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## **Oral testimonies of survivors from the "cleansing" operation of the occupation troops against the civilian population in Kommeno, Arta (1943)**

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### **Abstract**

The generation of survivors of the massacre in the village of Kommeno near Arta tends to disappear. Their oral testimonies are a valuable historical source for modern history. The memory of the massacre can only have universal significance. Our aim is to recall the historical memory to future generations through the experiences of the survivors of the "cleansing" operation in Kommeno. For this reason, the role of Public History and historical culture in general, becomes today more than ever before, crucial and imperative (Κόκκινος, 2015, p.191).

The massacre in Kommeno in August 1943 is one of the largest massacres of civilians in occupied Greece. The planned reprisals against the unarmed population were intended to fragment the resistance organizations. At Kommeno, however, an unprecedented massacre of innocent civilians took place without cause. It is estimated that there were 680 innocent people in the village on 16 August, of whom 317 people of all genders and ages died, and over 180 houses were destroyed.

Article 46 of the Hague Treaty stated that " Family honour and rights, the lives of persons, and private property, as well as religious convictions and practice, must be respected (International Humanitarian Law Databases. Article 46). The Nazi regime repeatedly violated these provisions both in Kommeno, and in occupied Greece and Europe in general (Στεφανάδης, 2000, p. 75). However, in the following post-war trials in the Nuremberg Tribunal for war crimes against the civilian population of Kommeno, no convictions were handed down.

Following these, we present through the oral testimonies of the protagonists a small sample of what took place in the martyr village. Our intention is to highlight the heinous crimes of the

Nazi criminals, which aimed exclusively at the annihilation of the entire village of Kommeno and the execution of the entire civilian population.

### **The Historical Narrative as a historical source**

Undoubtedly, oral history is a practice, a method of research. It is the act of recording the speech of people with something interesting to say and then analyzing their memories of the past (Abrams, 2010, p. 11). The collection, the rescue, and the "exploitation" of oral testimonies are particularly important for historical memory and the science of History, as it can be used to change the orientation of history itself and open up new areas of research. In addition, it constitutes a historical source charged with authenticity that is born through the recording of oral speech, by persons who have important information and data which are worth and should be saved (Σακκά, 2008).

The collection and transcription of oral testimonies have from time to time highlighted various dimensions of the social phenomenon, causing upheavals and challenging various assumptions. This happens due to the fact that oral testimonies have the ability to overturn theoretical figures or certainties, as they may be in complete conflict or even contradiction with written sources, thus drawing new conclusions. Nevertheless, we must keep in mind, that while oral history produces useful and unique material in the form of descriptions and factual information, oral narration itself is of particular importance because "it is a way by which people articulate subjective experiences about the past through the prism of the present" (Abrams, 2010, p.19).

It many times happens that reality is vague and different. However, the key feature of oral history is that it allows, more than any other source, to recreate this original plurality of views. The social purpose of history necessitates an assimilation of the past that is directly or indirectly related to the present. Another feature of oral history is, that it allows a fairer assessment of the past, as witnesses from various social and political classes can be recruited, among people who are "forgotten" in the mountain villages of Greece, the winners, the losers. This allows us the possibility of having a more realistic and fair reconstruction of the past and perhaps sometimes a call into question of the official version (Thompson, 2002, p. 35).

A fact that is often found in oral testimonies is that individuals recall their past both as individuals (private memory) and as members of a social group (public memory). The recall of

private experiences, however, is not independent of public memory. Trevor Lummis, an oral history researcher, argues that "most life-history interviews are a combination of personal and public memory (Abrams, 2010, p.127). The mixing of private and public memory also appears in the oral accounts of the Kommeno massacre. For example, several of our survivors recounted personal and family events, such as the actions they took to manage to survive during the massacre, while they also made reference to wider public events, such as the drowning of their fellow survivors in the river Arachthos while trying to escape the fire set by German soldiers.

Oral history over time introduces new ways of producing, collecting and processing information through experiential narratives. Experiential narratives constitute a remarkable historical material and a valuable hard-to-find heritage, since the oral word exists and can be treasured as long as the speaker is alive (Παπαευσταθίου, 2015).

