Prologue

This is a study of the Greek food crisis and famine that marked the years of the Axis occupation. This was the last 'significant' European famine in terms of mortality. Yet it remains largely unknown.[1] While not forgotten by the Greeks, many of whom experienced it, the famine has been effaced from official memory. The contrast with the Irish famine is stark.[2] The contrast with the Greek Civil War of the 1940s is equally significant. Not only are publications related to the Civil War numerous, but official public memory has also been shaped over the last two decades.[3] Still, it should be pointed that generally speaking, studies on the years of occupation are not plentiful for Greece. Most works focus on the political rather than the social aspects of the occupation. Thus, this is a first attempt to position the famine in the centre of the occupation scene while exploring a number of local cases.

[1] In the scientific community, a number of key publications have examined the causes of the famine and most notably the politics behind it. See e.g. D. Kitsikis, 'La famine en Grèce (1941–42). Les conséquences politiques', *Revue d'Histoire de la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale*, 74 (1969), 17–41; D. Kitsikis, *Ellas kai xenoi, 1919–1967* (Greece and foreigners, 1919–1967) (Athens: Estia, 1969); A. Laiou-Thomadakis, 'The politics of hunger: Economic aid to Greece, 1943–45', *Journal of Hellenic Diaspora*, 7 (1980), 27–42; M. Mazower, *Inside Hitler's Greece. The experience of occupation 1941–44* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993); P. Papastratis, *British policy towards Greece during the Second World War, 1941–1944* (Cambridge University Press, 1984); H. Fleischer, *Stemma kai svastika: E Ellada tes katohes kai tes antistases 1941–1944* (Crown and swastika: the Greece of occupation and resistance, 1941–1944) (Athens: Papazeses, 1986); G. A. Kazamias, 'Allied policy towards occupied Greece: the 1941–42 famine' (unpublished D.Phil. dissertation, University of Bradford, 1990). On the demography of the famine, see V. G. Valaoras, 'Some effects of the famine on the population of Greece', *Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly*, 24(4) (1946), 215–34 and publications by the present author; on the geography and social aspects of the famine, Mazower, *Inside Hitler's Greece*.

[2] Cormac Ó Gráda, *Black '47 and beyond. The Great Irish Famine in history, economy, and memory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 3–4.

[3] For example, Polymeris Voglis, *Becoming a subject: Political prisoners during the Greek civil war* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2002); Yannis Hamilakis, ' "The other Parthenon": Antiquity and national memory at Makronisos', *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, 20(2) (2002), 307–38.

A significant part of the writings on the Greek food crisis and famine are based, directly or indirectly, on contemporary writings and opinions. But these, in many instances, were based on presumed facts or carefully manipulated pieces of information or even mere war propaganda. Take for example what has come to be seen as an 'act of resistance' on the part of the Greek peasants who refused to provide the Greek government with the required tax in kind on their produce.[4] The government repeatedly declared that the collected produce would be used to feed the urban civil population. The widespread belief was that it would be used by the Axis troops. Still, the peasants had no moral scruples about exchanging their produce for German wheat, or selling it illegally to military supply officers and black market dealers. These actions suggest to me that the refusal to pay the tax in kind was a purely economic decision that was 'glossed' as an act of resistance. Even EAM, the main resistance group, was realistic in its expectations. It simply advised the peasants not to sell to Italians and Germans but only to Greeks.

A further example is that of the generally accepted 'fact' that agricultural production fell substantially during the occupation years. This 'fact' is cited in virtually all discussions of the famine as a partial explanation of its outbreak.[5] But these are statistics produced by the government, based exclusively on the amounts of produce collected as tax in kind. These statistics 'covered up' to a degree the government's inability to collect the tax in kind, providing at the same time a weighty reason to plead for help. In the realm of propaganda lies the incident where a BBC broadcast referred to the requisitioning of the harvest by the occupying forces. It prompted some decisive action on the part of the Joint Relief Commission, which requested the British to refrain in the future from such untruthful broadcasts, which were damaging to the relief operations.

The Greek famine was very important in demographic terms. Not only did it kill approximately five per cent of the population, but detailed data are available for the study of its short-term demographic effects, a rare occasion indeed in the world of famine research. In both respects, then, the Greek famine is different from contemporary African famines. Yet the lack of strong governmental authority and basic welfare provision, the use of food as a weapon, the intensification of existing enmities owing to extreme competition over limited amounts of food, the emergence of civil conflicts, brigandage and corruption are all familiar aspects of modern famines as they were of the Greek famine. Thus this was a

[4] Mazower, *Inside Hitler's Greece*, p. 27. [5] Margarites' work is exceptional in this respect.

