

The story of the donkey Foula and the mule Koula and/or the history of Greece, during Occupation-Resistance and the Civil War (1940-50)

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In the inter-war years the rural population of Greece was an estimated 70 percent of the total population. In rural Greece, animals played a very important role in peoples' lives and fortunes. Animals lived in *ntamja*, as people lived in houses. Most of the villagers did not have money to buy them and usually just "made them". Apart from their usefulness, Greek rural people also had developed a sentimental relationship with their animals. The whole family loved them, especially the children. Animals participated in carnivals, donkeys and mules masqueraded as grooms and brides.

But the 1940s was a decade of war. In October 1940, Greece entered World War II. Mussolini's army invaded Greece across the border from Albania. The main front of the war was in the Pindos mountain chain. But in the Pindos there were no roads so the Greek army used donkeys and mules to transport ammunition and food to the soldiers.

The number of donkeys and mules was not sufficient and the army also mobilized civilians, especially women, to help carry supplies. The women of the Pindos became famous and were regarded as heroines.



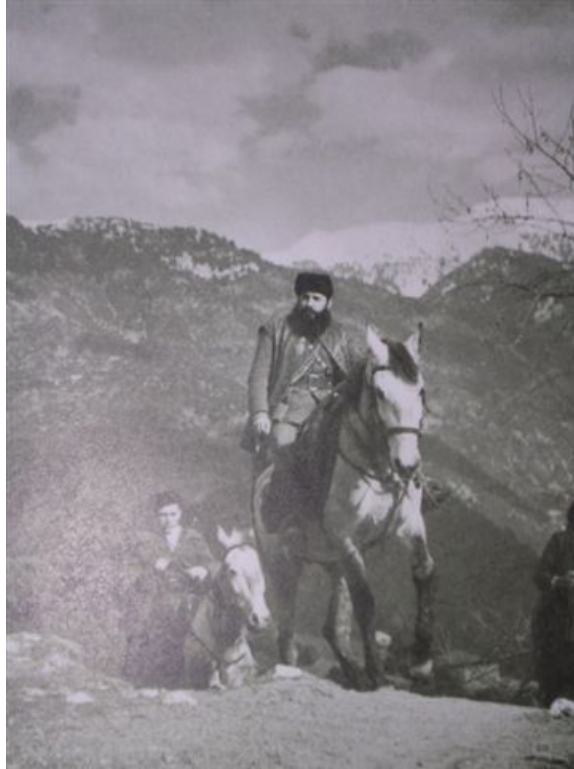


[Photo 1: “The Heroines of 1940”, Kostas Grammatopoulos, Lithography 1940, in A. Baharian, P. Antaios, *Eikastikes Martyries*, Ministry of Culture, Athens 1986, p. 29.]

[Photo 2: “Women of Pindos”, Ektor Doukas, oil, in A. Baharian, P. Antaios, *Eikastikes Martyries*, Ministry of Culture, Athens 1986, p. 41.]

Nobody thought that the donkeys and mules were brave, too. But thanks to the donkeys, mules and women of the Pindos the Fascist Italian army was defeated by the Greek army. In April 1941, however, the Nazi army of Germany invaded Greece through Yugoslavia and some weeks later the whole of Greece was occupied.

In Greece, the Axis occupation was split in three parts: German, Italian and Bulgarian. It lasted from April 1941 to October 1944. Almost four years. During the occupation a great resistance movement sprung up. The most massive resistance organisation was the National Liberation Front (EAM). It had a political and a military branch. In October 1942, the bravest of the brave, the *protokapetanios* (= first captain), called Aris, like the ancient Greek God of war, in a battle against the occupiers obtained a beautiful white mare.



[Photo 3 : “Aris Velouhiotis”, photo, in Spyros Meletzis, *Me tous Antartes sta Vouna*, Athens 1984, p. 79.]

He rode it as he went from village to village liberating them and creating the Free Greece. Leaders are expected to ride on beautiful horses.

Stamatia Barbatsi, a girl 18 years old, was just a simple resistance fighter and she was very proud having a little donkey. She lived with her family in the village Perivoli (= garden), in Central Greece. The Barbatsi family had two donkeys, both female. Stamatia’s was the child of an elder donkey named Kastrou. Stamatia’s donkey was named Foula. Kastrou and Foula took their names from the protagonists of a "major" criminal case of the inter-war period. Foula Athanassopoulou, her mother Kastrou, as well as their servant Ioanna Mpelloy, had killed Foula’s husband. In the village of Perivoli, the Barbatsi family “honoured” these women murderers by giving their names to their donkeys. We do not know the exact reasons for this, but we certainly know that Foula was very important in Stamatia’s life.