Oral history today is a tried and tested method, which has now been integrated into historical research and a variety of research disciplines. It is the science that allows us to approach the past and this is because it has the potential to introduce the past into the present. We may never achieve a truly 'total' resurrection of the past (On conviendra facilement qu'une resurrection intégrale du passé est irréalisable) (Samaran, 1989, p. 329) but in some magical way, which is achieved through personal narrative, we have the possibility of accessing each person's past. For we should not forget that "it [oral approach] is about individuals lives- and any life is of interest" (Thompson, 2017, p. 50).

## **Research methodology**

### **➤ Research**

The recording and collection of oral testimonies are personal recordings. The resulting archival material is original, delineated and with a clear object of study, the massacre of Artas' Kommeno, during the Occupation. The testimonies contain three kinds of possibilities: a) the exploration and development of new interpretations, b) the support, confirmation or change of an interpretation of the past, c) the rendering of the climate of the time (Thompson, 2017, p. 321). The testimonies were transcribed into written language for the purpose of studying and commenting on them in conjunction with bibliographical sources. The content of the material concerns oral testimonies of the survivors of the massacre of Artas' Kommeno, which took place on 16 August 1943. The oral testimonies cover the events that took place from 12 August 1943,

the day on which German soldiers met rebel groups in the village, until the 'cleansing' operation Säuberung Kommeno of 16 August.

It should be noted that before relying on oral testimonies for this research, we have reviewed and utilized all relevant written sources to ensure the validity of the information material. Documenting the oral data is imperative to ensure the accuracy and objectivity of the oral testimonies we collected.

## **Interview method**

For the purpose of collecting data for the present research, we chose the interview method. The survey interview in the social sciences is perhaps the most common method of obtaining qualitative material and data (Παπαευσταθίου, 2015). "Qualitative research is naturalistic and largely empirical in nature" (Μπαμπούνης, 2013, p. 80). The researcher during the interview doesn't remain on the sidelines, neutral and detached, but should create a climate of trust in order to succeed in collecting as much data as possible. The researcher in a qualitative study often uses a combination of methods and research practices.

In order to choose the appropriate method to follow in our interviews, we need to know the strengths and weaknesses of each method. In the case of our oral testimonies, it was deemed more appropriate to choose the semi-structured interview in which we prepare a set of questions that is sufficiently free-form to allow us to reorder the content, any digressions and extensions, and to provide us with the opportunity to discover new aspects in order to further develop our research.

## **Research stages**

### **➤ Research questions**

In this first stage, the research question is designed, the questions and hypotheses to be answered in the field are structured. Prior to creating the questions, considerations and hypotheses, we prepared for the interview by acquiring a background of general knowledge relevant to the topic through literature or other means. In addition, we conducted exploratory interviews, mapping the research field, to document the appropriateness of the interview methodology and the selection of individuals to participate in the research. For the selection of interviewees, it was considered necessary to set age criteria, as well as the possession of mental health and mnemonic competence. The total number of participants is seven (7), of which three (3) are females and four (4) are males.

The persons selected for interview fully cover the historical context of our study (Cohen, et al. 2007, p.182).

➤ **Survey layout**

This second stage involves the selection of the interview recording instrument and the design of the interview guide. An IC Recorder was used to record the oral testimonies. To conduct the interviews, we used a series of specific questions that fully covered themes and issues of our research, while at the same time the questions were directive in nature. Finally, the questions were, as far as possible, in familiar language, simple and straightforward.

➤ **The Interview**

This is the stage at which interviews take place. This stage requires the development of a climate of trust and mutual respect between the researcher and the interviewee, so that the data that will be obtained, is truthful. The interviews took place in the homes of the narrators, thus aiming to create a conducive environment for the narrator, which would allow the creation of appropriate conditions for the smoothness of the interviews. The oral testimonies were conducted during the morning hours, aiming at the emotional discharge of the researcher from traumatic experiences, which could cause sleep disorders. In addition, all interviews were preceded by a short introductory conversation with the narrator, aiming to avoid any anxiety that would impede the flow of the discourse. The duration of the interviews was not predetermined, but varied according to the interviewee's available time. Finally, we conducted re-interviews as to be provided with the necessary clarifications and to confirm what the narrators said during their initial interview.

➤ **Data analysis**

Once the interview data has been collected, the next stage is to analyze it, which is most often done under some form of coding. In qualitative data, the analysis is almost inevitably interpretive. There are several stages of analysis that will help us to render meaning, for example, classification, categorization and interpretation of the interview data (Cohen, et al. 2007, p.368). At this stage, therefore, we proceeded to the historical, linguistic and stylistic analysis of the oral testimonies.

