

Death in Salonika Bay: Who Pulled

By James G. Kellis

George Polk, a CBS correspondent, was killed in 1948 in Greece while covering the civil war. Here, an ex-investigator tells of his suspicions of a right-wing cover-up.

FAIRFIELD, Conn.—The disappearance and murder of George Polk in Greece has fascinated the news media for almost 30 years. Mr. Polk was an aggressive correspondent who was held in high esteem by those who had worked with him in the Middle East and in Greece. His courage and his abilities as a CBS correspondent did not endear him to Greece's extreme right wing, often the target of his reports.

At the time of his death in May 1948, Greece was embroiled in a civil war between Communist-led guerrillas attacking from mountain hideouts in the north and the Government, which consisted of moderate and right-wing elements. Mr. Polk and a handful of other correspondents had criticized the Greek Government for corruption, its lack of popular support, and its poor prosecution of the war against the guerrillas. He had suggested that if the Government was not reorganized and no effort was made to appoint honest, capable people, it was likely to collapse.

Mr. Polk's constant needling of the Government, particularly right-wing elements, made him their target: Rea Polk, his widow, told me they had repeatedly received threats by mail and by telephone from extreme rightist elements.

Consequently, the investigation and trial of a suspect in the case, fraught with discrepancies and contradictions, have been interpreted as a cover-up.

(A recent article in More magazine concluded that the Greek Government, United States State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the American press were all involved in a "massive cover-up.")

The discovery of Mr. Polk's body floating in Salonika Bay, his hands and feet bound and a bullet hole in his head, and the suspicion this was a political murder led the Overseas Writers Association, in the United States, to investigate the killing. It appointed Gen. William J. Donovan, World War II director of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), as counsel and chief investigator. At the time, I was an Air Force lieutenant colonel, and General Donovan arranged for my assignment to the investigation.

In June 1948, General Donovan and I flew to Greece and met with the chief Greek investigator, Maj. Constantine Moushountis, and representatives from the United States Embassy, C.I.A. and the British police mission. During our initial meeting, everybody accepted the theory Major Moushountis presented that the Communists

murdered Mr. Polk. Soon I conducted an independent investigation and discovered that Major Moushountis's story contained many inconsistencies and discrepancies.

Once when I walked into Major Moushountis's office, I overheard him saying to a subordinate, "Be careful of what you say in front of Colonel Kellis because he understands Greek." After the officer left, I confronted Major Moushountis with discrepancies and accused him of covering up. His answer: "Colonel, don't press me. There are questions of national interest involved here. I have my orders. I have only a few years of my career left and I don't want to lose my pension." I tried to find out who was putting pressure on Major Moushountis, but he was not helpful.

In the meantime, I collected other information that contradicted the official investigation, and reported to General Donovan that I believed there was an attempted right-wing cover-up. Karl Rankin, the chargé d'affaires at the United States Embassy, asked to meet with me. He admonished me: "I don't see why you are breaking your back trying to uncover who killed this correspondent. If you, as a military officer, or I, as a diplomat, were killed, none of these people would give a damn." I left his office disheartened by his lack of principles and courage, and was more than ever convinced that the American, British and Greek authorities in Greece were determined to hide the truth.

Mr. Rankin, Major Moushountis and others tried to impress on me the need to pin this murder on the Communists. The Greek Government considered it essential that United States public opinion remained favorable to it so that it could continue to get vital American assistance.

I could not accept these arguments. For much of World War II, I had served with guerrillas in Greece and China. This experience convinced me that it was essential for us, through

whatever influence we exercised in Greece, to remove from both the Government and the military corrupt and inept officials in order to gain the people's support. (As we learned subsequently in Vietnam, it is difficult to win against guerrillas if the Government they oppose is corrupt and inept, irrespective of the amount of United States aid.) By attacking corruption and ineptitude, George Polk had been making the same point.

My insistence that I would not be party to a cover-up led to my removal from the investigation and my reassignment to Washington. No one was ever named an investigator to succeed me.

Upon my removal, Major Moushountis and some Government officials decided it was time to act. They arrested a Reuters news agency correspondent, Gregoris Stactopoulos, who was also a reporter for Makedonia, a Salonika daily, and, after considerable torture and threats on the life of his mother and two sisters, extracted a confession of complicity in the murder, allegedly committed by two Communists. (At the time of his death, Mr. Polk was trying to reach Gen. Markos Vafiades, leader of the leftist guerrillas, for an interview.)

During the trial, besides the Stactopoulos confession the only physical evidence was an envelope mailed to the police on May 10, 1948, containing some of Mr. Polk's identity documents. The police asserted that the envelope was addressed by Mr. Stactopoulos's mother. Mr. Stactopoulos was convicted as an accessory to the crime and sentenced to life imprisonment. (He was released in 1960 when Prime Minister Constantine Karamanlis reviewed the case and commuted his sentence.)

When I recently visited Mr. Stactopoulos for the first time, he denounced the investigation and trial and described in detail how Major Moushountis had tortured him and how he

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finally broke down when the major had threatened the life of his mother and two sisters.

A young, bright member of Parliament, Stelios Papathemelis, volunteered his services as an attorney and with the support of other members of Parliament petitioned to reopen the Polk case. In addition to Mr. Stactopoulos's recantation of his confession, there is testimony from his sister, from the 1948 president of the Salonika Bar Association, and five persons who participated in addressing and mailing Mr. Polk's identity documents to the police. Attorney Papathemelis told me that he has a strong case, that he hopes to prove Mr. Stactopoulos innocent and reopen the Polk investigation in order to find the real killers.