In her written testimony, Stamatia expresses deep personal feelings for Foula that seem to surpass her feelings for all other human relations. Stamatia insists that she spoke to Foula "like a human" and Foula understood her "better than any other person."

“At the beginning, I had some difficulties with Foula; perhaps she was jealous of her mother. Animals understand more than people. After a while Foula could understand me better than anyone else. It sounds strange, but I tell you this: I spoke to her like a human – in Greek -- and she looked me in the eyes and she was ready. When I entered the damji, even when she was sleeping, she was ready to get up. If I told her ‘sit down Foula, we will not go out’ she sat down. I will never forget it. She was a part of my life.”

During the occupation, Stamatia’s village, due to its location, was in the maelstrom of war. Perivoli was a strategic passage for both fighting armies: the occupying forces and the *andartes* (=partisans).

World War II was a total war and the civilian population played a very important role in it. The inhabitants of Perivoli joined the Resistance. The latter's main slogan was: "Everybody and everything for the *andartes*." Each family had to contribute. The Barbatsi's family contribution was to send Stamatia and Foula to carry food and ammunition to the *andartes*.

"Every day, early in the morning, I loaded Foula and we went...." Stamatia walked alongside Foula, as she was loaded with supplies. Sometimes the trips were short -- only four hours -- and sometimes longer; they required an overnight stay. As Stamatia narrates *"During the occupation both of us went through hardships, rain, snow, thirst, hunger... We returned home very tired, but Foula first went to sleep and then to eat."*

Stamatia was lucky having a donkey, as most women carried cargos "*jaliga*", on their backs



The Story of the Donkey Foula and the Mule Koula



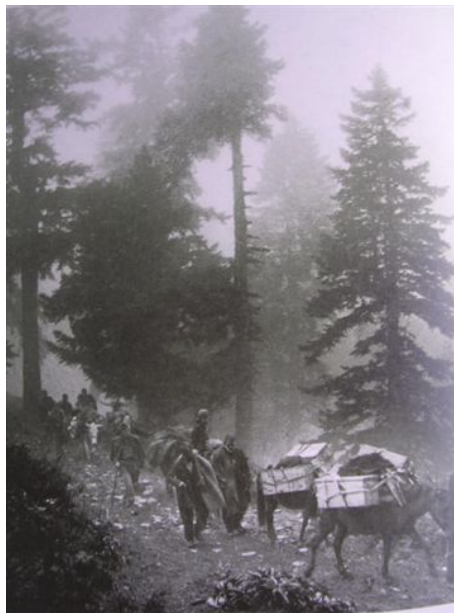


[Photos 4-7: Spyros Meletzis, *Me tous Antartes sta Vouna*, Athens 1984, p. 167, 165, 166, 105]

while men used donkeys or mules for transportation



Μέταξ ηγοσάθητς από Ζαχαράδτς



[Photos 8-10: Spyros Meletzis, *Me tous Antartes sta Vouna*, Athens 1984, pp. 51, 189, 190]

Stamatia and Foula, apart from transporting things, worked also as liaisons, due to the lack of telecommunications in the mountains. They transported messages (orders or other documents) down rough paths, as fast as they could. They functioned also as corpsmen. They participated in a unit that transported a wounded Englishman to the guerrilla's airport. This involved ten hours of non-stop walking.

Moreover, Foula served as a cover for Stamatia's "illegal" activities. Once, Stamatia and her cousin were ordered to gather the dynamite that the *andartes* had placed "by accident"

on the railway. The two girls decided to take Foula with them. As soon as they reached the railway line they saw German soldiers. *“When we reached the line, the Germans stopped us. They spoke German. I told them that I was gathering straw for the animal. When they saw a satchet with a few stones hung on Foula they asked me: ‘what is this?’ and I told them that the cargo must be equally heavy on each side. So they permitted us to pass.”* Thanks to Foula, the two girls convinced the Germans that they had nothing to do with the dynamite and that they were gathering straw. So they returned safely to the village.

