

1915 - 1918.

ORGANISATION OF THE HELLENIC ARMY AND PARTICIPATION IN THE OPERATIONS

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During the period from 1912 to 1922, with the exception of only the year 1914, Greece had been at war. This resulted in that the national memory is identified with the whole period and not separately with each single confrontation. This does not mean, however, that the First World War is absent as a separate event from the national memory of the Greeks, but that it is included as a part of a period beginning in 1912, culminating with the Treaty of Sevres and ending up with the Asia Minor Catastrophe.

At the end of the victorious Balkan Wars, Greece had almost doubled its surface and population. In November 1913, demobilisation began, followed by a short peacetime, during which the state focused on the enormous work of reconstruction, reorganisation and development.

Let us examine more analytically the way that these were implemented.

In late 1913, legislation passed for the provisional organisation of the Army, pending its permanent organisation; the Army included units of all arms and corps with dense composition and enhanced manning.

These measures really augmented the strength of the Army and set the foundations for a better organisation, training and, in general, enhancement of the combat power of the troops.

Thus, in 1914, were established the Royal Guard, the Commands of the Forts of Thessalonica, Ioannina and Kavala and eight Ordnance Depots. Moreover, the different Corps of Military Intendancy, Transports, Cartographers, Military Pharmacists, etc, were established; while the Army Staff Service was reorganised. Law Nr 357 of that year "on Military Servants" provided for the recruitment of civilians, who were to perform different tasks in the Army, such as military justice counsellors and registrars, military engineers and technicians, cartographers, archive keepers, clerks, military foremen, etc.

The period of normality, nevertheless, ended very soon because of the First World War and the general mobilisation of 10 September 1915, which, however, was terminated a few months later. The political change in 1917 and the official proclamation by the recognised Hellenic State of its participation in the Great War on the side of the Entente were followed on 6 August 1917 by a partial mobilisation of the Units, which was completed in February 1918.

However, the reorganisation had not been completed. Since November 1917, significant changes were made in the Ministry of the Army; new Directorates and Services were established, which were autonomous and directly subordinate to the Ministry of the Army, such as: the Military Justice Directorate; the Horse Care Division, later renamed as the Veterinarian Service; the Gendarmerie Command; the Chemistry Service; the Army Air Corps; the Military Chaplains Service; and finally the Transport and Vehicles Division.

It should, though, be added that the term of «preparation» essentially meant the long-term procedures of political willingness, financial action and military organisational, tactical and operational reshuffling. In particular, the objectives of the preparatory procedure had been the actions ordered for the organisation, the structure and the composition of the Army; for the means and equipment that it utilised; for the training of the personnel; for the fortification of various positions; and also for other functions, such as feeding, clothing, personnel welfare, etc.

We could focus in brief on some out of these opaque series of actions, launched immediately after the Balkan Wars and directly linked to this exceptionally lengthy and expensive phase of the preparation for war.

During the general mobilisation in 1917, the entire Army was equipped with Mannlicher-Schoenauer rifles, along with a significant series of special rifles for launching grenades. The Artillery was reinforced by approximately 30% with field and pack-guns; while the number of guns per Infantry battalion increased by 400%.

The sector of fortification also became part of the preparatory procedure. The extensive deployment of the Army, the lengthy borderlines and the poor transportation networks persuaded the Army Staff Service, after the end of the Balkan Wars, on the need to fortify some vulnerable positions along the Hellenic-Bulgarian frontier in Eastern Macedonia, where the menace was more imminent in those days.

Thus, it was decided to fortify the main passes along the borderline of the country and the region of Kavala, as a second defence line in the interior.

In total, seven forts were constructed between the rivers Strymon and Nestos; one east of the lake Doiran; together with those around of Kavala, to secure the city and the bay of Eleutherai.

Military training during this period, because of the war, the repeated mobilisations and the campaigns of the Hellenic Army, was limited.

The French Military Mission, which was invited in 1911, continued working even after the Balkan Wars. However, it left Greece in August 1914, when mobilisation was proclaimed in France.

Since mid-1917, there had been intensive training for the divisions mobilised during that period, applying modern methods, in particular in the camp of Philadelphia in Macedonia, and the results were satisfactory.

In essence, the most important military schools that kept functioning during that period, were: the Military Academy (Evelpidon); the application schools of Infantry, Artillery and Engineers; and in January 1917, the Cavalry Application School; while training of Aviators and certain staff officers continued in schools abroad.

Finally during that same period, many military regulations were published and a specific account was included in the annual budget of the Ministry of the Army for the issue of two reviews, one for the officers and one for the soldiers.

