

The Battle of Fardykambos – March 1943

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Abstract

The Battle for Fardykambos was the most successful battle won by the Greek resistance during the Second World War. The battle took place around the town of Siatista in the region of Western Macedonia in March 1943. This account of the battle is from a book that was originally published by the author in 2008. The book has been digitised and translated into English.

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General Military Situation In Europe

World War II began on September 1st, 1939, when Hitler's ironclad armies, led by 6 armoured divisions ("panzer divisions"), suddenly invaded Poland and occupied it in about three weeks.

In the spring of the following year (May 10, 1940) followed the German westward offensive against the troops of England and France, countries linked to Poland by a pact of alliance and mutual aid, which is why they had declared war on Germany.

Within about two months, the Germans prevailed over their opponents and became masters of the whole of Western Europe, with the exception of the countries of the Iberian peninsula (Spain and Portugal) which managed to maintain a strict neutrality.

The following year (1941) Germany, after denouncing the alliance with Russia (Ribbentrop-Molotov pact), attacked this vast country and thus began a bloody campaign, aiming at the conquest of the vast Russian territories with which Hitler intended to solve the great food problem of the German people.

On September 1st, 1942, three years after the start of World War II, the Germans were dominant over all of continental Europe, and only England – which was under constant devastating bombardment – and Russia – despite the fact that German troops had reached the outskirts of Moscow – defended themselves with heroism and self-denial, putting up strong resistance to the German invaders.

Meanwhile in North Africa the "Desert Fox" (General Rommel) was constantly advancing with his tanks, reaching very close to Alexandria and Cairo, thus threatening the oil-producing countries of the Middle East, and having in mind the very ambitious plan to join - crossing the Arab countries - with the German forces already operating in the Caucasus region.

However, three years after the start of the war, the first encouraging messages began to arrive.

First on the North African front, at the historic Battle of El Alamein (November 1942), German and Italian forces suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of Marshal Montgomery's multinational troops and were forced, after a few months, to withdraw permanently from the North African front.

The Italians paid a heavy price in these battles, and thousands of prisoners fell into the hands of the Allies, while in their country their morale began to seriously deteriorate, especially as the Allies were already preparing for the landing in Sicily that was to take place a few months later (July 1943).

On Russia's great eastern front, advancing German troops reached the verge of Moscow. But the "general" winter and the heroic resistance of the Russian soldiers forced them to "sternly recoil" and abandon their grandiose plans once and for all. A milestone in the 1st history of the war was the great battle of Stalingrad that lasted two months, resulted in thousands of dead on both sides and ended in the capture of von Paulus' army on 31-1-1943. Thus, 1943 entered with optimistic prospects on all fronts of the war for the fighting Allied troops.

Military Situation In Greece

On the 28th of October 1940 the Italians requested, through Ambassador Grazi, to be allowed to enter and occupy Greece. The Greek Prime Minister, Ioannis Metaxas, responded with the historic "NO", which was immediately adopted by the entire Greek people. Thus began the heroic epic of the enlisted youth of Greece in the snowy mountains of Epirus.

Despite the superiority of the Italians in number of soldiers and weapons, the Greek soldiers, fighting for faith and homeland - motives that the enemy did not have - soon managed to counterattack and repel the Italians in the mainland of Albania, conquering the Greek Northern Epirus.

In the face of this situation, Hitler was forced to postpone the grand plan of aggression against Russia and turn with sufficient forces - after occupying Serbia - towards the strongholds of the Greek border, whose men put up heroic resistance against far superior forces. The delay in the implementation of the Barbarossa plan (attack on Russia) thus had fatal consequences for the implementation of Hitler's grand plan of conquest. Thus, under these circumstances, Greece was forced to capitulate and, in this way, the sad period of occupation, which brought so much suffering to Greece, was imposed.

With the arrival of the year of 1943, Greece was still under the boot of the conquerors (Germans - Italians - Bulgarians), assisted by their collaborators Romanian-Vlachs (legionnaires) of the Pindos region, the comitadjis - Bulgarian-speakers and, even, by part of the Slavic speakers of the regions of Kastoria -

Florina - Edessa. The region of Western Macedonia was basically Italian dominated (with the Germans retaining a kind of suzerainty). An Italian regiment was based in Kastoria, a reinforced battalion was based in Grevena and smaller garrisons existed in Neapoli, Argos Orestiko and Kalambaka. The Italian Penarolo Division was based in Larissa.

However, as the guerrilla movement gradually began to make its presence felt in the various villages of the area, the Italians for security reasons withdrew their men from the garrisons of the small towns and confined themselves to Kastoria and Grevena.

The First Guerrilla Units Of The Region

The first guerrilla units of the area (decarchies²) were formed in the area of Grevena and had a total strength of about 30-40 men, under the command of Lieutenant D. Kyratzopoulos (aka Fotinos³) and Lieutenant N. Theocharopoulos (Skotidas). In the area of Siatista there were also three guerrilla groups, one under Lieutenant D. Charisiadis, the other under Lieutenant T. Venetsanopoulos, former commander of the Siatista Gendarmerie and the third under second lieutenant S. Katsogiannis.

Another group of guerrillas was that of the area of Ventzia, led by D. Zygyouras (Palaiologos), a teacher at the time in the village of Pylori, who, as we will see later in the narration, played a leading role in the last stage of the battle of Fardykambos, the capture of the Italian battalion. Finally, there was in the area of Voio (Tsotyli) a significant number of guerrillas led by officers I. Kontonasis, M. Portis, K. Boulogiannis etc., who belonged to PAO⁴ (Panhellenic Resistance Organization), and who took part in the battle of Fardykambos, mainly on the second day, contributing undoubtedly to the popular character of this great confrontation.

These, in general, were the rebel forces of the Voio-Grevena areas, they acted almost independently of each other and eventually they were all involved in the historic battle of Fardykambos.

Ambush At Vigla Bridge (*The "Appetizer"*)

On the morning of 2nd March, a message arrived from the EAM Kozani organization, via the Postal – Telegraph - Telephone office of Siatista, stating that a column of 10 Italian cars with food and war supplies, accompanied by a force of 132 men, starting from Kastoria, is heading to Grevena to reinforce the Italian army based there.

² A "decarchy" or "decharchies" is a military term referring to a "10-man rule", or junta, over a region. The term originates from the period of ancient Sparta.

³ Many leaders of the resistance forces had code names, usually based on previous historical revolutionary heroes.

⁴ PAO was a nationalist leaning resistance organisation, which was anti-communist and an opponent of EAM. It should be noted that despite their ideological differences, members of these organisations collaborated in the defence of Siatista during the battle of Fardykambos.

The news had arrived in Kozani from the EAM Amyntaio based organization, where Siatistian George Stergiou had served as a telegraph employee.

The Italians preferred the significantly longer route of Kastoria - Florina - Ptolemaida - Kozani - Siatista - Grevena than the significantly shorter route of Kastoria - Neapoli - Siatista - Grevena for security reasons, given that in the area of Argos Orestiko and Voio the guerrilla divisions were already showing significant activity. The telegraph message was received by Ypsilantis who immediately convened a meeting with the executives of EAM Siatista (G. Mentza, G. Simos etc.) to agree on what should be done. Intense disagreements arose about taking the very serious decision, namely whether to hit the convoy of 10 Italian cars, as it was not completely clear what the final destination of the Italians was, Siatista or Grevena. As the armed guerrilla groups in Siatista had a small force of men, they decided - at the strong urging of Ypsilantis - to deliberately let the news leak that the convoy of Italian cars had as its final destination Siatista and not Grevena.

