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Land of the Kapedani: Brigandage, Paramilitarism and Nation-building in 20th Century Greece

Giannes Koliopoulos noted in the introduction of his pivotal *Brigands with a cause* that “scholarly interest in Greek brigandage has not been equal to the importance of the phenomenon.”¹ The state of the historiography has hardly changed three decades after Koliopoulos’ study appeared. The dearth of scholarly studies is more surprising if we consider both the extent of the phenomenon that forced successive governments to place entire districts under martial law and mobilize hundreds of troops against the bandit gangs and the persistent fascination of novelists, popular historians and documentary filmmakers in brigandage.² The present essay will address this gap in the existing historiography by looking at a specific episode in the history of banditry—the era of the *listokrateia*³ (1914-1930) in the Epirus region. Epirus was not the only area afflicted by brigandage however, the ferocity of the local gangs, the area had one of the highest murder rates in Europe during this period⁴ and the extent of the phenomenon, with over 300 bandits and fugitives operating in the

¹ John S. Koliopoulos, *Brigands with a Cause: Brigandage and Irredentism in Modern Greece 1821-1912* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), viii.

² Nikos I. Panos, *Πεντζαίοι—Οι βασιλείς της Ηπείρου* (Fillipiada: self-published, 2014); Nikos Bakolas, *Μπέσα για μπέσα ή ο άλλος Φώτης* (Athens: Kedros, 1998); Kiriakos Kassis, *Αντιεξουσιαστές και ληστές στα βουνά της Ελλάδας 1821-1871* (Athens: Ichor, 2000); Evripides Makres, *Οι ληστές και τα τραγούδια τους στη Δυτική και Κεντρική Ελλάδα 1827-1930* (Ioannina: self-published 2008); Giannes Baslis, *Μήτσιος Τζιατζιάς, ο αριστοκράτης ληστής (1889-1930)* (Athens: Enastron 2010); Vasilis Tzanakaris, *Οι λήσταρχοι. Τα παλληκάρια τα καλά σύντροφοι τα σκοτώνουν* (Athens: Metaihmio, 2016).

³ The word can be translated roughly as the ‘bandits reign.’

⁴ Thomas W. Gallant, “Murder in a Mediterranean City: Homicide Trends in Athens, 1850-1936,” *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora* 23 (1997): 15.

area during the highpoint of the listokrateia, make the region particularly suitable for the study of brigandage.

Like many other studies of banditry Koliopoulos' book was published in the wake of Eric Hobsbawm's *Bandits*. Hobsbawm saw banditry as a pre-political form of agrarian protest accordingly, the men who engaged in such activities, the "social bandits" were "not regarded as simple criminal by public opinion" but rather "as heroes, as champions, avengers, fighters for justice."⁵ Hobsbawm acknowledged that social bandits were not necessary revolutionaries, indeed, when they rose in rebellion they often fought for God, the king and the return to the old ways, they nevertheless shared "the values and aspirations of the peasant world, and as outlaws and rebels were usually sensitive" to the "revolutionary urges" of the peasantry.⁶ Greek brigands and their Balkan counterparts constituted the most distinct type of social bandits "the haiduks [...] robbers by trade, enemies of the Turks and popular avengers by social role."⁷ Haiduks often came from groups that were positioned in the margins of rural society such as itinerant shepherds and landless labourers however, their circumstances led them to identify with the mass of the peasantry; "the haiduk was by definition an insurrectionary [...] an outsider and a rebel [...] this draws him close to the poor; he is one of them. It sets him in opposition to the hierarchy of power, wealth and influence."⁸

Koliopoulos' study took a critical view of the social bandit thesis. He argued that "the concept of the social bandit put forward in recent years is related to the bandits of that region and time in the way myth is to reality."⁹ Brigands, according to Koliopoulos lacked any social agenda or sympathy for the peasants "the support they were able to get from the common and helpless folk was the result of fear of reprisals rather than sympathy."¹⁰ Brigandage had three sources; a tradition of outlawry that reached back to the pre-revolutionary years,

⁵ Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (London: Abacus, 2001), 15.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁹ Koliopoulos, *Brigands with a Cause*, 277.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

a protracted crisis of the pastoral economy that led increased numbers of desperate and dispossessed men to join the ranks of the bandit gangs and the inherent instability of the Greco-Ottoman border that provided ample opportunities for plundering during the numerous uprisings staged by Greek irredentists.¹¹ The Balkan Wars and the subsequent nation-building eliminated the factors that had sustained banditry in the past. In the aftermath of the war ‘bandits of all descriptions were at last relegated to the past’ and the few who survived were ‘never more than hunted outlaws... survivors of an era that had come to an end.’¹²

However, while Koliopoulos’ study is critical of Hobsbawm, his depiction of brigands as “drifting members of a traditional world in a state of dissolution,” fighting a desperate rear-guard action against the advance of modernity, and the association between economic disaffection and bandit activity bears more than a passing resemblance to the latter’s view of bandits as defenders of the “old ways.”¹³ Both scholars saw brigands as opponents of the state and the modernist values it stood for. Such depictions were also shared by several other scholars who were otherwise critical of the social bandit thesis.¹⁴ However, the brigand was not always an enemy of the state and its modernizing agenda, in fact bandit groups often played an important but overlooked role in the state-building process. A series of recent studies have underscored the role of illegal actors; drug-runners, bandits, warlords and smugglers in extending the writ of the state and facilitating the emergence of market economy in inaccessible peripheral areas like the Afghan and Thai highlands and the Anatolian plateau.¹⁵ These violent actors acted as brokers between

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 310-8.

¹² *Ibid.*, 19.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 312.

¹⁴ See Thomas W. Gallant, “Brigandage, Piracy, Capitalism and State-Formation: Transnational Crime from a Historical World-Systems Perspective,” in *States and Illegal Practises*, ed. Josiah McC Heyman (Oxford and New York, 1999), 25.

¹⁵ Jonathan Goodhand, “Bandits, Borderlands and Opium Wars: Afghan state-building viewed from the margins,” in *A Companion to Border Studies*, ed. Wilson, Thomas and Donnan, Hastings (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 332-53;

the central authority and peripheral elites and provided the “muscle” necessary to pacify these lawless areas and establish a monopoly of violence. However, such groups did not just act as power brokers. During times of acute social and political crisis non state-violent actors were called to undertake activities: terrorism, massacres of civilians, forced displacement, which the state was unwilling or incapable to perform.

Such alliances have a long and chequered history across the former Ottoman domains; the role of Greek, Bulgarian and Ottoman paramilitary gangs during the Macedonian conflict and the Balkan Wars are cases in point.¹⁶ Historians have paid much less attention to the fate of these alliances after the war. Studies of nation-building in the 20th century Balkans have largely focused on the role played by the colonist, the refugee, the teacher and the gendarme in the process of the ethnic consolidation and assimilation that transformed the formerly multi-ethnic Ottoman lands into ethnically “pure” territories.¹⁷ Accordingly, outlaws were either cast as enemies of the state,

Alfred W. McCoy, “Covert Netherworld: Clandestine Services and Criminal Syndicates in Shaping the Philippine State,” in *Government of the Shadows: Parapolitics and Criminal Sovereignty*, ed. Eric Wilson (London: Pluto Press, 2009), 226-56.

¹⁶ Ipek K. Yosmaoglu, *Blood Ties Religion, Violence and the Politics of Nationhood in Ottoman Macedonia, 1878-1908* (Ithaca: New York, 2014); Dimitris Livianos, “‘Conquering the Souls’: Nationalism and Greek guerrilla warfare in Ottoman Macedonia, 1904-1908,” *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 23 (1999): 195-221; Ugur Umit Ungo, “Rethinking the Violence of Pacification: State Formation and Bandits in Turkey, 1914-1937,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54 (2012): 746-69; Ryan Gingeras, “Beyond Istanbul’s ‘Laz Underworld’: Ottoman Paramilitarism and the Rise of Turkish Organised Crime, 1908-1950,” *Contemporary European History* 19 (2010): 215-30.

¹⁷ Basil Gounaris, “Victims and avengers of the nation: The politics of refugee legacy in the Southern Balkans,” *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans* 8 (2006): 313-25; Philip Carabott, “Aspects of the Hellenization of Greek Macedonia, ca. 1912-ca. 1959,” *Kampos: Cambridge Papers in Modern Greek* 13 (2005): 21-61; Nathalie Clayer, “Education and the integration of the province of Gjiro-kastër in interwar Albania,” in *Albania. Family, Society and Culture in the 20th Century*, ed. Andreas Hemming, Gentiana Kera, and Enriketa Pandelejmoni (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2012), 97-113.

desperately resisting the modernization process or were altogether ignored.

