

**Halting the Iron Curtain at the Mediterranean:  
The Greek Civil War and the Origins of the Truman Doctrine**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the origins of the Truman Doctrine in the Greek Civil War (1943-1949). It also seeks to understand the perceptions which fueled the United States' response to the Greek Civil War. It looks at the history of the war and tries to also place it in the greater context of Cold War diplomacy and agreements – particularly the percentages agreement made by Stalin and Churchill in June 1944 with regards to the Balkans. By analyzing documents from the State Department's archives and other sources, we are able to see on what assumptions men like George C. Marshall and President Harry Truman based their policies on. The worry of Soviet domination and subversion in Europe fueled in large measure the desire of the Truman administration to intercede on behalf of Greece's monarchical government in its struggle against a communist insurgency. One noteworthy fact this paper shows is that Stalin's Soviet Union never had any intention of intervening in Greece, out of Stalin's desire to focus on the consolidation of control over other Eastern European states. It also comments on the legacy of the Truman Doctrine and how it has been interpreted by succeeding administrations.

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## **Introduction: The Iron Curtain**

On March 5, 1946, former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill arose to give a speech at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri. Speaking in steady, sonorous tones, he warned the world of a new threat menacing Europe:

From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe. Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest, and Sofia, all these famous cities and the populations around them lie in what I must call the Soviet sphere and all are subject in one form or another... to an increasing measure of control from Moscow. Athens alone—Greece with its immortal glories – is free to decide its future at an election under British, American and French observation.<sup>1</sup>

This speech and its warnings of encroaching communist control of large portions of Europe proved quite prescient. From 1945 to 1989, the Soviet Union would largely dominate and dictate the affairs of Eastern Europe, from East Germany to Poland. The monopolization of power by the communist parties of these various states and their subjection to a high degree of control from Moscow ensured the Soviets an overwhelming preponderance of strength in Eastern Europe. This united front of communist states would come to be known as the Eastern Bloc.

Notably, Greece was never incorporated into this front. This was in large measure due to a firm commitment on the part of the United States to ensure that Greece remained free from the titan's grip of communist domination. During the Greek Civil War (1943-1949), the United States provided critical material and military aid to the Greek monarchy in order to defeat a communist insurgency. By doing so, the United States ensured that Greece would remain a friendly, capitalist power. This policy of aid to anticommunist elements is the famous Truman

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<sup>1</sup> Winston Churchill, *Churchill Speaks: Collected Speeches in Peace and War, 1897-1963* ed. Robert Rhodes James (New York: Chelsea House, 1980), 881.

Doctrine, which would greatly influence America's foreign policy from 1947 to the end of the Cold War in 1989.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, even today, the Truman Doctrine has cast a long shadow. For a long time, the United States remained aloof from the affairs of Europe, practicing a policy of avoiding entanglements abroad. The idea of the United States intervening in a European civil war – very much an internal affair – would have been unthinkable even 100 years ago. Yet with the Truman Doctrine, the United States established a precedent that has continued to be followed to this day. The United States now intervenes with some regularity in civil wars, recent examples being Libya in 2011, Bosnia in 1995, Somalia in 1992, and Syria today. While the motivations behind these interventions have not been based around anticommunism, they have often been justified in terms of American security interests, much as the promoters of the Truman Doctrine framed supporting the Greek government as necessary for American national security.

But it would be incorrect to suggest this long-lasting legacy has been entirely positive for the development of American foreign policy. Some authors have argued that America has learned the wrong lessons from the Truman Doctrine, one of these false lessons being a tendency to overestimate the utility of military solutions in achieving American foreign policy goals. Indeed, military interventions by the United States in Korea in the 1950s and Vietnam in the 1960s were justified in the name of containing communism.

All of this leads to the question: why this break with precedent? Why did Harry Truman and his cadre of advisers feel it necessary to intervene in the Greek Civil War? Moreover, what perceptions fueled their desire to ensure a decisive victory over the Greek Communists? Were

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<sup>2</sup> There is some debate on when precisely the Cold War ended. I choose my ending year as 1989, when the Berlin Wall fell – but some scholars prefer 1991, when the Soviet Union dissolved.

these perceptions based on reality, or more on fantasy? The goal of this paper is to answer adequately and fully these questions.

## **Background to the War**

In order to understand the Greek Civil War and why the United States ultimately intervened on the side of the government, it is necessary to cover a brief history of Greece during WWII. The civil war itself is usually divided up into three phases or “rounds”.

Part of what made the civil war even possible was the invasion and subsequent occupation of Greece by Italy, Germany, and Bulgaria during WWII. Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini famously invaded Greece in October of 1940, resulting in the Italian Army being pushed back across the Greek frontier into Albania. This was a military humiliation on the part of the Italians; the Greek army was woefully undersupplied and untrained. Yet what the Greeks lacked for in war materiel they compensated for in fighting spirit. The invasion of the Italians had resulted in the evaporation of the prewar tensions and political quarrels that Greece had been suffering from up to that point.

