried to serve.”<sup>42</sup>

Going back to the group’s armed debut in 1975 and the assassination of the CIA’s Richard Welch, Koufodinas tried to explain the source of 17N’s inspiration and motivation. “In December ’75,” he stated, “a group of fighters decide to execute CIA’s station chief in Athens.” In the words of Koufodinas there

couldn’t be a more clear and justified action. CIA’s station chief was and remains the long hand of American power in our country. Running a 5th column of a few hundred agents positioned in neuralgic posts inside the government, the state bureaucracy, the Army, the political parties and the media, he controls and directs the political, social and economic life of our country in relation to the interests of the USA. The Greek people know full well what CIA was all about, know the role it has played since the Civil War. [The role it had played] in every election, especially the 1961 election of rigging and violence; in the assassination of [Greek MP] Lambrakis, and the military junta and the tragedy of Cyprus. Why the Cyprus dossier has not been opened yet? Whatever happened to your justice and your democracy? Why so much selectivity for what is a crime and who is really a criminal? Who let the [junta] torturers walk free? Was it the people or was it your independent justice? For, the Greek people know exactly why the CIA’s station chief in Greece was executed. What they didn’t know exactly was who were behind this action and that was thanks to a campaign of disinformation, distortion and disorientation by the government, the political parties and the media. When the campaign of 17N began, a campaign of disinformation began with it and still continues to this day.<sup>43</sup>

At the same time, in an attempt to impose retrospective historical significance on what 17N were and did, Koufodinas claimed that

the left which 17N belonged to was the left of Lenin, Che Guevara and Velouchiotis; the left of the October, Spanish, Chinese and Cuban revolutions; the left of the anticolonial revolutions in Algeria and Vietnam, the left of May ’68 and November ’73; the left of urban guerrilla warfare.<sup>44</sup>

For Koufodinas, one could say anything one liked about 17N, except that they were something other than what they always claimed to be and showed themselves to be in all of their actions. 17N’s activity, he further argued, “had the very same characteristics with the activity of the [Greek] resistance.” He did not attempt to present himself as a modern-day Aris Velouchiotis, the charismatic

guerrilla leader and founder of ELAS (the Greek People's Liberation Army), but it quickly became apparent that he idolized him. "When Aris would enter a village and give under the nose of the Germans a speech in the village square with his armed partisans in formation, he was both demonstrating that armed resistance was possible and cultivating the ground for further activity."<sup>45</sup> By connecting ELAS's military aims and practices to these of 17N, Koufodinas wanted to show that the group's armed struggle taking place "in a country that has experienced humiliation, exclusion, state-terrorism, the absolute power of plutocrats, policemen and military judges" was merely defensive.<sup>46</sup>

Unlike Alexandros Giotopoulos,<sup>47</sup> the group's chief ideologue, who denied participation in 17N, Koufodinas — as one of the leaders and chief organizer of the organization's operations — took responsibility for the entire 17N experience and sought to defend their violent actions by placing them in the political and historical context of the period. An emblematic personality of 17N terrorism, Koufodinas embraced the view that Greece's "self-negating democracy" necessitated exactly the kind of political violence they had undertaken. Obsessively clinging to his conviction that they took on "the capitalist state and its agents," Koufodinas maintained that 17N were attempting to create an insurrectionary mood that would empower Greek people to take revolutionary political action.

Alexandros Giotopoulos, on the other hand, maintained throughout the trial that he had no involvement whatsoever with the group. In denying all 963 charges against him, Giotopoulos asserted that "the role of the [17N] leader was a police fabrication" and that the main reason why he was put behind bars was because "the Americans, the British and their collaborators in the Greek government want it that [way]."<sup>48</sup> At the same time, he put a good deal of effort into arguing that 17N must have been a horizontal cell organisation with no leadership. At the same time, he placed the group's actions in a political environment which, in his view, necessitated armed intervention in daily life. From his point of view, 17N activity was not terrorism but "an armed political struggle with the aim of toppling the capitalist regime in favour of an anti-bureaucratic form of socialism that would give power to the people."<sup>49</sup> Giotopoulos also seemed to believe that resorting to armed violence was a reasonable and calculated response to certain social and political circumstances. As such, he saw militant opposition as the only effective form of political pressure against American hegemonism and an unresponsive regime. According to his analysis, it was the

perpetuation of the dependence on the USA, the reproduction of huge economic inequalities and the total absence of a basic welfare state together with the low level of worker's income and the disappearance of agricultural income which drove young people to take up arms against representatives of dominant circles, place bombs against symbolic targets and violently clash with repressive mechanisms.<sup>50</sup>