The news sounded like a dramatic alarm. Faced with imminent danger, a great mobilization of Siatista's inhabitants followed, and very quickly a number of 40-50 men were assembled, equipped with weapons and ammunition that they had acquired from the time of the war in the Albanian mountains. Later they headed to the bridge of Botsika, through which passed the only access road of Siatista from Kozani.

On the afternoon of March 3rd, the Italian convoy reached Kozani without any problems and then continued its journey to its final destination. When they reached Xirolimni (Karayiannia) it was already getting dark and the Italians, considering that it was not wise to cross at that time the dangerous strait between the mountains of Bourinos and Velia (Bougazi), they returned back to Kozani to attempt to continue their course to their final destination (Grevena) on the morning of the next day, March 4th.

In the meantime, the armed Siatistians, who were increasing in number hour by hour, led by Ypsilantis, had already taken their positions on the bridge of Botsika and spent the night there, despite the strong cold. *"Before dawn, the idea occurred to me that the convoy of Italian cars might not have Siatista as its final destination, but Grevena."* These words were spoken to me by Ypsilantis in 1976, shortly after returning from his adventurous living in Tashkent and Siberia, when I met him at his home in Kallithea, Athens, and asked him to describe in detail all the shocking events of those turbulent days. Indeed, the armed Siatistians who spent the night at the bridge of Botsika, moved a little further down the main road along Kozani - Grevena and assembled about 200 metres after the junction to Siatista, in a location on either side of the road, where there was a small bridge, the bridge of Vigla. At the bridge of Botsika, a small force of a few men remained, so that in the unlikely event that the Italian column of 10 cars turned in the direction of Siatista, it would be intercepted in some way, until those armed men who had already been deployed on

both sides of the road at the height of the bridge of Vigla came forward, especially since the distance separating them was small (200-300 metres).

The delay of the Italian column to move towards Grevena, because it caught them at dusk before Bougazi, had a beneficial effect on the whole organization of the ambush. Thus, D. Charisiadis arrived from the area of Ventzia with 20-25 men armed with rifles and a submachine gun, while at the same time the decarchies of the area of Grevena (Agios Georgios, Klimataki, Taxiarchis, Kokkinia, Kivotos, Polydendro) were notified who, led by G. Boukouvalas and Efth. Papasimos, placed their men appropriately before the bridge of the Aliakmon river (known colloquially as "Pasha's bridge"⁵), in order to prevent the intervention of the Italians by the garrison of Grevena, "which happened" as we will see later in the events, but also to strengthen the work of the men of the ambush in Vigla. The rebels from the area of Siatista were led by: Ypsilantis (main organizer of the ambush), S. Katsogiannis, Th. Venetsanopoulos and D. Charisiadis.

As 8 o'clock evening approached, the rebels, positioned on either side of the road and covered well behind dirt mounds and trees (vines), waited patiently. At the top of the hill of Vigla, where today stands the chapel of the Savior, observer Takis Varveris saw the 10 Italian cars coming from afar - with a 3 wheeled motorcycle preceding the convoy - and alerted, with his thunderous voice, the men of the ambush further down. Soon after, the Italian cars left the detour to Siatista on their right and headed at low speed towards the bridge of Vigla where the rebels were waiting for them. Ypsilantis was at the head of the ambush, where a water tank was placed as an obstacle on a cart, waiting for the first car to reach its height and then give the signal for the shooting to begin, thus calculating that all the cars would fall into the well-laid trap. But an untimely shooting forced the convoy of cars to stop about 20 metres before the predetermined point on the road where the ambush was to take place. As a result, the last (i.e. 10th) Italian car avoided being trapped and quickly reversed to return to Kozani where – of course – it immediately informed the Italian authorities (Grevena battalion and Penarolo Division in Larissa). Most likely an Italian soldier – forwarder - climbed a telephone pole and managed to alert the Italian Battalion Command of the surprise and danger they were in.

Meanwhile, the gunfire began. The rebels fired at the Italians on both sides of the road and they in turn returned fire. The struggle at Vigla was not easy, as the Italians had considerable weaponry and plenty of ammunition.

⁵ In colloquial Greek it is called "Τ' πασιά του 'Ιουφύρ". This can be translated as "Pasha's bridge". This is an old reference to Ali Pasha of Ioannina, an Albanian ruler who served as Ottoman pasha of the Pashalik of Yanina, a large part of western Rumelia during the years 1788–1822.



Figure 1 - "Bougazi" and the Kozani – Siatista road, as seen from the hill of Vigla.

The Siatistian guerrillas fought with bravery and tenacity, despite the fact that their armament was significantly inferior to that of the Italians. Little by little, they approach the Italians and created a stranglehold around them. The fierce confrontation continued for a lengthy period and little by little the surrounded Italians began to show obvious signs of fatigue and frustration. Finally, seeing that there was no hope of help from anywhere, they were forced, around 11 o'clock, to surrender.



Figure 1 - The point of the road (right after "Bara") where the Vigla ambush was set.

In Memory of a Patriot

The recent loss of a relative of mine, Thomas Karakotsios, brought to my mind his very active participation in the ambush, so that he became known by the nickname "Viglas".

A Dramatic Incident

As the battle was still in progress, a Greek guerrilla was confronted by a wounded Italian soldier and in the dizziness of the fierce conflict raised his gun and prepared to finish him off with his bayonet. At that moment, like a *deus ex machina*, G. Siasios intervened, grabbing the hand of the Greek guerrilla and saving the wounded Italian from certain death. Then the wounded Italian retrieved from his pocket a fine metal snuff box which with a kind gesture he offered, as a sign of gratitude, to his saviour, a Greek warrior, who in the Greco-Italian war, with the rank of sergeant, was particularly distinguished.

Results of the Battle

Italian prisoners: 132

Italian wounded: 15

Italian dead: 2

In the hands of the Siatistians came 9 cars (5 in good condition), a 3 wheeled motorcycle, 1 mortar, 10 machine guns, 2 machine guns and copious quantities of food, clothing and ammunition. On our side, we had 2 injured, with the heaviest being Zisis Liamas who had a penetrating wound to the chest.

Meanwhile, upon hearing of this first great success, the whole town of Siatista celebrated. All the residents poured into the streets to see the captured Italians and applaud the victors. Among them was the writer, at the age of 8. I recall these unforgettable images with great interest and admiration. The image of the 3 wheeled motorcycle, one of the spoils of the battle, noisily climbing the uphill roads of Siatista, remained indelible in my memory. In its canopy sat Ypsilantis who, wearing a woollen hood through which only his eyes could be seen, in my childish mind seemed like the figure of Alexander the Great.

The Fate of the 15 Wounded Italian Prisoners

The fate of the 15 Italians wounded in the battle of Vigla was controversial. In the detailed description of the battle by Drosos Zacharias, it is mentioned that the Italian wounded were transferred to Kozani under the care of the Red Cross. On the contrary, in the publication of the then mayor of Siatista, Miltiadis Strakalis, it is mentioned that the 15 captured wounded Italians were taken to Palaiokastro, where they were executed by order of EAM Siatista. With the above view, the ones mentioned in the "Resistance memorabilia 1941-44" by Markos Tsoukras (aka Botsaris), as well as those included in the unpublished diary of Giannis Papathanasiou, Infantry Major and Director of Operations of PAO, are compiled. Finally, Alexandros Rosios (Ypsilantis), the undisputed protagonist of the ambush in Vigla, does not even mention the fate of the captured wounded Italians. The fate of the commander of the Italian company Aurilio, however, is beyond dispute. Captain Aurilio was known in the area from his activities at the Italian garrison based in Neapolis, where he provocatively tormented the inhabitants of the town. Among the latter was Ypsilantis, who at that time was a teacher at the Neapolis High School. The moment Ypsilantis saw him, he said to him: "Allora, Aurilio, only mountain and mountain do not meet" and then the Italian was executed.

