

Greek's Radical Left: The Dangers of the Disaffected and the Unemployed

March 14, 2013 | 0900 GMT

Print



Text Size



Stratfor

By Scott Stewart

[*Vice President of Analysis*](#)

In last week's Geopolitical Weekly, George Friedman discussed how [the global financial crisis has caused a global unemployment crisis](#) and how Europe has become the epicenter of that crisis. He also noted that rampant unemployment will give way to a political crisis as austerity measures galvanize radical political parties opposed to the status quo.

Because unemployment is so pervasive, jobless, disenchanted people are joining radical parties espousing a wide variety of ideologies. Examples include populist euroskeptic parties, such as [Italy's Five Star movement](#); far-right parties, such as Greece's [Golden Dawn party](#); and anti-austerity leftist groups, such as Greece's [Coalition of the Radical Left, or Syriza](#). With unemployment in Greece at 27 percent, it is not surprising to see both radical right-wing and radical left-wing groups gaining support from those who have become deeply disaffected by the crises.

In fact, Greece has a long history of left-wing radicalism inclined toward violence. The 1970s saw the rise of radical group 17 November, and more recent years marked the rise of such groups as the Revolutionary Struggle and the Conspiracy of Fire Cells.

Given this history and the manner in which the current crises are producing disaffected, radicalized and unemployed people, we thought it would be worth examining radical far-left groups in Greece and the types of violence they can be expected to conduct. It is also important to remember that Greece is not the only country in which the population, particularly the left, is radicalizing. Italy, too, has seen increased leftist radicalism. What is happening in these two countries could herald things to come elsewhere in Europe.

A History of Radicalism

The revolutionary left in Greece dates back to the anarchists of the 1800s and the emergence of communism in Europe. Influenced by the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, communist partisans were some of the most effective anti-Nazi forces during the Axis powers' brutal occupation of

Greece (Italy and Bulgaria joined Germany in the occupation). After the Allied invasion of Greece and its liberation from Axis control, a civil war erupted that pitted communist partisans against anti-communist forces, which were backed by the British and the Americans. Because many former Nazi collaborators aided the anti-communists in the Greek Civil War, many anti-communist elements remained in Greece's security forces. The war also left the remnants of an embittered communist movement upset by the fact that Nazi collaborators such as Georgios Papadopoulos, who would become the future leader of a military junta that seized power in 1967, were never brought to justice.

Like much of Europe, Greece then became a Cold War battleground. The strength of the communist forces in Greece and in its neighbor, Turkey, was the driving force behind the 1947 Truman Doctrine in which U.S. President Harry S. Truman pledged military and economic support to Greece and Turkey to prevent them from falling into the Soviet sphere of influence. This resulted in strong anti-U.S. and anti-NATO sentiment among the Greek left, which would later act on that sentiment through terrorist activity.

But the United States and its allies were not the only ones attempting to influence Greece. The Soviet Union saw the Greek communists, like communist groups elsewhere in the West, as a useful tool. The Soviets actively supported communist activists in the Greek labor and student movements. Anti-regime radicalism in the Greek student movement came to a head in 1973, when student protests against the military junta were put down by force. In a particularly iconic incident, an army tank crashed through the gates of Athens Polytechnic on Nov. 17, 1973, as soldiers seized control of the university from student protesters.

The gravity of the Athens Polytechnic uprising was clearly felt when a then-unknown group, [Revolutionary Organization 17 November](#), assassinated Richard Welch, the CIA station chief in Athens, in December 1975. From then until 2000, 17 November conducted several assassinations and attacked NATO, Greek government and Greek industrialist targets. Although the group came to be known for close-quarter assassinations using .45-caliber pistols, they also conducted a number of successful bombing attacks, such as the June 1988 assassination of U.S. Defense Attache Capt. William Nordeen. In 1989, the group stole anti-tank rockets from a military base in Larissa. The rockets were later used in attacks against buildings and armored limousines.

The 17 November operatives practiced good terrorist tradecraft and excellent operational security. This allowed them to operate far longer than their contemporary radical leftist groups in Germany and Italy. While the founders of the German Red Army Faction and the Italian Red Brigades were arrested in the 1970s, the founders of 17 November were not taken into custody until 2002, when a botched bombing on a ferry company resulted in the arrest of the bomber. Authorities used the evidence the culprit provided to arrest most of the remaining members of 17 November, whose long reign of terror finally came to an end.

But Greece was not quiet for long. Inspired by the highly publicized arrest and trial of the 17 November members, a new group arose from the radical Greek left in 2003. This group was called [Revolutionary Struggle](#). The group shared 17 November's anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist and anti-U.S. focus, but it was more anarchistic than the Marxist 17 November.

From 2003 to 2010, Revolutionary Struggle bombed several Greek law enforcement buildings, banks and international corporations. The group was also responsible for a number of firearm

attacks against police and a rocket attack against the U.S. Embassy. In the latter attack, the group notably used an RPG-7, not the M28 super bazooka rockets associated with 17 November. The rocket-propelled grenade launcher was recovered in April 2010, when [six members of Revolutionary Struggle were arrested](#). Two members of the group, founder Nikos Maziotis and his wife, Panagiota Roupa, fled after being released from custody during their trial in July 2012. They are still at large.

In 2008, another Greek anarchist group calling itself the Conspiracy of Fire Cells announced its presence with a series of low-level [bombing attacks against car dealerships and banks](#) in Athens and Thessaloniki. Until late 2010, the group's attacks were meant to damage property and send messages rather than kill people -- a big departure from the homicidal intentions of 17 November. In [the January 2010 bombing of the Greek Parliament](#), the group made a warning call to a newspaper that permitted the area to be evacuated, thus avoiding casualties.

