LP: The authorities answered my ties on declaring your CO status. The military & the Greek authorities were afraid of me. They asked me why I didn't want to go. They told me that it wasn't something bad, that I was an educated young man and that I mustn't destroy my life.

KB: What do your friends and family think about you being a CO?

LP: My friends accepted it as my decision. My family was very afraid because it was something very new for them. They were afraid of conflict with the army. My father told me: "It's very serious - what you're doing - think about the military court." KB: How do you feel your beliefs and the Greek authorities' reaction to them affected you?

LP: Before 1990 and 1996 there wasn't a problem - nobody bothered me for these 4 years. But everyone knew that in 1997 the new law would be brought in and then the military would want to punish CO's. In those days, many of us had to be arrested and imprisoned before we could claim CO status and the right to do civilian service. It was just revenge against us older objectors. Personally, there was a difference between me and other objectors because I decided to live at a known address - my home - whereas the other COs left their homes to avoid being arrested.

KB: How many times have you been imprisoned, and why?

LP: Three times. The first time was in 1998 for draft evasion. In those days, many of us had to be arrested and imprisoned before we could claim CO status and the right to do civilian service. It was just revenge against us older objectors. Personally, there was a difference between me and other objectors because I decided to live at a known address - my home - whereas the other COs left their homes to avoid being arrested.

KB: When did you first realise that your conscience would not allow you to participate in the military?

LP: In 1981, when I finished university and it was my time to go to the army - although I had heard about the first COs in 1981-788 so it was not something new for me.

KB: What were you treated by the military & the Greek authorities on declaring your CO status?

LP: I had support from the Association of Greek COs so I was able to discuss things with people who had the same problem as me.

KB: How do your friends and family think about you being a CO?

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The REAL Meaning of Conscientious Objection

Conscription in Greece has wide-reaching implications for Greek society and the military institutions. The financial consequences as well as important effects on the socialisation of men and in the propagation of gender, sexual and international stereotypes. Conscientious objection has an important role in challenging many of these structures. Whilst this subject is large, here we will give an overview of some of them.

The economic role of conscientious objection

The Greek army is not a ‘conscript army’ since the officers are professionals - the conscripts are used merely as unpaid labour to sustain the military institutions. The army provides only the basics for survival, so that conscripts need financial assistance from their families. When families can’t afford this, the army often offers the conscript ‘postponement of service on the basis of psychiatric disorder’. The conscript can then go home and work, but at the enormous cost of psychiatric stigmatisation. ‘Middle-class’ conscripts sustain an even heavier loss of earnings, but they are in a much better position to absorb the financial cost.

Most of the parental financial assistance is spent in the vicinity of army camps, away from home. Conscientious objection functions as the deterritorialisation of parents and to the benefit of specific provincial societies. Conscientious objection is therefore resistant to the parasitic economy surrounding army bases. In addition, conscripts are removed from the general labour force so that conscription artificialises lower unemployment figures.

The socialisation of men through conscription

Conscription constructs ‘men’ out of Greek society. Let’s hear a characteristic statement from a officer admonishing a new recruit who was 2 minutes late. The officer shouted at the recruit in front of a winged Phallic person and the conscripts. “When a Russian tart is waiting for you to fuck her, are you late? If you’re not late then how dare you be late now?” This vignette summarises the grotesque insults, racism and sexism that conscripts suffer. All this seethes behind a persona of political correctness publicly displayed by the conscript. Conscientious objection is supposed to help 18-year-olds to ‘fly the nest’, to learn teamwork and responsibility.

