Ioannis D. Stefanidis[*]

Fighting in a Foreign Land: High Politics and Human Experience during the Greek Campaign in Southern Ukraine, 1919

The participation of Greek ground troops in the Russian Civil War, which lasted 99 days in the first quarter of 1919 and involved more than 23,000 men, was primarily intended to underpin Greek irredentist claims in view of the peace settlement that followed the Great War. It did succeed on that account, but it did not fail to affect the lives of tens of thousands of Greeks who, over the previous century and a half, had settled along the northern shores of the Black Sea. This event has not merited an academic monograph yet, though this is not due to lack of sources; and it has largely remained unknown to the Greek public, which only recently, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, became aware of the continuing presence of a sizeable population with Greek origins or identity in 'exotic' places like Odessa, Kherson and Mariupol.

The Greek Communities of Southern Russia

The first major Russo-Turkish War (1768-74) and the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, that ended it, marked the inception of several waves of Greek immigrants and refugees to Russian territories. By 1918, the numbers involved have been estimated ca. 550,000, excluding some 140,000 russianised Greeks. Their biggest concentrations were found along the littoral of northern Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, from Odessa and Kherson in the West, Crimea to the south, Mariupol, Tangarog and Batumi to the east, as well as in the Caucasus region as far as Kuban and Baku, on the shores of the Caspian Sea. From that number, some 85,000 were recent refugees from Pontus, who had fled at the end of the Russian occupation of Trebizond (April 1916-February 1918).

[*] Professor of Diplomatic History, Faculty of Law, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki.

The locations where the Greek army saw action in early 1919 included Odessa, Kherson and Nikolayev (Mykolaiv), with an estimated Greek population of 35,000, and the cities of Crimea, chiefly Sebastopol, Simferopol, Yalta, Feodosiya and Kerch, where 60-70,000 lived. Perhaps, half of this population retained Greek citizenship. Unlike the Greek communities in the Caucasus and the Don-Azov regions, perhaps a majority of the Odessan and Crimean Greeks were city-dwellers, busy in trade, shipping and the tobacco industry. Following the Bolshevik seizure of power and the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, the Greek communities suffered as a result of the German and Ottoman occupation of their regions, and the incessant fighting between Bolsheviks, 'White Russians' and various nationalist movements. In Crimea, in particular, the Germans tolerated widespread persecution of Greeks at the hands of Muslim Tartars, who were seeking to re-establish the pre-eminence they had enjoyed before their annexation to Russia.[1]

The French Involvement

As early as 23 December 1917, the Supreme War Council of the Entente Allies decided to assist the Russian forces organized by various generals in their fight against the Bolsheviks. They divided Russia in spheres of operations. The French were allocated Bessarabia, Ukraine and Crimea, while the British would fight the Turks in the Caucasus region. In practice, the Allies were able to intervene only after the Central Powers were defeated in the Balkans, and Bulgaria and Turkey sued for peace, in September-October 1918. It was Lt. General Anton I. Denikin, commander of volunteer forces in the Kuban region, who proposed to Entente representatives in Jassy and Salonika an anti-Bolshevik campaign with the aid of 150,000 Allied troops.

In October 1918, Georges Clemenceau, the French premier, instructed General Franchet d'Espèrey, the Commander-in-Chief of the allied armies in the East, 'to establish a continuous front from Albania to the Black Sea and thence to the Baltic, in order to destroy Bolshevism by economic isolation.' This over-ambitious scheme foundered

[1] Nikos Petsalis-Diomidis, 'Hellenism in Southern Russia and the Ukrainian Campaign: Their Effect on the Pontus Question (1919),' *Balkan Studies* 13.2 (1972), 221-4.

on realities on the ground, of which d'Espèrey was well aware: as a result of the recent fighting and the Spanish influenza pandemic, most units were understrength; it was doubtful whether colonial troops, especially the Senegalese, could withstand the harsh climate of the region; and, most importantly, there was the psychological factor: French troops were demonstrably averse to any idea of continuing to serve abroad, let alone of fighting, after the capitulation of the Central Powers.[2]

On 7 October, Clemenceau appointed General Henri Berthelot in charge of operations in Romania and Ukraine, effectively bypassing d'Espèrey. Before long, Berthelot came to share his colleague's doubts. Then, on 13 November, Denikin's representative in Romania reported that the French had agreed to send 12 divisions, French and Greek, to 'Southern Russia,' in order to take part in a campaign against the Bolsheviks. Their main base was to be Odessa, but they were also to occupy Sebastopol. At about the same time, the British Cabinet decided to give Denikin 'all possible help in the way of military material' and to secure the railway line from Batumi to Baku. This task the British completed quickly, but they refused to send troops in the area earmarked for the French.[3]

