

Macedonia in the Great War (1914-1918)*

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The First World War of 1914-1918 -“the Great War to end all wars”- was a period of great importance for Greek Macedonia, a time of dramatic political and military events. Foreign armies fought over its territory, with Greece remaining a neutral at the outset, and cast envious eyes at the possibility of controlling it politically. There was besides the Greek “National Schism”, the split between the supporters of the Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos and those of King Constantine, formalized by the setting up of a provisional government in Salonica. In September 1918 the Allies made a great drive into Macedonia, with the Greek army now taking part, the Macedonian Front of the Germans was at last broken, and the outcome of the war was no longer in doubt. At this same period Macedonia was in what may be called a transitional state. No longer was it a multiracial province, but it had been transformed into an ethnically fairly homogeneous area, as a result of population movements during and immediately after the Great War. Conditions in Macedonia -demographic, social, economic, and political- were described by contemporary observers, Greeks and foreigners, from their various standpoints. It was particularly the foreign observers, the soldiers, diplomats, commercial representatives, journalists, secret agents, and so on, who would leave posterity a valuable picture of Macedonia at this time. Their productions include memoirs, sketches, and even documentary films. But most typical of all were their photographs, which were legion, and many of which can be seen in the form of postcards that made Salonica and its environs familiar throughout the world. This made the Macedonia of the Great War one of the most thoroughly photographed subjects in Greek history, and in European history for that matter.

Macedonia on the eve of the Great War

After the Balkan Wars, Macedonia, which had already in the mid nineteenth century become an international apple of discord and the scene of political unrest and clashes between different nationalities, eventually obtained a new status. For what had once been an Ottoman province was now partitioned between Greece, Serbia and Bulgaria. This development was made official by the Treaty of Bucharest in 1913, and it was wholly reliant on an alliance between Greece and Serbia, with the approval of Rumania. This had as its object to limit Bulgarian expansionism and to maintain the balance of power in the Balkans. It was not to be. From the very start it was Greece which did best out of the Balkan Wars. She had won the larger part of Macedonia, and she had the lion’s share of the Greek-speaking (or at least Greek-minded) population in the region, its biggest towns, and its ports, which of course meant above all Salonica. But the absorption of Macedonia into the kingdom of

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Greece was not without its problems. The inhabitants of these “new territories” were very mixed, from the point of view of ethnicity and religion. In the city of Salonica itself, the Greek element was in no higher than third place, with 25% of the population, fewer than the large Jewish community (39%) or the Muslim population (29%). On a number of occasions the Greek administration showed that it was in no position to deal with something that it was encountering for the first time - the multiethnic nature of the region. It was also obliged to take account of the policies of the Great Powers, with their major economic and political interests at Salonica. Even though the situation appeared to have been normalized quite quickly, with the outbreak of the First World War everything was once more thrown into confusion and the Macedonian Question became a main item on the agenda of diplomats.

The Macedonian Front

The First World War started when the hostilities were formally declared in August



Preparing meal in open air in the allied camp at Zeitenlik, Thessaloniki.

1914, with the invasion of Serbia by Austro-Hungary. Within a short time all the Great Powers of Europe were involved in the conflict as a consequence of their alliances and obligations. The Central Powers -the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Germany- stood on one side, and on the other were the Allies of the Entente - France, Great Britain, and Russia. It was not long before the Ottoman Empire threw in its lot with the Central Powers, followed by Bulgaria. In October 1915 there was a drive into Serbia by the combined armies of Austria,

Germany and Bulgaria, and Serbia's army, her government and much of her civilian population were forced to withdraw and seek refuge on Greek soil. It was at the same period that Allied troops landed at Salonica to stiffen Serbian resistance. The landing was with the tacit consent of Eleftherios Venizelos, who was in favour of Greece coming into the war on the side of the Allies. It was however opposed by the Greek King Constantine, who had ties of blood and sentiment with Germany and whose wish was Greece to remain neutral. The conflict between Venizelos and the King, which is known as the “National Schism”, was temporarily won by Constantine. Greece now found herself in the strange position of maintaining neutrality as the two foreign armies opposed one another on Greek soil. This was the making of the “Macedonian Front”, where a coalition of troops from Britain, France, Serbia, Russia, Italy and, in the end, Greece, faced the forces of Austro-Hungary, Germany and Bulgaria.