This article will explore the overlooked role and impact of brigands and other non-state violent actors in the nation-building process. The article will focus on the area of Epirus in north-western Greece. It will demonstrate that banditry was neither an inheritance of Ottoman times as sometimes argued nor a form of social protest but rather an integral aspect of state-building efforts and the increased need for control and security of a highly fragmented and politically unstable area. The expansion of the polity, the inclusion of minorities and the increased sectarianism of political culture in an area of traditionally weak state authority created a niche for violent actors and augmented the need and demand for groups willing to perform the tasks the state was unwilling or unable to undertake. This situation led the authorities to seek and form alliances with non-state violent actors; brigands, rustlers and paramilitaries thereby transforming the previously marginal outlaw groups to an integral part of the security and administrative apparatus. As a parliamentary committee noted two decades after the Balkan Wars “banditry was unfortunately created from and is still sustained by the state.”¹⁸

Brigands to Freedom-fighters

In 1902 the newspaper *Φωνή της Ηπείρου* published a series of articles about the “banes of the Christian peasantry.” In ascending order these were the tax collectors, the notables, the Arvanites—a generic term used to describe Muslim Albanians—the landowners and finally the bandits.¹⁹ Brigandage was not a new phenomenon in the area. Indeed, Epirus had been a foremost recruiting ground for mercenaries and bandit gangs since the early 18th century.²⁰ However, a

¹⁸ *Πρακτικά των Συνεδριάσεων της Βουλής 1926-7*, vol. 1 (Athens: Ethiko Tipografio, 1927), 30.

¹⁹ «Εξ Ηπείρου», *Φωνή της Ηπείρου* (October 20, 1902).

²⁰ Frederick Anscombe, “Albanians and mountain bandits,” in *The Ottoman Balkans, 1750-1830*, ed. Frederick Anscombe (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 87-113.

series of political crises that culminated in the 1897 Greco-Turkish war and the rapidly worsening economic conditions had led to a striking increase in brigandage.²¹ In 1903 the Greek consul in the town of Preveza noted that “despite the efforts of the Ottoman administration banditry shows no signs of abating, the situation is nothing less than tragic.”²² The lack of security was responsible according to the same report for the increase in immigration²³ which was turning large areas of the countryside into “a desert [...] scores of our fellow countrymen have already departed this land of brigands and scoundrels [...] and those who haven’t will certainly do so.”²⁴

This crisis was felt particularly in the traditionally poor Albanian highlands. During the last quarter of the 19th century thousands of mountaineers abandoned their villages to seek their fortunes in the towns of Ottoman Empire as labourers, peddlers and craftsmen. Those who were unwilling or unable to find profitable employment often turned to crime. The proliferation of Albanian gangs in Asia Minor and Macedonia led the Ottoman administration to see them as a “criminal class” and adopt stern measures towards Albanian immigrants.²⁵ The presence of Albanian gangs was no less pronounced in Epirus. The majority of the bandit gangs active in the sanjaks of Preveza and Ioannina were comprised by Muslim Albanians from the highlands of Kurvelesh, Kolonje and Skrapar. The predominance of the Albanian element was evident in the material and social culture of the gangs. Albanian was the lingua-franca of the bandit world and

²¹ Mihalis Kokolakis, *Το ύστερο γιαννιώτικο πασαλίκι. Χώρος, διοίκηση και πληθυσμός στην τουρκοκρατούμενη Ηπειρο 1820-1913* (Athens: Kentro Neoellinikon Erevnon, 2003), 38-47.

²² Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs/Central Service, Athens (henceforth IAYE), 1903/5/1, Ηπειρωτικό Ζήτημα, Ioannina 15-9-1903.

²³ IAYE, 1907/72/3, Προξενεία Ηπείρου, Preveza 24-8-1907.

²⁴ «Η ληστεία εν Ηπείρω», *Φωνή της Ηπείρου* (September 9, 1905).

²⁵ Ryan Gingeras, *Sorrowful Shores Violence, Ethnicity, and the End of the Ottoman Empire 1912-1923* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 32.

any brigand of note would make sure to acquire and done the “attire of a Muslim Albanian chief.”²⁶

However, there was nothing revolutionary on the activities of the brigands. The majority of those who joined the gangs were jobless young men aspiring to upward mobility. The brigands did not sought to topple the regime or protect the peasantry but to gain access to institutionalized power usually by joining the retinue of a local notable or by being hired in the gendarmerie. Few if any brigand bands operated with complete autonomy “most of them were the retainers and instruments of the Albanian landowners.”²⁷ The gang of Emin Demo from Borsh for instance was employed by the Abazi landowning family of Delvino who also funded the Greek gang of his blood-brother [vellam] Thimio Liolis.²⁸ Jusuf Dino Dey, a major landowner from the town of Paramithia employed and occasionally led a large retinue comprised by brigands from the villages of Kourtesi, Nunesati and Karvunari.²⁹ Brigands were also hired by Christian landowners like the Mentzos clan of Delvanaki.³⁰

While some of these notables were motivated by profit, the alliances between the brigand and the notables were ultimately shaped by the extreme insecurity that prevailed in the region. The gendarmerie had a deserved reputation for violence, corruption and incompetence. Gendarmerie officers were known to protect robber bands and they sometimes turned to robbery themselves.³¹ In the absence of effective law enforcement the only solution was to turn to local brigands.³² The more successful and violent brigands were employed as bodyguards, retainers and rural guards or Bektsi, a position which

²⁶ Alexandros Livadeos, «Ο καπετάνιος Γιάννης Πουτέτσης», *Ηπειρωτική Εστία* 9 (1953): 75-81.

²⁷ «Εξ Ηπείρου», *Φωνή της Ηπείρου* (November 10, 1900).

²⁸ Alexandrou Mammopoulou, *Του τόπου μου και του καιρού μου* (Athens: s.n., 1965), 15-6.

²⁹ ΙΑΥΕ, 1907/10/2, Αναφορές προξενείων Ιωαννίνων, Πρεβέζης, Βερατίου για την κατάσταση στην Ήπειρο, Athens 18-10-1907.

³⁰ «Εξ Ηπείρου», *Φωνή της Ηπείρου* (October 10, 1900).

³¹ «Εξ Ηπείρου», *Φωνή της Ηπείρου* (October 20, 1900).

³² «Εξ Ιωαννίνων», *Φωνή της Ηπείρου* (March 11, 1905).

they ‘often used to carry on a licenced and modified robbery of their own.’³³ While Bektsi’s were more common in ciftlik villages, free communities would often strike a bargain with a local notable who would appoint one of his retainers in return for a yearly fee known as the ‘daourtzitliki.’ The position of the Bektsi was highly coveted as it provided a large and secure revenue stream which could sometimes run to hundreds of pounds per year. Pitched battles between gangs who sought to protect their rights over a certain village were therefore quite common. For instance in the spring of 1908 two bandit gangs led by Ali Farmaki from Skrapar and Seido from Premeti fought several skirmishes ‘over who would impose himself on the Christian villages.’³⁴

Greek gangs were no less common or violent, however, their lack of access to local networks of power relegated them to a secondary place. Most Greek gangs were based outside Ottoman soil in the areas of Vonitsa, Trikala and the island of Corfu.³⁵ The background and motivation of such men was often much more varied than suggested by Koliopoulos. Greek gangs were mostly comprised by déclassé expatriates, refugees and seasonal workers, drovers, tinkers and petty thieves. The border towns of Aetolikon and Vonitsa both of which contain a significant immigrant population and the shanty village of Mirtario created after the 1897 war to house refugees from Epirus and Albania where recruitment areas and haunts from where ‘desperate men and criminals cross the border to Epirus to commit all sorts of depredations; rustling, murder, stagecoach robberies... the refugees who had been resettled in Mirtarion had become the bane of their fellow countrymen.’³⁶ Additionally, a large number of recruits came from the criminal underworld in the cities of Athens, Patras, Agrinion and Lefkada³⁷ where they were recruited by men

³³ Henry Noel Brailsford, *Macedonia; Its races and their future* (New York: Methuen, 1906), 48.

³⁴ «Εξ Ιωαννίνων», *Φωνή της Ηπείρου* (May 30, 1908).

³⁵ IAYE, 1904/6/2, Ησυχία και ασφάλεια του κράτους, Ioannina 8-3-1904.

³⁶ IAYE, 1903/11/3, Ησυχία και ασφάλεια του κράτους, Preveza 17-10-1903.