However, the celebrations in Siatista quickly came to an end as news broke that the Italian battalion based in Grevena was moving towards Siatista in order to liberate the captured Italian soldiers but also to destroy and loot, considering that the Siatistians were the main cause of the attack on the 10-car convoy with the known consequences.

There was a serious danger, both for Siatista and for its inhabitants, who, before the imminent catastrophe, left their homes and walked the footsteps of painful refugees on the same night.

The Little "Odyssey" of our Family

On the evening of March 4, we set off heading north carrying a few essential things in our hands. We were five siblings (4 boys and one girl), the oldest 19 and the youngest 8 years old, with our mother as our "leader" since our father, George Siapantas, a reserve lieutenant, remained in Siatista as a member of the resistance committee consisting of the following: K. Bentas N. Boravos, G. Langas, D. Tzivelis, G. Lioukas, G. Siapantas, P. Goutziamanis, C. Tzonos, G. Nerantzis and G. Goutziamanis.

Walking along rough roads with snow and severe cold, we made the route Galatini – Eratyra – Namata – Sisanio – Vlasti – Emporio – Ptolemaida. Our overnight stays, during the few days that this march lasted, usually took place in school buildings or sometimes in the houses of acquaintances and friends of the area.

The curious thing is that, while we were fleeing away from Siatista to avoid the inconvenience of the conquering Italians, in Ptolemaida we boarded a German military truck, which transported us safely to Kozani, where we were hosted for several months in the house of Yiannis Siapantas, my father's brother, who we will never forget the care and interest he showed for us. The journey of our refugees, like most of the Siatistian families, continued after a few months with our trip to Thessaloniki where we eventually remained for several years.

I come back again to Siatista, where the atmosphere was extremely tense. The EAM committee was actively communicating with all the guerrilla groups of the villages of Grevena, Ventzia and Voio, asking them for their assistance in dealing with the difficult task of defending Siatista, as it had become the objective of the Italians. The latter, as soon as they were informed of the events at the bridge of Vigla, immediately sent a force of a company on four requisitioned cars on the same day, in order to rush to the aid of their struggling colleagues in the ambush of Vigla. The cars moved in the direction of the Aliakmon river bridge, about 25km from Grevena. At first the 4-car convoy ran at speed in a close formation. After the village of Taxiarchis, entering the turns of the descent towards the river, they reduced their speed. They carefully descended the bends and soon entered one by one the ravine where the ambush of the decarchies of Agios Georgios and the neighbouring villages was staged. The head of the guerrillas, Sergeant Boukouvalas, gave the signal and immediately dense gunfire from the men of the decarchies greeted the enemy column of four requisitioned cars, which were immediately immobilized, while the Italian soldiers, in a hail of bullets jumped terrified under their cars and tried to take cover in the ditches around the road. Some shot left and right, and a few bursts of automatic fire was thrown at random. The Italian force was grounded there until, after noon, it took the arrival of the Italian Battalion to restore order. However, the

goal had already been achieved, as in Vigla the force of ten Italian cars was in the hands of the Siatistian rebels.



Figure 2 – The remnants of the Aliakmon river bridge (aka “Pasha’s bridge”).

The Battle Of Fardykambos (The “Main Course”)

After the failure of the Italian force to rescue their colleagues who had fallen into the ambush of Vigla, the Commander of the Italian battalion based in Grevena decided, in full force, to head to Siatista with the ultimate objective of liberating the Italian prisoners and destroying Siatista, since the Siatistians were allegedly mainly responsible for the catastrophic developments up until that time. The Italian battalion, having neutralized relatively easily the resistance of the guerrilla groups from the surrounding villages of the area, decided to spend the night on the hills before the Aliakmon bridge.



*Figure 3 - The road on the left leads to the fountain of Tsipoutoura and "Alki's Pit".
On the right, the top of the hill of Sykia.*

In the morning of the next day, March 5th, the Italian battalion departed from the places where it had spent the night, crossed the bridge of Aliakmon and within an hour had reached a mostly lowland area, which bore the name "Fardykambos". In this area the Italian force gathered, and after the battalion had rested, at noon, they were ready for the excursion to Siatista. Indeed, the Italians, after a rest of 2 hours, began the attack with a force of 2 companies in the early afternoon. One company headed towards the lower district of Siatista (Geraneia) following an uphill and inaccessible gorge (aka "Alki's Pit"⁶) that finally led passing through the fountain of Tsipoutoura - to the hill of Sykia, where today is the chapel of St. Theodore. A second company deployed further west followed a ravine which eventually led to the mahala of Bounos, the upper district of Siatista (Chora), leaving on the right the hill of St. Christoforos where the rebels led by reserve lieutenant Kostas Bentas were hiding. A third company remained at the battalion headquarters (Fardykambos) in full readiness to intervene, whenever and wherever the need arose. The objective of the Italians was the occupation of these two fortified sites (heights of Sykia and St. Christoforos).

⁶ In colloquial Greek this is known as "Ο Λάκκος τ'ς Αλκής".



Figure 4 - "Alki's Pit" and, in the background, Fardykambos.

The Italians, having a rich arsenal that the Siatistians did not possess, bombard the Siatistian defensive positions on the aforementioned heights and at the same time fired on the guerrillas with all kinds of weapons (rifles, machine guns, mortars, grenades, and 3 x 75 mm mounted guns). The Siatistians returned fire against the Italians with all the weapons they had, augmented by those acquired after the capture of the Italian company in the ambush of Vigla. The Greek rebels fought with heroism and self-sacrifice, because they knew well that if Siatista was captured, the result would be catastrophic.

The company of Italians that operated west, towards the hill of St. Christoforos, it appeared to be slowly achieving its goal, as the strength of the rebels defending this area began to decline. The situation on the other front of the Sykia hill also appeared to be reaching a critical point. Using a barrage of dense fire from the various weapons at their disposal, the Italians gradually approached the summit, where the defending rebels, mostly Siatistians, were putting up stiff resistance. With stubbornness and self-denial, considering that a victory of the Italians will mean the final destruction of Siatista and the annihilation of its inhabitants, they attempted a last-ditch effort to overthrow them, using all the weapons at their disposal.



Figure 5 – The ravine followed by the 2nd Italian company, with the hill of St. Christoforos as its objective

Up on the hill of Sykia, scenes of heroism and self-sacrifice took place. The Siatistians counterattacked with fury, throwing a large number of grenades at the Italians. Their deafening bang and the loud cries of the rebels panic their opponents, who retreat slowly and finally flee, "the downhill took them". Among the protagonists was distinguished the short silhouette of a daring Geraniotis⁷, John Stergiou (aka Rachaïos or "Γιάννης της φακής⁸"), who, having in his possession a significant number of grenades, hurled them against the Italians, dragging the rest of his allies to repel the opponents.

Similar scenes took place on the other front to the west, where the Siatistians, reinforced by guerrillas from neighbouring villages, seeing the Italians retreat from the neighbouring hill of Sykia, also attacked furiously and succeeded in pushing the Italians down to the site of their initial expedition.

In the critical phase of the battle, the sections of Ventzia (D. Zygouras - Palaiologos) that had positions at the base of the hill of Magoula intervened, as from the observatory above they had a good picture of the battle that was taking place in Sykia. Just before nightfall, moving from a SE direction, these divisions approached

⁷ Geraneia is a neighbourhood within the town of Siatista

⁸ A nickname that translates to "Lentil John".

the battalion command post and hit the Italian transports with heavy fire. The tied mules were startled and frightened broke their straps and scattered in the surrounding area. In the meantime, dusk began and the Italians gathered again in Fardykambos surrounded everywhere by rebel forces coming from all regions of Western Macedonia (a characteristic snapshot: the white horse of the Italian Major, broke its shackles and returned to Grevena, thus carrying the news of the ongoing battle).

