

Global Histories

A Student Journal

Review: Greek Communism: A Transnational History (1912–1974) — By Kostis Karpozilos

Vasilis Plaitis

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/GHSJ.2025.719>

Source: Global Histories, Vol. 10, No. 2 (December 2025), pp.133–137
ISSN: 2366-780X

Copyright © 2025 Vasilis Plaitis



License URL: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Publisher information:

Global Histories: A Student Journal is an open-access bi-annual journal founded in 2015 by students of the M.A. program Global History at Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. *Global Histories* is published by an editorial board of Global History students in association with the Freie Universität Berlin.

Freie Universität Berlin
Global Histories: A Student Journal
Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut
Koserstraße 20
14195 Berlin

Contact information:

For more information, please consult our website www.globalhistories.com or contact the editor at: admin@globalhistories.com.



**Ελληνικός Κομμουνισμός: Μια
διεθνική ιστορία (Greek Communism:
A Transnational History (1912–1974)
by Kostis Karpozilos,
Athens: Antipodes, 2024.
ISBN: 9786185267827**

REVIEWED BY

Vasilis Plaitis

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Vasilis Plaitis graduated from the University of Crete in Rethymno in 2024, with a Bachelor's degree in History and Archaeology. He is currently a student in the Master's of Global History, jointly run by Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt Universität zu Berlin. His field of research is modern Greek history, whereas he is also interested in the history of nationalism and of everyday life.

Kostis Karpozilos' approach in the study of Greek communism, as it is delineated in his book *Greek Communism: A Transnational History (1912–1974)*,¹ is a refreshing addition to the lengthy corpus of studies on the phenomenon. After receiving his doctorate from the University of Crete in 2010, Kostis Karpozilos served as director of ASKI (Contemporary Social History Archive) from 2016 to 2023, which houses a significant part of the archival material the author references. The book serves as a culmination of the author's previous research, which has mostly focused on the history of Greek communism and its international/global aspects, such as the Greek-American communist workers in the early 20th century.²

The history of Greek communism is a contentious topic in Greek historiography, with its examination being largely connected to the Greek Civil War (1946–1949). The defeat of the military wing of the Κομμουνιστικό Κόμμα Ελλάδος (*Communist Party of Greece*, KKE) by the US and UK-supported Greek state led to the establishment of anticommunist policies in the next 25 years.³ With the dawn of the politically liberalizing *Metapolitefsi* (regime change) era (1974–1985) and the subsequent legalization of the KKE, there was a flurry of new works concerning the party, mainly focusing on the (also flourishing field of research at that time) history of the Civil War.⁴ These works, important in their own right for the study of communism in Greece, do have an internationalist focus, but it's one that is mostly restricted to the imposition of Soviet influence on KKE and the role of the Yugoslav government in the Greek Civil War.⁵

The book's stated aims are to move beyond the aforementioned methods of examination in making the globality of the communist phenomenon in Greece more multipolar. This globality is also one that is not located in the contacts of KKE to the International or of the USSR, but also in the lives of communist activists themselves. This is reflected in the structure of six chapters set in chronological order, which begin with a personal story highlighting trends that

1 Kostis Karpozilos, *Ελληνικός Κομμουνισμός: Μια διεθνική ιστορία (Greek Communism: A Transnational History (1912–1974))* (Antipodes, 2024).

2 Kostis Karpozilos, *Red America: Greek Communists in the United States, 1920–1950*, trans. Panagiotis Kechagias (Berghahn, 2023).

3 Antonis I. Liakos and Nicholas Doumanis, "The Edinburgh History of the Greeks, 20th and Early 21st Centuries: Global Perspectives" *Edinburgh History of the Greeks* (Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 246–262.

4 For an overview of the research conducted on the Greek Civil War, see Polymeris Voglis and Ioannis Nioutsikos, "The Greek Historiography of the 1940s. A Reassessment," *Comparative Southeast European Studies* 65, no. 2 (2017): 316–33.

5 Influential studies in English have been the following: Nikos A. Marantzidis, "Under Stalin's Shadow: A Global History of Greek Communism" *NIU Series in Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies* (Cornell University Press, 2023); Thanasis D. Sfikas, "War and Peace in the Strategy of the Communist Party of Greece, 1945–1949" *Journal of Cold War Studies* 3, no. 3 (2001): 5–30; Peter J. Stavrakis, *Moscow and Greek Communism, 1944–1949* (Cornell University Press, 1989).

are laid out in the rest of the chapter. The author uses biographical sources and references extensively in order to highlight the main themes of the book. In the book's prologue, the author states that the aims behind the study were to present a more global narrative for the history of Greek communism, following similar shifts in the study of communist parties elsewhere and to investigate the interplay between national ideology and the internationalist allegiances of the communist activists.⁶

The book begins with “Jewish Socialism,” which covers the two most prominent articulations of the communist ideal during the Balkan Wars and World War 1, one based on prewar Greek conceptions of socialism and the other on the multicultural syndicalist tradition of Salonica.⁷ The multiethnic character of the Salonica faction helped designate communism as an anti-national force by nationalists and antagonizing socialists alike, a rhetoric which remains relevant throughout the period that concerns the book.⁸ The Salonica faction was integral in forming the Σοσιαλιστικό Εργατικό Κόμμα Ελλάδος (*Socialist Labor Party of Greece*, SEKE) in 1918, which was reformed as KKE in 1922. At that time, the party sought tighter ties with the Soviet Union, a process completed by predominantly young refugees from the lands of the former Ottoman and Russian empires. The activity of the refugee communists is detailed in the second chapter, “Refugee Communism,” when KKE grew from a marginal party in the 1920s to an influential (and, to the eyes of the state, dangerous) political party.

