

Edmund Keeley, *The Salonika Bay Murder. Cold War Politics and the Polk Affair*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989. Pp 384, \$ 24.95. (Paperback edition with a new preface by the author)

America's involvement in the Greek civil war of 1946-1949 was enormous and its impact decisive not only for Greece but for Washington's newly declared policy of "containing" further Soviet aggression. Thousands of Americans, both military and civilian, were sent to every corner of Greece to investigate, advise and report. Yet despite the massive American presence, only two Americans died violently as a direct result of the Greek crisis. In January 1949, Air Force Lt. Col. R.S. Edner, a veteran of 150 combat missions in the Second World War, was killed when his Greek reconnaissance plane, in which he was flying as an observer, was fired upon and forced to crash land in guerrilla-held territory in Karpenisi. According to military sources, Edner, whose body was found some distance from the crash with a rope around his neck, had been beaten to death by his captors. In May 1948, the body of CBS correspondent George Polk was found floating in the harbor of Salonika just beyond the White Tower, arms and legs bound with rope, a bullet in his head. Several other Americans captured by the guerrillas during the same period were detained but later released unharmed.

The death of Col. Edner received no publicity, partly because the facts surrounding were not in dispute but also because the presence of American military personnel was not supposed to extend to the actual combat zones. By contrast, Polk's murder attracted enormous attention in Greece as well as the United States, resulted in a much publicized trial, and more than forty years later remains the subject of much speculation and controversy. In part this is because of the tendency to view the murder of a journalist as a more outrageous crime than the killing of a soldier under what were, after all, battle conditions. Also, Polk's superiors and colleagues could summon attention to his death in a way that Edner's comrades could not do to his. There is no question that the young journalist's brutal execution remains important primarily because to this day we do not know who carried it out or why. But as Edmund Keeley's new book brilliantly shows, the more profound significance of the Polk Affair is to be found in what it suggests about the frailties and failures of democratic regimes when they feel besieged by ideological foes.

A navy pilot in the Second World War twice wounded in the South Pacific, Polk had been a White House reporter and CBS correspondent in the Middle East before transferring to Athens in 1947, where he soon married a young Greek from Alexandria, Renee "Rea" Cocconis. He had flown to Salonika in an attempt to arrange for a visit to guerrilla headquarters to interview the head of the Democratic Army, Markos Vafiadis, a dangerous undertaking likely to arouse the wrath of the Greek authorities and bound to place him at the mercy of outlaws. In a letter to his boss and mentor Edward R. Murrow, Polk wrote that he hoped to put the guerrilla leader "on the air from his secret radio station and have the BBC record... I've offered to let them write the script on every word Markos says while I'll just give him cues and do the translating. Then — when I come 'outside' — I'd be able to tell any story I'd care to". A few days before his body was found someone mailed Polk's press card to the Salonika police.

For months the authorities appeared baffled by the crime, all the while proclaiming that it was the work of communists wanting to embarrass the Athens government and foster anti-Greek feelings in the United States. American officials in Greece and Washington followed the case very closely and a committee of distinguished journalists headed by Walter Lippmann commissioned William J. Donovan, head of the wartime OSS, to monitor develop-

ments in Greece and see to it that the guilty were brought to justice. Donovan and several of his investigators spent time in Greece and involved themselves in high level discussions on the progress and direction of the investigation. Finally, in mid-August, Gregory Staktopoulos, a minor-league Salonica journalist connected with the daily *Makedonia* and one-time communist who was known to have met Polk, was arrested and after more than six weeks' isolation and vigorous interrogation confessed to complicity in the murder. The key element in the case, which was brought to trial in April 1949, was government-produced expert testimony that the handwriting on the envelope which brought Polk's press card to the police was that of Staktopoulos' mother. Convicted as an accomplice, Staktopoulos received a life sentence while his mother was acquitted; two well-known communists were found guilty of murder and sentenced to death in absentia.

Even before his release from prison in 1960, in letters to the press and various state officials, Staktopoulos recanted his confession, which he claimed had been extracted under prolonged physical and mental torture, and proclaimed his complete innocence. Several attempts to reopen the case and exonerate him were turned down by the supreme court.