Adolf Hitler, concerned that Greece could be used by the British as a critical source of bases in the Eastern Mediterranean, promptly ordered the Wehrmacht to invade Greece in order to rescue Mussolini from a fiasco of his own making. The German occupation would last for three and a half years, devastating Greece economically and politically. Ultimately, the German occupation would cost Greece some \$8.5 billion, a massive sum for a tiny Balkan state of around 7.5 million people.<sup>3</sup> The human cost would be even starker: although estimates vary, up to

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<sup>3</sup> Anikam Nachmani, “Civil War and Foreign Intervention in Greece: 1946-1949,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 25, no. 4 (October 1990): 491.

hundreds of thousands of Greeks died, including most of Greece's community of 60,000 Jews who were murdered by German and Bulgarian occupation authorities.<sup>4</sup>

The first round of the civil war took place while the Axis occupation was ongoing; it mainly consisted of ELAM (National People's Liberation Army) forces controlled by the EAM (Greek National Liberation Front) attempting to eliminate all other potential opposition. Both of these groups were largely understood to be under the domination and influence of the KKE (Greek Communist Party). In this attempt to destroy their opposition they largely succeeded, although they were unable to completely annihilate all opposing groups: the British government, on the insistence of Prime Minister Churchill, interceded on behalf of the EDES (National Greek Republican League) forces, the only substantial resistance group that was not eliminated by the ELAM.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, for most of the 1940s, it was not the United States that was the premier power in Greece, but the British Empire. The British saw Greece as critical to their strategic position in the Eastern Mediterranean: by ensuring that Greece remained friendly to British interests, critical strategic assets such as the Suez Canal in Egypt could be protected against encroachment from unfriendly powers.

Eventually, the Germans were forced to evacuate Greece in September of 1944, much to the jubilation of the general population.<sup>6</sup> The mood was one of ecstasy upon liberation from the yoke of the occupation; however, fault lines soon began to develop and politics once again returned to the fray. The second round of the civil war would begin shortly after the restoration

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<sup>4</sup> Misha Glenny, *The Balkans: War, Nationalism, and the Great Powers, 1804-2011*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), 483, 511-518.

<sup>5</sup> Nachmani, "Civil War," 490.

<sup>6</sup> Glenny, *The Balkans*, 536.

of Greek independence. Under the British-brokered Lebanon Agreement of May 1944, the KKE and EAM were marginalized to a minor role in a so-called government of National Unity. Moreover, the Caserta Agreement of September 1944 placed all resistance bands under the command of a British general, Ronald Scobie. Importantly, the Caserta Agreement barred the communist forces from Attica – the region surrounding Athens – in order to ensure that they were not able to seize power.<sup>7</sup>

This attempt to destroy the influence of the communists in Greece by the British caused outrage, leading to demonstrations in the streets of Athens in December 1944 by the EAM. When government police responded to an unarmed EAM demonstration with violence, Athens itself was soon engulfed in violence and the communists attempted to seize power in a coup.<sup>8</sup> Eventually, with the introduction of British troops into the capital, the uprising by the communists was suppressed and they were compelled to sign the Varkiza Agreement of February 1945, forcing the demobilization of all ELAS units and promising a general political amnesty to all ELAS and EAM members.<sup>9</sup> But this was not the end of the war. Some units of the ELAS refused to disarm, and the right wing government supported by the British refused to honor its commitments to grant amnesty to former communist insurgents. This all but assured that the war would break out again.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> John O. Iatrides and Nicholas Rizopoulos, "The International Dimension of the Greek Civil War," *World Policy Journal* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 93-94.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Powers, "Containment: From Greece to Vietnam – And Back?" *The Western Political Quarterly* 22, no. 4 (December 1969): 847.

<sup>9</sup> Iatrides, "The International Dimension," 93.

<sup>10</sup> Iatrides, "The International Dimension," 93-94.

Up until this point in Greece, the United States took little interest in Balkan affairs generally. President Roosevelt was more than willing to allow Greece to remain firmly within the purview of the British. Indeed, even the Soviet Union of Joseph Stalin was amicable to allowing the British Empire to have a free hand within Greece, even if it meant sacrificing a successful and widely popular indigenous communist movement in the process.

Particularly noteworthy here is the Anglo-Soviet percentages agreement. Under this agreement, Stalin and Churchill agreed to divide up the Balkans into spheres of influence by assigning percentages of influence to various Balkan states. In the case of Greece, Stalin agreed to allow the British to have the overwhelming majority of the influence there – ninety percent British, ten percent Soviet.<sup>11</sup> Stalin's reasoning for this was pragmatic: if the Soviet Union recognized and respected the security needs of the British Empire in Greece, then the Soviet Union would be allowed to pursue its own policy agenda in states that the Red Army had successfully occupied, such as Romania and Bulgaria. This would allow Stalin to consolidate his own power in the Balkans.