Giotopoulos's attempts to link American hegemonism to long-standing domestic problems were reminiscent of 17N's Welch communiqué, in which 17N writers had argued that American presence on national soil was the root cause of Greece's underdevelopment and responsible for its perpetuation.<sup>51</sup>

Overall, Giotopoulos's court testimony shed no light on any major issues concerning the group's prehistory, motives, purposes, and notions of political power, though he spoke (in the few times when he chose to speak) with an authority rivalled only by that of Koufodinas. When asked by the chief judge if he would find the courage like his co-defendant Koufodinas to accept responsibility for his past actions, Giotopoulos' characteristic reply was: "that's exactly what I would have done, had I actually been the leader."<sup>52</sup> However, one cannot but be struck by Giotopoulos's overall stance. Even if one sets aside the ludicrousness of his claim that he has been "framed in an Anglo-American conspiracy because of his activity against the 1967-74 Greek dictatorship," the strongest aspect of his self-defence was that he relied up to the end on a heavy dose of defiance and mystique, as if this would somehow efface critique. Denouncing the hearing as a travesty of justice ("the decision is ridiculous, the entire world is laughing") and bombastically calling "today's Greece . . . a modern colony of the United States," Giotopoulos, like the group he led, refused to the very end to modify his ideological rigidity and doctrinal inflexibility, and tried to construct a 'language' with which to publicize his political existence, claim legitimacy, and pose as a representative of the entire community.

In that sense, Giotopoulos, like the majority of 17N members, had been impervious to political logic. Although the group saw its violence as an audacious protest against the Greek establishment, it never moved beyond terrorism to provoke a situation of crisis for the establishment it so bitterly opposed. Given its conception of political intervention and extra-parliamentary activism, 17N's organizational evolution was always certain to culminate into a full-scale campaign of terrorist violence. Ignoring the fact that violence "should not take the place of the political purpose, nor obliterate it,"<sup>53</sup> 17N continued the sporadic killing and wounding of high-profile targets as the most effective way to crystallize public disaffection against the regime and embed itself in mainstream consciousness.

### **For a Place in History**

What was 17N after all? According to Giotopoulos's defence lawyer, Yiannis Rachiotis, 17N was "an organisation very different" from the rest of the Left and from other armed groups that operated in Western Europe.<sup>54</sup> For Rachiotis, "the [Greek] left as we all know was, until 17N's emergence, on the defensive."<sup>55</sup> Offering a left-slanted interpretation of history, Rachiotis said that 17N epitomized "the attacking left, the hunted left that finally decides to become the hunter," seeking to restore a sense of proportion and balance.<sup>56</sup>

History, however, will judge 17N as a failed group. Irrespective of Rachiotis's readings and despite attempts by group members to justify their actions as an extension of a historically defined Greek communist tradition and a quest for national independence and nationhood, 17N was never an authentic revolutionary group. Rather, it was a clandestine band of disillusioned armed militants with a flair for revolutionary rhetoric and symbolism for whom terrorism had become a way of life: a career. It was not even "a variable of the movement gone crazy," to use the phraseology of Italian 'terrorist-philosopher' Antonio Negri.<sup>57</sup> If Koufodinas's apologia confirmed one thing, it was that he and the majority of his 17N comrades lived in a closed, self-referential world where terrorism became a way of life from which they found it impossible to walk away. Koufodinas's stubborn refusal throughout the trial to confront reality made him speak like a man whose entire sense of life revolved around the belief that destiny had somehow granted him this extraordinary privilege that he must guard well and pass on at some historical point. Feeling themselves to be a genuine instrument of history, 17N leaders advanced the view that it did not matter that there could never be a military victory as long as 17N 'intervened' and 'resisted.' For 17N's operational leader, Dimitris Koufodinas, and the majority of his comrades what was (and probably remains) important was the act of 'resistance' itself. And the notion that blood and death, even your own, somehow would carry the mission forward, ultimately securing 17N a place in history.