The French-led part of the campaign proved ill-starred from the outset. Berthelot soon discovered that, instead of the twelve divisions originally planned, only three would be actually available. Significantly, planning constantly suffered from poor intelligence or sheer misinformation. This was the responsibility of the Military and Political Bureau for Ukrainian Affairs, which operated as part of the French Legation in Jassy. The head of its military section was the Naval Attaché who would never set foot on Russian soil and who preferred to rely on information from 'Russian aristocrats or rich bourgeois fleeing from Odessa.' These

[2] J. Kim Munholland, 'The French Army and Intervention in Southern Russia, 1918-1919,' *Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique*, 22.1 (Jan.-Mar. 1981), 44-5.

[3] The general idea of a plan that was taking shape in Allied circles was that four armies would attack the Bolsheviks simultaneously: the British from the north, the French and Polish from the west, the Americans and Japanese from the east, and the French with the Romanian –and possibly the Greek– from the south, while the British would hold Transcaucasia: Dendramis' report to Athens, 7.12.1918 in Petsalis, 'Hellenism in Southern Russia,' 232, n. 12.

sources consistently underestimated the strength of the Bolsheviks, exaggerated the size and popularity of the voluntary army, and misinterpreted the multifaceted Ukrainian separatist movement, which, if properly handled, could prove a valuable ally against Moscow.[4]

The first mistake was the French attack, following disembarkation in Odessa on 18 December, against troops loyal to the Ukrainian People's Republic under Symon Petryura. The French dislodged the Ukrainian nationalists from the city and permitted the re-entry of the unpopular, ill-disciplined and ineffective volunteer army. As a result, they found themselves with the nearly impossible task of policing Odessa, as well as Nikolayev and Kherson, cities with large working class populations, ready to blame capitalism for their ills and with access to arms left behind by the departing German army of occupation.[5] The food situation was a further source of discontent, from which any authority in these areas was bound to suffer: as much of the crops of the previous summer had been sent to Germany, food was scarce and prices sky-rocketing. 'Food, money and good policing' were essential for any longer-term policy of control, and these the French proved unable to provide. To make things worse, their troops were physically exhausted (Europe was in the grip of the Spanish influenza pandemic) and their morale was sinking. As a result, they were susceptible to anti-war propaganda and prone to insubordination.[6]

---

[4] Konstantinos Nider, *Η εκστρατεία της Ουκρανίας* (The Campaign in Ukraine), first published in *Η Μεγάλη Στρατιωτική και Ναυτική Εγκυκλοπαίδεια* (The Great Military and Naval Encyclopedia), vol. 1 (1927), reprinted in Filippos D. Drakontaeidis, *Η εκστρατεία της Ουκρανίας (Ιανουάριος-Μάιος 1919)* (The Campaign in Ukraine, January-May 1919), Athens 2015, 433-4; Petsalis, 'Hellenism in Southern Russia,' 231-3.

[5] Genikon Epiteleion Stratou, Diefthynsis Istorias Stratou (Greek General Staff, Directorate of Army History), *Το Ελληνικόν Εκστρατευτικόν Σώμα εις Μεσημβρινήν Ρωσίαν (1919)* (The Greek Expeditionary Force in Southern Russia), Athens 1955 (henceforth cited as GES-DIS, *Εκστρατευτικόν Σώμα*), 24-25; Petsalis, 'Hellenism in Southern Russia,' 232.

[6] Munholland, 'The French Army,' 46-47. A summary of Soviet sources on Bolshevik propaganda in Kostas Avgitidis, *Η στρατιωτική επέμβαση των καπιταλιστικών χωρών ενάντια στη Σοβιετική Ρωσία και η Ελλάδα (1918-1920)* (The Military Intervention of the Capitalist Countries against Soviet Russia and Greece), Athens 1999, 235-62.

It is fair to say that Paris conceived of the participation of Greek troops as a convenient and possibly more reliable alternative to the use of its own troops: unlike the Greeks, the French conscripts had just emerged from a long and gruelling war of attrition; and perhaps the Greeks were better suited to fight under the inclement Ukrainian winter conditions than the African troops in Berthelot's Army of the Danube. Indeed, at the port of Constanza, Algerian units refused to embark 'when they were told they were leaving for Odessa.' Moreover, Greek troops had performed ably during the last, and decisive, operations on the Macedonian front. Last but not least, the French government and Clemenceau, in particular, were eager to capitalise on Greece's 'blood deficit' – the fact that, owing to its late entry into the world war, Greece had suffered comparatively few human losses, definitely disproportionate to the extensive claims which prime minister Eleftherios Venizelos was planning to submit to the peace conference in Paris.