Meanwhile, the stage was being set in 1946 for the breaking out of a new round of fighting between the communists and the government. This would turn out to be the final phase of the civil war, and the dynamics would be drastically affected by the changes in the international environment that had taken place over the past year. Moreover, with the death of President Roosevelt and the ascent of Harry Truman to the presidency, a hardline policy towards the Soviet Union would be adopted by the new administration.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Iatrides, "The International Dimension," 91.

<sup>12</sup> Iatrides, "The International Dimension," 96.

In a plebiscite held in September 1946, the Greek people voted to restore the monarchy of King George II, a move the communists violently opposed. This would inaugurate a new era of fighting, one that would ultimately conclude with a government victory thanks to over \$1 billion in pivotal American military and economic assistance.<sup>13</sup> This policy of furnishing massive amounts of material and economic support to governments opposing communism would come to be known as the Truman Doctrine.

### **A Wise or Foolish Policy?**

The Truman Doctrine has generated much controversy and debate over the years. It has received copious amounts of praise and criticism – oftentimes it seems that the praise or criticism is heavily dependent on that particular person’s views on American foreign policy. Of particular note is the Vietnam War and how some scholars felt the Truman Doctrine had been grossly misapplied there: under the guise of an anticommunist crusade, the United States involved itself in a costly and harmful war that damaged its prestige abroad and caused internal division at home.

One of the most forceful critics of the Doctrine and its consequences is Richard Powers. Writing in the 1960s, at a time when the Vietnam War was still raging, he argued that the Truman Doctrine and the policy of containment which followed from it had had disastrous results for the formulation of American foreign policy. Powers pointed out that George F. Kennan, the progenitor of the idea of containment, objected to the Truman Doctrine on the

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<sup>13</sup> Powers, “Containment,” 848.

grounds that Truman gave a much wider commitment to fighting communism than was feasible or desirable.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, it caused another issue: the misinterpretation of nationalism as communism. It gave the United States a hardline counterrevolutionary stance: anywhere a revolution was afoot, communism must naturally follow. For example, instead of seeing the war fought by France in Indochina as a colonial war of nationalists fighting their colonial overlords, both the Truman and Eisenhower administrations saw communist subversion.<sup>15</sup> Because of the United States government promoting this hardline counterrevolutionary, anticommunist stance, policymakers often failed to distinguish properly the difference between nationalist and ideological goals. Moreover, it often placed the significant military and economic power of the United States behind repressive governments, who simply had to convince the Americans of a significant communist threat in order to receive backing.<sup>16</sup> Powers noted – quite presciently, given how Vietnam played out – that the policy of containment as implemented would continue to cause the United States to suffer foreign policy defeats.<sup>17</sup>

Yet not all scholars hold such a negative view of the Truman Doctrine. Some scholars have actively praised the Doctrine's effects. John Iatrides and Nicholas Rizopoulos argued that the Truman administration's support of the Greek government during the civil war saved Greece from being misgoverned by communists for generations and ensured that it would eventually

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<sup>14</sup> Powers, "Containment," 851.

<sup>15</sup> Powers, "Containment," 853.

<sup>16</sup> Powers, "Containment," 857.

<sup>17</sup> Powers, "Containment," 859.

transition from a right wing dictatorship into a flourishing democracy.<sup>18</sup> Another author, D. George Kousoulas points out that the Truman Doctrine did an excellent job of achieving its stated objectives in Europe – Soviet expansionism on the continent was halted. An important qualifier to this statement is that the United States “chose its weapons and its ground wisely.”<sup>19</sup>

John Lewis Gaddis, a historian of the Cold War, argues that the Truman Doctrine was actually far more limited in its aims than the rhetoric of Truman would have suggested. He suggests that the Truman Doctrine did not actually represent a shift in the objectives of American foreign policy, but rather that the Soviet Union had emerged as a challenger to these stated objectives. Rather, Truman’s policy was in keeping with an American tradition of attempting to preserve the balance of power in Europe – which went back to at least World War I.<sup>20</sup> At bottom, the goal of the Truman Doctrine was not an actual opposition to communism everywhere it could potentially spring up and take over, but the far more modest goal of preventing the Soviet Union from dominating the European continent. Containment was thus not about *communism*, but rather the Soviet Union.<sup>21</sup>

Although recent evaluations of the Truman Doctrine have been sparser, one author contradicts many of these authors who argue that it was a great success – at least in terms of its goal of establishing democratic states as a bulwark against communist subjugation. John Iatrides

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<sup>18</sup> Iatrides, “The International Dimension,” 100.

<sup>19</sup> D. George Kousoulas “The Success of the Truman Doctrine Was Not Accidental,” *Military Affairs* 29, no. 2 (Summer 1965): 88-92.

