

CND and Greece

Peggy Duff

Peggy Duff was CND's first general secretary, during the turbulent years from 1958 to 1967. These excerpts about Grigoris Lambrakis are taken from her book, Left, Left, Left, published in 1971. She died in 1981.

... In 1963 it was Grigoris Lambrakis who was largely responsible for the links between the peace movements in Britain and in Greece. He was an independent Member of the Greek Parliament, supporting the Left Party. He was a doctor and had been a great athlete. He was loved throughout Greece and he had built a large independent peace movement in the country which, until then, had only a communist-aligned peace committee. Already he had adopted the CND symbol and it was mainly because he was seeking relations with CND and similar movements that he came as a delegate to the Oxford Conference in January 1963.

Grigoris Lambrakis returned to Britain again for the 1963 Easter March. He marched all the way from Aldermaston, carrying a banner 'ELLAS' and while the anarchists and the solidarity mob were holding their banner pole across Hyde Park Corner to hold up the march, he was laying a wreath on the statue of Byron nearby, for Byron was for him the symbol of British support for Greek independence.

In Greece, the peace movement was something more than an organization seeking peace and disarmament. It was also a campaign for human rights, for the right to demonstrate, to dissent, to speak freely, to vote freely, a campaign for the liberation of hundreds of prisoners in Greek prison camps, some of whom had been there for many years. And the Youth Movement that was set up called itself, first, the Committee of 100 and then, later, the Society for Nuclear Disarmament: Bertrand Russell. Either they knew nothing of the rows in Britain, or they ignored them. But to the Greek king and the

Greek right wing a large, independent peace movement with international links was a real threat. This is why they banned the march from Marathon to Athens, which Lambrakis planned for 21 April 1963. It was clear that hundreds of thousands would join the march and some Committee of 100 and CND people had managed to get in for it, though those wearing CND badges had been turned back at the airport and the frontiers.

It was on 20 April, the eve of the march, that the Government acted. Police cordons were put on all the roads to Marathon to stop people getting there. On the morning of 21 April, ten thousand police turned out in Athens to try and prevent people reaching the assembly point for buses. Nearly a thousand were arrested ... the organisers claimed 1,300, the police 900. They were slapped and beaten both in the streets and at police stations. Later they were released without being charged.

But Lambrakis got through the police cordons and reached Marathon. Protected by his parliamentary immunity (MPs could not be arrested) he marched on his own four miles from Marathon on the road to Athens, carrying the banner 'ELLAS' that he had taken earlier that year from Aldermaston to London.

That was the first Marathon March. On the following evening, in spite of the ban, 3,500 attended a meeting in a theatre in Athens. One of the speakers was Malcolm Macmillan, formerly Labour MP for the Western Isles, who had long associations with Greece.

The movement continued to grow and, as a result, Grigoris Lambrakis's life was threatened. Only a month after he had marched from Marathon, he went to a meeting in his constituency in Salonika. The hall was surrounded by members of a fascist organisation. He asked for police protection. It was refused. As he left the hall after the meeting he was run down by a motorcycle combination and killed.

Immediately, the Centre Party accused the right-wing government of responsibility for his death. Karamanlis, the Prime Minister, was, so they said, 'the moral perpetrator of Lambrakis's murder'. They accused the Government of using fascists to do their dirty work and of allowing the murderers to escape. The arrests were made by private citizens.

On 28 May another march took place in Athens ... but this was not banned. It was the funeral of Grigoris Lambrakis. David Boulton, who represented CND, said it was the greatest march he ever saw in his life. At least half a million took part. Here is how he described it in *Sanity*:

Athens was brought to a standstill. The building workers went on strike for the day, and everyone just left their desks and their benches. Throughout the morning, groups of people made their way to the cathedral carrying enormous flowered

wreaths made up in the CND symbol. During the funeral procession itself, flowers and symbol wreaths were flung into the streets from the houses and shops along the route. Behind the coffin walked a dozen members or so of the Athens Committee of 100, carrying a plain silk banner decorated with the symbol.