The diplomatic background to the Greek campaign in the Ukraine has been extensively covered by Nikos Petsalis-Diomidis.[7] Suffice it to repeat that Venizelos wished Greece not only to establish her credentials as an ally –much in the way Camillo Cavour had done when he committed Piemontese troops to the Anglo-French campaign in Crimea, in 1855– but also to 'atone' for the 'November events' of 1916: then an attempt by French marines to force their way into Athens was repelled by forces loyal to King Constantine, with considerable loss of life – something that Clemenceau reminded Venizelos upon occasion.[8] Anxious to secure French benevolence at the forthcoming peace conference, Venizelos instructed Athos Romanos, the Greek minister in Paris, to inform Clemenceau that the Greek army was at the disposal of the Allies and could be 'used for the common cause wherever needed.' He also removed the commander-in-chief of the Greek Army and close associate in the Salonika triumvirate (1916-17), General Panayiotis

[7] Petsalis, 'Hellenism in Southern Russia,' 221-63.

[8] According to Penelope Delta, Venizelos had repeated Clemenceau's jab as follows: "Vous oubliez que vous avez tué nos hommes dans la rue:" Nikos Petsalis-Diomidis, *Ο Βενιζέλος και η πρόκληση της Μεγάλης Ελλάδας* (Venizelos and the Challenge of Greater Greece), I, 424 and note 30.

Daglis, for warning d'Espèrey that his troops 'would refuse to cross the Danube.'[9] In return, Clemenceau promised support for the Greek claims in Thrace but reserved his position on Smyrna, pending a British initiative.

To be sure, almost immediately after his promise to the French, in late November, Venizelos himself got cold feet on various counts. Although emergency measures imposed after he resumed the helm of reunited Greece and its formal entry into the war, in June 1917, still circumscribed political liberties, Venizelos, a convinced liberal, could not discount domestic political reactions. Indeed, opposition to Greece's involvement in an anti-Bolshevik campaign were voiced by two Socialist members of Parliament, who, in the absence of the anti-Venizelist parties, acted as the only opposition in the Chamber. Already in late November, the socialist daily, *Rizospastis*, rhetorically wondered: 'Is reason entirely absent from [the mind of] our rulers? Or are they so attached to the chariot of secret diplomacy, that they are reduced to blind instruments of its aims?' The opaqueness surrounding the dispatch of Greek troops abroad was also used by the anti-Venizelist press in its, still cautious, effort to question the soundness of the government's policies.[10]

The Greek prime minister also repeated mentioned the risk of Bolshevik ideas spreading among Greek troops and the influx of politically 'contaminated' refugees into Greece.[11] Such fears were not unfounded. Greeks were active among the Bolshevik ranks,[12] and Lenin's propaganda mechanism stood ready to foster discontent among the incoming Allied troops.[13] Daglis' successor, General Leonidas Paraskevopoulos, also added his own doubts.[14] In fact, Romanos personally withheld a

[9] Petsalis, 'Hellenism in Southern Russia,' 234.

[10] Excerpts from parliamentary minutes, 29 Nov./12.12.1918, in Drakontaeidis, *Η εκστρατεία*, 474-85; *Rizospastis*, 16/29.11.1918, ibid. 512-3; *Akropolis*, 6/19.1.1919, ibid. 518; *Astrapi*, 11/24.1 and 8/21.2.1919, ibid. 518-21.

[11] Petsalis, 'Hellenism in Southern Russia,' 235-6, 242.

[12] Orion Alexakis, a young Greek from Balaklava, served in various posts, including that of party committee secretary in Sebastopol, during the period of the Franco-Greek occupation: Avgitidis, *Η στρατιωτική επέμβαση*, 248-9.

[13] Avgitidis, *op.cit*., 240-1.

[14] For instance, during ten days in December, the 6th Regiment of the Archipelago Division counted 110 men and 2 officers dying in hospital: *Αρχείο Πηνελόπης Δέλτα*

message from the Greek prime minister, who was in Paris, to d'Espèrey, whereby Venizelos was temporarily freezing Greek participation in a Russian campaign.