'non European' famine in the political sense, but affected a 'developed' population in demographic terms.

This study focuses on the food crisis of the occupation years, presenting an overall account of the events that led to the famine, those that led to its elimination and everything in between. A significant aspect of the food crisis was the great variation in the experiences and reactions to the crisis in different localities. I have therefore concentrated on case studies of three populations that had very divergent experiences of the food crisis. This is a thoroughly interdisciplinary study in which demographic, historical and economic approaches are used when and as necessary. Significantly, quantitative demographic methods are interwoven with oral evidence provided by survivors of the famine.

Chapter 1 situates the famine in its historical context. The most significant historical events prior to the Second World War are outlined, as are those of Greece's involvement in the war and her surrender. The process of the settlement of the occupying forces and its impact on the food crisis, which was observable almost immediately, is recapitulated. Emphasis is placed on the imposition of the blockade by the British and the politics that led to its eventual lifting. This only happened when pressure came from the US government. The lifting of the blockade was the most decisive step away from the famine. The utilisation of case study populations is justified and the socio-economic background of the three populations, Syros, Mykonos and the Hios towns (Hios town and Vrontados), is presented. The data employed in the study are presented and discussed.

It is widely acknowledged that occupied Greece suffered a famine in the winter of 1941–2. In Chapter 2, I argue that a serious food crisis prevailed throughout the years of occupation, a crisis which evolved – depending on conditions – into full-blown famine at different points in time in different Greek localities.[6] A variety of reasons account for the observed variations: local food production levels; patchy relief provision; limited communications with the rest of Greece; employment levels; inflation; destruction by military operations. Combinations of the above factors determined which population in Greece suffered a food crisis or a famine, and when. As might be expected, it was the more vulnerable groups of society that felt the famine first.

In the existing literature, the occupation period is usually treated as a whole. Here it has been divided into three segments: May 1941–March 1942; April 1942–April 1943; May 1943–September 1944. For each period the main events determining the course of the food crisis, both regionally and nationally, are considered.

[6] Here I define as 'famine' a food crisis that results in serious increases in mortality.

Chapter 3 briefly examines the administration of the country. While a new government comprised of Greeks was set up by the occupation authorities, the administration of the country was left intact. Still, any decision taken by the Greek government had to be submitted to the Italian or German administration for approval. But soon the Greek government became the government of Athens with little authority beyond the capital area. The administration of distant areas was 'left' to the local authorities, though their decisions could be challenged at any moment by the Athens administration.

Even more interesting is the comparison between the administration of two of the case study areas, German-occupied Hios and Italian-occupied Syros. This could be summarised as one of minimal intervention by the Germans and discreet takeover of authority by the Italians in the Cyclades, aiming to their gradual annexation to Italy. In mainland Greece, the Italians seem to have pursued a similar line to the Germans – minimal intervention. The plurality of administrative practices, the multiplicity of decision-making centres, the multiple layers of Greek and Italian administration in the Cyclades, the distance of the various localities from the central Athenian government, all led to administrative anarchy in the occupation years.

Chapter 4 focuses on the requisitioning of foodstuffs by the occupying forces, and the extent and consequences of such requisitions. Most writings refer to the extensive requisitions that occurred in the first months of occupation and assume that these had a great impact on the outbreak of the famine. These requisitions affected only cash crops already stored in depots at the time of the arrival of the occupying forces. What seems certain is that it is currently impossible, and may remain so, to even estimate the extent of 'official' requisitioning of foodstuffs by the occupying forces. It is certain that requisitioning occurred, but its extent seems to have been exaggerated, being based to a large extent on the 'propaganda' of the war years and the reports and diaries of individuals who lived through those years.[7] It was rather plundering by individual soldiers that reduced the availability of food, especially in places of low productivity such as Syros.

[7] An interesting example of the restricted nature of information, and possibly of its manipulation, is provided by the occupation of Samos by the Germans. Following a short period of occupation by the British, British reports stated that the Germans requisitioned all the foodstuffs left behind by the British. But a local in his memoirs describes the thorough and organised looting of the British depots by the local population. (PRO, FO371/36507, Greece, file no 3, co-ordination 1943, 'From His Majesty's Ambassador to the Greek Government, Cairo to Foreign Office', 23 December 1943); see Nikos Noou, *Ta paidia tes thuellas* (The children of the storm) (Athens: Alfeios, 1993), pp. 173–5.