Through the historical analysis we cross-referenced the data obtained from the oral testimonies with the written historical sources: German orders, court testimonies, Greek and foreign language literature. Following the analysis of these data, a match of historical events was

established, while additional historical details, which emerged through historical research, were recorded.

In the linguistic analysis we observed local idioms, which is a common phenomenon in the villages of Epirus up to the present day. Nevertheless, we did not encounter any linguistic problems during the transcription process of the interviews.

In the stylistic analysis, we found that the narrators did not make any exaggerations or inaccuracies. Their speech was concise and they were coherent in their thinking. Their style changed according to the events they were recounting, and they often "bent" and interrupted or made long pauses during the narratives when the tragic events of the massacre experienced by themselves, their families, and their fellow countrymen came to mind.

### **The massacres of the Nazi troops in Greece, Lidice and Oradour-sur-Glane**

The Second World War was unique in its character. It was a confrontation of rival military units fighting with a particular intensity that exceeded any other conflict in world history. Technological progress and its use as a means of warfare played a key role in this. In addition, there were other factors that shaped the modern texture of war, such as the character of totalitarian regimes and the gradual rise of violence as a social phenomenon. All these collectively led inevitably to the violation of the rules of warfare (Κωτούλας, 2007, p. 6).

The war crimes committed by the German army were unprecedented in modern society. They formed an integral and indivisible part of the Nazi concept of total war and were carried out as the execution of a pre-arranged and premeditated plan to terrorize, exploit the inhabitants of the occupied and invaded territories and exterminate those elements who would be hostile to the German conquest and Nazi rule (Lord Russell, 2007, p. 21) As a result of these practices, thousands of people were uprooted from their homes, many were executed in retaliation, and many were imprisoned and tortured to death.

The practice of reprisals was a single policy of the Nazi army, which was applied both in Greece and in Occupied Europe, aiming mainly to break the morale of the population. Almost always, attacks and murders against the occupiers in the occupied towns and communities, as well as ambushes or acts of sabotage, were "pacified" by the execution of prisoners who were "communists" (In Nazi phraseology, guerrillas were almost always referred to as "communists"), "potential collaborators" and sympathizers, or simply civilians from the surrounding areas. On the

contrary, in cases involving armed conflicts which could be regarded as “normal fighting”, the Germans, in most cases, did not retaliate against the civilian population (Fleischer, 1995, p. 295).

The German occupation of Greece was particularly violent and was accompanied by atrocities against the civilian population. From the very first moment, the German army applied policies of terrorism as official revenge for any act of resistance, aiming to maintain control of the country. The first example was the "Retaliation Operations" against the Cretans who resisted (Μίντσης, 1998, p. 46), while by the end of the occupation the "Network of Martyr Cities and Villages of Greece" speaks of 90 cities and villages that experienced massive Nazi atrocities (Network of Martyr Cities and Villages of Greece of the Period 1940-1945, 2010).

The German reprisals were based on the collective responsibility of the civilian population for the actions of the guerrillas. In Greece, resistance flourished in many forms, publicly or secretly, from senior officials to ordinary citizens (Brewer, 2016, p. 89). The practices of retaliation resulted in an endless list of massacres throughout Greece. We summarize some of the biggest massacres: The Kalavryta massacre on 13 December 1943 resulted in more than 800 dead; on 14-16 September 1943, more than 500 innocent inhabitants died during the massacre of Viannos and Ierapetra, while the villages were looted and burned; the village of Distomo, in Voiotia, was burned and destroyed, while 228 people died during the massacre. In Kommeno, Arta, which we will talk about at length later, on 16 August 1943, 317 people of all ages were slaughtered, while the village was looted and set on fire.

The policies of retaliation, however, were not applied exclusively in Greece, but also in German-occupied Europe. Widely known in modern history, mainly because of the brutality demonstrated by the Nazi troops in these areas, are the massacres of the village of Lidice in what is now the Czech Republic and the French village of Oradour-sur-Glane.

The destruction of the village of Lidice on the night of 9 June 1942 in Czechoslovakia and the massacre of almost all its inhabitants was the result of retaliation for the killing of the Protector of Bohemia and Moravia Reinhard Heydrich by a group of guerrillas. During the reprisals 172 adult males were executed, most of the women were taken to Prague where they were executed, while 90 children were taken to the Gneisenau concentration camp where they were put to death. The village houses were looted and then set on fire. Nazi troops turned Lidice into an uncultivated wasteland, which would serve as a warning to the Czechs (Lord Russell, 2007, p. 131).