Effective 1913, soldiers were to be drafted at the age of 20, instead of 21 valid until then; while a recruiting office were to be organised in the area of responsibility of every division. Gradually, the number of recruiting offices increased, after the opening of temporary ones in Crete, Adrianople, Athens and Thessalonica, together with the ones in New York and Chicago for the recruitment of the Greek enlisted or reservists, living there.

It is worth noting that effective 1918, the law provided for the generation of companies of volunteers with Hellenic citizenship, aged 18 to 45 years, not subject to obligatory military service.

These and other relevant recruitment topics preoccupied the military leadership, in order to apply comprehensive recruiting, as dictated by the requirements during that period.

On 10 September 1915, as mentioned before, Greece proclaimed mobilisation, for mainly deterrence reasons, as Bulgaria had also earlier proclaimed mobilisation. The Army, nonetheless, remained mobilised for nine months. Subsequently, it was gradually demobilised and in November of that year, started storing, allocating, classifying, controlling, providing, sending and delivering the mobilisation materiel to the responsible management agencies.

Since August 1917, the Hellenic Army had gradually started mobilising again, a rather successful action, in spite of the difficulties encountered during its initial stages.

How was it implemented?

The first decision taken by Venizelos government, immediately after assuming power, back in Athens in June 1917, was the official proclamation of war by the side of the Entente. In order to meet the war demands, Greece was forced to anew reorganise its Army, which had demobilised with the bulk of its forces in Peloponnese, according to the diktat of the Allies at the end of 1916. The government also sought and achieved the signature of an agreement with France for the augmentation of the French Military Mission, already deployed in Thessalonica, to sixty personnel, under the command of General Braguet, until then military attaché in Athens. The work of the Mission would be the organisation and preparation of the Hellenic Army for war, in the frame of the already issued operations plan.

Nevertheless, the National Defence Committee and the Provisional Government in Thessalonica had already activated the mechanisms for the preparation «*rough and ready*» and, in early September 1916, the first battalion of the National Defence administration was operational.

The Provisional Government had initially decided to recruit 80-90.000 men and generate five divisions (from Serrai, the Archipelago, Crete, the Cyclades Islands and Thessalonica) each 10.000 men-strong.

It is also worth mentioning that, in early 1917, Serrai Division had participated in the Allied operations west of Axios River, where it achieved, following fierce combat and suffering heavy losses, to seize the height of Koryfi (known as Ravine) a position crucial for the enemy. Further operations were suspended due to the strong resistance of the enemy and the lack of the necessary demolition and counter-artillery means of the Allied forces deployed there.

On 1 June 1917, the strength of the National Defence Army reached 1.497 Officers and 53.271 Soldiers; meanwhile, the Hellenic Gendarmerie, mainly composed of men from Crete, had 274 Officers and 5.361 Soldiers.

It was estimated in July 1917 that by the end of that year it would be possible to generate six to seven more divisions and equip them with materiel already in Greece provided by the Allies; on the other hand, it was also decided to mobilise, in the period from April to June 1918, three more divisions; thus the total Hellenic Army divisions would reach the number of ten.

Upon generation of those three divisions, the wartime strength of the Hellenic Army was complemented; its force along the borderline reached 104.500 Officers and Soldiers. This significant number of manpower was a prerequisite for any positive outcome of the operations.

It should be noted that during the summer of 1917, the situation in general of the Allied Army of the Orient was not good, as regarded the strength and the morale. The French forces lacked important numbers of Officers and Soldiers; while the fatigue, both physical and mental, was great. The Serbian Army had been asking for a cut of its front line, in order to be able to rotate its units; Great Britain had withdrawn an Infantry Division and the Cavalry Division, which were transferred to Egypt; the Russian troops had very low morale; and the Supreme Italian Military Leadership had

wished to move part of its forces, according to its own needs and agenda. Moreover, supply of the Army of the Orient was hampered and, therefore, the Army had to keep a defence posture.

In December 1917, General Guillaumat replaced General Saraille and received new orders; according to them, defence priority should be placed mainly on denying the occupation of Greece to the enemy, thus securing the front, which extended from Prespai Lakes to Orfanos Gulf. To implement this plan, he allocated his forces in three groups: the French Army of the Orient would defend the sector east of Pindos mountain-range, securing the liaison with the Italian and Serbian forces along its flanks; in the centre, the Serbian Army would imperatively defend the sector from Erigon River up to Axios River, securing the protection of the railway between Thessalonica and Monastiri; and finally, in the eastern sector, the British Army and the 1st Group of Divisions would cover Thessalonica front, between the rivers Axios and Strymon.