(One of two others sentenced to death in absentia in the Stactopoulos trial is now in Rumania and wants to return home to testify in a new trial, Mr. Papathemelis has said. The other defendant is dead.)

Walking recently near the place where George Polk's body was found, I remembered some of his dispatches. Ironically, those dispatches and the murder might have been the turning point in Greece's civil war. The shock of Mr. Polk's death focused American attention on Greece, and soon President Harry S. Truman was putting pressure on the Greek Government to remove corrupt and incompetent officials from both the Government and military and to introduce reforms. It is my considered judgment that without these reforms Greece would have been overwhelmed by the guerrillas.

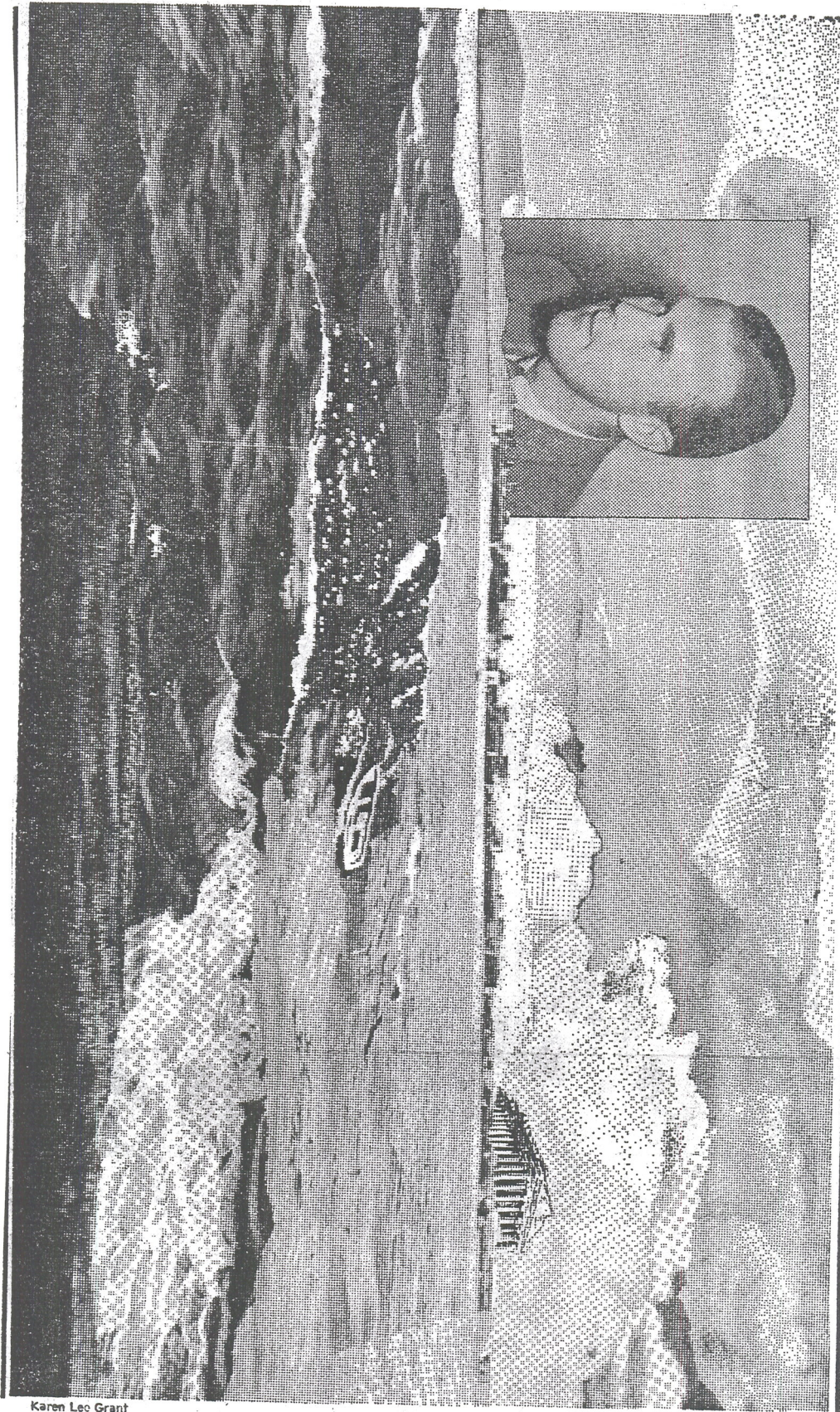
Still, my experience with the Polk investigation left me with an uneasy feeling that many United States officials were willing to disregard principles for personal or national convenience.

While I was in Greece in 1948, I often heard the statement that national interests had to be given a higher priority than discovering the real murderers of George Polk. I could not accept then, and I do not accept today, that we could support national interest by disregarding moral principles.

Last March, some Greek reporters interviewed me on the Polk case and I concluded the interview by saying: "It is to the best interest of Greece and America that our relations are conducted within the rules of law and morality. Compromises on pragmatic grounds eventually turn to haunt us."

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THE NEW YORK TIMES, SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 17, 1977
NYTimes C/A SEP 17 1977



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