Foreign propaganda and espionage

There was a sharp increase in foreign propaganda to the detriment of Greek sovereignty in Macedonia after the Macedonian Front had been formed and in the wake of Greece's domestic crisis. It was not only, and not even mainly, from the traditional claimant to Macedonia, Bulgaria, that this propaganda campaign emanated. In the years from 1915 to 1918 Serbian, French and Italian agencies were all hard at it. These agencies did not necessarily represent the official policy of their respective countries, for there is good evidence to show that the propaganda was sometimes in conflict with the "party line". At all events, what they made out was that there was a lack of control on the part of the Greek state; and it is indeed true that Greek sovereignty at Salonica was in a state of disarray in at least the first years of the Macedonian Front. Successive governments in Athens, under the thumb of King Constantine, blamed the situation on the French commander-in-chief of the Allied forces, General Maurice Sarrail, who had assumed de facto administrative powers over the region, in disregard of the Greek authorities. The Allies reciprocally accused Athens of hindering them in their work and of leaking information about their dispositions to the Germans. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the matter, the truth is that at that period Salonica had become a nest of spies, to quote the title of a later film, thanks to the presence of foreign troops and the bizarre situation caused by "parallel administration" by the Greek and Allied authorities.



The French Commander of the Army of the Orient, General Maurice Sarrail, Thessaloniki 1916.

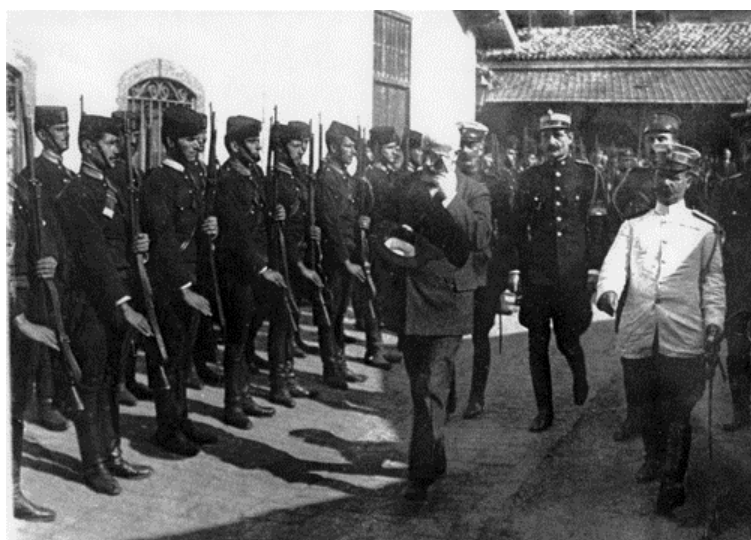
The Bulgarian invasion

After occupying Serbia, the onward drive by the German and Bulgarian forces halted at the Greek frontiers, since Greece was still neutral and Germany had no intention of precipitating its entry into the war. The Allies were too weak to unleash a counterattack, so that they had to stay on the defensive, in an "entrenched camp", as their enemies ironically called it. There was no change on the front until May 1916. Then the Bulgarian and German armies invaded, and seized the border fortress of Roupel, in eastern Macedonia, very probably with the connivance of Constantine. In the course of that summer the Bulgarian army was able, unopposed, to occupy eastern Macedonia and the city of Kavalla, where virtually the entire Fourth Greek Army Corps surrendered, on orders from Athens, and was taken off to Görlitz in Germany. However, the Bulgarian drive in west Macedonia was less successful, for it was cut short by a French and Serbian counterattack. Relations between Constantine and the Entente degenerated rapidly after the surrendering of eastern Macedonia. The Allies assumed control of Greek ports, and demanded the disbanding of the Greek army, which they now saw as potentially hostile. General Sarrail declared a state of emergency in Salonica. He confined the remaining Greek troops to barracks and gave orders that their

lines of defence should be taken over by Allied forces. But the most important thing about the Bulgarian invasion was that it for the most part shattered public morale. Greeks watched with dismay as the lands that had been won in the Balkan Wars were lost again. It was these perilous developments which hastened the emergence of the National Defence movement.