From the very beginning Staktopoulos' trial and conviction, a clearly and crudely orchestrated exercise, raised more questions than it purportedly settled. For example, why would the communists wish to kill a liberal-minded journalist whose reports had been loudly critical of corruption and defeatism in Athens and when an interview with Markos would have given the rebels a propaganda bonanza they so eagerly sought? Less than one month after Polk's death another American journalist of similar political views, Homer Bigart of the *New York Herald Tribune*, visited Markos (via Yugoslavia) and reported extensively on his tour. And why were two Americans of the economic mission who fell into communist hands in December 1948 released unharmed on orders from higher guerrilla commands? How could two known communists, wanted by the police, mastermind and carry out on execution in downtown Salonica, a city under extremely tight security, especially since Polk's trip to Salonica had been a last-minute decision on his part? Answers to these and many other questions can, of course, be suggested but they are not convincing enough to lay the matter to rest.

Moreover, from the outset the communists were not the only possible culprits. Polk's critical reports and demeanor had been especially upsetting to Greece's conservatives (he had recently had a stormy interview with Constantine Tsaldaris), leading to wide-spread speculation that he had been the victim of right-wing secret organizations. Others felt that the Greek authorities, bending to American pressure to close the case quickly, had deliberately fudged the evidence and conspired to turn Staktopoulos into a convenient scape-goat. According to yet another theory, still popular today, the key person behind the crime was a British official in Salonica whom Polk had approached for assistance in making contact with the guerrillas and who was believed to be an intelligence officer. In this scenario, the suggested motive was hatred of Polk for his harsh criticism of British policy in the Middle East (especially Palestine) and resentment of America's growing influence in Greece at the expense of Britain's traditionally dominant role in that country.

Over the past forty years the debate concerning Polk's murder has done little to solve the case while showing the lengths to which imagination and ideologically colored perception can go in finding convenient answers to disturbing questions. At last, a meticulously researched, carefully documented and reasonably argued book offers a detailed account of both facts and speculation on the entire affair. Keeley, a Princeton University professor of creative writing and authority on modern Greek literature who has spent much of his life in Greece,

is not neutral to his subject: he readily confesses his own "excess of passion" and "progressive sense of outrage" which drove him to write this book. But without hiding his sympathies and aversions he examines the mountain of documentary evidence he has unearthed (mostly in American diplomatic and intelligence archives) with a cool and sceptical mind, weaving together endless details in a lively and absorbing style.

Keeley makes no attempt to solve the case: the available evidence does not support definite conclusions. Instead, he suggests that of all the possible culprits, the communists had the least to gain from Polk's death. He finds the British "connection" to the crime difficult to sustain and reaches the speculative conclusion that "some agency of the Right would have fewer logistical and political difficulties in staging an 'assassination' and, in the heated war climate of those days, could well have persuaded itself that it was performing a reasonable — if not downright patriotic — act by preventing Polk, and thereby discouraging others on his inclination, from interviewing the enemy".

However, Keeley's attention is focused less on the crime itself than on its subsequent handling by the Greek investigatory and judicial authorities, on the role of American diplomatic and press officials in influencing the pace and direction of the investigation, on the trial, and on the political and psychological climate in Greece and the United States which affected every aspect of the case. His main thesis is that the unspoken but clearly understood purpose of the investigation and trial was to serve pressing Greek and American security objectives; justice and Staktopoulos' rights were sacrificed so that narrowly perceived "national interests" might be promoted. Whatever Staktopoulos' involvement in the affair (which we may never know), his interrogation, trial and conviction represented a travesty of justice reminiscent of Arthur Koestler's account in *Darkness at Noon*. Although Keeley is too careful to say it openly, the record he produces suggests that the "justice" handed down in that Salonica court in April 1949 and so eagerly endorsed by American government officials and the press, represented a different kind of "crime", in the long run more dangerous than the murder of a journalist. It is one thing, and almost commonplace in our times, for individual fanatics to kill in support of their cause; it is far more ominous when entire regimes, while professing their devotion to the fundamental principles of democracy, rules of justice and human rights, convict a man because it is politically expedient. In short, the real message in Keeley's remarkable book will remain relevant and crucial long after the tragic death of George Polk has faded from memory. And while other books on the same subject are bound to appear, Keeley's masterful and fair treatment of this complex case is certain to stand well the test of time.

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Peter J. Stavrakis, *Moscow and Greek Communism, 1944-1949*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989, pp. 231.

Peter Stavrakis has written the first full-length comprehensive study of Soviet policy towards the Greek Communist Party during the Greek Civil War. The book's significance is to be found in the enormous information it provides about Soviet attitude towards the Greek Communists, in the incorporation of newly revealed evidence about the activities of the Greek Communist leaders before and during the Civil War, and in its systematic treat-