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### Endnotes

1. For a detailed account of the sequence of events that led to the breakthrough against 17N, see *Odyssey* (September-October 2002).
2. For a detailed analysis of 17N's historical antecedents, ideology, strategy, and attacks, see George Kassimeris, *Europe's Last Red Terrorists: The Revolutionary Organization 17 November* (London: Hurst, 2001).
3. The longest in modern Greek history.
4. Five other members (the younger of the Xiros brothers, Vassilis, Costas Karatsolis, Patroklos Tselentis, Sotiris Kondylis, and Costas Telios) received the maximum 25-year sentence. Telios, who turned himself in and was diagnosed with a severe psychiatric disability, was the only convicted member to receive a suspended sentence and walk free pending an appellate trial, on the condition that he report to his local police precinct monthly and not leave the country. Only four convicts received less than the maximum 25 years: Thomas Serifis (17 years), Dionysis Georgiadis (nine years), and eight years each to Nikos Papanastasiou and Pavlos Serifis. Papanastasiou and Tselentis together with two of the acquitted — Koufodinas' wife, Angeliki Sotiropoulou, and former trade unionist Yiannis Serifis — will be tried again following appeals filed by the state prosecutor.
5. Raphael Cohen-Almagor, "Foundations of Violence, Terror and War in the Writings of Marx, Engels and Lenin," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1991), p. 2.

6. See Michael Y. Dartnell, *Action Directe: Ultra-left terrorism in France, 1979-1987* (London: Frank Cass, 1995), pp.73-77; and Vittoriofranco S. Pisano, "A Survey of Terrorism of the Left in Italy: 1970-78," *Terrorism: An International Journal* 2, nos. 3 & 4 (1979), pp.171-213.
7. See Yonah Alexander and Dennis A. Pluchinsky, eds., *European Terrorism: Today & Tomorrow* (McLean,VA: Brassey's, 1992).
8. Richard Welch attack communiqué, dated December 1975.
9. 'Apantissi sta Kommata kai tis Organosseis' was published by the Athens daily, *Eleftherotypia*, in five parts between 27 March and 4 April 1977. 17N sent the text to the *Eleftherotypia* editor with a cover letter stating: "We are aware that your newspaper barely agrees with our positions but we are sending it to you for two reasons: 1) Yours was the only newspaper that did not try to distort the truth in relation to our actions. 2) Your newspaper has been the only one which, in the past has published a number of texts by extra-parliamentary left whose positions it doesn't accept either. Last summer, it was the only newspaper that published a text written by the German fighter Ralf Pole. Our text, surely, is long. Yet, it could be published in two or three parts. We have sent this text to your newspaper only. We shall wait one week. In case some pressures prevent you from publishing it, we shall then send it elsewhere. Signature: Revolutionary Organization 17 November. April 1977."
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. 17N communiqué taking credit for the attack on Judd, dated April 1984.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. See M.L.R. Smith, *Fighting for Ireland? The Military Strategy of the Irish Republican Army* (London: Routledge, 1955); and D.A. Pluchinsky, "An Organizational and Operational Analysis of Germany's Red Army Faction Terror Group (1972-1991)," in Alexander and Pluchinsky, eds., *European Terrorism*, pp.43-93.
17. 17N attack communiqué on police bus, dated 26 November 1985.
18. See 17N Angelopoulos attack communiqué, undated. Dimitris Angelopoulos, a steel magnate, was shot and killed on a central Athens street on his way to work on 8 April 1986.
19. Tax offices attack communiqué, dated 3 October 1986.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Kapsalakis attack communiqué, dated 1 February 1987.
23. Ibid.
24. Attack communiqué on US military bus, dated 5 August 1987.
25. Attack communiqués US military buses, dated 11 April and 5 August 1987 respectively.
26. Communiqué-commentary on the Bank of Crete scandal, dated 11 November 1988.
27. Ibid.
28. Bakoyiannis attack communiqué, dated 18 September 1989.
29. 17N communiqué — commentary, dated 9 October 1989.
30. 17N attack communiqué on Ronald Steward, dated 12 March 1991.
31. 17N attack communiqué on Turkish diplomat Cettin Gorgu, dated 7 October 1991.
32. 17N attack communiqué against Turkish diplomats Deniz Bolukbasi and Nilgun Kecici, dated 16 July 1991.