³⁷ IAYE, 1907/10/2, op. cit., Athens 31-10-1907; *Φωνή της Ηπείρου* (December 1, 1906).

like Efthimios Dagopoulos aka Kokkinos a tavern-keeper and part-time bandit who owned a wine-shop in the Hafteia neighbourhood of Athens.³⁸

Few of these gangs operated in a permanent basis: most were formed and bankrolled by Greek notables and businessmen and operated for a very short period of time, usually between two to three months.³⁹ Some of the gangs that operated in the areas of Thesprotia and Delvino worked for Vasileios K, 'a well-known hotelier from the town of Corfu' and led by his confidant, Savvas Tsikos, a Christian Albanian from Labovo who lived on the same town.⁴⁰ Lawyer Nikolaos Zervas and merchant Nikolaos Spanos both of whom lived in the border town of Vonitsa were also involved with several gangs that operated in the areas of Preveza and Ioannina.⁴¹ These men funded and often planned raids, outfitted gangs with guns and provisions, helped bandits to deal with troublesome local officials and provided links to the local official and unofficial markets. These bands often had an uneasy relation with their Albanian counterparts with whom they contested for the same turf and resources. Greek brigands took care to provide the local Bektsi and notables with their cut after every operation and studiously avoided harming the estate and property of Albanian landlords.⁴²

However, this precarious co-existence was showing signs of wear. The escalation of ethnic antagonisms in Macedonia had rendered the Ottoman authorities particularly wary of Greek armed groups of any hue especially after an abortive attempt to infiltrate irredentist bands in 1907.⁴³ The gendarmes were not the sole worry of Greek gangs though. The appearance of Albanian irredentist bands from mid-1908 onwards further limited the scope and activities of the Greek gangs who had to face a well-armed rival that enjoyed the support

³⁸ «Ηπειρωτικά ειδήσεις», *Φωνή της Ηπείρου* (October 10, 1903).

³⁹ «Ηπειρωτικά ειδήσεις», *Φωνή της Ηπείρου* (September 16, 1905).

⁴⁰ «Εξ Ιωαννίνων», *Φωνή της Ηπείρου* (September 17, 1899 and May 24, 1902).

⁴¹ ΙΑΥΕ, 1911/109/1, Εμφύλιος σπαραγμός στο Δυρράχιο, μέτρα κατά ληστείας, Arta 24-11-1911 and 1903/11/3, op. cit., Athens 31-1-1903.

⁴² «Εξ Ιωαννίνων», *Φωνή της Ηπείρου* (December 1, 1906).

⁴³ ΙΑΥΕ, 1907/10/2, op. cit., Ioannina 16-11-1907.

of large segments of the local population. The Albanian nationalist bands or *cetas* were initially met with hostility by the Ottoman authorities, however, they found a valuable ally in the Young Turks⁴⁴ whose support allowed them to act with increased impunity.⁴⁵ By the summer of 1908 Albanian nationalists with the help of ethnic Albanian gangs and the silent consent of the gendarmerie were able to control large swathes of the countryside.⁴⁶ The activities of the Albanian bands were further facilitated by the help of the local notables ‘who used their influence to make the gendarmes turn a blind eye to [their] criminal ventures’ and provided volunteers from their retinues.⁴⁷ By the summer of 1908 the activities of the *cetas* had convinced the Greek government that many pro-Greek villages would soon would declare their loyalties for the Albanians.⁴⁸

The Greeks responded by raising their own bands. The bands were recruited by the foreign ministry with the help of the Epirote Society, a state-sponsored irredentist society.⁴⁹ Greek guerrilla bands in Macedonia were as a rule comprised by men from the Greek kingdom and Crete and were led by regular army officers and NCO’s.⁵⁰ The bands that operated in Epirus were exclusively comprised and led by native-born brigands such as Spiros Mitsis aka Krommidas from the village of Geromnimi and Giannis Poutetsis aka Vorias from the village of Stegopul in southern Albania. These men had been often presented as ‘social bandits’ who were motivated by a pro-peasant agenda.⁵¹ However, this seems highly unlikely. During their long careers Poutetsis, Mitsis and their associates who were often described as the ‘scum of the earth’ by the Greek press, had

⁴⁴ M. Şükrü Hanioğlu, *Preparation for a Revolution 1902-1908* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 257-9.

⁴⁵ IAYE, 1908/97/3, Προξενεία Ηπείρου, Argirokastro 3-6-1908.

⁴⁶ «Εξ Ιωαννίνων», *Φωνή της Ηπείρου* (May 9, 1908).

⁴⁷ IAYE, 1911/109/1, *op. cit.*, Ioannina 25-8-1911.

⁴⁸ IAYE, 1908/97/3, *op. cit.*, Ioannina 10-6-1908.

⁴⁹ Spyros Ploumidis, “Nuances of Irredentism: The Epirote Society of Athens (1906-1912),” *The Historical Review/La Revue Historique* 8 (2011): 149-51.

⁵⁰ Koliopoulos, *Brigands with a Cause*, 225.

⁵¹ Ploumidis, *op. cit.*, 152.

showed no qualm in victimizing Greek peasants.⁵² In fact a few months before his enlistment, Mitsis, who had also worked for a period as a hired gun for the Romanian consulate,⁵³ committed a series of robberies in the Greek-speaking area of Kourenta.⁵⁴

The alliance between the gangs and the Greek state was rooted in local conditions. The advent of the Young Turk revolt ushered a period of vigorous cooperation between the Ottoman authorities, Albanian cetas and Muslim notables in Epirus, particularly in the vilayet of Ioannina where ‘the Young Turks encouraged the development of albanianness and albanianist activities with the aim of countering Greek claims. In these regions, they also mobilized Muslims specifically.’⁵⁵ The cooperation was not limited in the cultural-political realm but was also extended in security tasks. Albanian gangs and notables also collaborated with the gendarmerie in suppressing Greek nationalist activities. Expectedly the limits between policing, vigilantism and private vendetta were hazy. Notables and cetas used their connections to pursue their struggles over turf and revenue and persecute their enemies; disgruntled tenants, rival gangs and hostile notables.⁵⁶ Greek gangs irrespective of their political affiliation were singled out as their presence was seen as a prospective security threat. This situation led many outlaws who had previously collaborated with the Albanian gangs pliable to the approach of the Greek authorities who sought to construct their own guerrilla and intelligence networks in the area.⁵⁷

The activities of the Greek bands were limited to a brief period between November 1908 and March 1909, however, these few months were crucial towards the establishment of a symbiotic relationship between the state and the criminal gangs that characterized the political and social life of the area until the late 1940’s. The men who

⁵² «Εξ Ιωαννίνων», *Φωνή της Ηπείρου* (May 30, 1908).

⁵³ Georgios Manos, *Καπετάν Κρομμύδας* (Ioannina: self-published, 2002), 30-2.

⁵⁴ «Εξ Ιωαννίνων».

⁵⁵ Nathalie Clayer, “The Young Turks and the Albanians or young Turkism and Albanianism?,” in *Penser, agir et vivre dans l’Empire ottoman et en Turquie*, ed. Nathalie Clayer and Erdal Kaynar (Louvain: Peeters, 2013), 80.

⁵⁶ «Εξ Ιωαννίνων», *Φωνή της Ηπείρου* (February 6, 1909).

⁵⁷ ΙΑΥΕ, 1912/125/1/12, Συμμορίες, Ioannina 29-6-1912.

helped shape this relationship were Spiros Simos, a journalist, editor and rising star of the liberal party, and Spiros Spiromilios, a gendarmerie colonel and veteran of the Macedonian struggle. The two men played a crucial role in recruiting and outfitting the Greek bands and retained close ties with the brigands after 1909. Spiromilios and Simos helped Poutetsis to purchase an estate in the region of Almyros in eastern Thessaly after the dissolution of the bands and interceded with the foreign ministry to grant a monthly allowance and civil-service jobs to Poutetsis and several of his closest associates. Spiromilios' brother also christened Poutetsis' younger son.⁵⁸

These connections helped Poutetsis to build a criminal/guerrilla network that extended from the plain of eastern Thessaly to the Ionian coast. Poutetsis and his associate Mitsis bankrolled bandit gangs in Thessaly and southern Macedonia and were involved in a series of abductions, murders for hire and robberies in Epirus which accrued an income of over 1,000 gold sovereigns per year to Poutetsis.⁵⁹ His network was further involved with gun running and smuggling in the regions of Arta and Vonitsa and numerous protection and extortion schemes in the same area. Poutetsis and his associates extracted contributions up to 500 drachmas per household in the area of Tzoumerka and Katsanohoria and collected a safety tax from migratory shepherds in exchange for protection against rustlers and robbers.⁶⁰

These activities rendered Poutetsis and his comrades 'a significant political force on their own right' in the border area.⁶¹ In 1910 and 1911 Poutetsis and several of his associates were hired by Simos and Spiromilios to assist them with their electoral campaign. Elections were traditionally violent in this region however, the gangs brought this violence to a whole new level. Poutetsis' men attacked the electoral centres of Simos' and Spiromilios' rivals, destroyed

⁵⁸ Manos, *Καπετάν Κρομμύδας*, 90.