In reality, the army keeps conscripts dependent and utterly institutionalised. The army is where Greeks learn how to exploit others in order to get out of duty or danger. Obtaining an advantageous post is a prime example. In wartime, it’s the poor boys that become cannon-lodder while most of the rich ones sit in offices. Conscription trains men in setting up bullying hierarchies and rituals. One example is so-called ‘Seniority’, whereby new recruits are worked to exhaustion and ritually humiliated by those further into their term of service. Greek men realise that although the written rules are on the surface fair, the real, unwritten rules are grossly abusive. They learn that they can’t beat such a system, only join it. Abuse of ‘friends’ and ‘boss’ becomes normal. If you don’t order more conscripts are exposed to conflict. Along Greece’s ‘threatened’ northern border, thousands of immigrants have captured trying to enter Greece are often grossly humiliated and treated as if they are conscripts. The captives are ‘only’ Albanians, fair game for anyone socialised in Greek military racism. The strain relationships are even worse for conscientious objectors. Partners perceive the conscript as a socially corrosive effect: femininity is aroused by socially obedient men.

The social implications of conscription

Conscientious objection serves to transform Greek society from a militaristic one to one of ‘disarmed’ men. Conscientious objection has long been seen as a ‘solution’ to the problem of ‘conscripts’. Conscientious objection has gradually influencing the Greek government. The government is gradually increasing the number of conscripts. The government is gradually increasing the number of conscripts. The government is gradually increasing the number of conscripts.

Turkey, an often expressed concern of ‘faggotry’, flaunt their ‘manhood’ by frequent lapdancing clubs and organise porn video-viewing sessions within camps. They seem to think of involving Turkish villages and raping the villagers. On the other hand, conscientious objection persuades it of the dangers of real world sexual relationships.

Partners suffer enforced, prolonged strains in their relationships. Conscripts whose very mentality becomes alienated by the gender hierarchy. Ensuing splits are very sad and promote further malignant gender stereotypes. Men who have called for conscientious objection by a few terrorist groups and demonstrations have called for conscientious objection have called for conscientious objection have called for conscientious objection have called for conscientious objection have called for conscientious objection have called for conscientious objection have called for conscientious objection have called for conscientious objection have called for conscientious objection have called for conscientious objection have called for conscientious objection have called for conscientious objection have called for conscientious objection have called for conscientious objection have called for conscientious objection have called for conscientious objection have called for conscientious objection have called for conscientious objection have called for conscientious objection have called for conscientious objection have called for conscientious objection have called for conscientious objection have called for conscientious objection have called for conscientious objection have called for conscientious objection have called for conscientious objection have called for conscientious objection have called for conscientious objection have called for conscientious objection have called for conscientious objection have called for conscientious objection have called for conscientious objection have called for conscientious objection have called for conscientious objection have called for conscientious objection have called for conscientious objection have called for conscientious objec
The History of CO Struggle in Greece

Compulsory military service was introduced in Greece by the Constitution of 1911. A year later, Greece was engaged in consecutive wars (two Balkan wars, the First World War and the Campaign in Asia Minor), which lasted a decade. During the final two years of this decade there was a vast movement of desertions from the Greek Army, due essentially to the long period of mobilisation (there were conscripts who were called up in 1911 and not released until 1923). There aren’t known cases of desertion for ideological reasons at that time.

Jehovah’s Witnesses

Over the next 60 years nobody except the Jehovah’s Witnesses contested the compulsory military service. The Military Courts were condemning the Jehovah’s Witness conscientious objectors to extremely long penalties - it was common for a Jehovah’s Witness to stay 10-15 years in a military jail. Throughout the Civil War (1946 - 1949) some of them were given the death penalty and shot (Ioannis Tsoukaris on February 11, 1949 and Georgios Orfanidis on March 2, 1949). The last Jehovah’s Witness who was condemned to death was Hristos Kazanis (1966), but under the international pressure, his penalty was reduced to 4 years in prison. Another Jehovah’s Witness, Vasileios Karafatas was assassinated on 23 June 1971, whilst he was being transferred from one prison to another.