The demonstration was a model of non-violence. This was non-violence arrived at by the route of experience rather than by theorizing. The most frequent slogans shouted were 'Long live Lambrakis' and 'No more blood'. When one demonstrator near me shouted what was translated as 'Death to the murderers', he was immediately hushed by those around him. The Greek Left knows what violence means. They know that if they choose violence they choose the enemy's weapons. They know that it cannot be their road to victory.

David told me later that as the enormous procession moved out of the centre of Athens into the working-class areas, the police disappeared and left the ordinary people to mourn their dead. Years later, five years later, I went to Athens and was taken to the cemetery to see Lambrakis's grave. At its head was a plain grey stone into which the CND symbol had been cut. Months later I went back again, after the *coup d'état*, and went again to the grave. The stone and symbol were still there, untouched and unchanged, but the plate with his name at the foot of the grave had been broken. I hope that when freedom returns to Greece, and I can go back again, that stone will still be there with its symbol, and Lambrakis still remembered.

David Boulton came back to London and for a time there seemed nothing that the Committee and CND could do. Then a unique opportunity arose. King Paul and Queen Frederica of Greece were invited to London on a state visit. The King, and even more Queen Frederica, symbolized the repression of the Greek Right. Here was a real occasion for demonstration. For the Committee it was easy. Swiftly they planned a march from Trafalgar Square to Buckingham Palace on the day of the arrival of the royal pair, 9 July. Naturally, this posed tremendous problems for the police and the Government, for marches to the palace are not permitted, except on formal State occasions, by the Guards.

It was not so easy for CND. It was so much more conservative, so much more law-abiding. It was not a direct question of nuclear arms, but of solidarity with a similar movement which we had helped into being and which was suffering repression, of support for a fine man, sharing our beliefs, who had died for them. This had to be explained to campaigners, to the canon [Collins – Chair of CND], to CND Council and Executive. However, it was finally agreed to organize a march on Sunday, 7 July, two days before the king and queen arrived, from Byron's statue at Hyde Park Corner, round the West End to Marble Arch. But it was also agreed to send

a small delegation to leave a wreath, in the shape of the symbol, at Buckingham Palace.

The police were very unhappy, especially about the wreath, and as we waited in the park for the start of the march they tried very hard to persuade us to abandon that particular part of the demonstration. But we refused to be dissuaded and as the march went along Piccadilly, David Boulton and Canon Collins left it to cross Green Park with the wreath for delivery. They arrived at the Palace and propped up the wreath against the railings. Almost immediately a small man wearing a bowler hat swept it up and took it into the Palace. I wondered then and still wonder what they did with it.

The Committee, of course, had fewer inhibitions. All over London the single word 'Tyranny' appeared on walls. There is one still, as I write, on the low wall outside St Pancras Station facing the Town Hall. On the night of the demonstration every effort was made by the police to stop the demonstration reaching the Palace. The first part in Trafalgar Square and Whitehall ended in a clash with the police. Then a number of demonstrators, led by George Clark, waving a newspaper and, so it was alleged, shouting 'Follow me', broke through into the park. George and a number of others were arrested ...

Meanwhile, throughout the rest of the royal visit, demonstrations, more or less organized, continued. Wherever King Paul and his consort appeared there were demonstrators and, on one occasion, outside a theatre there was booing. The ever hostile press reported that the dear Queen was booed, but they got the wrong queen ...

The demonstration against the visit of the Greek royal pair received a great deal of publicity, most of it hostile. The effect on public opinion both within and outside the movement was disastrous, mainly because the Queen had been involved. This was an astonishing revelation both for CND and for the Committee.

Here was a movement which had challenged the establishment all along the roads from Aldermaston to London; at the Labour Party Conference and at innumerable trade union conferences; on the streets and squares in Central London. But on an issue which involved the deliberate murder of a fine man, dedicated to peace and democratic rights, they dived for cover, because the Queen was involved.