⁵⁹ ΙΑΥΕ, 1912/127/1, Εσωτερική κατάσταση Ελλάδας–Νέες χώρες, Athens 13-3-1912.

⁶⁰ ΙΑΥΕ, 1911/109/1, *ibid.* and 1911/99/1, Μακεδονομάχοι, Trikala 2-4-1911.

⁶¹ ΙΑΥΕ, 1912/29/2, Δράση συμμοριών στην Ήπειρο και στην Μακεδονία, Arta 13-8-1911.

ballots, beat up electoral representatives, bribed and threatened voters all under the eye of the gendarmerie. These activities caused an uproar and solicited a parliamentary research committee which declared the election void. However, neither the gangs nor their backers were touched.⁶² Moreover, the rival of Spiromilios came to an understanding with him by providing guns and money for Poutetsis expeditions. The violence unleashed by the gangs also led several high-ranking civil servants to suggest severing the ties with the gangs since they acted 'in a completely independent manner' and have 'caused great harm to our national interest.'⁶³ However, no measures were taken against them, in fact the gendarmerie repeatedly turned a blind eye to such activities and even helped to smuggle out of the country Poutetsis' nephew G. Farmakis who was involved in a murder-homicide on Greek soil.⁶⁴

This was not the only gang active at the time. Indeed, by late 1911 entire areas had slipped out of Ottoman control and were controlled by bandit gangs. The areas of Souli and Lakka were at the hands of the Zarkadas and Koutoupis gang that comprised between 40-60 men, the plain of Fanari was controlled by the gangs of H. Oikonomou and the Tzimas brothers, the valley of Kalamas and the area of Lower Pogoni was under the rule of A. Moukovinas, K. Memos and I. Vantzou. These men were a veritable authority, they collected taxes, tried cases and supervised most aspects of local life.⁶⁵ However, these gangs were a far cry from social bandits, for instance Zarkadas gang was responsible for a series of robberies and abductions in the Zagori and Lakka areas.⁶⁶ The press derided these gangs as 'mere brigands... whose only goal in life is to live off the sweat of their fellow Greeks.'⁶⁷ However, as a foreign ministry report noted

⁶² Elpidoforos Intzebelis, *Ο Ελευθέριος Βενιζέλος και το Κόμμα των Φιλελευθέρων στην Ήπειρο* (Athens: Historical Quest, 2015), 186-7.

⁶³ IAYE, 1912/125/1/12, op. cit., Ioannina 29-6-1912.

⁶⁴ IAYE, 1912/127/1, op. cit., Athens 13-3-1912.

⁶⁵ IAYE, 1912/29/2, op. cit., 4-6-1912.

⁶⁶ Kostas Lazaridis, «Η ληστεία στην Ζοντίλα», *Το Ζαγόρι μας* 104 (1986): 161-2; IAYE, 1912/125/1/12, ibid.

⁶⁷ «Εξ Ιωαννίνων», *Φωνή της Ηπείρου* (May 15, 1909).

their contribution was not altogether negative, as they had helped to discredit Ottoman authority by wresting control of the countryside from them ‘and have helped to safeguard the Greek villages of the region that were under constant threat by the Albanian gangs’.⁶⁸

These developments circumscribed the activities of the Albanian gangs. Yet, the cetars were far from a spend force. Cetar and bandit gangs controlled several areas including the areas of Deropoli, Filiates, Koritsa and the lowlands of Thesprotia. The proliferation of gangs had rendered these areas into ‘a state of complete anarchy.’ The villages of Grikohori, Grava and Ledeza in Thesprotia were turned into a battleground by the rival Cani and Dule clans who clashed over control of the smuggling routes between Corfu and the mainland. A gendarmerie detachment sent to restore order in the area was forced to flee after they were attacked by the gangs that united temporarily to fend off the gendarmes. Eventually the activities of the Cetar and the albanianist notables backfired, as these bands not only failed to curb the threat presented by Greek gangs but also alienated the local Muslim community and officials –in one occasion Albanian gangs vandalized the house of the Filiates kaymakam– further contributing to the disintegration of Ottoman authority in the region.⁶⁹

The outbreak of the Balkan Wars led to a rapprochement between the Greek and Ottoman states and the various armed groups. The Ottoman authorities began arming Albanian bands during August 1912 with the help of local notables.⁷⁰ The Greek authorities preceded to do the same after the commander of the Greek expeditionary force in Epirus general G. Sapountzakis asked ‘for the urgent dispatch of irregular bands.’ The bulk of these bands was recruited from among the ranks of bandit gangs including the bands of Poutetsis, Mitsis, Tzimas, Oikonomou, Koutoupis, Memos, Kolovos and Liolis. The number of men recruited this way was close to 1,000.⁷¹

⁶⁸ IAYE, 1912/125/1/12, op. cit., Ioannina 7-8-1912.

⁶⁹ IAYE, 1912/125/1/12, op. cit., Ioannina 22-5-1912.

⁷⁰ IAYE, 1912/125/1/12, op. cit., Argirokastro 16-9-1912.

⁷¹ GES/DIS, *Ο ελληνικός στρατός κατά τους Βαλκανικούς πολέμους του 1912-1913. Επιχειρήσεις εν Ηπείρω* (Athens, 1932), 44-5.

Irregular bands were tasked with three duties; combating rival guerrillas; guarding supply routes and sabotaging enemy installations. Some of these bands performed admirably however, most were unwilling to fight unless there was the prospect of loot and exhibited a shocking barbarity towards the Greek and Muslim peasantry. Greek guerrilla bands were able to quell Albanian irregular resistance after a brutal six month campaign during which scores of villages were burned and large numbers of civilians were victimized by both sides. The fighting was particularly brutal in the ciftlik zones of Vourkos, Thesprotia and Frar/Fanari where Greek and Muslims peasants joined in the fighting. The end of hostilities did not bring their activities to a halt, irregular bands in conjunction with local peasants undertook the ethnic cleansing of large swathes of territory. The mountain towns of Vostina and Petrovitsa were thoroughly 'cleansed' from their Muslim inhabitants with the land divided between the band-leaders and peasants.⁷²

While this opportunistic land-grab was bemoaned by some government representatives⁷³ the expropriation of Muslim properties was tolerated and in some cases encouraged. The shortage of security personnel and the fear of an Albanian backlash perpetuated the alliance between the gangs and the state. Former gang-leaders and guerrillas were inducted into the security and administrative apparatus particularly in the border regions where civilian militias and bandit-gangs assisted the gendarmerie and the army in the suppression of bandits and the routing of Albanian resistance. The alliance between the state and the gangs was going to escalate in the following years, as the increased insecurity and political turmoil drove them to an ever close cooperation.

⁷² Vasilis Pavlidis, *Οι αλβανοτσάμηδες της περιοχής Παραμυθιάς και η Κατοχή* (Athens: self-published, 2009), 12.

⁷³ Benaki Museum, Eleftherios Venizelos Archive (henceforth MB/VA), 100/4, Αναφορά του γενικού διοικητή Ηπείρου Α. Φορέστη 4-9-1914.

National Heroes to Mafiosi

On 16 September 1916 two men shot several times at E. Lappas as he was returning to his home. As Lappas was the publisher of the foremost liberal daily and a staunch critic of the royalist government some suggested that the attackers were government agents. The royalist press countered this accusation and claimed that the assailants were Albanian robbers. An investigation launched by the police uncovered that both assailants were local Greeks and veterans of the 1912-3 guerrilla bands.⁷⁴ The attempt against Lappas' life did not come out of the blue, in fact it was the culmination of a spate of political violence in which bandit gangs had played a pivotal role. A few weeks before the Lappas' incident, gangs led by Ioannis Vantzou and G. Baltas both old associates of Poutetis visited numerous villages where they 'made speeches against premier Gounaris and called the peasants to disobey the government.'⁷⁵ These incidents were accompanied with an increase in criminal activity.⁷⁶

The local press and the authorities attributed this outbreak of violence to Albanian infiltrators and Entente agents who tried to defame the royalist administration.⁷⁷ However, the causes of banditry were much closer to home. The Balkan Wars led to an unprecedented mobilization of the local peasant communities. The military authorities distributed over 4,000 guns to Greek peasants approximately 3,000 of whom took part in the fighting. The authorities tried to disarm these men after the cessation of hostilities but with little success. Two years after the parting shots, large areas of the countryside remained at the power of gangs comprised by former guerrillas.⁷⁸ Yet, while these bands engaged in criminal activities they were not simple outlaws. Local newspapers described them as 'political bandits' who acted at the behest of specific political factions.⁷⁹ While continuities

⁷⁴ Ioannes Nikolaidis, *Ta Γιάννινα του Μεσοπολέμου*, vol. 2 (Ioannina: Dondoni, 1992-96), 111.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁷⁸ MB/VA, *ibid.*

⁷⁹ Nikolaidis, *Ta Γιάννινα*, vol. 2, 100.

between pre and post-war banditry were not altogether non-existent these 'political gangs' constituted a new phenomenon that was directly related to the political and social developments that were taking place in the area.