Once, Foula saved Stamatia’s life. After they had dropped off their cargo and went back home the weather turned bad. It was a stormy night. Stamatia lost her fellow combatants. She and Foula had to pass through a waterlogged river. *“I shouted. It was a very dark night. I could not see anything, not even my fingers. I was afraid of the wolves. The river was overflowing. Nobody could hear me. What to do? I kneeled and I embraced Foula. I spoke to her humanly. ‘What are we going to do Foula? Both of us will die tonight.’ She shook her head and started crossing the bridge. Then she stopped. I mounted her and lost consciousness. I did not know where Foula was going, but Foula went straight home. My mother put me in bed and the only thing I told her was to take care of Foula.”*

In the summer of 1944, just some months before the end of the war, Stamatia’s father became ill and went to nearby town, where there was a doctor. He died just a month before the Germans left the country. His funeral took place in the town as there was no priest in the village. The villagers had abandoned Perivoli and had found shelter in the mountains. The Nazis had burned and destroyed most of the houses in reprisal.



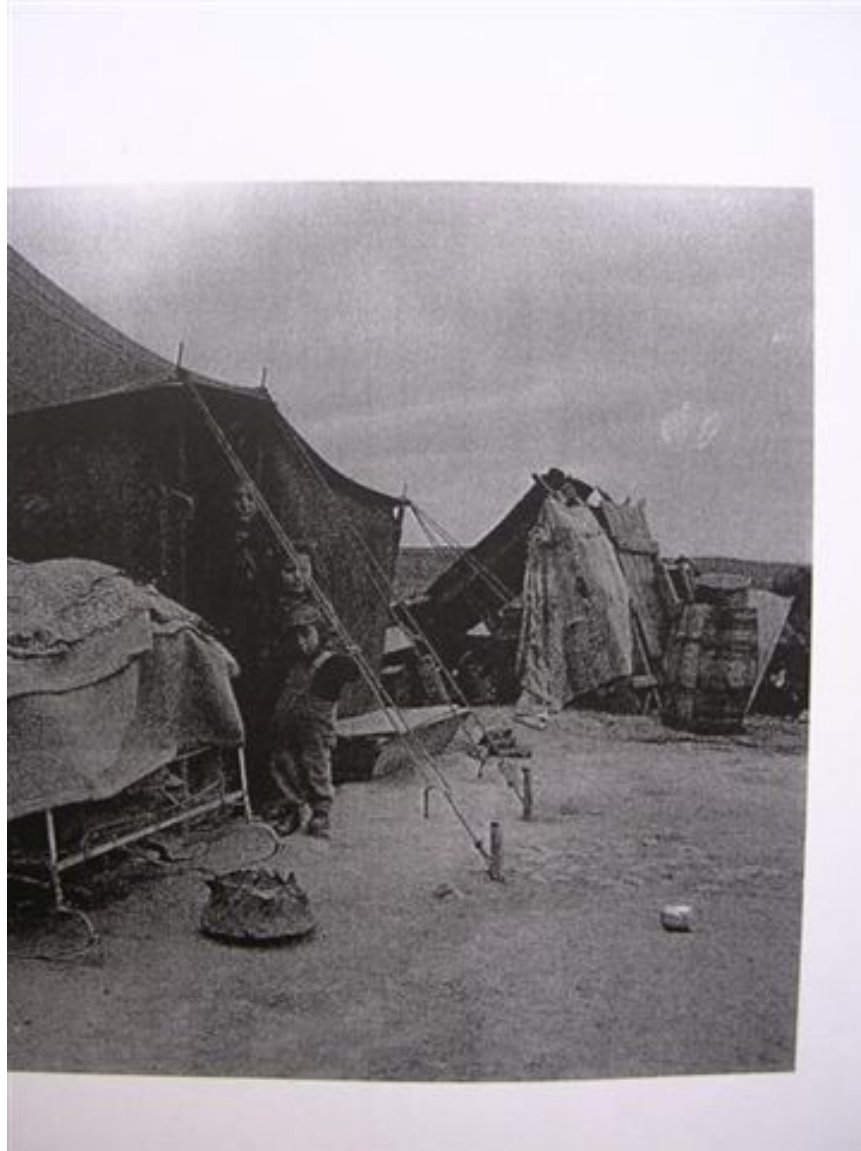
[Photo 11: Voula Papaioannou, Benaki Museum, Photo Archive]