The provisional government in Salonica

The threat of national disaster in Macedonia in the wake of the Bulgarian invasion was enough to persuade the Venizelist officers of the National Defence -a body that had been formed in Salonica in December 1915- to bring forward the date for making their movement public. At the start of their activities they had not found much support among the officers and troops stationed in Salonica, who were for the most part steadfastly of royalist sympathies. In the event their success was due to intervention by the French, who disarmed any unit refusing to join the movement. After some initial misgivings, Venizelos agreed to undertake the leadership of the movement. Taking up residence in Salonica, he formed a provisional government. He himself was at the head of what was immediately



Men of the Cretan Gendarmerie of Thessaloniki present arms to Eleftherios Venizelos.

nicknamed “the triumvirate”, with Admiral Pavlos Kountouriotis and General Panagiotis Danglis as the other two members. At the very outset the provisional government found itself having to face complex problems. Not only did the Allies, unwilling to completely break off relations with Athens, refuse to acknowledge it officially; they did not give it sufficient financial support. The government likewise met with difficulties in its attempted campaign into the hinterland of Macedonia, because local populations had no stomach for the fight. The provisional government went ahead anyway, and

took various important steps of an institutional nature, even if many of their resolutions were not in the end implemented. One was to introduce the use of vernacular spoken and written Greek (“demotic”) in primary schools. Another was to transfer the ownership of farm estates (“chiftlics”) in order to set landless farmers on their feet. There were also the drawing up of an ecclesiastical charter for the “new territories”, the founding of a Labour Centre in Salonica itself, and so on and so forth. The provisional government reached the end of its existence in June 1917, when Constantine abdicated in favour of his second son Alexander, and Venizelos returned in triumph to Athens, to become prime minister and assume the leadership of the country as a whole.

Salonica during the Great War

The years of the Great War were to see the last flash of Salonica's brilliance as a cosmopolitan, multiethnic city. It had already been the home of a mixture of cultures, but now was swollen by refugees and by thousands of foreign soldiers, of unfamiliar speech and race. Among them were many Africans and Asians, serving with the British and French colonial regiments. Though their arrival more than doubled the number of inhabitants, causing serious problems of provisioning, billeting, and transport for vehicles, pedestrians and livestock, its overall effect was to pump up the city's economic life, with the construction of military works providing employment for refugees and for men who were out of work. Trade gave badly needed relief to businesses that had been hard hit by previous wars, but it also meant that the price of goods and accommodation soared. Despite the fact that by the end of 1917 there was a serious shortage of foodstuffs and other goods, mortality among the population fell significantly, because of the hygiene measures taken by the Allied staffs. What had once been an Ottoman provincial capital was transformed into a European metropolis, with cafés-chantant, picture palaces, orchestras, cabarets, and a social whirl such as it had never seen before. At Zeitenlik, on the western outskirts of the city, in what was the biggest of the Allies' encampments, there were frequent shows and entertainments that tickled the curiosity of the local people. On the eastern outskirts, beyond the Cemeteries and the villas of the well-to-do middle classes, aerodromes and military hospitals were built. Foreign soldiers took photographs, and sometimes even filmed, whatever came into view, thus recording the look of a city that was changing rapidly, and preserving for posterity the image of its buildings, quartiers, and public monuments, many of which were later to be destroyed.

Daily life in the Macedonian countryside



French soldiers and villagers standing among corn husks.

Wartime brought the Macedonian countryside many hardships, but at the same time many benefits. It was rural people, especially those not very far from the battle front, who bore the brunt of enemy action. Many of them were forced to abandon their homes, either by the fighting itself or by the inexorable advance of the Bulgarian invaders. There were certainly some advantages to the inhabitants of Macedonia from having the Allies present and active on their lands. One was the intensive programme of public works. Intended primarily for military use, these not only provided many people with work, but they simultaneously improved the road and rail network in the region. Then there was the fight against malaria.