The incorporation of the new lands into the Greek state had proved to be a formidable task. Peasant communities had enjoyed a significant degree of autonomy in their communal, educational and religious affairs during the Ottoman period. The incorporation of the area into the Greek kingdom changed this. The state's effort to nationalize the area entailed an incursion in almost every aspect of communal life. The Church, schools and local government came under direct state control, the peasants were also called to pay an increased amount in taxes and to their horror serve in the army for a period of over two years. The haughtiness and arrogant attitude of the newly arrived civilian authorities who derided the local population as 'turkosporoi' (Turkish-seed or Turk-lovers) led to further friction and occasional violence. The situation was even more complex among the sizeable ethnic communities of the area who were shocked by the sudden change of status and some of whom longed for a return to the previous state of affairs.⁸⁰

However, the more important change of all was the extension of the enfranchisement. Greek politics revolved around and relied to patronage networks dominated by local *kommatarhes*, party bosses that served as brokers and mediators between the rural population and the political elites in the cities. In contrast to old Greece, Epirus lacked a political class, most office holders and candidates in the 1915 elections came from 'old Greece,' or indeed an indigenous elite outside the urban areas. Prewar village notables, were dependents of the Muslim landowning elites. While some notables used these connections to shelter their communities from the attacks of brigands and the greed of landowners, corruption was rife and many took advantage of this position to further their own interests.⁸¹ These ties

⁸⁰ Eleftheria Nikolaidou, «Η οργάνωση του κράτους στην απελευθερωμένη Ήπειρο 1913-1914», *Δωδώνη* 16 (1987): 497-610.

⁸¹ «Ειδήσεις εξ Ηπείρου», *Φωνή της Ηπείρου* (September 26, 1903).

rendered them suspect to the eyes of the Greek civilian and military authorities who viewed them as ‘Turk-lovers’ – *Turkolatres* a perception that was further reinforced by the opportunistic stance of many notables during the Balkan Wars.⁸²

This situation created a niche for a new class of political actors – the veterans and band-leaders of the recent war. Band-leaders had already emerged as a distinct authority in many areas since 1908, however, the establishment of the Greek authorities accelerated this process. While many band-leaders had an unsavoury past, their participation in the war had elevated them to the status of national heroes, especially among the urban population and led the military and civilian authorities to see them as a particularly trustworthy element especially in comparison to the old elites. Moreover, the band-leaders connections with the state and reputation for violence led many Turkish and Greek landowners who were increasingly worried by the peasants’ demands for the expropriation of the estates⁸³ to hire them as guards, agents and collectors. Several band-leaders like T. Tzimas, V. Kolovos were thus able to amass considerable fortunes. Three years after the war the Tzimas brothers bought the entire village of Koukouli and other holdings in the Frar area while Kolovos bought large tracts of land in the area of Filiates and several properties in the city of Ioannina.⁸⁴ Other band-leaders were incorporated in the army, the civil service and the gendarmerie. This process transformed the former gang-leaders into a new provincial elite. Band-leaders became the peasant’s first port of call when dealing the landlords, the state authorities, and particularly, the gendarmerie and the military. Some of them were also allowed to raise their own private forces which acted in conjunction with the army and gendarmerie.⁸⁵

Their role as brokers and intermediaries rendered them invaluable to aspiring politicians since the band-leaders played an essential role

⁸² MB/VA, 365/91/92, Έκθεση πεπραγμένων υπό ανεξαρτήτου μικτού αποσπάσματος αντισυνταγματάρχου πυροβολικού Αντων. Ιπίτη.

⁸³ MB/VA, 100/4, *ibid*.

⁸⁴ Kostas Vakatsas, «Η Γενική Διοίκηση Ηπείρου. Η αγροτική ιδιοκτησία 1913-1918» (PhD diss., University of Ioannina, 2001), 404.

⁸⁵ Nikolaides, *Ta Γιάννινα*, vol. 3, 56, 67.

in mobilizing the rural vote that was crucial in the elections. In return for their support their patrons intervened when they came to trouble with the law, provided them with commercial contracts and made sure to find for their clientele a position in the civil service.⁸⁶ These networks played an invaluable role in mediating between the peasantry and the political class and by extension between a marginal peripheral area and the national centre thereby facilitating the inclusion of the peasantry into the national body-politic. However, this alliance also had many and important side effects the foremost of which was the institutionalization of violence into the political process. The band-leaders authority rested essentially on their ability to control and use extrajudicial violence for political purposes. In order to achieve this they sought the alliance of local criminals who served as their enforcers and retainers.

The escalation of the royalist-liberal feud and the resultant national schism of 1916 made the services of such men even more valuable. The nullification of the 1915 elections and the consequent dismissal of Premier Venizelos who supported Greece's participation in the war on the side of Entente gave rise to a bitter political rivalry which culminated in the clashes known as Noemvriana and the Ethniki Amina coup that divided the country into two separate and hostile factions. As the rivalry escalated both sides resorted to violence to curb the influence of their rivals.⁸⁷ The royalist side took the lead with the formation of the *epistratoi* a paramilitary organisation comprised army veterans and reservists. In Epirus the *epistratoi* were organised around and relied on local paramilitary networks. Liberal militias were accordingly founded and led by veteran paramilitaries like Mitsis and brigands like Nikos Souliotis a freelance hitman who was rewarded for his services with a commission in the gendarmerie. Venizelist and royalist bands fought each other and on some occasions even attacked Entente representatives and officers.⁸⁸ Brigands played an important role in paramilitary bands that operated outside

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 90.

⁸⁷ Giorgos Mavrogordatos, *1915: Ο εθνικός διχασμός* (Athens: Patakis, 2015).

⁸⁸ Nikolaides, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, 254-5; Manos, *Καπετάν Κρομμύδας*, 155.

the area particularly in Macedonia. For instance a ten strong band led by Kapetan Andreas from Kleisoura comprised by ‘men of the lowest common denominator’ undertook the persecution of royalists in the area of Florina.⁸⁹

The political turmoil led to a surge in banditry. In 1917 the prefect of Preveza warned the government that the activities of the various political gangs ‘and the general proliferation of evildoers... will eventually lead to a complete breakdown of law and order.’⁹⁰ It was not long before these predictions were realized. In February 1919 the district commander noted ‘anarchy reigns supreme in the countryside... the gangs commit all kinds of depredations and criminal acts; and the peasants do not dare to travel or even venture outside their villages come nightfall.’ What the authorities found even more worrisome was the reappearance of several Albanian gangs and the alliance between them and the Greek gangs who often used Albania as their operation basis.⁹¹ The heightening of bandit activities led the liberal government and its royalist successor to believe that the minority areas and communities had been infiltrated by Turkish and Italian agents who were preparing an uprising.⁹² These perceptions eventually changed the way banditry was seen and transformed banditry from a law enforcement problem to a national security risk.

The scare which culminated in 1921 in the arrest and imprisonment of over 100 Turkish and Albanian notables in the region of Ioannina and Thesprotia⁹³ led the government to adopt a radically new approach in combating the gangs. In March 1920 the state prosecutor met with wanted fugitive Tsili Mastoras in the town of Paramithia. The persecutor offered Mastoras immunity for past charges in exchange for his collaboration in the persecution of local gangs. A few

⁸⁹ IAYE, 1916, Ησυχία και ασφάλεια του κράτους, 29-10-1916.

⁹⁰ IAYE, 1917, Ησυχία και ασφάλεια του κράτους, Preveza 25-2-1917.

⁹¹ The Hellenic Literary and Historical Archive/Nikolaos Platis Archive (henceforth ELIA), 3/10, Περί της εν Ηπείρω καταστάσεως και της δημοσίας τάξεως και ασφαλείας και της εφαρμογής μέτρων προς αποκατάστασιν αυτής, Ioannina 14-2-1919, p. 12.