The next two chapters focus on issues that took place outside of Greece but significantly influenced the policy of KKE. The third chapter, titled “The Socialists of the International,” is set in the interwar period and references the participation of Greek communists in international communist networks, such as the Third International and the communist universities of the USSR (KUTV and KUNMZ),⁹ which accepted prospective communist activists from around the world. The chapter concludes with the end of the Third International, during the Great Purge of 1937, which also signified a more violent crackdown of “foreign agents,” including lots of Greek immigrants and students. Afterwards, “War and Revolution” documents the revolt of Greek Army units in Palestine and Egypt during the Second World War. Karpozilos argues that the revolt, later derided as “counterrevolutionary” and “useless” by party sources, followed a similar

6 Karpozilos, *Greek Communism*, 20-21, 32-34.

7 Ibid., 43-136.

8 Ibid., 131-134.

9 The abbreviations stand for Коммунистический университет трудящихся Востока имени Сунь Ятсена (*Communist University of the Toilers of the East*, KUTV) and Коммунистический университет национальных меньшинств Запада (*Communist University of the National Minorities of the West*, KUNMZ).

ideological trajectory (from antifascism to revolutionary communism) to the resistance movement in the Greek mainland, a much more famed example, while at the same time it incorporated anticolonial arguments, due to the participation of Greek-Egyptians active in the Egyptian communist movement.¹⁰

The final two chapters discuss the postwar reality of the Greek communist movement, after the defeat at the Civil War. The fifth chapter is concerned with the operation of KKE in the Eastern Bloc in the 1950s and is titled “International Socialists.” A big part of the chapter is dedicated to the everyday lives of the refugees of the Civil War, who mostly lived in Tashkent and gradually became integrated in the local community, as well as with the organizational structure of the party, mostly located in Tashkent and Bucharest. The chapter concludes with the ousting of the Stalinist leadership of KKE in 1956, in accord with the official USSR policy at the time. The last chapter, entitled “The Riddle of Democracy,” entails the discussions of the leftist movements during the seven-year Dictatorship of the Colonels (1967–74). The preeminence of KKE in the communist movement became severely disputed, as intellectuals influenced by the ideas of postcolonialism, Eurocommunism and the international movement of 1968 sought independent modes of action. As a result, a multitude of new leftist/communist parties were created, with suggestions for alternate political solutions, such as the participation in a liberal political framework. The book concludes with a small reference on the history of KKE during the *Metapolitefsi* era, when it was ultimately accepted as an essential and legitimate part of the political sphere.¹¹

The book is successful in making a significant contribution to the existing historiography of Greek communism, by making its globality more salient. More specifically, the book provides information on the contacts and interactions of the communist movement in a multitude of contexts, ranging from Malaysian anticolonial activists in the 1930s¹² to the loss of KKE’s preeminence in Western Europe,¹³ instead of being restrained in a binary international analysis between the Soviet Union’s decisions and KKE’s actions. The width of these transnational interactions and contexts does not, however, represent the adoption of an exclusionary narrative by the author, where globality in itself is the only motor of change. Rather, by choosing to omit the resistance and the Civil War, extremely important in most analyses of KKE, the author provides a different narrative, which aims to shift the existing depictions. Additionally, globality is not presented as a signifier of “progress,” as evidenced by the first

10 Karpouzos, *Greek Communism*, 416-424.

11 Ibid., 619-630.

12 Ibid., 176.

13 Ibid., 519-551.

and the last chapter, where different kinds of global interactions contribute to different results. Other than that, the use of personal stories and anecdotes doesn't just make the story more interesting, but additionally serves as an exemplary way to highlight the author's points, namely the transnational experiences of the actors portrayed in the book and the role of them in them becoming communists, a trend more prominently seen in the second chapter and the description of the lives of various interwar-era communists.

However, there are also shortcomings on the author's account. Barring the fifth chapter, the gender aspect is almost entirely ignored, an absence especially salient when the narrative of the book is mostly based on personal stories. While this could be partly attributed to the dearth of archival material of the interwar period, KKE and the communist movement was the only political space of the time, in which women were theoretically legitimate political actors, and the discussion of the gendered aspect would greatly enrich the analysis of the book. Some details are also left unexplained, such as the moving of Greek communist students from the KUTV to the KUNMZ. While the book accounts why, at first, Greek communists were considered as actors coming from an eastern and backwards state,¹⁴ the change of Greece's status to a "Western" (and therefore "progressive") country is left unexplained. Lastly, while KKE was undoubtedly the most important political actor in the communist movement during the timeframe of the book, a more elaborate reference on other strands of the 20th century communist movement (such as the trotskyist Archeiomarxist movement of the interwar period) would have enriched the narrative of the book, an absence not clarified in the book.

In conclusion, *Greek Communism* provides a different outlook to the one usually employed for the analysis of the Greek communist movement. It does so without any allusions of grandeur, and, despite its shortcomings, is a fascinating and interesting read.

14 Ibid., 175.