<sup>20</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, “Was the Truman Doctrine a Real Turning Point?” *Foreign Affairs* 52, no. 2 (January 1974): 389.

<sup>21</sup> Gaddis, “Was the Truman Doctrine a Real Turning Point?” 392.

notes that Truman's stated goal to help establish free democratic states that would resist communist encroachment largely failed in Greece. Despite attempts by American officials to convince the victorious Greeks to establish an inclusive government that would include rightists and leftists and would attempt to govern fairly for all Greeks, the postwar Greek government was in fact still ruled by a tiny elite of oligarchs.<sup>22</sup> Eventually these efforts by the Americans to build a strong democracy were abandoned in favor of ensuring Greece stayed hostile to communism. With this being the case, Iatrides notes that the primary success of Truman's policy was not ensuring Greece (at least in the short term) became a robust and healthy democracy. Rather, its success lay in the fact that it successfully kept Greece from falling behind the iron curtain.<sup>23</sup>

### **Facing the Soviet Threat: The Promulgation of the Truman Doctrine**

In the words of one author, "The struggle was local, the stakes worldwide."<sup>24</sup> In a nutshell, this summarized the attitudes of the Truman administration to the Greek conflict: although it was very much an internal affair concerning the Greek people themselves, its outcome nonetheless concerned the most powerful states in the world. As previously noted, the United States had not taken a particularly strong interest in the affairs of the Balkans during the war years. This was an area of the world seen as entirely peripheral to the national interests of the United States. It was assumed that the British and the Soviets would largely dominate in

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<sup>22</sup> John Iatrides, "George F. Kennan and the Birth of Containment: The Greek Test Case," *World Policy Journal* 22, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 142.

<sup>23</sup> Iatrides, "George F. Kennan," 142-143.

<sup>24</sup> Evangelos Averoff-Tossizza, *By Fire and Axe: The Communist Party and the Civil War in Greece (1944-1949)*, (New York: Caratzas Brothers, 1978), 1.

Balkan affairs (as was acknowledged by the percentages agreement), and that the United States would keep out.

Yet even some far-seeing American officials acknowledged that in the postwar world, this view of the Balkans might very well change. In a June 1944 letter to President Roosevelt, the United States Ambassador to Greece Lincoln Macveagh wrote:

Parenthetically, I realize that Yugoslavia, -- and Greece to an even greater extent -- are very small potatoes in the typical American view of foreign affairs. But I should like to stress once more my belief that eventually what goes on in the Balkans and the Near East generally will have to be recognized as of prime importance to us despite the fact that the countries involved are small and remote...<sup>25</sup>

This prediction by Ambassador Macveagh would prove prescient. Not only would the United States become deeply involved in Balkan affairs, Greece would come to be seen by the Truman administration as the frontline battle in the effort to contain the expansion of communism. Indeed, George F. Kennan's famous idea of "containment" would be first implemented by the Truman administration in Greece.<sup>26</sup>

But it is also important to realize that the Soviet Union in actuality never made any serious attempt to provide assistance to the communist forces fighting in Greece. Stalin and other Soviet officials made it clear time and time again that the insurgents could not expect military aid from the Soviet government and that Stalin expected them to cooperate with the British-backed government. In a memo to Soviet foreign commissar Vyacheslav Molotov, Ivan Maiskii, the former Soviet ambassador to London, noted: "The USSR is interested in Greece much less than in other Balkan countries, whereas England, in contrast, is seriously interested in Greece. In

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<sup>25</sup> Lincoln Macveagh, *Ambassador Macveagh Reports: Greece 1933 to 1947* ed. John Iatrides (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 627.

<sup>26</sup> Nachmani, "The International Dimension," 99.

relation to Greece, therefore, the USSR should observe great caution.”<sup>27</sup> The policy of the Soviets was therefore not one of overt aggression and subversion, but rather studied caution.

Moreover, Stalin had made it clear that he did not want to risk angering the United States and the British over a peripheral country such as Greece. It would not have been in the Soviet Union’s interest to provoke them into a vigorous response: after all, the Soviets were busy consolidating their own authority and power in Eastern Europe in places such as Poland, East Germany, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. The successful consolidation of one party communist states throughout Eastern Europe would grant the Soviet Union a vast frontier of friendly satellites, ensuring that the devastation wrought by Hitler’s invasion could not be easily repeated. But the mere creation of these governments had been cause for suspicion in the United States. It convinced officials in the United States government that the establishment of these satellites was indicative of a larger Soviet plan of expansionism: one where the Soviet Union was bent on extending its reach globally.<sup>28</sup> Soviet dominance of Europe would also be greatly disruptive to the balance of power in Europe, and as such it needed to be opposed vigorously.