A significant part of the blame for the food crisis and the outbreak of the famine were put on the low agricultural productivity of the occupation years. This was written repeatedly in contemporary reports, which have been quoted and reproduced time and time again in the post-war literature in reference to the causes of the famine. In Chapter 5 I show that the situation was not as depicted. Overall production did not necessarily decline and certainly not to the degree that was claimed. On the contrary, at times and in some places production was substantially raised. The figures quoted by the report writers usually referred to the corresponding amounts of produce that the Greek government had managed to tax, though this was never admitted.[8] And these were very small indeed. In essence, the published figures for productivity during the occupation years were closely linked to the taxation in kind that was imposed at the time. This diverging of the written sources from reality was mainly established through interviews with survivors of the occupation years.

Chapter 6 examines the operation of the markets in occupied Greece and the effect their operation had on the food crisis. The controls imposed upon the existing markets were so severe that legal trade was almost entirely curtailed. The creation of a black market in the specific circumstances was truly inevitable and the oral testimonies suggest that virtually everybody participated in it. A great disparity is apparent between the 'official' view and attitude towards the black market and the 'unofficial' or the 'grassroots' one. The former was that of the press, the governments and, significantly, the Left. The latter was that of the people. It seems that it was the splitting up of the country, and concomitantly the markets, into patchwork pieces, the attempt to impose extreme controls, the government's inability to impose some of its laws and decrees (such as those referring to the collection of agricultural produce), and the complete lack of reliable information that turned a problem of limited food availability into a full-blown famine.

Chapter 7 outlines the relief operations throughout the years of occupation. A clear distinction can be made between the first period, when the allied blockade was in place, and the second period, when regular relief was allowed to come into Greece. Relief in the first period was essentially a continuation of 'old' practices focusing mostly, if not exclusively, on the setting up of soup kitchens targeting, in theory at least, vulnerable groups. The second period, from the autumn of 1942 onwards, is dominated by the presence of the Joint Relief Commission that became an all-powerful food supply machine. As soon as it was established in Athens, the Joint Relief

[8] Giorgos Margarites, *Apo ten etta sten exegerse. Ellada: Anoixe 1941–Fthinoporo 1942* (From defeat to revolt. Greece: spring 1941–autumn 1942), Athens: Polites, 1993, p. 148.

Commission asserted that it would retain its independence from Greek and occupation forces, but also from the ICRC. It retained close links with the British government by submitting reports, asking for advice on significant plans and following this advice dutifully. A specific aim of the Commission was to ultimately gain control of Greek agricultural production. Interestingly, the Commission adopted the mechanisms already devised and established by the occupying forces in its attempt to achieve control of production.

Chapter 8 deals with a largely disregarded aspect in the historiography of the occupation years, that of migration. A first outline of the subject is given. Population movement was severely restricted by the occupying forces during much of the occupation, but restrictions were somewhat relaxed in the later years. Nonetheless short-term movements occurred especially on the mainland, in order to procure food from producing areas. Long-term illegal movements took place almost exclusively from the Aegean islands situated near the Turkish coast. Thus a significant part of the Hian population sought refuge in Turkey, from where they were moved to refugee camps in the Middle East, Cyprus and Africa. Escaping from Syros or Mykonos was hardly an option, and thus these populations offer a unique opportunity to study the demographic effects of famine on 'closed' populations.

Chapter 9 examines the short-term demographic effects of the crisis. Mortality increases during the months of famine ranged between 300 and 1000 per cent compared to the pre-war 'normal' years for the various populations examined here. Sex and age differentials are considered and explanations are offered for the relatively high mortality of adult males. It is argued that females may posses a biological advantage over males at the early stages of starvation-led famines. In contrast the relatively low mortality of children and the high mortality among the elderly are attributed to cultural reasons. In searching for the reasons for reduced fertility in famine situations, the significant importance of psychological reasons in early and/or sudden reductions in the rate of conceptions is emphasised.

