

## **The Macedonian Struggle**

Macedonia is the heart of the Balkan Peninsula, a fact that gives it an a priori prominent geostrategic and political significance. In the depths of time, it was the site where national counterbalancing movements collided, while during the period of the Macedonian Struggle it was a large venue of the defensive struggles of the Hellenic Nation in this area.

The beginning of the Macedonian Struggle marked 1870 with the creation of the Bulgarian Exarchates and by 1897 it was characterized mainly by intense propagandistic action. The Struggle took on the mantle of the armed clashes of Greeks against the Bulgarians, as well as with the Turks, during the period 1904-1908, while during the years that followed it took on other forms –excluding armed clashes- that were mainly at the political and diplomatic levels.

Initially, the Bulgarians –with the pretext of Turkish misgovernment and the inaccurate and insincere application of the reforms, as they were adopted at the beginning of 1903 with the “Vienna Reform Plan”- staged the Ili-Den uprising on 20th July 1903 in order to provoke reprisals from the Muslim population against the Christians and the Turkish Administration against the Greek inhabitants. In contrast, the moderation that characterized the actions of the official Hellenic State –at least until 1903- acted against the tried and tested Greeks of Macedonia, and its inability to reinforce and to protect the Macedonian Greeks was initially covered by private initiative. In 1903 the first armed guerilla group was formed by liberated Greece, commanded by 2nd Artillery Lieutenant Georgios (Varda) Tsonetos, in order to reinforce the organisation of the Metropolitan of Kastoria, Germanos Karavangeli, who was one of the first to take action, together with Iona Dragoumi at the Vilaeti Monastery and the General Consul in Vilaeti, Thessaloniki.

However, from the beginning of 1904 the Hellenic Government decided to abandon its moderate stand and apply a more realistic policy, in conjunction with the multifaceted contribution of the Army for the better organisation and preparation for the armed struggle. In fact, on the night of 27th/28th August 1904 a group led by 2nd Artillery Lieutenant Pavlo Mela, crossed the Greco-Turkish border, signaling with this action the intervention of the Hellenic State into the Macedonian problem. The event that constituted the last drop that spilt over the glass of national arousal and national apprehension and the Macedonian Matter became a matter of the Nation as a whole as it no longer concerned just a section of Hellenism, was the death of Pavlo Mela on 13th October.

Within a short period of time guerilla groups were formed from different parts of Greece, led by officers or chieftains, and thus the struggle was extended to Central and Eastern Macedonia, thanks mainly to the qualities of the General Consul in Thessaloniki, Lambros Koromila. The remaining Macedonian regions followed the example of Western Macedonia and officers were installed as heads of the guerilla groups, while centres were set up along the Greco-Turkish border for the purpose of promoting groups and weapons to Macedonia. The units of Captain Moraitis, 1st Lieutenant Mazarakis and Lieutenant (Gend) Spyromilios advanced by sea, mainly to Central and Eastern Macedonia. The Consulate in Thessaloniki extended its organisation with the creation of centres for the struggle in other cities in

Central Macedonia, such as in Stromnitsa, Giannitsa, Gevgeli and around Giannitsa Lake, where in May 1905 the group of 2nd Lieutenant Boukouvala undertook to clear the region.

At the same time, the armed struggle in the countryside was accompanied by the organisation of the urban Hellenic population, with Thessaloniki comprising the first example of a systematically organised city, the labors of 2nd Lieutenant Athanasios Soulioti-Nikolaidis, who succeeded in wiping out the Bulgarian activities and boosting the morale of the population.

At the beginning of 1906 and despite the unpleasant situation that had been created by the bipolar character that the struggle took on, mainly in Western Macedonia, centred in the Hellenic Consulate in Monastiri and the Macedonian revolutionary Committee in Athens, and the exceptionally adverse winter conditions, the actions of the Hellenic groups continued unceasingly, with the clearing out of the regions of Olympos, Langada and Halkidiki, and thus reinforcing the Hellenic positions in the process.

During 1907 the struggle continued with unflagging intensity throughout Macedonia. The Hellenic groups were further reinforced with the deployment of new units and extending their action zones up to Perlepe. The pursuit of the Bulgarian gangs was also accompanied by the successful dealing of the assaults by the Turkish Detachments. In Central Macedonia, the death of 2nd Lieutenant Agapinos Tellos, or Agras, filled the Macedonian Greeks with indignation and subsequent faith to continue the struggle. In Eastern Macedonia the activities of the Hellenic groups were reduced significantly, but without being suspended. This was due to the strong actions of the Bulgarian gangs, to the hostile stance of the Turkish Authorities and to the biased positions of the French and British officers against the Greeks. In Thrace in 1907 the Hellenic Government assigned the organisation of the Greek Thracian population to 1st Lieutenants Stylianos Gonata and Vlasi Perikli, so that they would be able to cope with both the Bulgarian propaganda as well as with the actions of the armed Bulgarian gangs.

In 1908 new Hellenic and Bulgarian groups entered the struggle, which managed to stabilise themselves almost throughout the Macedonian region. The promises however of the movement of the New Turks that were expressed in July 1908 brought an end to the age-long and exhausting Macedonian Struggle that was also so successful for the Greeks Armed Forces, and thus ending practically the actions of the armed groups. Despite this, the danger of disorganizing the complete organisation because of the obvious anti-Greek stance of the New Turks, led the Government to the formation of the "Pan-Hellenic Organisation" under Panagiotis Danglis, in order to maintain and to reinforce most of the Greek footholds in areas of Macedonia that were voluntarily fluid and to preserve the enslaved Greeks at a level of permanent vigilance.

The Macedonian Struggle theoretically ended with the disbandment of the "Pan-Hellenic Organisation" in August 1909, which –despite sacrifices in blood and money- proved to be priceless for Hellenism. The members of the Hellenic Army showed leadership and organisational skills and at the same time acquired experiences and knowledge of the Macedonian region, which would later be "cashed in" during the victorious Balkan Wars. At

the same time, they recovered the respect and trust of the Greek people and raised the military morale that had been lost in the unfortunate war of 1897.