Or so that is what the United States government thought. In a February 1947 memorandum to President Truman, Secretary of State George Marshall wrote the following: “A crisis of the utmost importance and urgency has arisen in Greece and to some extent in Turkey. This crisis has a direct and immediate relation to the security of the United States.”<sup>29</sup> With the

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<sup>27</sup> Geoffrey Roberts, “Moscow’s Cold War on the Periphery: Soviet Policy in Greece, Turkey, and Iran, (1943-8),” *Journal of Contemporary History* 46, no. 1 (January 2011): 60.

<sup>28</sup> Nachmani, “The International Dimension,” 99.

<sup>29</sup> Department of State. *Memorandum by the Secretary of State to President Truman* by George C. Marshall, Foreign Relations of the United States, February 27, 1947, document 37, Near East and Africa 1947, Volume V. Accessed November 3rd, 2016. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1947v05/d37>.

announcement of the British government to the United States that they could no longer continue to support the Greek government financially, it became clear that if the Greek government were to survive, it would need immediate assistance and that such aid would need to be provided by the Truman administration. It was time for a new American policy toward Greece. But first the president would need to be convinced that a new policy course would be prudent. Secretary Marshall attempted to make the case for forceful action in his memo:

Our interest in Greece is by no means restricted to humanitarian or friendly impulses. If Greece should dissolve into civil war it is altogether probable that it would emerge as a communist state under Soviet control. Turkey would be surrounded and the Turkish situation, to which I shall refer in a moment, would in turn become still more critical. Soviet domination might thus extend over the entire Middle East to the borders of India. The effect of this upon Hungary, Austria, Italy and France cannot be overestimated. It is not alarmist to say that we are faced with the first crisis of a series which might extend Soviet domination to Europe, the Middle East and Asia.<sup>30</sup>

In essence, Marshall was saying that the victory of communism in Greece would have worldwide implications for American security and the standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union. And indeed, at the time of Marshall writing this memo to President Truman, the situation in Greece appeared dire for the government: the Greek government only controlled Athens and the immediate area outside of it.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the GDA (Greek Democratic Army – the renamed ELAS) forces were able to move freely across the frontiers of Greece into the neighboring states of Albania, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia in order to resupply, rearm, and regroup. In short, the GDA was in a position to win the war decisively. And considering that all of

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<sup>30</sup> *Memorandum*, Marshall. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1947v05/d37>.

<sup>31</sup> Nachmani, "Civil War," 502.

Greece's neighboring states were controlled by communist regimes that were seen as sympathetic to the Soviet Union, it was imperative that Greece remain anticommunist as a bulwark against a complete communist takeover of the Balkans.<sup>32</sup> After making clear the stakes of losing Greece to communism, Marshall warned Truman: "We can give you no assurance that American assistance to Greece will unquestionably save the situation but it is plainly evident that that situation cannot be saved without American assistance. The choice is between acting with energy or losing by default."<sup>33</sup>

The situation clearly required immediate and vigorous action. To this end, Marshall recommended that the United States render significant financial assistance to the Greeks, the expenditure of which would be carefully monitored by the Americans. Moreover, Marshall recommended the authorization by Congress for shipments of military equipment as may be required by the Greek government in its struggle.<sup>34</sup> This policy that Marshall recommended would eventually lead to the American government wielding significant power and influence in the affairs of the Greeks – after all, it gave the United States significant leverage over the Greeks by making them dependent on American aid for their survival against the communist insurgency.

It is worth discussing whether or not Marshall's views were unanimous among the members of Truman's administration. Where there any notable voices of dissent against such a seemingly drastic policy? In a March 7, 1947 memorandum written by then Secretary of War Robert Patterson, he discusses the deliberations of the administration over whether or not aid

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<sup>32</sup> Nachmani, "Civil War," 502-509.

<sup>33</sup> *Memorandum*, Marshall. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1947v05/d37>.

<sup>34</sup> *Memorandum*, Marshall. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1947v05/d37>.

should be furnished to Greece. After noting that Greece not falling to communism was critical to American military interests in Western Europe, Patterson recounted:

The Secretary of the Treasury, the Attorney General, the Secretary of the Navy, the Secretary of the Interior, the Secretary of Commerce, and the Secretary of Labor,—all the Cabinet members present—expressed themselves as in favor of giving assistance to Greece. The Secretary of the Navy laid stress upon getting the aid and assistance of American business, not only in this matter but in our economic policy overseas in all areas. The President said he was in favor of this, and he designated the Secretary of the Treasury as chairman and the Secretary of the Navy, Secretary of Commerce, Secretary of Labor, and Secretary of Agriculture as a group to inquire into the matter and formulate a program.

The President had a draft of a message, prepared by the State Department, and he mentioned that he might deliver it on Monday.

Several of those present laid stress on the fact that the entire situation should be made clear to the American people.<sup>35</sup>

It then seems fair to conclude from this that there was no significant voices of dissent amongst Truman's cabinet during the moment of truth. That is, the cabinet seemed to concur with the force of Marshall's reasoning: Greece was too important to simply let slip away into the Soviet sphere.