From the north the forces of the Siatistians pressed forward, led by: Alexandros Rosios (aka Ypsilanti), S. Katsogiannis and D. Charisiadis (aka Karaiskakis), from the East the rebels of the area of Ventzia led by D. Zygouras (aka Palaiologos). On the south side, the forces of the villages of the area of Grevena (near the river of Aliakmon) led by V. Ganatsios (aka Chimarros), N. Theocharopoulos (aka Skotidas), Th. Venetsanopoulos and second lieutenants M. Papagiannopoulos and N. Evangelopoulos.

The last two, on the night of 5th–6th March, gathered their division, of about 25 men, on the right bank of the Aliakmon, planning to cross the river, whose water was wild and icy. Some of the men searched and found in the neighbouring area of Jankovi five mules and brought them to the place where the rest of the force was concentrated. The mules were lined up one behind the other. On both sides was tied to the harnesses a thick rope (made of hair) which the men held with one hand, while with the other they held their clothes so as not to get wet. Carefully the division passed to the opposite bank and then the men organized themselves in a location from where they could harass, with their fire, the rearguard of the Italian battalion.

Finally, from the West side were added hundreds of guerrillas from the Voio area led by officers I. Kontonasis, Milt. Porti, Kosmas Boulogianni, Birda and D. Kyratzopoulos (aka Fotinos). Although the rebels of the Voio (Tsotyli) area reached the area of Fardykambos towards the end of the first day of the battle, they had nevertheless taken drastic measures to intercept the Italian forces heading from Kastoria to reinforce the Grevena battalion, which was surrounded everywhere by the Greek divisions.

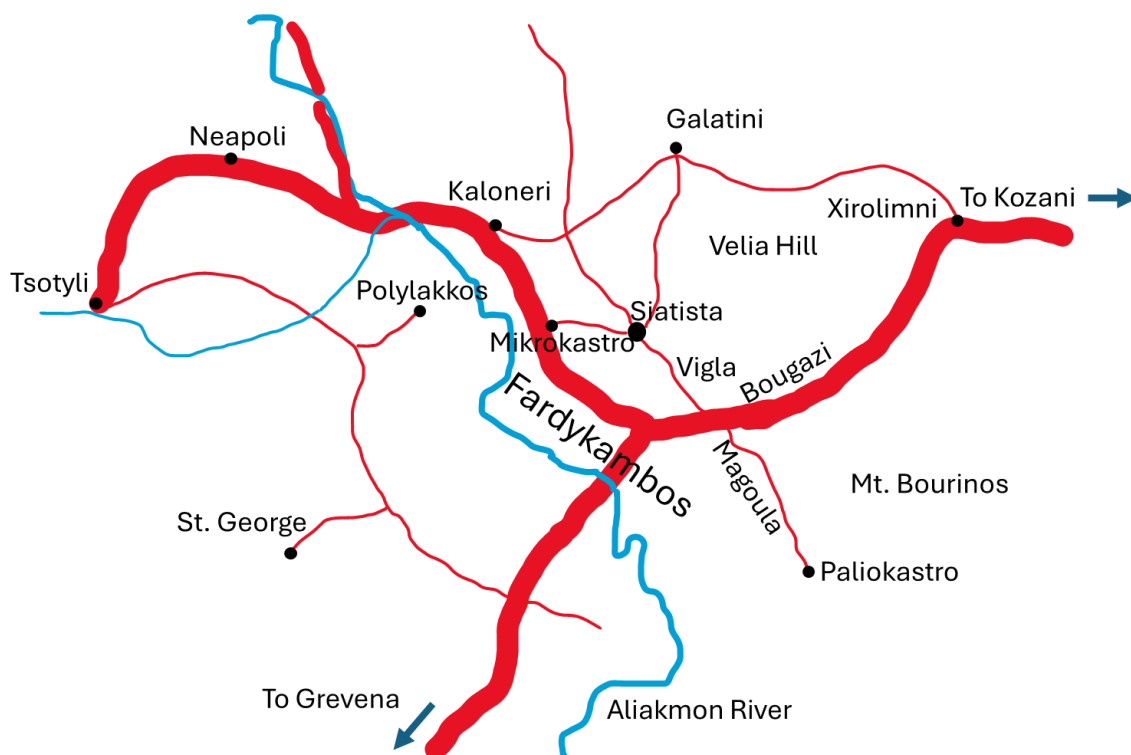


Figure 6 – Map showing the location of the dramatic events of 4th to 6th of March 1943

In this regard, Major I. Kontonasis, mentioned the following in the archives of the General Directorate of Army History: *"The various military measures, such as preventing the dispatch of reinforcements to the fighting Battalion, from Grevena and Kastoria, which caused its failure, as it was confessed by the captured Italian Major. As predicted, around noon, reinforcements were requested from the encircled Battalion by telephone, and the (Italian army) contingent leaving Grevena was forced to turn back, because the two cars in front as soon as they reached the destroyed bridge of Vatolakos came under surprise fire and one was captured, while the other returned full speed to follow the retreating (Italian army) contingent back to Grevena. The (Italian army) contingent from Kastoria, as soon as it detected in Argos Orestikon, the occupation of a strait towards Vogatsiko – Siatista, was forced to remain there, where it was found - only in a demonstrative appearance before Argos Orestikos and bombarded with artillery the positions of our divisions towards Amoudara"*.

Throughout the period of 5th and 6th of March, Italian planes appeared in the air, which on the one hand bombed the positions of the Greek guerrillas and on the other hand dropped supplies to their own forces, but without always having the expected "accuracy", since several parcels fell in the rebel areas as well. Planes also bombed Siatista, resulting in material damage and the death of a woman, Peristera Gerechte, sister of the town doctor, Takis Gerechte.

On the 5th of March the fierce and contentious battle came to an end - for the time being - with the complete victory of the Greek guerrillas against a well-organized and fully equipped Italian unit. Once again it was shown that courage and self-sacrifice can cope successfully even with the very well-organized military divisions, which did not have the great advantage of fighting for faith and country, ideals that the Italian soldiers did not have.

On the night of March 6th, a small staff was formed at the Monastery of Panagia Mikrokastrò, which was assigned the plan of the battle that was to follow. Major Kontonasis, as a senior officer, was appointed in charge, assisted by the energetic Lt. D. Kyrtzopoulos. It was decided to launch a total attack against the Italian battalion, surrounded from all sides, on the next day at 6 a.m.

This order was communicated to all the guerrilla forces with the objective of capturing the Italian battalion, which clearly appeared to be overworked, with its men facing serious problems due to lack of food and especially water. However, despite the optimistic predictions for the successful outcome of the final battle that would follow, measures were also taken in case the expected result was not achieved. Thus, all rebel forces were informed by the combat command staff of the plan they would take when it became clear that the capture of the Italian battalion was not possible.

On the morning of March 6th, the rebel attack took place. The Italians were under fire from all directions, but they were well deployed and returned the rebels' fire effectively. Of course, they were particularly worried, as they found that there was no way out of the tight noose that had been imposed on them. On the other hand, as darkness approached, the rebels realised that the capture of the Italian battalion was not going to happen immediately. They then attempted a last offensive effort that did not succeed, and afterwards the rebels, fearing that their final goal was not going to be realised, gradually began applying the alternative plan of the chief of staff by withdrawing towards the predetermined destination areas, under cover of the darkness that began to fall. The Siatistians with great hesitation also began to withdraw slowly towards Siatista, while on the eastern side there remained the guerrillas of Ventzia, whose leader D. Zygouras (aka Palaiologos) either did not receive the order to withdraw or decided to ignore it.