⁹² Nikolaidis, *Ta Γιάννινα*, vol. 4, 40-4.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

days later the army intelligence bureau and the persecutor's office authorized the transfer of rifles, ammunition and funds to lieutenant N. Papageorgiou who was authorized to act as a liaison in 'special task force' comprised by Mastoras and his associates.⁹⁴

Mastoras was authorized to hunt bandits if necessary by crossing to Albanian soil, collect intelligence and neutralize anti-national activities. The prosecutor also intervened in the release of several Mastoras associates from jail to join his band. The co-option of the bands continued with the K. Souliotis, Giotis and Nasis gangs. This arrangement was protested by the police authorities who remonstrated that Mastoras and his associates took advantage of this deal to take out the competition and further their own interests. This charge was not incorrect. Mastoras and his cohorts used their position to extract money and services from their fellow villagers. Those who protested these impositions 'were threatened with the name of the state prosecutor.'⁹⁵ However, neither the prosecutor nor the military authorities were willing to sever these ties. The state prosecutor even hired several of these men as their bodyguards.⁹⁶

The relations between the state and the gangs were further strengthened during 1922-1923. The catastrophic defeat of the Greek army in Asia Minor and the consequent army revolt reinvigorated subversive activities in the home front particularly in Macedonia where the old internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO) cells had been reactivated by the early 1920's.⁹⁷ Bulgarian bands cooperated with Albanian and Pomak cetas and bandit gangs which accord-

⁹⁴ ELIA, 3/10, Ανωτέρα Διοίκησης Χωροφυλακής Ηπείρου, Ιοαννίνα 19-3-1920.

⁹⁵ ELIA, 4/10, Μηνύσεις περί διεπραχθέντων εκβιάσεων εν περιφερεία Παραμυθιάς υπό διαφόρων κακοποιών στοιχείων, 25-7-1920.

⁹⁶ ELIA, 4/10, Περί της αποδράσεως και εκ νέου συλλήψεως του υποδίκου Φ. Δρίτσου περί των σχέσεων μετά του εισαγγελέα Γραβάκου, 19-8-1920.

⁹⁷ John Paul Newman, "The origins attributes and legacies of paramilitary violence in the Balkans," in *War in Peace: Paramilitary violence in Europe after the Great War*, ed. Robert Gerwarth and John Horne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 147.

ing to one source were funded by the Turkish and Italian governments.⁹⁸ This increase in subversive activities alarmed the government who believed that a full scale uprising was imminent in Epirus and Macedonia. The police commissioner of Thessaloniki protested that ‘the army and the gendarmerie are oblivious to the fact that the Muslim element is armed to the teeth... several gangs have been already formed in Albania and Bulgaria and it is absolutely certain that this is part of an Italian subversive plan.’⁹⁹ These problems were further exacerbated by the dearth of security personnel and the unreliability of those available. A confidential report noted that less than 30% of the armed forces were deemed reliable with the percentage being much lower among the gendarmerie as the later was largely comprised by royalist officers ‘who showed no willingness for action’ and instead waited for the collapse of the regime. As a result, ‘the security situation is going from bad to worse, the countryside is engulfed in crime.’¹⁰⁰

This situation led several officers to suggest the creation of a parallel security apparatus comprised by ‘trustworthy elements,’ refugees from Asia Minor, Circassians, Cretans and former band-leaders.¹⁰¹ These ‘special squads’ comprised by ‘trusted civilians... that would have complete freedom of action’ would be tasked with combating foreign subversives ‘and engaging in counter-reprisals; plundering, massacres, burnings’ in foreign soil.¹⁰² Several of these clandestine groups were formed in the Aegean area, Macedonia and Epirus where ‘plain-clothes bands comprised by suitable men’ most of

⁹⁸ IAYE, 1922/12/1, Τουρκοβουλγαροαλβανικό κομιτάτο, Rome 19-11-1921; 1923/6/5, Κομιτατική και ληστρική δράση στην περιοχή Μακεδονίας και Θράκης, Kilkis 10-1-1923 and 1923/26/3, Δολοφονία μελών της Ιταλικής αντιπροσωπείας στην Κακαβιά, Ioannina 19-8-1923.

⁹⁹ IAYE, 6/7, Κατασκοπεία και συλλογή πληροφοριών για μειονοτικά ζητήματα στην Μακεδονία και Θράκη, Thessaloniki 4-11-1923.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. and 90/7, Συννορικά Επεισόδια, Athens 23-4-1923.

¹⁰² IAYE, 1923/6/5, *op. cit.*, Zirnovo Gendarmerie Sub-division 29-9-1923.

them veteran paramilitaries and bandits were raised by the local prefect and the military commander to combat Albanian irregulars.¹⁰³ The government made even more concerted efforts towards this direction from September 1922 with the reestablishment of the second counterintelligence bureau also known as 'Alpha 2' that was assigned, with 'following the efforts of foreign propagandas... and providing intelligence on any counter-revolutionary efforts that could potentially put the state's safety in danger.' The second bureau was also tasked with 'hiring special operatives' that would participate in off the books operations against foreign agents and comitadji.¹⁰⁴

The task of these groups was not limited in combating foreign subversives. Bands were also task with locating and dealing with royalist supporters who sought to subvert the new regime. Paramilitary bands and bandit gangs led by veteran band-leaders and notables like V. Kolovos and Ioakeim Nakios, the abbot of the Prophet Elias monastery in Preveza and patron of several bandit gangs played a pivotal role in quelling a pro-royalist rebellion in 1923. The gangs played an equally important part in the subsequent plebiscite on the monarchy during which the gangs of Kontogeorgis, Mastoras and Rentzos, 'were employed to strike fears to all those who opposed the [republican] regime;'¹⁰⁵ 'the brigands' noted a local newspaper, 'roamed the villages in horseback and threatened all those who were suspected to be royalist supporters to burn their homes and loot their properties and kill them and their families.'¹⁰⁶

This process of cooption and collaboration took a more concerted turn with the formation of the 'special security service' in September 1925. This service that was led by colonel G. Fessopoulos was en-

¹⁰³ IAYE, 1923/26/3, op. cit., Preveza 5-9-1923.

¹⁰⁴ IAYE, 1923/6/5, op. cit., Athens 7-10-1923.

¹⁰⁵ ELIA, 3/11, Περί της καταδιώξεως των ληστών Ρεντζαίων, Ioannina s.a.

¹⁰⁶ «Ο επίλογος της ληστρικής εποποιίας της Ηπείρου», *Ελευθερία* (October 27, 1930).

dowed with coordinating the fight against communism and minorities,¹⁰⁷ and the creation of ‘regional security committees’ coordinated by the prefect, the gendarmerie and the army that were tasked with providing intelligence and recruiting militia detachments to fight subversives and brigands.¹⁰⁸ The formation of these detachments or ‘apospamata’ was relegated to veteran paramilitaries and notables and were often comprised by former or even active bandits and outlaws. It was not long before the apospasmata became exemplars of inefficiency and brutality. The detachments led by H. Oikonomou, P. Peristeris and V. Kolovos sold information to bandit gangs and occasionally acted as auxiliary members. During the 1926 trial of the notorious Kontogeorgis gang several witnesses testified that the gang was given the names and lists of those who informed on them and was warned about impeding raids by general Markou ‘who had often collaborated with them in apprehending other gangs and fugitives.’¹⁰⁹

Despite the protests of the peasantry the activities of these bands continued unabated. The relationships between state, paramilitary and bandit gangs was particularly close in border areas that comprised strong minority populations like Thesprotia. The demarcation of the borders had left a sizeable Muslim and Christian Albanian-speaking population in the area. Muslim Albanians comprised a compact 20,000 strong population while Greek-Orthodox Albanian speakers, the overwhelming majority of whom identified with the Greek state, numbered a further 12,000. However, the presence of both groups was seen as problematic. According to the local gendarmerie commander ‘the Muslims have come to look towards Albania, such [pro-Albanian] feelings are also shared by some Christians.’ According to the same report the presence of this population among

¹⁰⁷ Pavlos Apostolides, *Υπηρεσίες πληροφοριών στην Ελλάδα* (Athens: Papanisis, 2014), 90-5.

¹⁰⁸ Kostantinou Antoniou, *Ιστορίας Ελληνικής Βασιλικής Χωροφυλακής*, vol. 3 (Athens: s.n. 1967), 1341.

¹⁰⁹ «Από τα ζοφερά εγκλήματα της συμμορίας Τσόγγα», *Ηπειρος*, September 20, 1926.

whom ‘young Greeks cannot even utter a single word in Greek’ constituted a dire danger as they could serve as a bridge-head for Italian influence. In a series of reports dispatched to the counter-intelligence bureau and the foreign ministry the district commander noted that it was necessary to ‘change the ethnological make-up of the region to our favour by using any means necessary.’¹¹⁰ However, the gendarmerie could not be directly involved such actions, as the sub-prefect noted, ‘it is politically necessary to give the foreigners the impression that we have not used coercion or acted outside the law.’¹¹¹

The only solution was to form militias ‘with private citizens of the outmost trust, fluent in all three languages spoken in the area.’¹¹² The first approach between the authorities and the gangs took place in the summer of 1923 when major I. Loutsaris and his colleague and future MP N. Botsaris – held a clandestine meeting with K. Memos, a former paramilitary and bandit. The two men promised Memos who had several open warrants for murder and robbery, a full amnesty and a position in the gendarmerie in exchange for his help in eliminating several Albanian Cetas that had infiltrated the region.¹¹³ Other officers conducted veteran paramilitary leaders such as Oikonomou, Kolovos, T. Haidousis and P. Tsamatos and the gangs of T. Mastoras, K. Kiamos and G. Nasis. A large number of paramilitaries was also recruited among Greek refugees from Southern Albania a restless element, with an axe to grind against Albanians whose rabid nationalism and experience as guerrilla fighters made them ideal material for off the book operations.¹¹⁴

The bands that were put to the field in late 1923 proved highly successful in dealing with Albanian cetas as they managed to exterminate two bands and apprehend large numbers of weapons. They

¹¹⁰ IAYE, 1923/92/8, Βόρειος Ήπειρος, Ioannina 5-2-1923.