Ultimately President Truman did not need much convincing to act. A few short weeks after Marshall's memo and a mere few days after the cabinet deliberations, Truman appeared before a joint session of Congress on March 12, 1947 and portrayed a cataclysmic situation in Greece. And as Marshall had done, Truman framed the situation in Greece in terms of a worldwide struggle against the forces of communistic imperialism. He said: "The gravity of the situation which confronts the world today necessitates my appearance before a joint session of

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<sup>35</sup> Department of State. *Memorandum by the Secretary of War (Patterson) on the Meeting of the Cabinet on March 7, 1947* by Robert Patterson. Foreign Relations of the United States March 7, 1947, document 65, Near East and Africa, Volume V. Accessed December 19th, 2016. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1947v05/d65>.

the Congress. The foreign policy and the national security of this country are involved.”<sup>36</sup>

Truman illustrated a catastrophic situation in Greece: one of collapsed infrastructure as a result of war and occupation, economic impoverishment, and the inability of the Greek government to effectively deal with the immense crisis that it was facing. He noted the immensity of the human suffering that existed in Greece as a result of the occupation:

When forces of liberation entered Greece they found that the retreating Germans had destroyed virtually all the railways, roads, port facilities, communications, and merchant marine. More than a thousand villages had been burned. Eighty-five per cent of the children were tubercular. Livestock, poultry, and draft animals had almost disappeared. Inflation had wiped out practically all savings.

As a result of these tragic conditions, a militant minority, exploiting human want and misery, was able to create political chaos which, until now, has made economic recovery impossible.<sup>37</sup>

Truman also noted that the United States was uniquely poised to address these problems. With the British Empire in the process of liquidating its commitments across the world, only the United States possessed the capabilities to save Greece from communist subjugation. After discussing the much less dire situation that existed in Turkey, Truman acknowledged the enormity of what he was requesting, saying, “I am fully aware of the broad implications involved if the United States extends assistance to Greece and Turkey...”<sup>38</sup>

Truman framed American foreign policy objectives as intended to create conditions of freedom so that other states could not dominate and bully weaker states. He pointed out that the

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<sup>36</sup> Harry Truman “Truman Doctrine,” *The Avalon Project*, accessed November 3, 2016, [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/trudoc.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/trudoc.asp).

<sup>37</sup> Truman, “Truman Doctrine,” [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/trudoc.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/trudoc.asp).

<sup>38</sup> Truman, “Truman Doctrine,” [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/trudoc.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/trudoc.asp).

recently concluded war against Germany and Japan was in part fought to ensure that these states could not simply impose their wills and ways of life on less powerful nations. Moreover, Truman said that the United States had sought to fight totalitarianism in the postwar world. By ensuring the development of free, democratic states, American security would be assured. To this end, the United States had “taken a leading part in establishing the United Nations.” Through the promotion of democracy and freedom against the spread of totalitarian darkness, the United States would thus ensure the stability of the international order.

It was after framing American policy objectives in this way that Truman said perhaps the most famous line of his speech: “I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.” In essence this was an articulation of anticommunism: the United States would make it its policy to assist any people resisting communism. Truman in his speech also echoed Marshall’s warnings of the loss of Greece to communism as having global implications in the struggle against communist domination:

It is necessary only to glance at a map to realize that the survival and integrity of the Greek nation are of grave importance in a much wider situation. If Greece should fall under the control of an armed minority, the effect upon its neighbor, Turkey, would be immediate and serious. Confusion and disorder might well spread throughout the entire Middle East.

Moreover, the disappearance of Greece as an independent state would have a profound effect upon those countries in Europe whose peoples are struggling against great difficulties to maintain their freedoms and their independence while they repair the damages of war.

It would be an unspeakable tragedy if these countries, which have struggled so long against overwhelming odds, should lose that victory for which they sacrificed so much. Collapse of free

institutions and loss of independence would be disastrous not only for them but for the world. Discouragement and possibly failure would quickly be the lot of neighboring peoples striving to maintain their freedom and independence.

Should we fail to aid Greece and Turkey in this fateful hour, the effect will be far reaching to the West as well as to the East.<sup>39</sup>

Truman's articulation of the worldwide importance of the Greek Civil War could be said to portend of what the Cold War would be like in general. That is, conflicts in small and faraway nations between peoples whom most Americans knew little about would nonetheless have great and grave implications for the international order. Therefore, these conflicts would attract the attention of the world's most powerful states and it would be in the interest of the United States to support anticommunist elements in these places. Having made his case, Truman thus requested \$400 million in funds for Greece and Turkey, \$350 million of these to be furnished to Greece.<sup>40</sup> The approval by Congress of Truman's request would mark the beginning of a long policy of American economic and military assistance to governments resisting communism during the Cold War.