So, while the Greek guerrillas were disappointed in not realizing their goal of capturing the Italian battalion, the Italians were disappointed as they saw no other way out other than surrendering to the Greek guerrillas. And indeed, this is what eventually occurred, the Italian battalion surrendered.

Conditions Under Which The Surrender of the Italian Battalion Took Place

The description of the surrender of the Italians, as presented by one of the protagonists of the battle of Fardykambos, Dimitrios Zygouras (aka Palaiologos) was as follows:

“It was completely dark. Under the constant fire of our sector, which had not collapsed, and our threats to the Italians that they would be exterminated if they did not surrender... A little later along the road of Fardykambos we saw a dark mass of soldiers and at the same time we heard a voice from their side shout in Greek: ‘We will surrender! Greeks, you cease fire’..... I gave orders for the shooting to stop and I replied that they could come one by one to surrender. Then the same voice asked again in Greek if their Major could come with an interpreter to talk with us. My answer was ‘yes’.

It wasn't long before two men were walking towards us and eventually reached us. At a short distance short we could see their silhouettes as they stopped about 10 metres away. The interpreter informed us that the Major was armed with his pistol and two grenades. I ordered him to hold his pistol and put down the grenades, which he did. They then proceeded towards our position and when they reached a distance of 3-4 meters they stopped. The Italian Major, through his interpreter, the Lieutenant, immediately asked: ‘Who is your General with whom I first want to talk?’ At some point soon afterwards, while I was feeling embarrassment, one of the reserve ELAS from Siatista, Christos Manios, managed to answer the Major's question that he was the General!!

I immediately approached the Major, and after telling him that the General had been notified and would soon arrive, I suggested that we march to meet the General with the intention of moving him further away from that point which was so close to his Battalion that he could, possibly, call it for a dash against us, since it was easy to neutralize us, since we were few. We stopped behind a fence of wadding and thorns. From this point, no matter how much the Major shouted, he could not be heard by his soldiers. I told him that here he would wait for the General while at the same time I instructed the deputy leader of my group, Giorgos Mavridis from Kolokythaki-Ventzio, to keep the Italians there with the help of his men, without delivering them anywhere until I returned. To the team leader of the guerrilla group of EAM Siatista, D. Charisiadis (aka Karaiskakis), who was coming to ascertain the information circulated about the surrender of the Major and at the same time to see him, I told him that if he wanted he could present himself as the General that the Italian commander of the Battalion asked to see, especially since he was dressed in a normal uniform of a Greek Army officer and I then left immediately.

Taking with me the rest of the men of my group, I headed to the road of Fardykambos, where the Italian battalion was concentrated, took with me all the men of the reserve ELAS of the Ventzia area, and saw the assembled Italian soldiers waiting, in absolute silence, for the result of their commander's meeting with the guerrillas. But they were in no mood to react and were ready to surrender, which was done in a few minutes.”

Ypsilantis described what happened during the surrender of the Italian Battalion in his book "On the Wings of Vision", as follows:

“As soon as it got dark, most of them - as the night before - left for Siatista to eat and sleep a little to return again morning and morning. But they didn't have time to come back. We had stayed in the area near Fardykombos 27 men... The battle had stopped for an hour. Suddenly I heard a voice: ‘Italians, surrender.’ He was the guerrilla from Siatista, Christos Manios. I approached him and told him to repeat in his thunderous voice: ‘Italians, surrender.’ The Italians replied: ‘Come and pick us up.’ Then we told them to go out on the road, their administration and our administration. And lo and behold, we are now walking down the road and we really met. On the side of the Italians were the Major and two Captains, from ours Kostas Hadjizisis, Nikos Boravos and myself. One captain knew Greek. I told them to surrender. The Major replied: ‘With my weapons, because I, as a career major, cannot surrender without my weapons.’ ‘With weapons,’ I replied, ‘they fight.’ He insisted... Then, in order not to waste time, I told K. Chatzizisis, who also knew a little Italian, to continue the discussion in the same pattern. I took with me Elias Dilaveris with his submachine gun and another, whose name I do not remember, and we went towards the Italian soldiers. When we got closer, we saw a dark mass - the Italian soldiers were ready to surrender. I shouted at them in Italian: ‘Soldati Italiani, finito la guerra’ (Italian soldiers, the war is over). The Italian soldiers responded with shouts of joy. I sent and they called six of our own, they came and stood three on one side and three on the other, and the Italian soldiers, passing between them, surrendered their weapons (guns and grenades).”

In the "Resistance Memorabilia 1941-43", Markos Tsioukras (aka Botsaris), a heroic fighter during the battle of March 5th, when the Italians immediately threatened the occupation of Siatista, mentions that the surrender of the Italian soldiers was implemented by D. Charisiadis (aka Karaiskakis) with the help of K. Chatzizisis, second lieutenant, who had some knowledge of Italian, and thus the process of the surrender of the Italian battalion was achieved.

A pure fighter from Asia Minor was Geraniotis Kitsios Manios. In the surrender phase of the Italian battalion, he claimed that this was entirely his own achievement. Although this version is not so convincing, his personal involvement in the whole process of carrying out the captivity of the Italian battalion cannot be overlooked.

Finally, there is another version according to which the surrender of the Italian battalion was made to Lieutenant N. Papagiannopoulos, who even accepted in his hands the pistol of the Italian Major, and later handed it to his son, Nikolaos, who was kind enough to allow us to photograph it for our work.

However, this story about the authorship of the surrender of the Italian battalion by the Commander Major is reminiscent of the well-known saying: "Victory has many fathers, defeat is an orphan".

At night, the captured Italians were taken to Siatista, where the soldiers stayed overnight in the building that formerly housed the Municipal Library (next to the

church of St Dimitrios) and the officers stayed in a hall of the Trapantzion High School.

Account of the battle of Fardykambos

Casualties and spoils of the battle are summarised in the tables below:

	Greeks	Italians
Dead	3	10
Wounded	15	55
Prisoners		603

Table 1 - Account of the battle of Fardykambos – Casualties

Rifles	600	Shells	300
Pistols	30	Vehicles	3
Mortars	7	Mules	62
Machine Guns	12 Heavy & 40 Sub	Horses (chargers)	3
Mounted Guns	3 x 75mm	Ammunition	unlimited

Table 2 - Account of the battle at Fardykambos - Spoils

After The Battle

The 7th of March dawned in Siatista finding its inhabitants proud and happy for the great success against the conquering Italians, but also with a feeling of anxiety and fear about what was to come, as rumors circulated that the Italian Penarolo division began mobilizing from Thessaly and was headed towards Western Macedonia in order to carry out reprisals and the release of the captured Italians in the two battles that had preceded (ambush at Vigla and battle at Fardykbambos).

However, on the same day the captured Italians were already being transferred from Siatista and were heading towards Pentalofos (Ziupani), where they arrived in the afternoon accompanied by a sufficient force of guerrillas. As the victors escorted the prisoners to Pentalofos, they chanted “*all six hundred and three were caught at once so drag yourselves to Ziupani to see them!*”

The Fate of the Captured Italians

The Italian prisoners, officers and soldiers, did not stay for many days in Pentalofos because of the news that the Italian Penarolo armoured division was heading towards Western Macedonia. For security reasons, therefore, all prisoners were taken to the area of Samarina where they settled permanently in conditions that were anything but pleasant or even satisfactory.