¹¹¹ IAYE, 1923/11/3, Ανταλλαγή πληθυσμών/μουσουλμάνοι Έλληνες υπήκοοι/Κόνιτσα, Konitsa 21-11-1923.

¹¹² ELIA, 2/2, Περί Αλβανικής προπαγάνδας και δημόσιας ασφάλειας Ηπείρου, Athens 13-3-1923.

¹¹³ IAYE, 1923/26/3, op. cit., Ioannina 19-8-1923.

¹¹⁴ IAYE, 1923/26/3, op. cit., Preveza 5-9-1923 and 1923/92/8, op. cit., Ioannina 20-12-1922.

exhibited the same ruthlessness when dealing with Muslim peasant communities. The prefecture had tried to settle several Greek refugee families in the Muslim villages of Dragoumi and Gardiki. These efforts were repeatedly repulsed by the Muslim villagers who harassed and victimized the refugees.¹¹⁵ The bands were ordered in to deal with this situation. In 30 November 1923 two large bands led by paramilitary veteran and president of the local farmers association H. Oikonomou and Mastoras encircled the village of Gardiki and ordered the Muslim peasants out. Those who protested were shot on the spot. The violence led more than 100 Muslim families to abandon the area.¹¹⁶

These bands combined paramilitary activities with straightforward criminal acts. They forced Muslim villages to pay them protection money, ‘the villages are obliged to pay blackmail to them’ and threatened landowners to sign off their properties to them. Other bands were mobilized north of the area in the region of Filiates where they were tasked with harassing and expelling Muslim villages from the border towns of Liopsi, Kotsika and Filiates. Such actions were also undertaken in close cooperation with the gendarmerie and the army. A letter of protest to the League of Nations noted that these ‘brigands... who are on very good terms with the civil and military authorities... molested and plundered... the Albanians under the eyes of the Greek gendarmerie and civil authorities’ many of whom were provided by the brigands a cut of their profits.¹¹⁷ Civilians who tried to protest these actions were arrested by the gendarmerie. In one case a local gendarmerie commander arrested three Muslim notables ‘because they refused to pay blackmail to the brigands.’¹¹⁸

However, such activities were not limited to minority areas. A gendarmerie report noted in mid-1923 that large areas in the countryside and even some towns have come under the control of the

¹¹⁵ Robert Eslie, Bejtullah Destani, eds., *The Cham Albanians of Greece: A Documentary History* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), 96.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 121-2, 206.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 121-2.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 206.

brigands. In one case a gang led by Kiamos entered the town of Par-amithia where they beat up the prosecutor, disarmed the gendarmerie and thrashed the local court.¹¹⁹ On another occasion a gang led by M. Bouzoukis occupied the town of Filippiada where he announced that his native village of Krania was ‘an independent kingdom’ and he prohibited gendarmes and tax collectors from entering its environs.¹²⁰ The convergence between the gangs, the security services and the political class had ushered a new form of criminality which according to local press was developing into an organisation ‘akin to the cammora.’¹²¹ Such parallels were no-doubt inspired by the flood of news on Cesare Mori’s anti-mafia campaign but, they should not be dismissed altogether.¹²² Indeed, the scope and extent of criminal activities presented many intriguing parallels with those usually associated with mafia groups.

The foremost difference between pre- and post-1922 banditry was the extension of the gangs’ networks and activities to the towns. Until the eve of the war the main activities of the gangs were robbery and rustling, however, during those years they evolved to include abduction, protection rackets, usury and smuggling. Between 1923 and 1925 over a dozen abductions were committed in the environs and on two occasions inside the city of Ioannina. Armed robberies committed by rural gangs also became increasingly commonplace within the towns as was racketeering. A gendarmerie report noted in 1923 that ‘respectable citizens in Ioannina... are blackmailed and forced to pay protection money to the Rentzos gang.’¹²³ These developments led the prosecuting authorities and the press to argue that banditry had been transformed from a ‘toilsome and dangerous venture of the mountains’ to an ‘organised business venture,’¹²⁴ with ties

¹¹⁹ Panos, *Πεντζαίοι*, 168.

¹²⁰ Mihalis Ntousias, *EAM Ζαλόγγου, ΕΛΑΣ Σουλίου* (Athens: self-published, 1987), 132-3.

¹²¹ «Διά της μεθόδου των κουμπάρων των ληστών», *Ηπειρος*, July 21, 1928.

¹²² John Dickie, *Mafia Brotherhoods: The Rise of the Italian Mafias* (London: Sceptre, 2011), chap. 6.

¹²³ ELIA, 2/11, Απόρρητο τηλεγράφημα, Ioannina 7-4-1923.

¹²⁴ «Διά της μεθόδου των κουμπάρων των ληστών», *Ηπειρος*.

to the local political and security establishment. A senior police officer noted in 1926 that ‘it is common knowledge that the bandit gangs are backed and actually led by people of influence who reside in the towns... it has also been proven that the planning and formation of plans are being made in the towns.’¹²⁵

According to the same report, the real leaders of the local criminal nexus were ‘persons of note’ merchants, businessmen, lawyers, publishers and several local politicians. Such statements were far from an exaggeration, according to the governor general ‘the bandits enjoyed a strange type of immunity because of the close and pernicious association between them and the local political class.’¹²⁶ He cited as an example the case of lawyer and MP Stavropoulos who was also the confidant and consiglieri of the Kiamos criminal gang. Spiropoulos case was far from unique. Members of the Rentzos and Mastoras gang were hired by MP’s Alkibiades Loules and Georgios Kagias to act as their bodyguards during the 1923 and 1925 elections. The two men toured the countryside in the company of the bandits who casually threatened their rivals and blackmailed peasants to vote for their backers under pain of death.¹²⁷ In some cases ties went even deeper. Kagias who was ‘intimately tied’ with the Rentzos gang helped them to organise several abductions and provided the bandits with information on police movements.¹²⁸

Bandits had even closer ties to local party bosses like Vasilis Kolovos, a veteran of the Balkan Wars and founding member of the band-leaders association and Lazos Mitrokostas, a party boss for the liberal party and founder of the stockbreeders union. The two men were described by the gendarmerie as persons of ‘tremendous influence; and ‘the real force behind the bandit gangs.’ According to the same report their ties to the gangs have given them an ‘undue degree

¹²⁵ MB/VA, 104/4/1928, Έκθεση του Αρχηγού της Χωροφυλακής προς το Υπουργείον Εξωτερικών.

¹²⁶ MB/VA, 332/02, Επιστολή του Α. Καλεύρα προς τον Ε. Βενιζέλο, Ιοαννίνα 4-9-1928.

¹²⁷ Panos, *Πεντζαίοι*, 118-9.

¹²⁸ ELIA, 3/11, Προσωπική, εμπιστευτική επείγουσα, Ιοαννίνα 27-7-1923.

of influence even among the better class of people and the professional community of Ioannina who lose no chance to court their favour.¹²⁹ Their influence was even greater in the countryside where ‘no peasant or shepherd dared accuse them or testify against them’ and the gendarmerie. The two men had several officers on their payroll and used threats and blackmail to cajole those who tried to scrutinize their activities, a senior gendarmerie officer noted ‘I am saddened to admit that most gendarmes even the more hardened and courageous ones are afraid to investigate them.’¹³⁰

These ties rendered the bandits ‘untouchable.’¹³¹ In 1924 Mastoras, the Rentzos brothers and several other bandits were granted with the help of their backers’ unconditional amnesty and to the surprise of many a commission in the gendarmerie. However, none of these men severed these ties with the former comrades, in fact they used their new position to bring under their control the entire criminal network in Epirus and extent their activities in new fields including construction; the Rentzos brothers were awarded a lucrative contract to build houses for refugees, real estate, usury and trade.¹³² Mastoras and his associates dominated the olive trade in western Epirus and operated a lucrative protection and abduction scheme in the region of Paramithia. The dominance of the bandits was ‘almost complete,’ as a local newspaper noted, ‘the bandits have finally left the mountains and are now comfortably situated in the towns where they hatch their plans at their own leisure – they have been transformed to a true mafia who dominate every kind of activity.’¹³³

This situation reached its peak during the 1928 elections. Violence had never been unusual during the election time but ‘this time the whole affair had turned to a slaughter.’¹³⁴ The turmoil culminated in the abduction of three MP’s by bandit gangs. The shock was profound as this was the first time that members of the political class

¹²⁹ ELIA, 2/11, Περί της συμπεριφοράς του μοιράρχου Δερμιτζάκη, Chanea 25-8-1924.