Campaign Caravan Workshops, which were operating that summer down in deepest Dorset and wildest Wilts, discovered a new and virulent hostility to the Ban the Bomb movement. CND found that some of its oldest supporters, who had helped it for many years with donations, suddenly disappeared. Michael Howard and I spent an evening on the

telephone to try to discover the reason why they had suddenly stopped sending their donations. One and all they gave the answer: the Greek demonstrations and the Queen.

It was partly, of course, that it was difficult to explain to people the importance of support for the Greek peace movement and the strong links between CND and the Committee and those who led the movement, at great risk to themselves, in Greece. Certainly the press did not help. But what was odd was that there was a lot of support for George Clark and the others charged at that time. This was an issue which people understood and to which they responded. But the danger, the threat, to George and the others was minimal compared with the dangers faced by those who led the movements for peace and civil rights in Greece. Eighteen months in prison for George was bad, of course, very bad. But there was no possibility of torture, of the sort of repression and fascist oppression which existed in Greece in 1964 and which was intensified after the *coup d'état*. His life was safe. His liberty was only temporarily threatened. I must confess that the failure of the movement as a whole to react to the murder of Lambrakis and all it implied was something I never forgave it.

While the reactions in Britain to the demonstrations were extremely mixed, in Greece they were wholly good. On 6 August, Hiroshima Day, about a month after the London demonstrations, the Society for Nuclear Disarmament: Bertrand Russell planned a further demonstration. A number of Britons turned up for the occasion and were turned back at the borders, the airports, and the ports. They included David Boulton who decided the time had come for CND to adopt civil disobedience. He sat down in the airport and had to be carried into the plane which took him back to Britain. But a General Election followed on 2 November, and there was a slight swing to the left, sufficient to put the elder Papandreou into power. It is clear that the world reactions from the demonstrations against King Paul and Queen Frederica had played a considerable part in the swing.

The new government was a centre government. It was certainly not left-wing. Yet in Greece a centrist government was a tremendous achievement and one of the first results was that hundreds of prisoners were released. Some of them had been in prison for ten to twenty years. They were not released unconditionally, but on parole. If trouble started, or the government changed, they could be sent back immediately to their prison camps not merely with new sentences, but with the balance of the old as well. This is what happened in 1967. But in 1964, 1965 and until the *coup d'état*, they were free.

But meanwhile there were other consequences of the change. The driver of the motorcycle combination which had killed Grigoris Lambrakis, and his passenger, who had been held in custody, were actually charged and with them a group of thirty right-wingers, including some police, who were accused of complicity. They were all members of an ultra right-wing, fascist organization in Salonika, the leader of which had been convicted of wartime collaboration with the Nazis. Later, the film *Z* told the story of Lambrakis's murder ...

Later still, in May 1971, Christos Sartsetakis, the magistrate who challenged the secret service to ensure that justice was done, was himself arrested and charged with planning bomb explosions against the Junta.

Another sequel was that in 1965 and 1966 the Marathon Marches actually happened. They were enormous. In 1965 it was estimated that half a million took part. In 1966 it was as large, though the police prevented it passing through the centre of Athens and tried to prevent buses leaving for Marathon. On the last six kilometres, the march filled one side of a big dual carriageway. The other side of the carriageway was filled with an equal number of supporters who had come out from the city to join the march. Both years, the CND symbol was everywhere – on flags, on pennants, on banners, on badges, on brooches, even on eye-glasses. In 1966 a number of Labour MPs took part – Reg Freeson, Stan Orme, Russ and Anne Kerr and many others from Britain. ‘Please be careful’, the Foreign Office told Stan Orme. ‘We are trying to sell the Greek Government a nuclear reactor.’

The Greek Colonels staged a coup d'état in the early summer of 1967, and many activists were imprisoned or had to seek refuge abroad. For seven long and hard years, the military junta maintained its dictatorship, finally collapsing in 1974, when elections took place.