On 10 June 1944, the Germans reached the village of Oradour-sur-Glane, some 22 km north-west of Limoges. The German troops forced the 600 or so inhabitants to line up with their identity cards in hand, in the village square. The German commander ordered the inhabitants to divide into two groups. One was to consist of women and children and the other of men. The men were taken to barns where they were executed. After the execution, the barns were set on fire. About 400 women and children were taken to the village church where they were shot and burned alive. The massacre of Oradour-sur-Glane was carried out in retaliation for the Maquis' attacks on the German forces (Bennett, 1999, pp. 22-25).

### **Säuberung Kommeno**

In 1943 the action of the guerrilla groups had caused serious losses to the Italian-German army. Fearing the invasion of Greece by Allied forces, the German command ordered three divisions to be sent to reinforce the troops. Strong forces of the German army advanced into Epirus in early summer, carrying out a series of cleansing operations aimed at fragmenting the guerrilla groups operating in the area. Operations "Salminger" and "August" were generally considered to have been a failure, as they failed to inflict any significant casualties on the resistance groups. Nevertheless, during these operations, civilians and captured guerrillas were executed and villages and towns were destroyed.

From April 1941, when the occupation of Greece began, until mid-August 1943, Kommeno did not face any particular problems from the Axis forces. However, the course of history of Kommeno was destined to change on the morning of 12 August 1943, when two guerrilla missions of EDES and ELAS appeared in the village square to discuss with the village representatives the amount of food they would receive.

Christos Demetriou, 16 years old at the time, happened to be in the village square. As he told us: "On that day [i.e., 12 August 1943] I happened to be in the square. The ELAS and EDES guerrilla groups had come to ask for food and had left their weapons on the street in front of the square. More specifically, I remember there was a platoon of ELAS negotiating food with the village's National Struggle Committee. But because ELAS was asking for larger quantities of food, they could not reach an agreement. However, I think the National Struggle Committee made a mistake. Since they could not come to an agreement with the ELAS group, they called in a platoon

of the EDES to intimidate the ELAS people. So, opposite the school located in the square, the EDES men also set up their weapons."

After several hours of negotiations, the guerrilla groups came to an agreement with the village "prokrites" about the quantities of food they would receive. During the negotiations between the guerrilla groups and the village precursors, a German vehicle appeared in the village in which the commander of the 12th Regiment, Josef Salminger, and his driver and Lance Corporal, Anton Bader, were riding. The German driver, fearing an attack, lost control of the vehicle as soon as he saw the guerrilla armament, causing the vehicle to roll over and fall into a ditch (Meyer, 1998, p.15).

Alexandra Stasinou's family home was located in the square. She was only 11 years old when she first saw Germans in Kommeno. "I first saw Germans on August 12 if I remember correctly. It must have been a Thursday. Two German soldiers had come in a car. But on that day, there were also guerrillas in the village. In particular, the guerrillas were in the village square. They had placed their machine guns on the well and were cooking. As soon as it was heard that the Germans were coming, my sister ran and grabbed the guns together with other women who were there and went to hide them in some grass. As soon as the Germans saw the guerrillas they got scared and, in their agitation, they lost control of the car and fell into a ditch. Immediately then some villagers ran to help the Germans get the car out of the ditch. As soon as they got the vehicle out with the help of the villagers, the two soldiers boarded it and drove off. The Germans, however, on their return from Kommeno, reported that in the village even the women belonged to guerrilla groups."

On that day, Konstantinos Rossos was also present in the square. As he told us himself: The EAM disagreed with the Zerva's guerrillas and had left their machine guns under the plane tree in the square. Suddenly, there came a race of Germans. Seeing the guerrillas, they immediately turned to run away but fell into the ditch. Then a partisan said: "I'll fire my machine gun and kill them", but they wouldn't let him.

The next day, the village president Lambros Zorbas, the priest Lambros Stamatis and the teacher Stefanos Pappas, went to the Italian commander in Arta to give the necessary clarifications about the presence of the guerrillas in Kommeno (Mazower, 1994, p. 220). The Italian commander, after taking note of what had happened, assured them that there was no cause for concern.