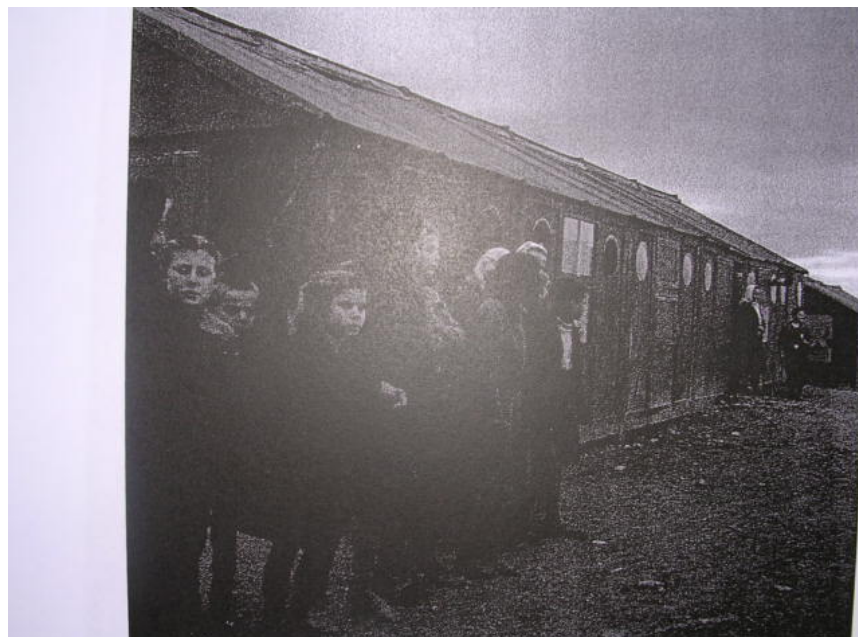
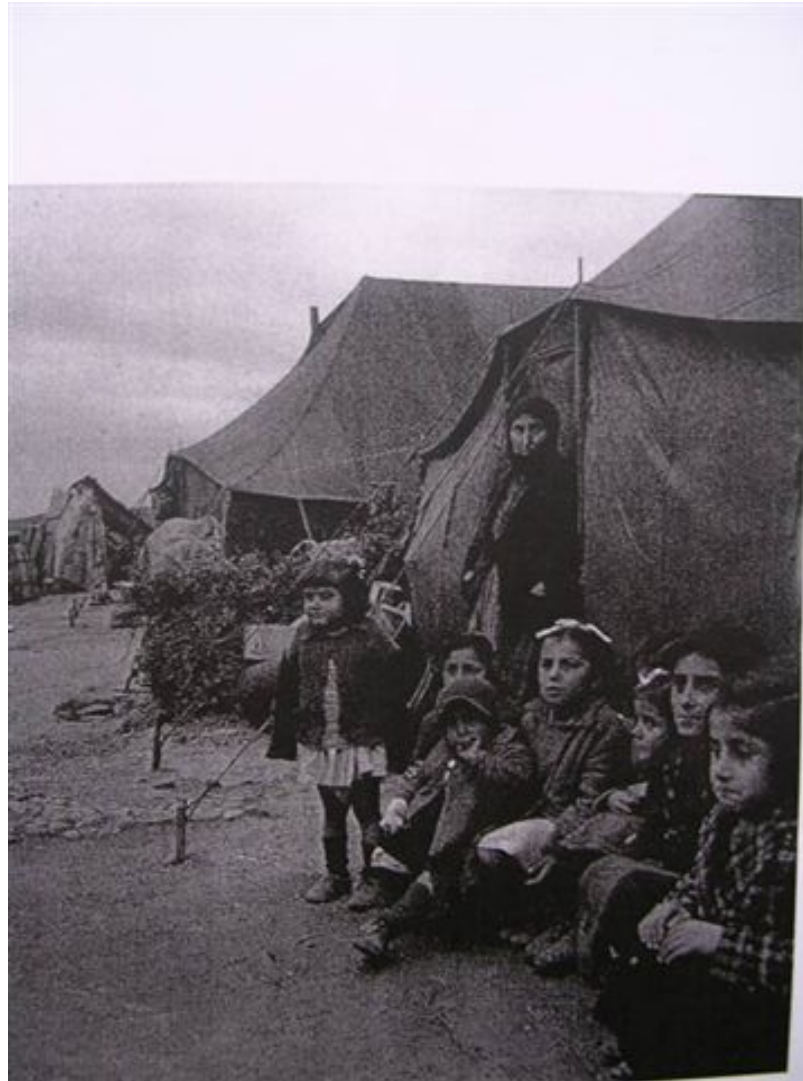
The three women, Stamatia, her mother and her sister, had to rebuild the house, as the man of the family was dead. Stamatia – and Foula, of course – undertook the effort to go to the forest, cut trees and bring them to the village.

