



Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC) Case Studies

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Greek Civil War 1944–49

Executive Summary

The Greek Civil War (1944–49) involved the Communist-led National Liberation Front (EAM) and its military arm, the Greek People's Liberation Army (ELAS), against the British-supported Greek government and anti-Communist groups. The war unfolded in three phases, starting with the power struggle during Nazi occupation followed by intense battles in December 1944. Despite the Varkiza Peace Agreement in 1945, hostilities resumed in 1946.¹ Communist forces, aided by neighboring countries, faced setbacks due to internal strategic errors and the loss of Yugoslav support. The abduction of 28,000 children into neighboring countries by the Communists contributed to the loss of public support for the Communists.²

The war caused widespread destruction in urban and rural areas of Greece, resulting in heavy civilian casualties, economic ruin, and an estimated 150,000 people dead.³ British and, later, American support provided the Greek government with military and economic aid.⁴ The defeat of the Communists solidified Greece's alignment with Western powers, considerably impacting its postwar political landscape and social structures. This conflict highlighted broader Cold War tensions and represented a critical struggle between Communist and capitalist ideologies in the region.⁵

Assessing the Five Factors

1. Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?

Yes. Greece gained its independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1821.⁶ When the Greek Civil War broke out, Greece was considered a nation-state with defined geographical borders and a population that shared culture, history, and language, creating a sense of national identity. The Italian invasion of Greece in 1940, followed by the German occupation in 1941, unified the population against the common enemy in Germany in the early stages of the occupation. The population was divided into different political groups, however, that, during the occupation, started to fight each other.⁷

2. Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?

No. The legitimacy of the Greek government was contested.⁸ The government, backed by Britain and, later, the United States, faced opposition from the Communist factions and other leftist movements.⁹ The political and social polarization and brutal tactics employed by both sides meant that many Greeks did not accept the government's legitimacy. Successive governments struggled to establish stable and credible governance, further eroding public confidence.¹⁰ The government's reliance on foreign support and the harsh measures taken against perceived Communist sympathizers also contributed to its lack of legitimacy among a large portion of the population.

3. Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country's overall population?

No → Yes. The Greek government initially did not maintain security control over 85 percent of the population. At the peak of Communist influence, significant portions of rural Greece, especially mountainous regions, were controlled by or supportive of the Communist insurgents.¹¹ At the beginning of the conflict, the British-supported government's control was limited mainly to urban areas and strategic locations, with continuous battles for territory.¹² Additionally, the government's strategy of population resettlement and counterinsurgency methods did not always gain the loyalty and support of the rural population, further undermining its control.¹³ Eroding support for the Communists and the strengthening of government security forces pushed the guerillas into remote rural areas, however, and gradually brought a majority of the population under the government security umbrella.

4. Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?

Yes → No. The Communist insurgents initially received support from neighboring Communist countries such as Albania, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia. This support included military training, arms supplies, and havens for insurgents to retreat into when under pressure from Greek government forces.¹⁴ The external sanctuary and support were crucial for the insurgents' early ability to sustain their operations and launch offensives against the government. In 1949, Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito stopped his support for the Greek Communists following his split with Joseph Stalin, which significantly weakened the insurgents' positions.¹⁵ Closing the border and ending military and logistical support from Yugoslavia were central to the defeat of the Communist insurgents.¹⁶

5. Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?

Yes. A Greek national army did exist. World War II and internal political conflicts weakened the Greek National Army, but it was rebuilt with assistance from Great Britain and, later, the United States.¹⁷ Both countries strengthened the Greek army by providing crucial military equipment, training, and financial aid.¹⁸ By the end of the civil war, the Greek National Army had become a capable fighting force able to counter the insurgent threat and secure victory.

In addition to the National Army, Greece had an armed gendarmerie, which played a role in maintaining internal security and combating the Communist insurgents, especially in rural areas.¹⁹ These forces participated in resettlement programs and actions against civilian supporters of the insurgents.²⁰ Their actions were crucial to the broader strategy of the Greek government in quelling the Communist uprising and expanding its control to regions beyond the reach of the regular army.

Outcome

The government won against the insurgents. This case supports the Five Factors model since four of the five factors favored the government in the latter state of the war, but it is an outlier in that the government did not have 85 percent or greater legitimacy. The Communists made a strategic error by abducting 28,000 children, which turned a significant part of the Greek population against the Communist and leftist groups. American and British support for the government, together with Tito's decision to stop the support of and deny the Communists a haven in neighboring Yugoslavia, further weakened the insurgency.

GREEK CIVIL WAR 1944–49	
NATIONAL IDENTITY	YES
GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY	NO
POPULATION SECURITY	NO → YES
EXTERNAL SANCTUARY	YES → NO
EXISTING SECURITY FORCES	YES

Endnotes

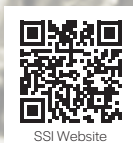
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19. Plakoudas, *Greek Civil War*, 28.
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