Receiving assurances that Kommeno was in no danger of reprisals, the envoys informed the villagers that they had nothing to fear.

Artemisia Skara's family, as well as many other Kommeno residents, after being assured that there was no cause for concern, took the decision after the incident to remain in Kommeno. Artemisia told us that: "There was fear in the village, we were all afraid that something would happen, but those who were more educated, why didn't they warn us to leave the village? Stefanos Pappas, the village president and the priest had gone to the Italian commander and discussed what happened in the village on August 12. When they returned, they told us that the Italian commander assured them that the village was not in danger.

But there were also residents of Kommeno, such as Dimitra Bouya, who were terrified by the incident and chose to take refuge in the fields to spend the night. "Every day we feared for our lives. In the evening we would leave our homes and go to spend the night in the fields. But the days went by and as we saw that the Germans were not coming, we began to believe that they would never come."

Josef Salminger, returning from Kommeno, in his report of 12 August, states: "Personal reconnaissance operation found that Kommeno (12 km south-southeast of Arta) is in the hands of gangers, 25-30 men in desert uniforms. For the time being, no retaliation is planned (Meyer, 1998, p.60). In a report on the same day that was forwarded to the German headquarters, it was confirmed with complete clarity that "Kommeno is in the hands of 25-30 men [...] wearing similar uniforms [...] and the result of this investigation has been confirmed by the Italian headquarters in Arta" (Meyer, 1998, p.60). This report makes it clear that the Italian headquarters in Arta informed the 1st Mountain Division about the meeting it had held with the three representatives of Kommeno.

The decision to prepare a "sudden operation against the established gang in Kommeno" was taken on 14 August (Meyer, 2009, p. 297). Lieutenant Willibald Röser was ordered to conduct the "cleansing operation" Kommeno, with the 12th Company of the 98th Regiment on 16 August. On the eve of the operation, Salminger ordered the soldiers to act with toughness because of the "insidious way of fighting" of the guerrillas (Meyer, 2009, p. 297).

In the early morning hours of 16 August, a group of about 100-120 soldiers boarded trucks with Kommeno as the destination. The journey took about an hour and a half. The soldiers carried heavy weapons, as they considered the possibility of a clash with the rebel forces highly likely. At five in the morning the soldiers arrived just outside the village, where they were served coffee.

There, the battalion commander, Willibald Röser, an admittedly hardline Nazi, gave an explicit order: "No one must survive, everyone in the village must be executed" (Meyer, 1998, p. 60).

Gregory Kontogianni had been woken up by his father in the early hours of the morning that day to go out to graze the cattle. "As I was going to graze the animals, I heard the German trucks going towards Kommeno. So, I stopped at one side, and saw two motorcycles leading the way, and behind them I counted twenty trucks full of soldiers. On the road I met a fellow countryman. It wasn't long before we began to hear gunfire. He then turns around and says to me: "Gregory, these bullets must be falling on human bodies."

The German soldiers of the Edelweiss Division, gathered in front of the church just outside the village. After using the bell tower as a lookout post, they then divided into three assault units, surrounding Kommeno on three sides. The unit guarding the outer cordon had been ordered to shoot anyone trying to escape. The western side of Kommeno was decided to be left unguarded, as it was thought that the river Arachthos would act as a natural barrier. After the necessary clarifications were given to the assault teams, at six o'clock in the morning two green flares were launched into the sky, giving the signal for the start of the operation.

Dimitra Bouya was at home with her family that morning when she heard the first shots. "My father had seen the Germans from afar arriving in the village [...]. When we heard the first shots fired in the village, it was too late to leave. The whole village of Kommeno was surrounded by German soldiers. I think it was six o'clock when they came to our house."

Artemisia Skara spent the evening of 15 August with her father outside the village in a small hut. At dawn on August 16, she and her father decided to take the road back to Kommeno. "In the morning we set off again for the village. We didn't realize what was happening until we heard gunshots. As we approached the village, we were separated from our father. However, we kept seeing people running towards the river to cross to the other side. When we realized what was happening, we started shouting "Where is our mother, where is she?". A woman heard us shouting and said: "Come with me and your mother will come too". We followed this woman to the river and we were saved, otherwise we would have gone into the village and been killed. But our mother didn't make it and the Germans killed her in our house. My brothers were burned alive together with my grandmother, while my mother was killed outside the house. When the Germans arrived outside the house, my mother took her little child which the German was dragging and put it inside the house and gave it to my grandmother. My mother was killed in the yard of the house and my

brothers and my grandmother were burned alive. We kept looking for our mother as if we felt it, as if we knew something. We were told by a neighbor who had been saved by our mother: "Your mother was killed, don't look for her." That image can never be forgotten."