Alarmed by the incidence of this disease among their troops, the Allies were not slow to take measures to eradicate it. New canals were built; marshes were drained or hosed with paraffin; and large quantities of quinine were distributed to non-combatant local people as well as to the soldiers. Food shortages led to partial modernization of agricultural produc-

tion and to the setting up of agricultural colleges in order to train farmers in the new methods. As at Salonica, there was a boom in economic activity. The Allies' needs were the cue for many merchants, craftsmen and factory owners to exploit the situation by stepping up productivity and increasing their profits. Contact with troops from abroad meant that new ideas caught on among the local population. And there were even "mixed marriages" between Macedonian women and foreign soldiers.

The great fire of 1917

Wartime Salonica saw one major civilian event that was to have enormous consequences for the city and its development. This was the great fire of August 1917, which destroyed perhaps two thirds of the city's centre. Various conspiracy theories went the rounds about how it had started, both at the time and in later years. But it does seem to have been a genuine accident. The truest causes of this great disaster should be sought in the city's cramped streets and alleys, the high summer temperatures, and the inability of the Fire Brigade to get the fire quickly under control. Within a few days 120 hectares of the city's old centre had been reduced to ashes, leaving seventy thousand of its inhabitants homeless, and also obliterating its traditional appearance and street pattern. The great fire was a fearsome catastrophe for Salonica's inhabitants, and it caused terrible housing problems that were only made worse by the influx of foreign soldiery and refugees. But at the same time, it was a great opportunity to rebuild what had been an Ottoman city on a European model. The Venizelos government acted at once to start the rebuilding, by setting up, in the days that followed, a joint Greek, British and French design committee headed by a French architect, Ernest Hébrard. His plan called for the construction of broad avenues, as in Paris, galleries of shops, houses for workers, and city centre buildings that had a distinctly Byzantine flavor still to be seen in the Plateia Aristotelous in the heart of Thessaloniki. Hébrard's intentions were never fully realized, however. There were various reasons for this: frequent changes of government, pressure from private owners and builders, and also the urgent immediate necessities to which were due further events, the chief of which was a housing crisis when refugees started to arrive from Asia Minor in 1922.

Newspapers in Salonica

Even before the Macedonian Front came into being, there were a fair number of newspapers in circulation at Salonica, in various languages. But the period from 1915 to the end of the decade was to be one of unparalleled success for the local press, with twenty or so wartime newspapers and periodicals appearing in the city, in seven different languages - Greek, Turkish, French, English, Russian, Italian and Serbian. They had what was, for the time and place, an impressive print run. In 1917, for instance, the readership of the three newspapers in French - *L'Independant*, *Echo de France* and *Paris-Balkans* - reached 18,000, 7,000 and 6,000 respectively. The celebrated British organ *Balkan News* had a readership of no fewer than 25,000, the Tsarist *Ruski Vestnik* 3,000, and the *Voce d' Italia* another 2,000. Nor was the domestic Greek industry far behind. The *Macedonia*, still with us, had a print run of 5,000, *Nea Aletheia* of 4,000, and *Phos* and *Hellas* of 2,500 each. Then there were the newly-established newssheets, some published by refugees from the Bul-

garian-occupied zones or the Ottoman Empire (for example the *Semaia* [Flag] from Kavalla and the *Neologos* from Constantinople), others by republicans in hiding at Salonica (for example *Rizospastis* [The Radical], the *Ephemeris ton Balkanion* and *I Pali* [The Political Struggle]). Salonica's dailies and periodicals had to cope with the fact of military censorship by the Allied and the Greek authorities, a censorship which was due not only to the war situation but to the domestic crisis within Greece. They were also one of the major propaganda weapons in the war, with the two opposite camps each endeavouring, frequently by buying out or coercing an interest to get the city's newspapers on their side.