Chapter 10 examines the experience of Syros, Mykonos and Hios in terms of the causes of mortality, revealing a situation whereby starvation played by far the dominant role in raising mortality, with an almost total absence of epidemics. Evaluation of the Greek case not only raises doubts about the validity of generalised monocausal explanations for famine mortality but also highlights the importance of reliable data in offering explanations of the causes of famine mortality. The Greek case is put into perspective and compared with other famines. The comparison shows that Greece is far from unique in showing that starvation is important. Recent findings – medical and otherwise – suggesting that even moderate

malnutrition *can* impair immunity and can increase the fatality or severity of an infection are encompassed in the construction of a model of famine mortality that attempts to embrace all possible famine situations.

The existing contemporary writings indeed emphasise the severe impact of the famine on specific social and occupational groups, but depending on the report the worst affected groups range from labourers to the destitute, from the middle class to civil servants. In Chapter 11 an effort is made to answer the question which occupational groups suffered worst from the famine by utilising numerical data. Occupations as reported on death certificates are utilised, distinguishing and comparing occupational distributions in 1936–40, during the famine (chiefly late 1941 and most of 1942) and in the post-famine period (chiefly 1943 and up to September 1944). The numerical data are in line with the qualitative data and both draw an interesting picture of the ever-changing strengths and vulnerabilities of each group. An important aspect that is not considered in Sen's theory of entitlements[9] is that conditions during a famine do not necessarily stay still. Depending on the length of the famine, changes can be significant and determine the relative fortunes of the various groups. This is exactly what happened in the Greek famine: in the three and a half years of its duration the fate of, for example, civil servants changed from an acceptable situation in the first stage to a very difficult one in the second.

[9] A. Sen, *Poverty and Famine. An essay on entitlement and deprivation* (Oxford University Press, 1981).

1 Contexts

Greece before the Second World War

The history of early twentieth-century Greece is dotted with crises, social, political and economic.[1] The political unrest at the end of the first decade of the twentieth century eventually brought to power E. Venizelos, who was to dominate the political scene for twenty years. Following the end of the Balkan wars that lasted from October 1912 to August 1913, Greece had to decide with whom to ally herself in a possible World War: should she throw in her lot with the Entente (Britain, France, Russia), as Venizelos wished, or remain neutral as the King would prefer, though he had a very strong preference for the German–Austrian–Italian alliance? The country was on the brink of civil war, with the King established in Athens while Venizelos was entrenched in Thessalonike, having formed a 'provisional' government in September 1916.[2] This constitutional crisis ('the National Schism') and the division between monarchists and Venizelists dogged the political and social life of the country for many years. In December 1916, France and Britain imposed a blockade on all Greek ports under the King's control. This brought about a food crisis that came to an end six months later when King Constantine unwillingly left his throne.[3] Greece joined the war only to reap significant rewards in the form of substantially

[1] For some excellent accounts of pre-Second World War Greece see Thanasis D. Sfikas, *The British Labour Government and the Greek Civil War 1939–1945: the imperialism of 'Non-Intervention'* (Keele: Ryburn Publishing, Keele University Press, 1994), pp. 15–22; Thomas W. Gallant, *Modern Greece*, Brief Histories series (London: Arnold, 2001), pp. 75–159; David Close, *The origins of the Greek Civil War* (London: Longman, 1995), pp. 1–59; Athanasios Lykogiannis, *Britain and the Greek economic crisis 1944–1947. From liberation to the Truman doctrine* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2002), pp. 16–39; John Louis Hondros, 'Greece and the German occupation', in David H. Close (ed.), *The Greek civil war, 1943–1950. Studies of polarization* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 32–57.

[2] Gallant, *Modern Greece*, p. 132.

[3] No. 8, Hios; No. 13, Hios; Gallant, *Modern Greece*, p. 132. The effect of this blockade on the population's memory was a lasting one: 'Even the intermittent blockade of the last war

extended frontiers.[4] But these annexations were not quite enough to fulfil the long-lived dream of the 'Megale Idea' (Great Idea), that is, the liberation of all Greeks from Turkish domination and the incorporation of the lands where they lived into the Greek state. So in 1921 a military offensive was launched against Turkey. This quickly led to what became known as the Asia Minor Catastrophe. The defeat was absolute and led to the exchange of populations between the two countries. More than a million refugees arrived in Greece, which had a population of five million at the time. The disaster-stricken refugees arrived penniless, ill and severely distressed in a place and among a population that was not prepared for such an influx. Their establishment and integration in Greece was very difficult indeed and took a considerable time.[5] The Asia Minor Catastrophe was certainly the most traumatic event in the history of Modern Greece. The 1920s were characterised by extreme levels of political instability even by Greek standards. Within five years, from 1924 to 1928, three Presidents and ten Prime Ministers succeeded one another and a number of military coups took place.[6] Of outstanding importance in the whole of the period prior to the late 1920s is the lack of any commitment by government or politicians to addressing the welfare of the people. The focus of both the politicians and the populace was always on the territorial expansion of the country, with little interest paid to welfare.