### **Challenging Perceptions: Stalin's Reluctance in Greece**

American policymakers justified their Greek policy on the basis of opposition to the Soviet domination of Europe. Both Marshall and Truman believed that the GDA were in fact Soviet proxies being used to extend the dominion of international communism and threaten Turkey. In actuality, the truth was more complicated: the GDA, while receiving backing from the

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<sup>39</sup> Truman, "Truman Doctrine," [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/trudoc.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/trudoc.asp).

<sup>40</sup> Truman, "Truman Doctrine," [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/trudoc.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/trudoc.asp).

communist states of Albania, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia, never received military aid directly from the Soviet Union.

Here we have a case of where perception felt like reality: American policymakers seemed convinced that Stalin was seeking to subvert the Greek government to serve his own interests, considering he and the communist proxies controlled by Moscow had fatally undermined democracies in other places in Eastern Europe. But Stalin was assiduous in his commitment to his agreement with Churchill and did not want to provoke a response that could potentially threaten his gains from WWII.

This is perhaps best illustrated by a conversation with a Yugoslav politician, Edvard Kardelj, Stalin made his views on the Greek insurgency quite clear:

The rebellion in Greece must be crushed... They have not the slightest chance of winning. Do you really imagine that Britain and the United States – the strongest countries in the world – that they will tolerate any disruption to their communications artery in the Mediterranean! What rubbish. And we don't have a fleet. No – the rebellion in Greece must be crushed and the sooner, the better.<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, Stalin's policy of indifference to the struggles of the Greek communists was greatly unfortunate for them, as they continued to expect eventual help from the Soviet Union: Nikos Zachiarides, the General Secretary of the KKE, expected that his personal contacts with Stalin himself would eventually lead to generous supplies of much-needed aid. They did not realize that Stalin was bent on upholding his end of the Anglo-Soviet spheres agreement with the British (and their American successors), and had no intention of breaking this promise. If the Soviets were to act aggressively in Greece in contravention of the agreement, then perhaps the

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<sup>41</sup> Glenny, *The Balkans*, 543-544.

United States would have been more willing to introduce its own military forces into Greece in order to ensure that the Iron Curtain did not stretch all the way to the Mediterranean – a possibility that was considered by Truman’s National Security Council, although ultimately ruled out as unwise.<sup>42</sup> This could have threatened Stalin’s hard won gains in neighboring states such as Bulgaria and Albania. If sacrificing a communist movement that had a reasonably high chance of success was the price to pay for this, then Stalin more than was willing to let the KKE be the unwitting pawns in his chess game of great power politics.<sup>43</sup>

Important also to the failure of the Greek communists were other developments in international communism at the time. Josip Broz Tito, the successful partisan general and leader of Yugoslavia, was a far more important source of aid to the KKE’s struggles than Stalin ever was. As one author astutely points out, it was not Moscow’s form of communism that the Truman Doctrine defeated in Greece, but rather *Balkan* communism – the sort peddled by Tito’s Yugoslavia. Stalin was far more concerned with maintaining Soviet supremacy over the communist parties he firmly controlled in places like Poland and East Germany than he was with a largely homegrown communist movement in faraway Greece.<sup>44</sup> When Tito and Stalin famously split with each other over differences of policy in 1948, this showed that communist states were not necessarily monolithic. That is, not all communist party leaders were willing to be the errand boys of Moscow.

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<sup>42</sup> Department of State. *Report by the National Security Council by the Executive Secretary of the Council* by Sidney Souers, March 22, 1949, document 67. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1948. Eastern Europe; the Soviet Union: Volume IV. Accessed November 3rd, 2016. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v04/d67>.

<sup>43</sup> Peter J. Stavriakis, *Moscow and Greek Communism (1944-1949)* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 204-208.

<sup>44</sup> Stavriakis, *Moscow*, 212-214.

This difference between two leaders had important consequences for the Greek rebellion. When the KKE decided to adopt a pro-Stalinist line – despite the fact that Stalin had not actually rendered them with any significant support – Yugoslavia decided to act to defend its own interests: the closure in July 1949 of the Greek-Yugoslav border which had allowed the GDA rebels to slip across Greece’s frontiers to rearm, regroup, and resupply themselves proved fatally injurious to their cause.

We must also remember that Stalin was generally paranoid about any potential – real or imagined – challengers to his own personal power. As the Tito-Stalin split aptly shows, Stalin did not enjoy his final say on matters relating to international communist policy being challenged or questioned. When Tito asserted an independent foreign policy path from Moscow in 1948, it caused a rupture in Stalin’s monopoly of power in the international communist movement. Were a Greek communist uprising to be successful, that could have potentially resulted in another Yugoslavia – that is, a communist state whose behavior and politicians could not be controlled reliably from Moscow.