Subsequently, Venizelos tried at least to secure adequate provisions for the Greek troops, while still hoping that the project would be aborted. Thus, in his contacts with the French commander-in-chief in Salonika and the British minister in Athens, he demanded that the Greeks be 'clothed and fed exactly like the French' as a condition for their despatch to 'Russia.' The Allies consented. Greek military preparations began on 8 December 1918 and by 4 January 1919 the A Army Corps consisting of three divisions with 42,000 men was ready for departure. This was delayed, as ships were not made available until 15 January. In the event, only two divisions, with a total strength of 23,351 men (roughly ten percent of the Greek Army), would be despatched, in piecemeal fashion and at intervals of several weeks.[15] Still, the Greek force would outnumber the dwindling French troops (belonging to the 156th and 30th Colonial Divisions) by a 5:3 ratio.[16]

Meanwhile, in Paris, Venizelos was still trying to secure the material assistance promised by the Allies. As late as 12 January, he authorized the cancellation of the expedition in case the British and the French failed to send the 4,500 beds they had promised in December. Finally, the British did provide 1,040 beds, to which the Greeks added 1,560.'[17] 'Made in England' was also much of the winter gear (especially greatcoats, socks and boots) distributed to the Greek troops.

Naval Preamble

The first Greek military presence in southern Ukraine consisted of the 1033 ton destroyer *Panther*, which reached Sebastopol on 26 November 1918. The arrival of the ship was warmly greeted by the Greeks of the city. According to a young warrant officer, it was 'an apotheosis.' It was 'impossible to move on the deck' as visitors kept coming until

(Pinelopi Delta Papers), 2, *Νικόλαος Πλαστήρας: Εκστρατεία Ουκρανίας 1919* et al., edited by Pavlos A. Zannas, Athens 1979 (henceforth: Delta, *Πλαστήρας*), 2.

[15] Nider, *Η εκστρατεία*, 435-6.

[16] Colonel Bujac, *Les Campagnes de l'Armée Hellénique, 1918-1922*, Paris 1930, 189.

[17] GES-DIS, *Εκστρατευτικόν Σώμα*, 43.

late at night.[18] Her captain, Commander Ioannis Yiannikostas, sent to his wife a vivid description of his first weeks in the city:

> 'As soon as I arrived, there began the 'hurrah' (ζήτω) and fêtes (πανηγύρια), lots of Greeks, (lots of) toasting, and speeches over and over again; can you imagine me, being shy, to have to address (people), and, alas, Russia is a place where people are obsessed with toasting, and this is because it gives them an opportunity to drink; you are aware that here water is used for washing only. So, speeches, kissing, enthusiasms, and, most important, invitations to meals, and *jours fixes* – you can imagine how wound up I get. "Do come here, and do come there." I have spit blood to convince them that we have not come for fêtes.'

Yiannikostas also appraised his hosts from a social perspective, exhibiting no small measure of condescension:

> 'The Greeks are mostly of small class, nice people with money and imitating what they see in the Russians, but of course lower class Russians, (they display) an unpretentiousness (*sans-façonism*) beyond description, no distinction of class, sex, age, position, and it is only natural to find ourselves faced with comical surprises, for which we cannot burst into laughter, but have to feign enthusiasm. Imagine then a formal invitation and the house Lady inviting me to tea together with my NCOs; I was obliged to say that "cela ne se fait pas chez nous" […] whoever can afford eats, whoever cannot (afford) drinks tea, enjoys oneself, goes to the theatre, gets shot in the middle of the street, sells one's clothes, and God provides!'

Sans-façonism notwithstanding, Yiannikostas considered he had no option but to partake in the small pleasures of the treats on offer:

> 'Imagine yourself eating all day, saddled with a pistol and 50 bullets, two vests, woollen underwear, and also drinking. Endless toasting: "Here is to your nice eyebrows!" "Here is to the fine shoe of yours!" and so on. […] Tell me, have you

[18] Stilianos I. Haratsis, *Η πρώτη επέμβαση: Η άγνωστη δράση του Πολεμικού Ναυτικού στη Μεσημβρινή Ρωσία 1918-20* (The First Intervention: the Unknown Action of the [Greek] Navy in Southern Russia), Athens 1997, 81.

> ever imagined such a place? How do they not suffer perforation of the stomach? Eventually, 9/10 of the Russians were drunk and there began a café chantant too, and this is what they call a reception; finally, we parted around three in the morning, having understood nothing, having promised even less, and certain of the bestiality of the men and the right of the people's struggle.'[19]

For at least two months, the *Panther* had received no precise order regarding its mission. From his talks with French and British commanders, Yiannikostas realised that they too were wondering about the purpose of their presence in Sebastopol.[20] Gradually, three objectives would take shape during the first third of 1919: the seizure of the Russian Black Sea fleet, an obvious prize for the Bolsheviks; support for the Allied ground units; and, with the Allied retreat in sight, the protection and evacuation of refugees.[21]