33. 17N attack communiqué on New Democracy MP Eleftherios Papadimitriou, dated December 1992.
34. *Manifesto 1992*, dated 17 November 1992.
35. In January 1996, Greece and Turkey almost went to war over the Aegean islet of Imia, and it was only the intervention of US President Bill Clinton and his assistant secretary of state, Richard Holbrooke, that actually prevented armed conflict between the two NATO allies.
36. 17N communiqué claiming responsibility for the Peratikos assassination in *Eleftherotypia*, 30 May 1997. Shipowner Costas Peratikos was ambushed and killed by 17N in broad daylight on a busy Piraeus street. 17N said that Peratikos was targeted because he was responsible for “the fraught” privatization of the Elefsina shipyards, which his shipping group bought in 1992 and closed three years later.
37. 17N communiqué on Brigadier Stephen Saunders, dated March 2000.
38. 17N attack communiqué on Brigadier Stephen Saunders, dated March 2000.
39. Dimitris Koufodinas was born in 1958 in the village of Terpni, 45 kilometres from the city of Serres in northern Greece. Terpni was, as it remains today, a typical Greek northern village that prides itself on the ordinariness of its daily life and unexciting decency of its people. In 1971, when Koufodinas was 13, his father moved the family to Athens at a time when the Greek capital was in turmoil because of the Colonels’ dictatorial regime. *Metapolitefsi*, the 1974 transition from dictatorship to democracy, seems to have had a strong impact on Koufodinas’s early political formation. The 1974 transition, it has to be emphasized, was not the result of a clear and sharp break with the Colonels’ junta but the product of a whole range of compromises and negotiations between elite-level political actors and the military. *Metapolitefsi*, or “junta by another name” as 17N called the transition in several communiqués, had a formative influence on Koufodinas’s politicization as his early involvement in student politics attests to. A member of PASOK’s Socialist PAMK youth movement from secondary school, Koufodinas intensified his activism when he enrolled in 1977 in the Athens University to read Economics. Koufodinas is remembered by secondary school friend, Nikos Giannopoulos, who testified in court, as “someone whose depth and intellect were impressive for his age and who could have, had he stayed on course, landed himself at a later stage an important job in party-politics or the state bureaucracy.” Another friend from his days of student activism, remembered Koufodinas as a “calm, articulate young man with guts and ideological consistency.” Relatives also described Koufodinas as “somebody who never liked upsetting people.” Koufodinas broke family ties in 1983, almost a year before the attempted assassination of US Army Sergeant Robert Judd, which, according to the indictment, was Koufodinas’ operational debut with the group.
40. Court proceedings, Korydallos prison chambers, 24 July 2003.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid.
47. The 59-year-old Giotopoulos, whose fingerprints were identified by Greek police in 17N’s two Athens hideaways containing the group’s arsenal, maintained throughout the trial that he had no involvement whatsoever with 17N. According to Giotopoulos, the charges were nothing more than “a cheap construct of the Americans and British signed by prosecutors and former provincial police and based on confessions taken in a hospital intensive care unit from people destroyed by psychotropic drugs and blackmail,” referring to Savvas Xiros’s hospital confession. Soon after the June 2002 botched bomb attack, Giotopoulos also denied that handwritten corrections on drafts of 17N proclamations were his own as the state prosecutor charged and

claimed that his fingerprints, found in 17N safe houses, including a left thumbprint on a mobile phone manual, were transferred by agents onto movable objects. Giotopoulos was convicted as “the clear mastermind and leader” of 17N. The prosecutor characterized him as “the root of evil both before and after his arrest” and proposed for him a sentencing that amounted to 2,412 years, which is what Giotopoulos eventually received. Giotopoulos’s defence team maintained throughout that physical evidence was scant and that his conviction was basically the product of testimonies by other accused 17N members, a violation of the Greek criminal code’s provision which specifically states that the testimony of a guilty person alone cannot be sufficient in establishing guilt.

Son of a prominent Trotskyite theoretician and activist of the pre-World War II era, Giotopoulos studied in France during the years of the Colonels’ junta, where in 1969 he helped found the radical “May 29” movement, which advocated armed rebellion against the Greek military regime. In 1971, he was found guilty in absentia by the Greek authorities of creating an armed organization and was sentenced to five years in jail. He remained in Paris where he founded a new group, the Popular Armed Struggle (LEA), which from its inception was divided over how to direct its energies, Giotopoulos was in favor of aggressive acts of urban guerrilla warfare and split from the group with a small clique of others. Returning to Athens after the fall of the Colonels’ regime in 1975, he came, according to Greek police files, into contact with members of Greece’s other prominent urban guerrilla group, Revolutionary Popular Struggle (ELA), and attempted unsuccessfully to persuade them to sign on to a plan to abduct CIA station chief Richard Welch. Welch was eventually shot dead outside his home on 23 December 1975 by 17N.

48. Korydallos prison court chambers, 6 March 2003.
49. Pre-trial Giotopoulos interview with provincial newspaper, *Lamiakos Typos*, 5 October 2002
50. Ibid.
51. The Welch communiqué, dated December 1975, charged that “US imperialism [was] the Number One enemy of the people” and held the Americans responsible for “decades of innumerable humiliations, calamities and crimes” inflicted upon the Greek people.
52. Korydallos prison court chambers, 16 March 2003.
53. Peter Paret, “Clausewitz,” in Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 200.
54. Court proceedings, Korydallos prison chambers, 13 March 2003.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid.
57. See interview with Negri in the *Independent*, 17 August 2004.