The compulsory military service and the preponderance of the army in Greek society were contested in the beginning of the 1980s. Thanassis Makris (in September 1977), sustained pressure by the Council of Europe had obliged the Greek government to vote in a law providing for Jehovah’s Witness COs, according to which they would either serve 4 years in armed military service or would be condemned to 4 years imprisonment. The movement for the acceptance of the CO three months later and civil liberties of conscripts preceeded the first debates on the right to refuse military service. Whilst the parties of the Left were very suspicious of conscientious objection, the young ecological movement, a part of the anarchist movement and some of the thousands of draft evaders living abroad initiated serious discussion on the issue. Thoughout this decade, the “Oikologiki Efimerida” (Ecologist-Journal) and the “Anarcho” (I refuse) became the main contributors to the debate on conscientious objection and anti-militarist culture.

I ideological CO

In December 1986, Michalis Marangakis publicly declared himself a conscientious objector for ideological reasons. His declaration, a real challenge of anti-militarism, was the turning point for the CO movement in Greece. He was arrested three months later and condemned to 4 years in prison, later reduced to 26 months at appeal. Shortly after this, Thanassis Makris suffered an identical fate: he was condemned to 5 years in prison, reduced to 18 months at appeal. Both were released after having served two thirds of their respective penalties.

The arrest of Michalis Marangakis and Thanassis Makris and their struggle for the respect of the right to conscientious objection provoked an unprecedented movement of international solidarity. Both endured a series of long hunger strikes (Michalis Marangakis did three of 71, 50 and 20 days respectively whilst Thanassis Makris did two of 55 and 33 days), which finally resulted in the government giving up and releasing them.

International Solidarity

During this period of three years, the Greek Ministries for National Defence and for Foreign Affairs were receiving hundreds of letters from abroad every day, demanding the recognition of the right to conscientious objection and calling for the release of Michalis Marangakis and Thanassis Makris. Indeed, the President of the Republic of Greece confessed during a meeting with representatives of the Association of Conscientious Objectors in February 1990 that during 1986, as Minister for Foreign Affairs, he was receiving 600 protest letters per day! This campaign was the result of the combined efforts of Amnesty International, the European Bureau for Conscientious Objection and War Resisters’ International.

In Greece the Committee for Solidarity With Conscientious Objectors organised hundreds of meetings as well as several demonstrations all over the country. In just one year more than 20 people declared themselves ideological COs. Thanks to the actions of Michalis Marangakis and Thanassis Makris we overcame the fear of being imprisoned and forced the government, the political parties and even society to face the reality of conscientious objection.

The overwhelming international solidarity shown to Greek conscientious objectors forced the government to extend the possibility of unarmed military service to all COs (February 1988) and some months later, to present a proposal for a law recognising the right to conscientious objection and introducing an alternative civilian service, the length of which should be double that of military service. However, that proposal was never presented to Parliament.

During the 1990s, fear of an intense international campaign made the Greek government reluctant to arrest ideological COs. (Although the Jehovah’s Witnesses who presented themselves to Military units and refused to wear military uniform were regularly sentenced to 4 years in prison. However, arrest warrants were pending and, under pressure from the Police, most COs in Greece lived clandestinely. They had (and still have) no right to a passport and had (and still have) to change addresses in order to avoid arrest. Police officers regularly visited their parents’ homes and threatened them.

Between 1990 and 1997, only three ideological COs were arrested: Nicos Maziotis and Pavlos Nathanail (both anarchists) in 1991 and Nicos Karanicas in 1995. Although the trials of Nicos Maziotis and Pavlos Nathanail took place during a period of nationalistic paranoia and both of them had rejected any kind of civilian service, they were only given suspended sentences of 1 year in prison. Some months later Nicos Maziotis was arrested again, but after a 50 day hunger strike he was released. Nicos Karanicas was condemned to 5 years in prison, but this was later reduced on appeal to 1 year suspended sentence.

Legal Recognition

On June 6, 1997 the Greek Parliament voted in Law 2510/97 which introduced a substitute civilian service 18 months longer than the military service. This was the start of a new era, with conscientious objectors struggling for the respect of their rights and the reduction of the length of the substitute civilian service. The continuing prosecutions against Lazaros Petromelidis are a consequence of this struggle.