All of this to say that the fear of Soviet influence and meddling in Greece was largely unfounded. The Truman administration was basing its projections of Soviet subversion in Greece off of the Soviet Union’s actions in other places in Eastern Europe in the years after WWII. This was not an unreasonable supposition, although it was ultimately incorrect. This showed that Joseph Stalin, while certainly more than willing to act ruthlessly and cruelly when it was beneficial for him to do so, was not mindlessly expansionist. He had his limits on where he was willing to attempt to extend the reach of his power.

But Greece did serve as a testing ground for what was to come in the Cold War more generally. The American efforts to advise and expand the GNA (Greek National Army) in order to more effectively battle the GDA guerrillas proved wildly successful. Beyond simply providing the United States with an opportunity to implement the idea of containment and to show its resolve to resist Soviet expansion, it had some deeply practical results: The usage of napalm by the Royal Hellenic Airforce against GDA forces in Grammos was the first time the American military was able to observe the effects of this material.<sup>45</sup>

Yet it must be acknowledged as well that this policy of extension of aid to anticommunist forces certainly had its human costs: undoubtedly the intervention by the United States on the part of the Greek government prolonged the civil war. The butcher's bill for Greece's civil war ultimately totaled anywhere from 100,000 to 150,000 souls – out of a total population of seven million people. Alongside this, some one million Greeks ended up homeless and 28,000 Greek children were either kidnapped (according to the government) or taken abroad for their own safety (according to the rebels).<sup>46</sup>

### **Conclusions: Truman's Ghost**

Ultimately, the Truman Doctrine proved to be a stunning success in preventing Greece (and Turkey) from falling behind the iron curtain. The Soviet Union never succeeded in achieving complete hegemony over the European continent. Other important acts by the United States in the postwar world such as the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe and the creation of NATO can be seen as stemming from containment. Considering that the Marshall Plan greatly

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<sup>45</sup> Nachmani "Civil War," 509.

<sup>46</sup> Nachmani, "Civil War," 515.

facilitated the economic reconstruction of Europe after WWII's devastation and that NATO is still around today as an institution, these too might be judged to be successes.

Yet in other respects, the Truman Doctrine cannot be seen as an unequivocal success. In my view, future administrations grossly distorted the policy of containment to mean trying to halt communism anywhere it may spring up. The most glaring example of this would be the Vietnam War: the anticommunist tendencies promoted by the Truman Doctrine caused the United States government to back a repressive government in a war that was largely based on anticolonial principles. This was the tragic flaw of the Truman Doctrine as it would be interpreted in the future: by failing to recognize gradations and nuance in communist states and movements, it caused numerous presidents to reach the erroneous conclusion that any movement that could be even remotely associated with communism was necessarily dangerous to American interests. More troublingly still, it also promoted a policy of the United States backing repressive dictatorships so long as these dictatorships made their avowed anticommunism known.

As mentioned at the beginning of the paper, the United States to this day still intervenes with some regularity in the internal conflicts of other states. These interventions, while perhaps having varied motivations, are generally justified on the grounds of promoting American security interests and defending democratic institutions against sinister forces. Whether it's the civil war in Bosnia in the 1990s, or the war raging in Syria today, the United States has involved itself in a broad variety of civil wars in faraway places that, at first glance at least, might seem peripheral to the national security of the United States. The echoes of the Truman Doctrine are not hard to notice: President Truman said that the success of the Greek government in the civil war were essential to the security of the United States. To cite one example of Truman's rhetoric echoing

to the present day: much in the same way President Barack Obama justified the intervention in Libya in 2011, Truman tried to frame the support of the Greek government in terms of promoting American security and also promoting the spread of democratic institutions the world over.

All of this might be to say that the Truman Doctrine set precedents that it was not necessarily intended to set. Certainly with international communism no longer being a powerful political or military force, it is fair to ask whether or not such a policy is worth pursuing in a world that has not known the Cold War for over 25 years now. And indeed, the policies of intervention pursued by both Republican and Democratic administrations seem to have been recently repudiated: with the impending ascent of Donald Trump to the presidency – someone who was very critical of previous American military interventions, particularly in Iraq and Libya -- it might well mean an end of this 70 year policy of the United States intervening in civil wars.

Ultimately, for better or for worse, the Truman Doctrine greatly shaped the trajectory of American foreign policy across many generations. In exploring its origins, we can also conclude that sometimes policies that are meant to be more cautious in their goals can have unintended and far-reaching consequences. Outside Greece today, the Greek Civil War is little known – especially when compared with other major civil wars of this past century, such as the Russian Civil War or the Spanish Civil War.<sup>47</sup> Nonetheless, the strife and violence in this small Balkan nation greatly affected the trajectory of United States foreign policy for the past seventy years in a way that is often not fully appreciated. It also shows the importance of perception in shaping how foreign policy is formulated: even if that perception is not based on the actual reality, as far as policymakers are concerned, perception is reality.

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<sup>47</sup> Nachmani, "Civil War," 515.

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