Christos Demetriou was lucky in his misfortune, as he told us in his interview: "We heard during the early hours of the morning a woman through the village, who was running screaming and shouting 'Get out quickly because the Germans are coming. They are killing and burning'. When we heard the woman, my uncle and I separated. Fortunately, he managed and shouted at me and I came back. If I had taken a different road, I would have run into the Germans and they would have killed me."

Many of the inhabitants, wanting to survive the fury of the soldiers of the Edelweiss Division, fled to the side of the Arachthos River. That side remained unguarded, as it was considered a natural barrier that would prevent any possibility of escape. On the banks of the river the second act of the drama unfolded. In their attempt to cross to the opposite bank, the inhabitants boarded a small boat about five meters long and one meter wide by the dozens. Although they managed to cross to the opposite bank the first two times, the third attempt proved fatal. The excessive weight caused the boat to capsize and 17 people lost their lives.

Artemisia Skara was present when the boat capsized and, as she told us: "Many people saw their own people drowning and could not help them. Some people saw people who were trying to swim across the river. I remember barely stepping on the slippery water. Me, my sister and four other children didn't cross the river where the others were crossing in the boats, but further on, swimming.

The massacre of Kommeno lasted about six hours. During this time the Wehrmacht soldiers carried out a series of murders, rapes and looting. They indiscriminately killed- most of the time with horrific methods- innocent civilians, without any procedure, without any justification and without any distinction of gender or age.

Gregory Kontogiannis was one of the first inhabitants to return to Kommeno after the departure of the German soldiers. "After I saw the trucks leaving for Arta, I set out to come into the village. It must have been two o'clock in the afternoon when I arrived. As soon as I entered the village, I saw some fellow villagers trying to put out the fire from their houses. They wanted to salvage what they could. So, I went on to come to my house to see what was going on [...] So I enter the house and what do I see; my father was dead in front of the front door of the house. He

had been stabbed with the bayonet of the gun. I found my two sisters and my guest down on the floor. They had been shot in the forehead. My mother I saw sitting on the terrace at the edge of the house, burning from top to bottom. What should I do? How could I save this woman? I couldn't do anything."

Theodoros Skaras had managed to leave the village that day and go to his uncle's house. Instead, his family remained in Kommeno. In his oral testimony he tells us: "After some time my father came to my uncle's house. As soon as my father saw me, he told me: "They killed your mother, your little sister and your grandfather." My other five sisters, my little brother and thirty other families from the area ran away and went to hide in a deep ditch and got away. [...] My mother was shot while she was in the field with the cattle. My grandfather was shot in the house, while my sister was found in the crib. They put cotton wool with gasoline in her mouth and burned her alive. They did this to many newborns.

Christos Demetriou returned to the village at six in the evening. "When I arrived, I could hear the cries and moans and see the smoke from the houses that were still burning. [...] So when I was returning to the village, I went to meet my mother at home. After I found her, I told her that I would go to the farm. On the way I came across a house where there were twelve people killed. The landlord of the house had four girls, two sons-in-law and two grandchildren. All of them were killed side by side and their house was burning. Their bodies were stained. Seeing all this I lost my mind. I couldn't recover, I was in shock. Slowly I continued to the field. I reached the field and saw two women with their children, who had been killed by the Germans. One woman had three children and the other two. They went into the field to hide. However, when the Germans set fire to our hut, it seems the little children were frightened and began to cry. Hearing their cries, the Germans found them and killed them. I remember the mothers whose bodies were on top of those of their children. They tried to protect them, but it was all in vain."

Demeter Bouya, who did not have time to leave her home, saw the Nazi soldiers kill her family in her own house. "We heard a shot from across the yard. Immediately, my mother came out and saw my father who had been shot. She grabbed him by the armpits and put him inside the house, but he was dead. When we saw our father dead, me and my brothers and sisters started crying. At that moment our mother turned around and said: "Don't cry, your father was killed unintentionally". After a few minutes they came into the house and killed my mother and grandmother. Then a soldier looked at me and said to me in Greek: "Don't be afraid, they won't

kill you." I then remained in the house with my brothers and sisters. I did not know what else to do. I didn't know where to go. I was young. While I was sitting with my brothers in the house, a German soldier threw a grenade through the window. The grenade sat on the pillow of the bed and the explosion killed both my brothers. I was not even hit by a projectile."