The journalist Stavros Theodosiadis, who wrote a very remarkable book entitled "Pindos speaks - The National Resistance (41-44)", writes about the situation of the captured Italians: *"I met them for the third time in Samarina with Metropolitan Joachim as captives, living a miserable life. Most of the soldiers were dressed, their officers were well-dressed, they lived on the little food provided by EAM's logistics and on the charity of the Samarinioti. They literally vegetated. They roamed free like a herd of animals in the forests searching for grasses, frogs, lizards and turtles. Many of them, those who were farmers, were sent to various villages where they cultivated the vines and fields, fed by the owners. We persistently tried to find out from their officers, especially from their Major, why they surrendered, a whole battalion and fully armed, to some rebels and dozens of irregulars in the battle of Fardykbambos. They did not want to tell us much, almost nothing clear about this historic accident, if it is possible to describe this national disgrace as an accident. From our interview we realized the following: Most of them were not willing to take risks, throwing themselves into a battle with people, the Siatistians, who, on the contrary, despite what the Romanian-Vlach Legionnaires had told them, emerged from their humble homes and the narrow streets of lower Siatista like wild bees that perceived the dangers to their hive. Then, seeing everywhere in the vicinity of fire and mobs at night, they (the Italians) formed the belief that they were surrounded by a great force. The third reason was hunger and thirst, because their food was exhausted, they could not get water from Aliakmon because it was also from the other side of the river. The fourth reason is the disharmony of relations between soldiers and officers. The "fascists" were only willing to attack. Those who were not*

"fascists" had no appetite to be torn apart by the "wild bees" of Siatista who saw them armed with pickaxes and pitchforks from the vineyards."

Finally, we could add another reason that contributed to the serious drop in morale of the Italian soldiers, as in the great battles that preceded it (Stalingrad and El Alamein) the Italians suffered thousands of casualties, dead and captured, while in the meantime there was an imminent danger of the landing of the Anglo-Americans on the coast of Sicily, which would inevitably lead to the enslavement of their country.

For all these reasons, the Italian soldiers who fought in the ambush of Vigla and the battle of Fardykambos were unable to successfully confront the irregular, but passionate Greek guerrilla forces.

The Role of the Italian-Speaking Professor Ag. Tsompanaki (in the days following the Battle of Fardykambos)

Agapitos Tsompanakis, a philologist professor and Dodecanese by origin, at the time of the battle of Fardykambos was seconded to the High School of Siatista from October 1941.

The Dodecanese, for many years, were occupied by the Italians and on April 26, 1925, in the London Agreement between the states of the Triple Entente (England – France – Russia) on the one hand and Italy on the other, Italy was officially given full ownership of the Dodecanese.

Having Italian citizenship and having excellent knowledge of the language, having been trained in Pisa for two years and obtaining the title of doctorate, Agapitos Tsompanakis proved very useful in all talks and negotiations with the Italian prisoners.

Typical is the conversation between the commander of the captured battalion Perroni Pasconelli and the Chief of Staff of the Italian division (Penarolo) based in Larissa:

"On the other end of the telephone line, after 'Pronto, chi parla?' ('Go ahead, who speaks?'), it was not the General but the Chief of Staff of the division who was puzzled to hear the Major give his name and mention that he was calling him from Siatista. "Well and how did you get there?" the Chief of Staff asks him in amazement. The Major hesitantly and awkwardly replies: "Sono con loro" ("I am with them"). "Con chi con loro?" ("Who are you with?"), insists the Chief of Staff. The Major is dazed, he doesn't know what to answer, he looks at me with embarrassment. I tell him to say "with the rebels" and he says so. The question this time comes from the side of the Chief of Staff who asks him: "Sotto quali condizioni stai con loro?" ("Under what circumstances are you with them?"). The embarrassed and anxious Major hesitated his answer. I then advised him to say that he is their prisoner, and he hardly says so. A few seconds of icy silence passed, until the tough question came from the other end of the line: "Now what do you want from me?" The Major was paralyzed and could not utter a word. Then I told him to state to him the

two demands of the rebels. To the first request, not to bomb Siatista again, otherwise serious reprisals against the prisoners would follow, the Chief of Staff replied in the same icy tone "Ognuno faccia il conto suo" ("Let everyone do his own account") and to the second request, concerning the exchange of prisoners with communist prisoners in prisons, his answer was: "Questi sono problemi che riguardano gli strati superiori" ("These are problems that must be dealt with by higher echelons").

Meanwhile, consultations between rebel leaders continued in a heated tone inside a high school classroom. Outside this room the Italian officers waited patiently with their Commander. Because there was a lot of noise in the room and the voices could be heard outside, Tsompanakis, sad about the image given to the ranking Italian prisoners, took the courage and knocked on the door and then entered the room where the Guerrilla Committee was "meeting" and said to them: "Comrades, excuse me for interrupting you, but I want to tell you that your conversation is clearly heard outside and it is possible that one of the Italian officers knows Greek". "The answer I got," says Tsompanakis, "was harsh and laconic: Do your job, teacher, and shut the door. This, however, is what I did, leaving Siatista in the following days (like the majority of its inhabitants) and followed the well-known route of the refugee (Eratyra – Vlasti – Ptolemaida – Kozani – Thessaloniki)".

Professor Ag. Tsompanakis later served as President of the Academy of Athens.

"Were Their Heads Filled With Overconfidence?"

After the great success of the rebels in the ambush of Vigla and in the battle of Fardykambos, the idea of facing the Italian Penarolo division that was heading towards the region of Siatista came to mind, after having completely destroyed the town of Servia, because the guerrillas of the area had the "audacity" to face, without success, the Italians in the straits of Porta.

The rebels chose as a suitable location the strait between the heights of Velia and Burinou (Bugazi), which offered the potential for an ambush, and entrusted the leadership of this daring venture to Major Mantzios.

The latter visited the area for reconnaissance and having information about the Italian force heading towards Kozani - Siatista, considered that it was not possible to deal with an entire division given the strength and means available to the rebels. Major Mantzios decided to renounce the mission assigned to him and fled to Kozani. Consequently, a few days later, Major Mantzios was executed by the rebels as a traitor.

Thus, this extremely ambitious plan, which in retrospect seemed not feasible and which would probably end in the final destruction of Siatista, was not realized. This is because this time the Italians were very well prepared. While the bulk of the Italian forces followed the well-known route Kozani - Xirolimni - Bougazi - Siatista, two other divisions, each with a reinforced company force, followed, one the route Xirolimni - Skiti - Galatini - Siatista - Bara and the other the route Kozani - Aiani - Palaiokastro -

Bara. So the rebel forces would have no chance this time and Siatista thus escaped certain destruction.

In the meantime, the Italian soldiers of the Penarolo division, after burning Servia in retaliation for the resistance put forward by the rebels of the area, continued their march, reached Kozani and then passed through Siatista without harming it, because they cared about the fate of their captured compatriots. Subsequently, they proceeded to Neapolis, fighting small battles with the retreating rebels and then headed to Grevena from where, after receiving the rest of the Italian garrison - and their Romanian-Vlach "allies" - they returned to their base, Larissa.

From then on, a large part of Western Macedonia gained its freedom and lived without the direct pressure of the conquerors.

The Pistol of the Italian Major

Ypsilantis mentions in his book "On the wings of vision" that he took the pistol from the Commander of the Italian battalion and later, when he acquired a German "parabelum", he gave it to someone else who does not name him.

Mitsos Zygouras (aka Palaiologos) reports that the pistol was left to be taken by George Mavridis, responsible for guarding the Italian Major, while he kept the briefcase with the maps and the Major's harness.

Eventually, the pistol, possibly after changing owners, was found in the hands of Lt. M. Papagiannopoulos and today it is in the possession of his son, N. Papagiannopoulos, a Lieutenant and maxillofacial surgeon who also served (at the time of writing) as deputy mayor of the Municipality of Thessaloniki.