How the Front was broken

After the Bulgarian invasion in the summer of 1916, all was quiet on the Macedonian Front. It was not until the start of 1918, when a new commander, a Frenchman named Louis Guillaumat, came to take over the Allied troops, that the decision was taken to launch



Greek soldiers escorting away Bulgarian prisoners.

a new attack. It was at the start of 1918, too, that the Greek contingent started to pull its weight. This was because Venizelos had returned to power and war had been declared by Greece against the Central Powers. With the added numbers of the Greek army, the Allies were now able to carry out a series of local assaults during April, May and June 1918, the Greeks distinguishing themselves in the battles at the river Strymon and at Skra. Guillaumat's replacement, Louis Franchet d'Esperey, at once began preparations for the great Allied assault that was to break

the Macedonian Front. The attack was launched in the vicinity of Dobropol by French and Serbian divisions on 15th September. After a few days, the Allied troops had successfully broken through the Bulgarian lines of defence. The bulk of the Bulgarian army was able to avoid encirclement by beating an orderly retreat, but its soldiers now found themselves confronted with popular uprisings in the homeland itself. Realizing that it could no longer continue the war, the Bulgarian government came to terms. By the treaty signed on 30th September 1918, Bulgaria was obliged



German and Bulgarian soldiers at Fort Rupel following its surrendering.

immediately to evacuate all the Serbian and Greek territory it occupied; to disband almost the whole of its army; and to permit the Allies to take over strategic points in the country. The War in Macedonia was at an end. The part played by Greece in the European conflict had in the ends strengthened her reliability in the eyes of the Entente. The sacrifices which the country had made, and her rise to become a power in the region at large led to the definite incorporation of Western Thrace into Greek territory and the provisional cession of Eastern Thrace and Western Asia Minor. The ultimate fate of these lands was to be decided only later, and in the most dramatic manner, for Hellenism.