Not even Alexandra Stasinou's pregnant neighbor was spared from the fury of the Nazi army. "She was a pregnant woman, close to giving birth and that day she was in pain. So, they were trying to take the girl to hide her but where to hide her? The girl couldn't move. So, when the Germans found her, they disemboweled her, took the baby out and put it aside."

After the massacre of the civilian population, it was the turn of the looters. Men of the Aufräumtrupp, broke into houses and removed various valuables, carpets, clothing, food, animals and anything of value to them and carried them off in trucks. They then burned the houses with the aim of total destruction of the village. Both the house of Grigoris Kontogiannis and most of the residents of Kommeno were destroyed. "[...] they set him on fire and the whole [i.e., the house] fell down. There was nothing left. I was forced to leave Kommeno afterwards and went to live in a hut that my father had built somewhere outside Neochori (Neochori is a town south of the city of Arta. It is about 15 km from the city of Arta along the river Arachthos). They would go into the houses and before they set them on fire they would take clothes, jewelry and anything else of value. They also took animals and food and loaded them into trucks."

On 16 August 1943 there were about 680 people in Kommeno, including foreigners who had come to the village to celebrate the Assumption of the Virgin Mary and the marriage of Alexandra Malliou (Βλαχοπάνος, 2018, p. 103). Statistics during the census showed that the 317 dead consisted of 14 men, 172 women and 97 children, aged between six months and fifteen years old, while 20 families were completely wiped out (Παππάς, 1976, p. 103). A total of 38 people were burnt to death in their homes, while some 180 houses were completely destroyed.

At four o'clock on the morning of 17 August, the German staff received the daily report of 16.08.43 which stated: "Result of the "Säuberung" Kommeno: 150 dead on the enemy side, some cattle, weapons of Italian origin. The fire in the village blew up large quantities of ammunition. The result of the operation confirmed the division's suspicion and report that the eastern side of the Gulf of Arta is a gang center with strong active bandit gangs (Meyer, 1998, p. 93). In reality, neither guerrillas nor weapons were found at Kommeno. The 150 dead were not "rebels", they

were 317 civilians. The martyred village experienced a series of war crimes and crimes against humanity that went unpunished.

In conclusion, we should make it clear that the responsibility for the realization of the "cleansing" operation of Kommeno, is not borne by the resistance organizations. Undoubtedly, the indiscriminate presence of both guerrilla groups was a childish blunder. Nevertheless, under no circumstances can the responsibility for a massacre be attributed to the defending people. The inhuman slaughter of 317 civilians and the destruction of an entire village is the sole responsibility of the Nazi forces.

## Sources

### Oral Testimonies:

1. Alexandra Stasinou: Year of Birth:1932  
Recording Time: 10/08/2019  
Place of Recording: Kommeno, Arta  
Place of origin: Kommeno, Arta
2. Artemisia Skara: Year of Birth: 1932  
Recording Time: 09/10/2018 – 05/09/2019  
Place of Recording: Kommeno, Arta  
Place of origin: Kommeno, Arta
3. Christos Demetriou: Year of Birth: 1927  
Recording Time: 04/09/2018 – 05/09/2019  
Place of Recording: Kommeno, Arta  
Place of origin: Kommeno, Arta
4. Demeter Bouya: Year of Birth: 1936  
Recording Time: 02/12/2017  
Place of Recording: Kommeno, Arta  
Place of origin: Kommeno, Arta



5. Grigoris Kontogiannis: Year of Birth: 1929  
Recording Time: 09/10/2018 – 05/09/2019  
Place of Recording: Kommeno, Arta  
Place of origin: Kommeno, Arta
6. Konstantinos Rossos: Year of Birth: 1928  
Recording Time: 07/08/2019  
Place of Recording: Aneza, Arta  
Place of origin: Aneza, Arta
7. Theodoros Skaras: Year of Birth: 1926  
Recording Time: 04/09/2018  
Place of Recording: Kommeno, Arta  
Place of origin: Kommeno, Arta

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