Figure 7 - The pistol of the Italian Major with the holster.

A Serious Omission

When the storm of the civil war subsided, the Chief of General Staff V. Dromazos, at the suggestion of Major I. Kontonasis, made the following proposal:

"For the following reserve army officers who took part in the battle of Fardykambos on 3-7 March 1943:

<i>2nd Lieutenant</i>	<i>J. Atzaris</i>
<i>2nd Lieutenant</i>	<i>N. Evangelopoulos</i>
<i>Captain</i>	<i>A. Dafnis</i>
<i>1st Lieutenant</i>	<i>C. Kalogeropoulos</i>
<i>Warrant Officer</i>	<i>T. Birdas</i>
<i>2nd Lieutenant</i>	<i>B. Papadopoulos</i>
<i>2nd Lieutenant</i>	<i>M. Papagiannopoulos</i>
<i>Major</i>	<i>M. Portis</i>
<i>1st Lieutenant</i>	<i>S. Portis</i>
<i>2nd Lieutenant</i>	<i>T. Sidiropoulos</i>
<i>Lieutenant</i>	<i>K. Tsourelas</i>

I propose a War Cross of the Third Class because they distinguished themselves in the fight against the conquerors and especially during the battles of Siatista, when the capture of an entire Italian battalion with its guns was achieved, after a hard struggle. They demonstrated excellent administrative and fighting ability, a wonderful spirit of self-sacrifice and, fighting with indestructible heroism, they addressed the enemy's serious losses and finally achieved its complete destruction, thus contributing to the creation of the most beautiful national Greek epic during the occupation."

However, the names of many other reserve officers, most of whom played a leading role in the fierce clashes with the Italians and were the main contributors to the great final victory, were omitted. Only in Siatista there was a significant number of officers (around 15) of whom 5-6 had direct participation in the difficult conflicts with the Italians, while another 10 had formed the so-called struggle committee that offered various and important services to the fighting sections against the Italian occupiers. Apart from the Siatistans, there were several important other officers, who came both from the area of Ventzia (D. Zygouras - Palaiologos) and from the area of the villages of Grevena (V. Ganatsios - Chimarros, N. Theocharopoulos - Skotidas, D. Kyratzopoulos - Fotinos and others).

Unfortunately, the proposal to award the War Cross Third Class concerned, almost exclusively, the officers of a single specific region (Voio) and also of a single specific political position.

A way must be found, albeit belatedly, to attribute this honorary distinction to the other officers who took part in this great success of the National Resistance against the occupying Italians.

The Battle of Fardykambos in the Greek Parliament

In July 1946, the Member of Parliament of the Grevena region, A. Ladas, brought to the attention of the Parliament the great achievement of the capture of the Italian battalion at Fardykambos, Siatista, by the guerrillas of Western Macedonia, as well as the previous ambush of the column of 10 Italian cars at Vigla, Siatista, with the same successful result.

Unfortunately, his whole speech had a biased connotation, praising the work of Kontonasis, Portis, Boulogiannis etc. and completely and unjustly ignoring the combatants who came from different areas of Voio and who mostly belonged to another political faction while on the other hand they had the most active participation in the overall victorious campaign.

The audience of MPs, however, was impressed by the great success of the Greek guerrillas against the Italian conquerors and asked for this event to receive wider publicity both in Greece and abroad.

The History of the Construction of the Monument of Fardykambos

The Monument of Fardykambos was first erected by the Municipality of Siatista in 1964, at the junction of Grevena, near the site where the historic battle took place and on the marble slab the following was written:

"With a lion-hearted cry and with hands rather than weapons the Siatistians and residents of rural communities, captured a full battalion of Italian occupiers after a firefight on 5-3-1943".

The unveiling of the Monument took place on the 4th of November 1964, which coincided with the 52nd anniversary of the final liberation of the town from the Ottoman Empire was celebrated in Siatista, where in a similar vein the Turks were finally defeated by the Greek troops assisted by the inhabitants of Siatista. The unveiling of the Monument was made by the then Minister of Northern Greece, Konstantinos Taliadouris, and the Siatistian Mayor, Miltiadis Strakalis, who spoke about the history of the battle.

In 1972 the first plate was replaced by another on which the following was written:

"To those who struggled and in the morning fell for the Fatherland, fighters of the National Resistance during the battle in Fardykabos, Siatistians against the occupying troops in 1943".



Figure 8 – The monument of Fardykambos

On 4-8-1979 unidentified persons destroyed the marble cladding and on 5-3-1982, the rest of the monument was destroyed, again by unknown persons. On 9-5-1983 PEAEA (Panhellenic Union of National Resistance Fighters) placed a marble plaque in the area "Aga Tsousme", which is near the junction of Grevena, with the inscription:

"Honor to the fighters of EAM-ELAS of the battle of Fardykambos".

On 21-2-1989 the Municipality of Siatista announced a Panhellenic competition among Greek artists for the creation, construction and installation of a Monument dedicated to the battle of Fardykambos in 1943. The Monument was erected in 1992 in the "Aga Tsousme" area, where it still stands today. Its cost amounted to 4,000,000 drachmas. The unveiling of this imposing monument took place on April 27, 1992 by the then Mayor of Siatista, Yiannis Nakos, on the occasion of the 49th anniversary of the historic battle of Vigla - Fardykambos.

Judgments and Opinions

"The historical significance of this battle goes beyond the local contexts of the region. With the help of the entire population, hundreds of armed fighters came from all directions to strengthen the defences of Siatista and prevent the Italian battalion from invading and destroying it."

Vassos Georgios (HISTORY OF RESISTANCE 1940-45)

"This astonishing event, from a purely military point of view, saved Siatista from certain destruction, further strengthened the national and patriotic morale of the population of the whole of Northern Greece and raised the idea of National Resistance to unimaginable degrees, and this act of war also made a very remarkable contribution to the Allied struggle in general."

Charalambos F. Kallinikidis (HELLENIC NATIONAL RESISTANCE)

"In Siatista, the popular mobilization reaches its peak. The organizations called for alarm among the entire people. The entire population and all the actors of Siatista took part in this mobilization.

On the front line of the battle appear women, elderly men and children with axes, clubs, knives, grenades, determined not to let the enemy step on the city.

All this popular torrent, armed and unarmed, at some point erupts into a fierce counterattack with all the means at their disposal, thus halting the advance of the Italians, pinning them down and finally forcing them to flee."

Drosos Zacharias (FARDYKAMBOS)

"The success of the capture of the entire Italian battalion of Grevena in Fardykambos is due, primarily, to the universal participation of the inhabitants of Siatista who fought for their homeland, regardless of their ideological affiliation, and to the joint decisive contribution of the other resistance organizations and volunteer Greek patriots, "Nationalists" and "EAMites", of the provinces of Voio and Grevena".

Christos Vitos, Deputy Chief of Staff (Grevena under occupation and in the guerrilla war)

"Thanks to the heroism of the Siatistians, a unique outcome in the history of the occupation in Greece was achieved: to capture prisoners in a battalion with all their weapons.

They contributed sufficiently both to the morale of the Siatistians fighting in the front line and to the arrival of reinforcements from the Province, as well as to the awe of the enemy, who found that they were encircled, especially from the direction of the Ventzia area, in which the movement was made without any precaution.

During this critical period for Siatista, all her children performed their duty with unprecedented heroism and self-denial. One exaggerated the other in voluntary

sacrifice, and no one can claim that this glorious result was the fruit of a person's leadership or other action."