During Greece’s reconstruction started a bloody civil war. In the autumn of 1947, the Government army started a sweeping up operation in Central Greece. Stamatia, as well as other villagers, left Perivoli and reached the *andartes* of the Democratic Army of Greece. Stamatia was recruited. Her mother and her sister returned home. But some months later the Government army ordered the evacuation of the village. Stamatia’s mother and sister went to the nearby city. Foula as well as their two oxen were left behind in Perivoli. In the cities there was neither space nor food for the animals.

The Story of the Donkey Foula and the Mule Koula

The number of people who abandoned their villages is estimated at 700,000 (about 10 percent of the total population of the country). They lived in very bad conditions.





[Photos 12-14: Voula Papaioannou, Benaki Museum, Photo Archive]

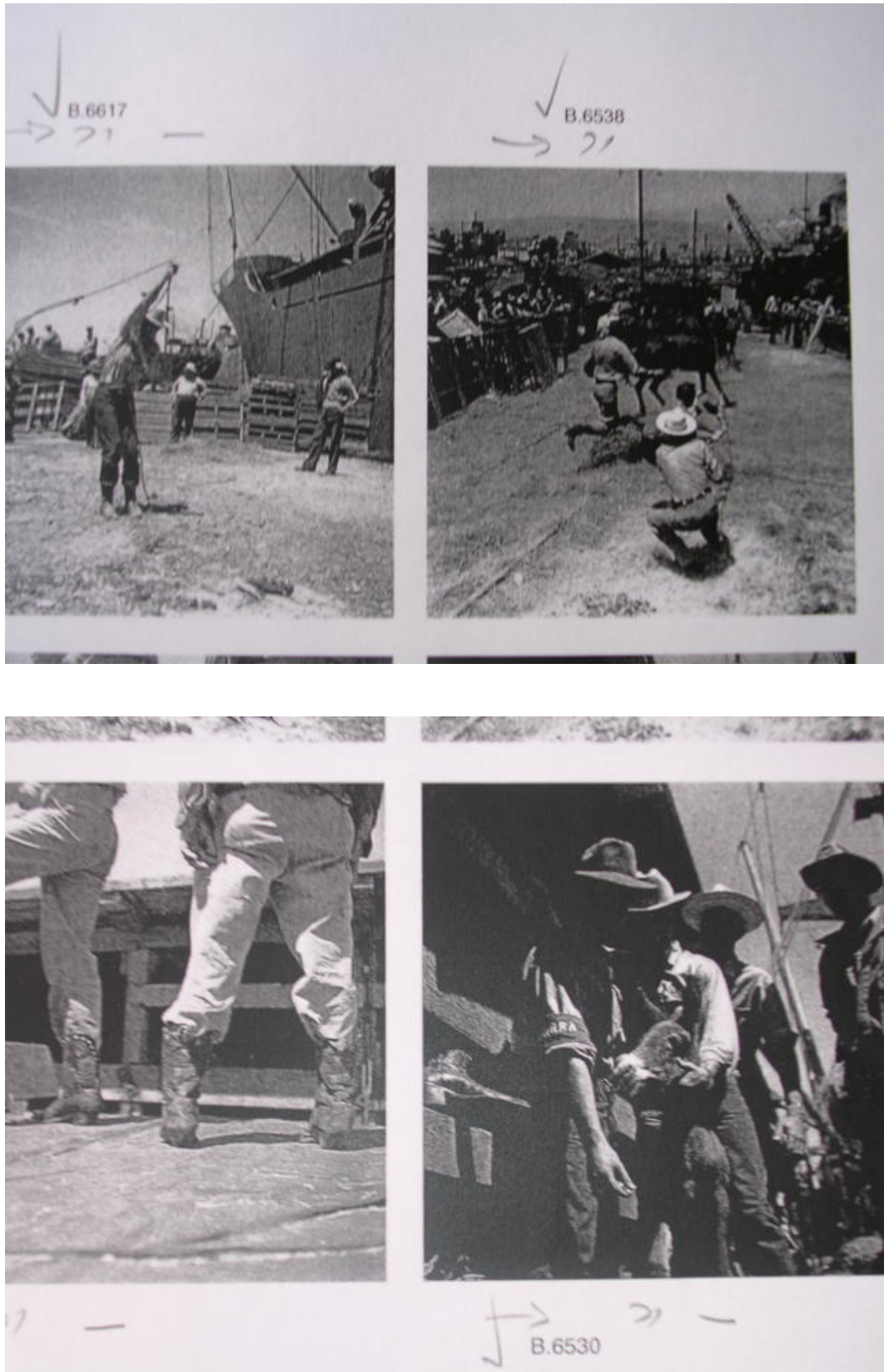
The Story of the Donkey Foula and the Mule Koula

Many of them sold their animals “just for a piece of bread”. Foula was not sold, but she was abandoned. After the end of the Greek Civil War the Barbatsi family came back to Perivoli. But they did not find Foula. Stamatia believes that “*ta joulapia*” (wild animals), had eaten her.