This operational paradigm changed dramatically in 2010, when the group began to [send letter bombs](#). After a number of letter bombs were sent to the Greek Ministry of Justice, foreign embassies in Athens and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Greek police arrested two suspects. At the time of the arrests, the suspects were found to be in possession of letter bombs addressed to then-French President Nicolas Sarkozy's office in Paris and to the Belgian and Dutch embassies in Athens. In total, 13 people were arrested and charged for their involvement in the Conspiracy of Fire Cells letter bomb campaign.

In the weeks before their trial in January 2011, anarchists in Italy mailed letter bombs packed with shrapnel to several embassies in Rome. On Dec. 28, 2010, anarchists attacked the Greek Embassy in Buenos Aires, which was followed by a bombing attack on the Athens courthouse in which the Conspiracy of Fire Cells members were to be tried. The courthouse bombing involved a substantial device that damaged the building and several nearby vehicles, but because of a warning call placed to authorities 40 minutes before the device detonated, it inflicted no casualties.

A group calling itself [the Lambros Fountas cell of the Informal Anarchist Federation](#) claimed responsibility for the Rome parcel bombs. (Lambros Fountas was a member of Revolutionary Struggle who was killed in April 2010 and whose death led to the roundup of the group's members.) The moniker shows the close relationship between Greek and Italian anarchists. Attacks in Italy, such as [the May 2012 shooting of a nuclear engineer in Genoa](#), and two attempts to sabotage rail signaling cables in Bristol, the United Kingdom, have been claimed by people operating under the name of the Informal Anarchist Federation.

In one of the most brazen attacks in recent years, three armed men appeared at Microsoft's Athens office in the early hours of June 27, 2012, and, after forcing out the security guards, they backed a van up to the doors of the building and ignited a large incendiary device, which damaged the building.

More recently, anarchists in Greece have conducted small-scale arson and bombing attacks against bank branches, political parties and the homes of journalists. On March 11, 2013, they conducted a low-level bombing attack against a courier company in Athens.

Progressing Toward Lethality

From this history, we can identify some trends for future radical activity. First, it's clear that the

Marxist terrorism that wracked Europe in the 1970s and 1980s is not about to return, no matter how many people are radicalized by the current crises. The geopolitical environment that spawned and nurtured Marxist terrorism has changed dramatically. The state-sponsored training and support that many European Marxist groups received from the Soviet Union and Eastern European states, such as East Germany, simply will not reappear. In addition, the Marxist training camps European militants were able to visit in such places as Yemen, Libya and Iraq no longer exist.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, most left-wing radicals, save for some in Latin America, have become disillusioned with Marxism. This has helped foster the growth of anarchism, which is seen by many radicals as a system that is less prone to corruption and is therefore a more viable alternative to the capitalist imperialist system.

Something that has remained consistent among those in the radical left is the sense of international solidarity. It was this solidarity that drew Japanese Red Army operatives to conduct attacks in the name of their Palestinian comrades and inspired the Provisional Irish Republican Army to train other Marxist revolutionaries in bombmaking tradecraft in training camps in southern Yemen. Likewise, present-day Italian and Argentine anarchists claim attacks for their imprisoned Greek comrades.

While Greek and other European anarchists have shared the Marxists' anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist beliefs, they have yet to kill people to the extent the Marxists did in their attacks. Bombing an ATM or setting a building on fire is a far cry from kidnapping or assassinating a banker or industrialist. Sending a letter bomb to an embassy is also quite different from the Nordeen and Welch assassinations.

Nevertheless, the shift from attacks meant to cause property destruction to attacks meant to maim people -- sending letter bombs or kneecapping a nuclear engineer, for example -- is quite disturbing. If the trend continues, it will not be a far jump to conduct attacks meant to cause fatalities. The Revolutionary Struggle already made this jump in their attacks against Greek police targets, and other anarchists could follow suit. The fact that Italian anarchists have included shrapnel in their letter bombs is another disturbing indicator that they may be making a similar progression toward lethality.

The January 11, 2013, firebombing attacks against the homes of five journalists in Greece is also unsettling in that it brought violence to the homes, rather than the business offices, of the targets. [Fire can be a very deadly weapon](#), and if the firebombing attacks against homes continue, it is only a matter of time before someone dies.

Although today's anarchists lack the state sponsorship the Cold War-era European Marxist groups enjoyed in terms of funding and obtaining weapons, the proximity of places like Greece and Italy to the black arms markets in the Balkans and the Middle East means that they will be able to readily obtain arms. The rocket-propelled grenade launcher and the Serbian Zastava pistols found in the possession of Revolutionary Struggle militants at the time of their arrests is a great example of the availability of arms in the region.

Whereas Molotov cocktails, camping gas canister bombs and letter bombs are fairly cheap, guns and rocket launchers cost real money on the black market. Therefore, it will be important to see if Greek anarchists begin moneymaking operations, such as bank robberies and high-value

kidnappings for ransom. Since anarchists tend to be more plugged in to technology, indications of cybercrime should also be looked for.

Because the anarchist movement is so interconnected, shifts in violence in places like Greece and Italy can quickly translate into continentwide, even global, trends.

[Send us your thoughts on this report.](#)

Print



Reprinting or republication of this report on websites is authorized by prominently displaying the following sentence, including the hyperlink to Stratfor, at the beginning or end of the report.

"Greek's Radical Left: The Dangers of the Disaffected and the Unemployed is republished with permission of Stratfor."

Simply copy and paste this code:

```
"<a href="http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/greeks-radical-left-dangers-disaffected-and-unemployed">Greek's Radical Left: The Dangers of the Disaffected and the Unemployed</a> is republished with permission of Stratfor."
```