In early April 1918, the Allied Army of the Orient had completed its defence posture; was reinforced in Artillery and Aviation; and expected further reinforcements with the deployment of the remaining Hellenic forces. Therefore, it was ready, not only to defend against any enemy action, but also to assume offensive operations in order to clasp all the enemy forces in the Macedonian front. Hence, it was needed to conduct localised attacks against selected objectives, in order to harass the enemy and have its freedom of movements reduced.

In this context, the operations were to include offensive incursions for intelligence collection; clasp of forces; capture of prisoners; and destruction of defensive works. In particular in the sector of the 1st Group of Divisions, they were to seize the enemy position north of Skra. The main offensive against Skra Height was assigned to the 1st Serrai and the 5th and 6th Archipelago Regiments, along with Engineers and Artillery units; the whole operation would be conducted in conjunction with a secondary action of the Division of Crete, eastwards of Skra, against Heights 789 and 459. By the evening of the day of attack 17*/30 May, all objectives had been captured. However, the losses were heavy: the single Archipelago Division had 338 men dead, 1.777 wounded and 164 missing; the Division of Crete, 71 dead and 314 wounded; important also were the casualties of Serrai Division. Nevertheless, the morale and the bravery of the Greeks attracted the admiration of the Allies and thus ensured their trust. (* Julian calendar)

Meanwhile on 27 May 1918, General Guillaumat was recalled by France and replaced by General Franchet d' Esperay, who arrived in Thessalonica on 5 June and immediately assumed the function of the Commander-in-chief of the Allied Forces in the Macedonian Front.

At the end of May 1918, Lieutenant General (Artillery) Panagiotis Dagklis was appointed as Commander-in-chief of the Hellenic forces; his staff was essentially composed of Greek and French Officers of the Hellenic Staff Service and the French Military Mission respectively; his Chief of Staff during the operations were initially the French Colonel Bastien and afterwards the Greek Colonel Emmanuel Raktivan.

By the end of July 1918, the development of war operations in Europe was decisively in favour of the Allies. For this reason, the Allies authorised General Franchet d' Esperay to launch a general offensive against the German and Bulgarian forces, with the objective to breach the front and disorganise them.

This plan provided for the main offensive against the central mountainous sector of Dobro Polje and, upon advance of the Allied forces, for the offensive in the sector of Doiran to relieve the lines of communication along Axios River. At the same time, Hellenic Forces were to operate towards Strymon River to clasp the enemy forces deployed there; while the forces of the 1st Group of Divisions, deployed immediately

west of Axios River, in between the Serbian-French and the British-Hellenic forces, were to support these offensive actions, by conducting operations in Axios River valley.

On 1 September 1918, the Allied offensive was launched. The contribution of the Hellenic forces was decisive. By 5 September, the Allied forces had advanced to a depth of 15 kms and had achieved breaching the enemy position.

The Hellenic 6th and 12th Infantry Regiments of the Hellenic III Division and the 35th Regiment of the IV Division participated in the offensive and fought bravely, with self-sacrifice and self-abnegation.

In the sector of Doiran, the Divisions of Crete and Serrai, alongside the Allied forces, pinned down the enemy troops east of Axios River; meanwhile, offensives were launched in all the sectors, which, effective 7 September and within three days, led to the capture of the opposite Bulgarian defensive positions.

The subsequent pursuit in all the sectors ended up in a form of generalised advance.

On 16 September, the entire Axios River valley had been cleared. In view of this situation, Bulgaria asked for an armistice, which was signed in Thessalonica on 17 September 1918; meanwhile, effective 21 September, the Hellenic A' Army Corps advanced and liberated Eastern Macedonia.

Serbia was liberated on 21 October 1918. Turkey signed an armistice on 17 October; Austria-Hungary on 21 October; and Germany on 29 October, in the forest of Compiègne, «*unconditionally*».

Greek losses, during the generalised Allied offensive in September 1918, reached 834 dead, 3.790 wounded and 671 missing (in total 5.295). This number represents 30% of the total casualties and approximately 50% of the Allied dead during the same period in the Macedonian Front.

Out of the 29 Allied divisions under the command of Franchet d' Esperay, 10 were Hellenic, 8 French, 4 British, 6 Serbian and 1 Italian; the Hellenic forces thus stood for 34% of the total forces.

Undoubtedly, without this contribution of Greece, it would have been impossible for the Allies to assume offensive operations, as it was recognised by all their leaders.

The Great War had come to its end.