"*Our mind is a virgin forest of killed friends*" wrote the poet George Seferis (Nobel Prize). Foula would be considered one of those friends – at least for Stamatia. In fact, donkeys can not live without people’s care. And Stamatia could not take care of Foula as she was in prison from 1948 until 1958. Her mother and her sister sold a field and bought a new donkey. They were farmers and badly needed at least one.

Foula was not the only animal that had been lost. According to the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) during World War II the Greek animal population had been reduced by nearly 50 percent, and practically all tractors had been destroyed. Thus there was a vital need for draft power, which explains the emphasis on horses, donkeys and mules, essential for rural work and the main means of transport in the Greek countryside. In 1946, UNRRA supplied Greece with 62,200 draft animals. This includes more than 30,000 mules (almost half of the total amount), 21,400 horses (1/3 of the total) – mainly mares for reproduction -- and the rest were donkeys (6,800) and cows (1,900).





[Photos 15-17: Voula Papaioannou, Benaki Museum, Photo Archive]

These animals were vaccinated by the veterinarians of UNRRA, but needed also to be domesticated.

The Story of the Donkey Foula and the Mule Koula

By the time the UNRRA livestock program was completed, it had procured and shipped an additional 13,000 animals on behalf of the Greek War Relief Association, which the Greek-Americans had established to help their brothers in Greece.

Greece's reconstruction took on another dimension with the Truman Doctrine and the European Recovery Programme, the so-called Marshall Plan. Both were implemented during the Greek Civil War, which took place in the context of the Cold War. The U.S. strongly supported the government in Athens and helped defeat the pro-Soviet Democratic Army of Greece.

In July 1948, under the Marshall Plan, the European Cooperation Administration of Greece (ECA/Greece) was established. Most of the money of the Marshall Plan was spent for weapons. Moreover, the ECA, focussing on Greece's economic reconstruction, pushed the government in Athens to repatriate the refugees of the evacuated villagers, like Stamatia's family. They thus allocated an amount of 7 million dollars for agrarian equipment and 18,000 animals.

At this point begins the story of the mule named Koula. It is much shorter than the one of the donkey Foula -- just 25 minutes. Koula as well as Kyriakos, a boy, are the stars of the film "The story of Koula".





[Photos 18, 19: “The Story of Koula”, video, Photo Archive of Greek Foreign Office]

“The story of Koula” is an American propaganda film. Kyriakos says to his grandfather (in Greek) that “the Americans brought you a mule” and an ECA/G poster is displayed obviously on a tree. The aim of the film was to teach Greek people how to be patient and to love these new kinds of American mules. In fact, Greek villagers needed horses, donkeys and mules. But these mules that UNRRA and the Marshall Plan gave them, were good for nothing if rural people could not communicate with them. And they could not.

In the film, Kyriakos, the boy, exemplifies the new generation which domesticates Koula by gently singing her a Greek popular song about a woman named Gerakina who went to bring water and was lost. Perhaps American propaganda or the director of the film knew that animals, like illiterate people, communicate better through music than through words. Moreover, the film shows how Kyriakos taught other villagers how to handle their animals.

The film has a happy ending. While Kyriakos is ploughing in the field, he brings Koula a companion, a Greek donkey that he puts next to Koula and the plough.



[Photo 20: “The Story of Koula”, video, Photo Archive of Greek Foreign Office]

And the narrator concludes: “As farmers learned to handle their new American mules, their lives became a little happier, their farms became just a little more productive, and Greece itself became just a little happier a land to live in.”

The name of the film’s director and producer is Vittorio Gallo – and like the actors in the film, it sounds Italian. In the movie we can hear some Greek words, but the pronunciation is not. The narrator speaks English. The music is like Italian opera, although there is the Gerakina’s Greek popular song. The story takes place in the municipality of Mesias. I do not know if Mesias is an imaginary community or not; due to the Greek civil war many village’s names has been changed. The film is a work of fiction, not a documentary. And we do not know if the mule named Koula really lived in Greece, but – for sure – Koula lived in the Mediterranean.

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