Yannis Chryssoverghis
The Association of Greek CO’s supports conscientious objectors in Greece. They were officially formed in 1991 and have been instrumental in effecting changes in Greek CO law and practice. They can be contacted at: Association of Greek CO’s, Treasneriou 13, 10686 Athens; +30 6944542228; fax 210422753; email greekCO@hotmail.com; website: www.omhroi.gr/SAS/
Conscientious Objection in Greece & International CO Day

War Resisters’ International reports to the United Nations

When the UN Human Rights Committee announced their plan to examine human rights abuses in Greece, WRI saw an opportunity to get CO issues on the international agenda and significantly raise the profile of the Greek struggle against militarism.

WRI produced a comprehensive report on conscientious objection to military service in Greece detailing numerous human rights shortfalls. The report describes the legal situation in Greece vis-à-vis conscription and CO before outlining the problems and discriminatory practices that the current law causes. It focuses on violations of internationally recognised standards, in particular UN resolutions and articles of the International Covenant on Civil and Political rights (ICCPR) as its benchmark.

Some of the main concerns raised by the report include the punitive length of the substitute service, the exclusion of professional soldiers from applying for CO status and a loss of individual rights suffered by CO’s in Greece. Importantly, the report highlights the fact that it is standard procedure in Greece for CO’s to be repeatedly tried and imprisoned for the same offence of draft evasion - a practice which violates the Geneva-UN declarations.

WRI’s Kat Barton presenting at the UN

Photo: John Miller

international law. With the use of case studies, the report is able to illustrate the harsh treatment of CO’s by the Greek authorities thus adding a human dimension to a complex topic.

The report was presented to the UN Human Rights Committee on the opening day of their 83rd session at their office in New York. WRI staff member Kat Barton addressed the Committee: speaking about the problems facing Greek COs and urging the Committee to consider the issues when looking at human rights stan system in Greece. This consultation with NGO’s is an important and necessary part of the work of the Committee, and certainly a worthwhile exercise for WRI in terms of influencing Greek policy on CO.

Having examined the Greek human rights situation in Greece, the Committee distributed a press release outlining their main concerns and Greece’s subsequent response. It was clear from this document that CO issues feature quite highly in the minds of some of the Committee members, who criticised the Greek government saying that the right of conscientious objectors had not been complied with nor had it conformed to the norms of article 18 of the Covenant (ICCPR). We hope that given this, Greece will now move forward and identify specific changes it intends to implement with regards to CO. Indeed, already on 1st April, the Military Court in Athens ruled that Jehovah’s Witness and former Russian army conscript Sergey Gutsarov would be allowed to apply for the substitute civilian service despite having previously served in the armed forces.

Kat Barton “Conscientious Objection To Military Service” (privately printed, Toronto 2002)

“Refusing To Bear Arms” (1998) A World Survey

(WRI, London 1998) 

Price: £11.00

Eurozone: IBAN IE91 BOFI 9000 9247 41 35

Greece-Cyprus Relations

Cyprus, a tiny divided island in the eastern Mediterranean is a military minefield. Even after accession to the EU, no country in the world – with the exception of Korea - has seen its territory assimilated with such a deadly array of weaponry with possible catastrophic consequences for the inhabitants. 40000 occupying Turkish forces and another few thousand Turkish-Cypriot soldiers face a few thousand Greek-Cypriot conscripts and Greek soldiers, with British troops and bases and a few a plan for UN peacekeepers guarding the ceasefire line. Since 1974 with the Coup by EOKA B fascists and the Turkish forces and another few thousand occupying Turkish-Cypriot soldiers and the proponents of hate ideology and nationalism are opposed to such a move. In addition, a number of other initiatives for peace and reconciliation must now be strengthened. Such measures must not, however, be mere tactical manoeuvres for media and market- ing purposes; they must be serious, robust and legitimate.

This is the time for peace activism and genuine imaginative common action. The CO’s groups, youth groups, citizens action groups and NGOs must work together at this critical moment to overcome all the “state” and “ethnic” boundaries. This is the best guarantee for freedom and security, over and above any logical and international guarantees, which are also of course welcome.

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