By 1928 Venizelos was back as Prime Minister. His focus moved from territorial expansion to progress within the country. There was some agrarian reform, infrastructure improved, public housing was made available and schools were built. The League of Nations and the Rockefeller Foundation were invited to help shape a public health policy.[7] At the same time the coercive powers of the state expanded greatly, possibly in response to the rise of the Communist and Agrarian parties. In 1932 Venizelos resigned and two failed military coups followed in quick succession. In

[First World War] left a legacy of resentment in Greece which only disappeared when the present war was already impending' (PRO, FO371/32455, 'Taut no. 513, Agreed by Southern department and approved by Sir O. Sargent, January 1942').

4 Gallant, *Modern Greece*, p. 138.

5 Demetra Giannuli, 'American philanthropy in action: The American Red Cross in Greece, 1918–1923', *East European Politics and Societies*, 10 (1996), 108–33; Renée Hirschon, *Heirs of the catastrophe: the social life of Asia Minor refugees in Piraeus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

6 Gallant, *Modern Greece*, p. 151.

7 D. Giannuli, ' "Repeated disappointment": the Rockefeller Foundation and the reform of the Greek public health system, 1929–1940', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 72(1) (1998), 47–72; Antones Liakos, *Ergasia kai politike sten Ellada tou mesopolemou: to Diethnes Grafeio Ergasias kai e anaduse ton koinonikon thesmon* (Work and politics in inter-war Greece: the International Labour Office and the emergence of social institutions) (Athens: Idruma Ereunas kai tehnologias tes Emporikes Trapezas tes Ellados, 1993), pp. 315–30.

1935 the King was restored to the throne through a fraudulent plebiscite and elections followed.[8] The results – 143 seats for the royalists, 141 for the republicans and 15 for the Communists – were unwelcome to the King and the Right. Following public disorder the King appointed Ioannes Metaxas, a trusted monarchist general, as Minister for War. Metaxas staged a coup and on 4 August 1936, with the King's blessing, became dictator of Greece. It was the Communists who felt the effects of the dictatorship the most, suffering systematic repression, imprisonment and exile on remote Greek islands.[9] Still, within the enforced atmosphere of law and order Metaxas addressed, though he did not necessarily resolve, a number of important issues concerning the welfare of the population, promoted self-sufficiency in cereal production and introduced public works projects.[10]

The economy of the country suffered severely from the long periods of warfare and the need to incorporate the refugees and deal with the effects of international economic crises. Greece addressed her financial problems mostly through loans.[11] In this context and with Metaxas trying to keep a balanced relationship with both Germany and Britain, an ultimatum came from Italy on 28 October 1940. Greece was to allow Italian forces on to Greek soil. Greece refused and entered the Second World War in opposition to the Axis forces. Metaxas died in January 1941 while Greece was still fighting against Italy. The King appointed as Prime Minister the head of the Bank of Greece, Alexandros Koryzis. The German attack started on 6 April 1941. The Prime Minister committed suicide on 18 April 1941, to be replaced by Emmanuel Tsouderos; General Georgios Tsolacoglou surrendered to the Germans. Before their arrival in Athens the King and the Prime Minister fled to Crete, and later to London and Cairo, to become the Greek government in exile. General Tsolacoglou became Prime Minister.

Events leading to the famine

In economic terms, pre-Second-World-War Greece was predominantly rural, with more than 60 per cent of the population engaged in agricultural occupations generating 35 per cent of the national income. Nonetheless the country was heavily dependent on food imports for its subsistence. In the

[8] Gallant, *Modern Greece*, pp. 155–6.
[9] Margaret Kenna, *The social organisation of exile: Greek political detainees in the 1930s* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 2001).
[10] Gallant, *Modern Greece*, pp. 157–8; Lykogiannis, *Britain*, p. 29.
[11] Close, *The Greek Civil War*, p. 6.