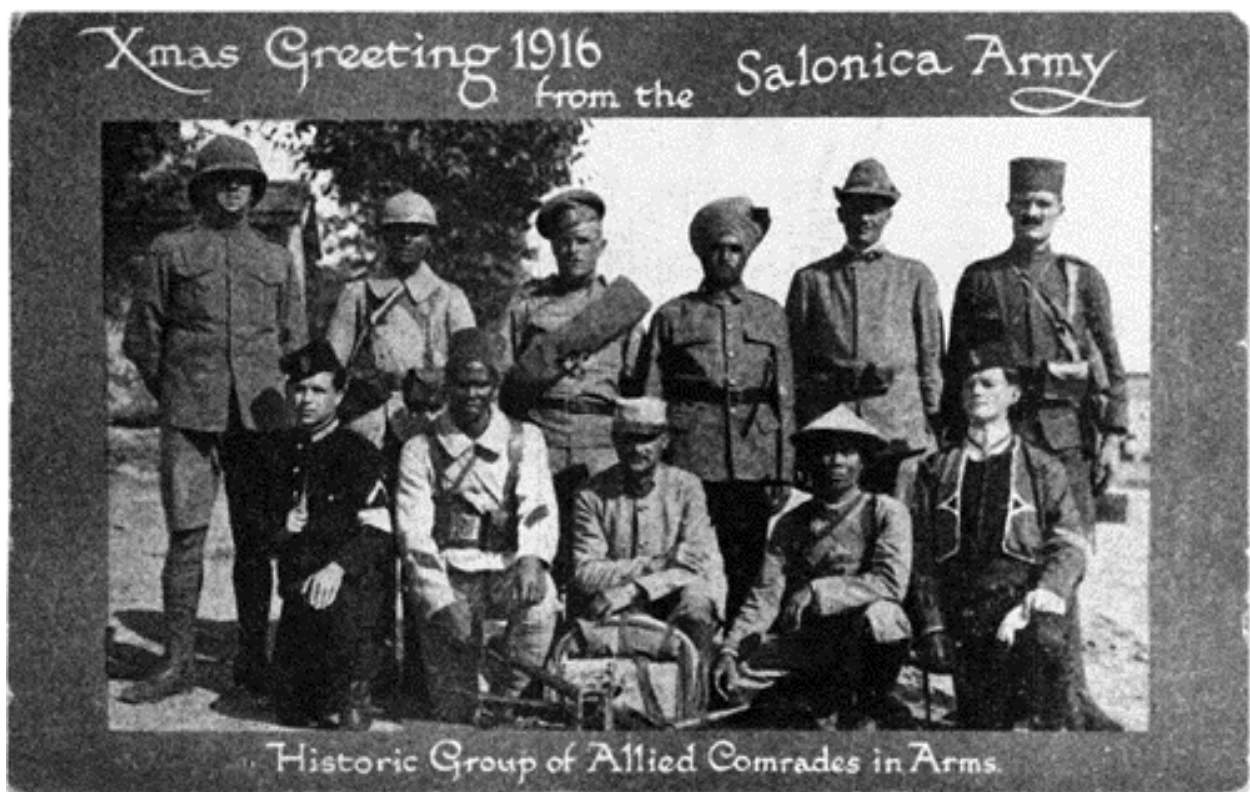
Refugees and forcibly displaced persons

Population movements in Macedonia, whether voluntary or forced, had already begun at the time of the Balkan Wars, and they were to continue almost unabated throughout the First World War. Even before the Macedonian Front had been formed, upwards of seventy thousand Greek refugees from eastern Thrace and Asia Minor sought shelter in Greek Macedonia, to escape the pogrom which the Young Turks had unleashed against them. Macedonia was likewise the destination of refuge for thirty thousand Greeks from what was at the time Bulgarian western Thrace. There were moreover the Serbian refugees, thousands of whom arrived in Greek Macedonia after Serbia had been occupied by the Central Powers in 1915, remaining there to the very end of the war. In 1916 some thirty thousand Greeks from eastern Macedonia were forcibly displaced by the Bulgarian army and resettled in Bulgaria. Even after the war had ended, the population movements still went on. By the Treaty of Neuilly (1919), provision was made for the free exchange of populations between Greece and Bulgaria, whereupon upwards of sixty thousand Bulgarians left Greek Macedonia to go and live on Bulgarian soil, while the corresponding movement brought some forty thousand Greeks southwards into Greece. But the major change in the ethnic map of Macedonia was yet to come, after the disastrous defeat of Greece in Asia Minor, when by the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) provision was made for the compulsory migration of Greek Orthodox Christians out of Turkey and of Muslims out of Greece. This meant that some 300,000 Muslims left the region for ever, their place being taken by some 600,000 Greeks from Asia Minor. These changes dramatically altered the composition of the population in Greek Macedonia: the Greek element rose from 42.6% in 1912 to 88.8% in 1926. Greeks were now heavily in the majority, and this was in practice to neutralize the claims of neighbouring countries on Macedonia while at the same time making Greek sovereignty over Macedonian territory definitive.

Remembrance of the Macedonian Front

Mention of the Macedonian Front was very muted until quite recently. In Greece itself, historians were reluctant to touch on a period so marked by tragic political divisiveness. For Europeans, the Macedonian Front was a sideshow by comparison with the other theatres of war in 1914-1918. Typical is the attitude of a British music-hall song of the time: "If you don't want to fight, go to Salonica", an ironic comment on the immobility of the Allied armies in the Salonica region. The same thought is implicit in the title of Alan Palmer's comprehensive scholarly study *The Gardeners of Salonica* (1965). In actual fact the

importance of the Macedonian Front was not to become clear until 1918, when the Allies' drive proved decisive in ending the war. This has been acknowledged by world historians only recently, but those who were only too well aware of it were the veterans of the campaign, who tried all they knew to make people aware of what had happened, what they had been through personally, and how they had done their bit for the final victory of the Entente. Their reminiscences, particularly those of French and British veterans, are still a very rich source of information for anyone studying the history of Macedonia at the start of the twentieth century, and they also shed much light on the way foreign observers dealt with the region and its population in general. In Thessaloniki and elsewhere in Macedonia, the history of the Macedonian Front is still kept alive by the occasional Allied cemetery or war memorial and by the remaining traces of foreign troops' intervention in the region.



Historic group of Allied comrades in arms (British, French, Russian, Italian, Indian, Anamite, and Cretan), Christmas 1916.



British soldiers on motorcycles wear gas masks to protect themselves from toxic fumes following a bombardment of the area around lake Doiran, 1916.



British and French soldiers at a coffee shop in Thessaloniki.