Syrakalis Miltiadis - Mayor of Siatista (FIFTY YEARS OF FREEDOM)

"The astonishing results of the historic battle of Fardykambos were undoubtedly the result of the common fighting effort of all resistance forces (cadres and fighters) with the greatest and decisive contribution being that of the Siatistians.

The boldness, combativeness and heroism of the Siatistian resistance groups on the heights of Tsioukas and Rachi Sykia, forced with their bravery two Italian companies that were moving in order to invade Siatista, to retreat and return to their base in Fardykambos".

Nikolaos K. Deligiannis, Deputy Commander (Battle of Fardykambos)

"The Siatistians had in time occupied timely positions on the heights and waited for the enemy. A very fierce battle ensued and the enemy, thanks to the heroism of the fighters of Siatista, led by: Ypsilanti, Katsogiannis, Karaiskakis, Barbalia, Benta, Dilaveri, Venetsanopoulos and others, was repulsed with heavy losses. All of Siatista is on the side of the warriors, encouraging them, helping them. This is purely a war of the people in favour of altars and hearths.

It was a war not only of the rebels but of the whole people, it was a war of the people in which all the Siatistians, the entire population of the countryside of Grevena, all the inhabitants of Voio, Ventzia and the villages around Siatista were mobilized.

Siatista bore the brunt of the battle."

Vasilis Ganatsios - Torrent (A MASTER CAPTAIN)

"He really deserves every praise to the departments and officers of Siatista who showed not only heroism and fortitude but also self-sacrifice.

Excellent was the help given by Major Kontonasis, as a direct key partner in directing and conducting the battle with advice, opinions and actions.

Fardykambos is the pinnacle of the National Resistance, it is the most classic and graphic national-popular armed uprising for independence, freedom and democracy in the modern history of Greece.

The victory achieved at Fardykambos was a nationwide, popular victory, in front of which Gorgopotamos is overshadowed and remains far behind, which was nothing but sabotage, while Fardykambos was a battle and a partisan victory, a three-day battle in an open field, with unequal terms and under difficult conditions for the fighters, the officers and for the command of the battle, for leaders.

The main feature of Fardykambos was a battle with the direct participation of the people."

D. Kyrtzopoulos - Fotinos / W. Macedonia - THE FREE GREECE OF THE OCCUPATION

"The great victory in Fardykambos is due to the will of the heroic inhabitants of Siatisti to defend themselves for the safety of their homes, their property and those of their families.

Eager and unyielding in willpower, they placed themselves under the command of the local officers.

All of them, officers and soldiers of Siatista, were the heroic warriors of the IX Division of Kozani during the Greco-Italian war in Albania.

They faced the attacking Italians with bravery and self-sacrifice, in the belief that they were doing the highest service to their homeland in general, and that is why they won."

G. Papathanasiou - Infantry Battalion (SOLDIERS OF FREEDOM)

"The battle of Fardykambos was an angry and enthusiastic popular uprising, a national patriotic uplift of our enslaved people.

It is the first battle of our national liberation struggle, not only for its brilliant results and the time it took place, but also for the forms of tactics in its conduct, a form of popular (people's) war. That is why it had a great impact throughout Greece, but it was also trumpeted by foreign radio stations.

The great lesson from the historic battle and glorious victory of Fardykambos is that the people of Western Europe are not in the midst of it. Macedonia fought united and driven by hatred against the conquerors, pure patriotism and love for freedom. And they won."

Alexis Rosios - Ypsilantis (ON THE WINGS OF VISION)

"The heroic Siatista, which gives birth not only to heroes but also to eminent intellectuals, had to be saved at all costs.

The ensuing struggle was indeed cruel and unequal, and yet this small Greek force, almost unarmed, without any moral or material assistance and with only the pure national pulse and mental fortitude, successfully faced powerful enemies completely equipped with heavy weapons and reinforced with plenty of artillery and aviation.

The Greeks fought with heroism, their bravery and wonderful spirit of self-sacrifice amazed and exhausted the enemy, who after two days of hard struggle and after many losses succumbed and surrendered."

Ioannis Kontonasis – Major, Infantry Division

"This is really a mass uprising. There are over 2000 armed men and many unarmed, who nevertheless enter the battle as anyone can: throwing stones and uttering

terrible war cries that impress the enemy. And women are present, numerous. They go back and forth among the various rebel groups, carrying ammunition, water and bread on their shoulders. The villagers seem to have come out of the very land they are defending. In the forte of battle, they flock from the four points of the horizon, and from the most remote areas. The hills around Fardykambos have been blackened by the people. Strange battle, indeed, and strange sight."

Andre Kedros (La Resistance Grecque)

"There is in the European history of WW2 an event not only unique (and highly original from a war point of view), but also full of glory and recognition in itself. It is the historic captivity of a complete and heavily armed Italian battalion of the occupying army of Greece within the occupied territory of our country. The "occupiers" were captured by the "occupied". And this happened in March 1943 in the glorious Fardykambos, near Siatista.

Not only is this unprecedented event not written in the Guinness Book of World Records, but European historical memory has not recorded it, and it is in danger of being erased from the Greek one!!

Dosas Gerasimos - Acrobat (NEWSPAPER "AGGELIOFOROS")

An Unsuccessful Attempt

In order to obtain a more thorough and complete description of the battles at Vigla and Fardykambos, I made an effort to obtain information from the Italian side as well.

However, despite my efforts with written applications first to the Italian Consulate in Thessaloniki and then directly to the History Directorate of the General Army Staff in Rome, I received no reply.

However, the attitude of the Italian authorities is reasonable and understandable, as it is not pleasant to stir up stories that are, obviously, unpleasant for them.

Equally disappointing were my actions on the German side (Consulate of Thessaloniki and General Army Administration of Southeast Europe). The only relevant publication I found referred to a (German) report published in Vassos Mathiopoulos' book, "The Greek Resistance (1941-1944) and the Allies": *"In the area of the German Military Command of Thessaloniki - Aegean from December 1942 until now (April 1943) there were thirty attacks by armed units that carried out sabotage and raids to supply them. Attacks against Italian soldiers, as well as entire units, are increasing daily. The pinnacle of the partisan attacks was the raid on Siatista in the Prefecture of Kozani, on March 4, 1943, where an entire Italian unit, consisting of five hundred men with its artillery, was captured. These attacks help armed bandits mainly to enrich themselves with weapons and refuel."* (The Germans were quite noble and discreet as to the size of the volume of Italian prisoners).

Epilogue

The greatest achievement of the National Resistance against the conquerors was, without doubt, the victorious battles of the Greek guerrillas at Vigla and Fardykambos.

They were great successes that came from the popular uprising of the inhabitants of the whole region, regardless of political affiliations, and this last was admitted by all the protagonists in these war confrontations with the Italian conquerors.

Therefore, this feat should be considered by far the greatest resistance achievement, even more brilliant than Gorgopotamos⁹, and its anniversary should be celebrated annually, by all, with solemnity, in the place where this remarkable victorious confrontation with the conquering Italians took place.

Unfortunately, however, the well-known canker of division that led to the civil war, with the disastrous results that we are all well aware of, has put this great achievement of the rebellious people of Western Europe in second place. Macedonia and it has reached the point where many people know nothing about it today.

The humble ambition of this work is for the old to recall those unforgettable heroic days, while the young people should consider that it was their fathers and grandfathers who projected their breasts to the conquering Italians and managed to keep our beloved Siatista intact and free.

⁹ The Battle of Gorgopotamos, also known as Operation Harling, was a World War II mission by the British Special Operations Executive (SOE), in cooperation with the Greek Resistance groups EDES and ELAS, which destroyed the heavily guarded Gorgopotamos viaduct in Central Greece on 25 November 1942. (source: Wikipedia, accessed 4th June 2024)

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