¹³⁰ ELIA, 3/11, Επί του υπομνήματος του Βασιλείου Κολοβού, 4-9-1923.

¹³¹ ELIA, 3/11, Περί της δράσεως των ληστών Ρεντζαίων, 26-12-1923.

¹³² «Οι σύγχρονοι Αληπασάδες της Ηπείρου», *Πατρίς* (May 28, 1928).

¹³³ «Διά της μεθόδου των κουμπάρων των ληστών», *Ηπειρος*.

¹³⁴ MB/VA, 332/02, op. cit.

were directly targeted. The opposition press accused the Liberal Party for orchestrating these abductions to intimidate their rivals while the Liberals argued that the abductions were a carefully staged stunt to discredit the liberal party. While central political involvement should not be dismissed altogether it was more likely that these abductions were planned at the local level by liberal party bosses. The uproar forced the government to renew its efforts and adopt new measures to combat banditry. Epirus was declared in a state of emergency; hundreds of troops were brought to the region and over 200 individuals involved with the bandit gangs were displaced to southern Greece. These measures brought impressive results, by early 1930 the gangs of Tsoumanis, Koubaioi, Kiamos and Tzatzas were dispersed and most of their members were killed.¹³⁵

However, what effectively allowed the eradication of banditry was not the novel persecution methods, indeed, these methods had been repeatedly tried and failed in the past decades,¹³⁶ but a sharp turn in the foreign and domestic policy of the government. The advent of the Venizelos administration led to a greater push towards modernization of the civil service and military and a rapprochement between Greek and its Balkan neighbours and the country's minorities.¹³⁷ In 1931, the parliament passed legislation that allowed Albanian Muslim landowners to appeal the decisions of the expropriation committees, permitted the direct payment of indemnification and returned all expropriated urban properties to their owners. It also reinstated to their owners all the farms, buildings and homes that had been requisitioned for refugees or occupied illegally by local Christian farmers and restored religious endowments to the control of the Muslim community.¹³⁸ This policy rendered the usage of extra-legal

¹³⁵ MB/VA, 322/44, Επιστολή του Α. Καλέυρα στον Ε. Βενιζέλο, 15-10-1928.

¹³⁶ Koliopoulos, *Brigands with a Cause*, 111-2.

¹³⁷ George Mavrogordatos, *Stillborn Republic: Social Coalitions and Party Strategies in Greece, 1922-1936* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 38, 46.

¹³⁸ MB/VA, 058/01, Έκθεση σχετικά με την κατάσταση της μουσουλμανικής μειονότητας, p. 22; for a general overview of government policy vis-à-vis the Albanian Muslim minority see Eleftheria Manta, *Muslim Albanians in Greece. The Chams of Epirus 1923-2000* (Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies, 2008).

security forces void thus depriving the bandit gangs from their backers in the security services that had allowed them to operate unmolested until this point. However, the time and need for local paramilitary heavyweights was far from over, in the following decades, bandits, urban criminals and security services would form new alliances against the nation's new enemies: communists and Jews.

Conclusion

In 1923 the Rentzos brothers abducted P. Papagiannopoulos as he was promenading with his mother in the outskirt of Ioannina. Papagiannopoulos' mother recalled in her statement to the police that she tried to convince them to let them go by offering them her jewellery and cash. The two men declined, as they explained to the terrified woman, 'we are not thieves, we are unfortunate lads trying to make it good.'¹³⁹ It seems that in this case the Rentzos brothers were rather modest. Between 1916 and 1924 the Rentzos brothers accrued millions which they invested in flocks, land and real estate.¹⁴⁰ Bandits have been variably described as primitive rebels and brutish rustics. However, men like them were neither. Their foremost motivation of the brigands that populated Epirus was economic advancement and social mobility, and while most bandits had no affection for the men who were tasked with destroying them; gendarmes, police officers and prosecutors, many of them, including the Rentzos brothers aspired to nothing less than joining their ranks. In fact, most brigands of note found themselves working along the security forces for some time in their careers. The alliance between the state and the bandits is seemingly anomalous as the presence of the later challenges the foundations of the modern state: the monopoly of violence and the right to collect taxes. However, the relation between the state and the brigands were not always adversarial. Indeed, for a long period of time the state had relegated the above functions to paramilitary bands and brigand groups that acted as its unofficial representatives.

¹³⁹ Manthos Oikonomou, «Η ληστεία του Η. Παπαγιαννόπουλου», *Το Ζαγόρι* μας 111 (1987): 72.

¹⁴⁰ «Οι σύγχρονοι Αληπασάδες της Ηπείρου», *Πατρίς*.

The alliance between the brigands and the state was not a simple matter of corruption. While corrupt dealings between state representatives and outlaws were far from rare the alliance between the two parties was ultimately dictated by the state's inability to control the borderlands. The paucity of security personnel, the almost obsessive suspicion towards the minority population and the increased sectarianism of political life from 1916 onwards forced the two sides into an even close collaboration which embedded the gangs into the state's security apparatus. The brigands were thus employed to do what the state was unwilling or unable to undertake. In 1917 the Rentzos infiltrated Albania and killed a leading ceta leader and nationalist Mete Duce, during the same period the two brothers acted as bodyguards for MP Spiros Simos.¹⁴¹ This convergence changed the patterns of criminality leading to the emergence of a mafia-like nexus that dominated the political and social life of the region for two decades. Such developments were not unique to Greece though. As Ryan Gingeras noted 'the period between the 1910s and 1920s produced a seismic shift in the development of the contemporary nation-state. As revolution and war weakened the authority of central governments, concomitant surges in poverty, migration and political disorder served to strengthen the political authority of rural gangs and paramilitaries.'¹⁴²

In Turkey, these developments led to the metamorphosis of the rural gangs into the criminal organisations that have become known as the 'Turkish Mafia.'¹⁴³ The relation between criminal gangs and the state followed a different trajectory in Greece. The liberal administration that came to power in 1928 opted for a greater centralisation and the normalisation of relations with the country's northern neighbours, a course that was followed by the Metaxas regime. This development led to the decline of banditry, however, the state-bandit nexus was far from dissolved. Former paramilitaries, smugglers and

¹⁴¹ Panos, *Πεντζαίοι*, 40-2.

¹⁴² Gingeras, "Beyond Instabul's Laz Underworld," 229.

¹⁴³ Ryan Gingeras, "In the Hunt for the 'Sultans of Smack:' Dope, Gangsters and the Construction of the Turkish Deep State," *Middle East Journal* 65 (2011): 426-41.

rustlers retained albeit with diminished power their role within the patronage and security networks and played a prominent role during the occupation and the subsequent civil war. Bandit gangs and veteran paramilitaries provided the bulk of EDES forces in several areas and played a pivotal role in the outbreak of ethnic violence in Thesprotia during 1942-44.¹⁴⁴

The liberation and the outbreak of the civil war further facilitated the integration of paramilitary and rural outlaws in the security apparatus. These groups provided the bulk of the gendarmerie forces and constituted the main element in the National Guard groups formed by former EDES leader Napoleon Zervas between 1946 and 1947. While some units took part in fighting most were occupied with surveillance and policing duties¹⁴⁵ and the massive colonisation program that followed the ousting of the minority from Thesprotia during which band-leaders 'were able to lay claim to entire villages and the more fertile areas' and profit heavily by speculating on land.¹⁴⁶ These developments completed the integration of the paramilitary world in the state structure and led to the consolidation of the rural elite class that had begun in the aftermath of the Balkan Wars. While illegal activities, particularly smuggling and rustling continued unabated during the following years, the time of the bandit was gone. 'Big Bossism' was not finished, indeed, veteran paramilitary would continue to exercise an undue degree of influence as members of the Tagmata Ethnofilakis Aminas-TEA [a state-sanctioned paramilitary group] while others would migrate to the towns and set the foundations of what would become known during the subsequent decades as the 'parakratos,' the deep state.

¹⁴⁴ Spyros Tsoutsoumpis, "Violence, resistance and collaboration in a Greek borderland: The case of the

Muslim Chams of Epirus," *Qualestoria* 43.2 (2015): 119-38.

¹⁴⁵ Antoniou, *Ιστορία Ελληνικής Βασιλικής Χωροφυλακής*, vol. 4, 2219.

¹⁴⁶ «Ηπειρος», *Αγροτική Ελλάς* (June 15, 1946).

