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# 15 in Greece guilty in string of deaths

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## Radical group's attacks lasted 27 years; trial was housecleaning for Olympics

By Mark Landler

**ATHENS:** In a landmark ruling on Monday that Greece hopes will allay fears of terrorism before next summer's Olympic Games, a court here found 15 members of a radical group guilty of a string of assassinations, car bombings and rocket attacks that stretched over nearly three decades.

Among those convicted were one of the founders as well as the chief assassin of the group known as November 17. After its first killing, of a CIA station chief in Athens in 1975, the leftist gang waged a hit-and-run terror campaign believed to have claimed 23 victims, including a Greek shipping magnate, a British brigadier and three other American officials.

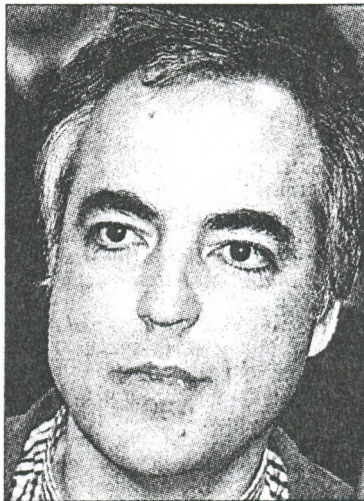
The verdicts, delivered by a judge in rapid-fire style without commentary, brought an abrupt close to a trial that had riveted Greece for nine months, with nearly 500 witnesses, 10,000 pages of evidence and a carnival atmosphere that threatened at times to spiral into chaos.

The court acquitted four defendants, including the only woman, who is married to the suspected hit man, Dimitris Koufodinas. He and the others are expected to be sentenced by early next week. Several face life in prison; their lawyers said they planned to appeal.

Called the "trial of all trials" by Greek newspapers, the case against November 17 was rich in spectacle and symbolism. In the end, though, it was less revelatory than many would have liked. Much about the group, and why it was able to act with impunity for 27 years, remains a mystery.

"We may never get answers to some questions," said Alexandros Lykourezos, a conservative member of the Greek Parliament and a lawyer who represents the relatives of some of the victims. "Why it took so long for the Greek state to catch them is something the court did not touch."

Still, the verdicts were historic, clos-



Dimitris Koufodinas was the hit man of the group called November 17.

ing a blood-stained chapter in Greece's history that began after the collapse of the military junta, which ruled the country from 1967 to 1974. The group's name derives from the date in 1973 when that regime brutally quashed a student protest.

The last assassination attributed to the militants came on June 8, 2000, when the British military attaché, Brigadier Stephen Saunders, was gunned down on his way to work. His widow, Heather, campaigned tirelessly for justice, helping to galvanize Greek public opinion against the group.

Greece prosecuted the November 17 suspects under a new antiterrorism law, using a panel of three judges instead of a jury to avoid intimidation. Officials here viewed the case as a crucial house-cleaning on the eve of 2004, when the Olympic Games return to their ancestral land.

"Greece can boast of being one of the

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**'I think the chapter of terrorism in Greece is finally over.'**

their lives in jail," said Welch, who was a 23-year-old Marine when his father was killed and who now works for Citibank in Chicago.

Welch huddled with his brother Nick and sister Stephanie, who recalls being pulled out of a humanities class in high school to be told that something had happened to her father. She is a public prosecutor in Delaware, and attributes her career choice to her family's quest for justice.

For Chip Tsantes, whose father, Captain George Tsantes of the navy, was shot to death in 1983 along with his driver, the questions linger. The police never recovered the weapon used in the shooting, and prosecutors did not have enough evidence to charge these defendants with the killing.

Like many relatives, Tsantes believes other people involved in the killing of his father are still at large.

"People who come here for the Olympics should know this a country where known terrorists walk the streets," he said, adding that November 17 also attacked American commercial interests like McDonald's and American Express, some of which will advertise during the Olympics.

The police only broke the case, Tsantes noted, because one suspect, Savvas Xeros, was badly wounded when a bomb he was trying to plant in Piraeus accidentally exploded. Xeros, a painter of Greek icons, proved to be a rich find: He was carrying keys to a safe house.

For an outlaw band that rivaled Italy's Red Brigade or Germany's Baader-Meinhof gang in local reputation, the November 17 suspects led surprisingly ordinary lives. They worked as loan officers, teachers and telephone operators. Koufodinas, the assassin, was a beekeeper.

Some people in Greece believe the government did not pursue November 17 vigorously because the group's opposition to the country's military rulers gave it something of a folk-hero status among Greeks. The junta had been backed by the United States, and there was a bitter residue of anti-American feeling after it collapsed — which November 17 took to violent extremes.

To the chagrin of some here, Greece's fitful investigation of the terror group — which stood in stark contrast to the aggressive crackdowns in Germany or Italy — was not put on trial along with the terrorists.

"From the beginning, it seemed as if everyone was rushing to finish this up," said Mary Bossis, a Greek terrorism expert. "You can't finish up 27 years that quickly. You've got to look deeper."

# GREECE: 15 are guilty in string of killings

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safest countries in the world, which is important due to the Olympics," said the minister of press, Christos Protopapas, after the verdicts were handed down.

In fact, the judges faced an even more pressing deadline. If they had not ruled by the end of December, they would have had to release the defendants, because suspects here cannot be held for longer than 18 months.

American officials, who prodded Greece for years to put a stop to the violence, reserved judgment Monday.

"I want to see what the final sentences are before I comment," said Thomas Miller, the American ambassador, whose friend, Captain William Nordeen of the navy, was killed by the group in 1988.

For relatives of two other American victims, the verdicts were an imperfect end to a nearly intolerable ordeal.

"It's the best we can hope for," said Tim Welch, the son of Richard Welch, the CIA official who was shot while walking home with his wife after a Christmas party on Dec. 23, 1975. Prosecutors did not bring charges in his killing because the statute of limitations had expired.

"If we can't get them for my father's death, at least they'll spend the rest of