The *Panther* remained at Sebastopol until 8 March 1919. By that time, Greek ground units were fighting north of Odessa, at the fronts of Nikolayev and Kherson. One day, the destroyer was ordered to Khorly, an idyllic port island off the western shores of the Crimean (Perekop) isthmus. Yiannikostas' mission was to locate a number of tugboats and barges, and prevent them from falling into Bolshevik hands. The Greek captain managed to steer clear not only of the treacherous shoals but also of the Russian and German minefields along the Dzharylgaç peninsula. The local maritime pilot was the single Greek of Khorly, who came aboard and helped the ship to moor safely in the small harbour. According to Yiannikostas' description, it took him a good deal of exhortation before the 'drowsy and apathetic' White Russians, whom he had brought along, collected six barges and two tugboats. The barges belonged to a German, who subsequently gave permission for their removal to Sebastopol.

As Yiannikostas found out from villagers, there was a Bolshevik force under a certain Taran some three km away from Khorly. In the following morning, twelve Bolsheviks encircled the village coffee

[19] Haratsis, *Η πρώτη επέμβαση*, 81-2.
[20] *Op.cit*., 79.
[21] *Op.cit*., 67, 101.

house and, after a skirmish, took a number of White Russians prisoner. However, of them managed to snatch a horse after killing its rider and made it to the port. The horse was taken aboard the *Panther*. Its captain was ready to sail with his flotilla of tugboats and barges, when the Bolshevik leader, Taran, used the only telephone in the village in order to warn Yiannikostas that, if he failed to return the horse, he would have his prisoners shot. In a second phone message, he informed the Greek captain that, if the *Panther* did not depart until the following morning, he would 'shoot her to smithereens.' He was resolved, he added, not to let the Greeks meddle in Russian affairs.

Yiannikostas kept his temper. He moved his destroyer into a cove some three miles away from Khorly and waited for the arrival of two sea-planes from Sebastopol. Then, he sent one of them to locate Taran's force and throw leaflets warning the inhabitants of the region that he held them accountable for harbouring a 'gang' of criminals. He stayed moored at night and on the morning, as Taran's deadline expired, had his guns fire three shots to the direction of the isthmus. Half an hour later, a boat conveyed a letter from Taran, accusing Yiannikostas of theft, piracy, looting etc. Yiannikostas dismissed the accusations and responded that the men arrested by Taran's troops were under the protection of the Greek flag. He also professed readiness to take up the gauntlet: for the flag's honour, he warned, he could destroy Taran with the guns, aircraft and every means at his disposal. However, he would prefer it if he and Taran parted ways calmly, on condition that the prisoners were released. It was his turn to give a deadline until 7 of the following morning. Yiannikostas received no reply, and, on the following morning he sent the sea-planes to bombard the Bolshevik positions. He then set off for Sebastopol. Two days later, he was informed that the White Russian prisoners had been released.[22]

Ground Operations

The Greek expeditionary force saw action in a theatre of operations hinging on Odessa and extending along the railway line to the north as far as Berezovka and along mainly sea routes to the east, to the cities

[22] *Op.cit*., 83-6.

of Nikolayev and Kherson. The first ground units, 3,600 men of the 34th Regiment, XIII Division, reached Odessa on 20 January 1919. For 38 days they would be the only Greek force in the region. Confirming the haphazard manner in which the entire operation was conceived and executed, the units usually arrived without essential equipment and supplies, from blankets and camp beds to machine-guns, artillery, which, even if they had been shipped, could not be transported owing to the lack of pack animals and vehicles.[23] As a result, not only the men suffered 'from the bitter cold and snow,'[24] but they were also thrown into battle with little cover and reduced firepower.[25]

To make matters worse, relations between the Greeks and the French military, who had been given overall command of the operation, were never easy. Greek officers and men felt slighted by what they described as French rudeness, arrogance and contempt. Perhaps, there was a tendency on the part of French officers to scapegoat the newcomers: following the evacuation of Kherson, the French commander of the Allied forces attributed the hostility of the local population to 'anger' over the presence of Greek troops, which was 'regarded as a humiliation and an insult to [the people's] national pride.'[26] Franco-Greek antipathy only made worse an already bad situation. As the arrival of reinforcements, equipment, money and the post from home was delayed for weeks on end, officers struggled to maintain morale in an unknown land, surrounded by an alien, often hostile, population. They were assisted by the Regiment's chaplain, Archimandrite Panteleimon Fostinis, whose memoirs depict Odessa as a sort of contemporary Gomora. Not surprisingly, Fostinis warned against the moral and health hazards associated with 'corrupt women,' as well as other forms of corruption, such as

---

[23] Petros Karakassonis, *Ιστορία τής εις Ουκρανίαν και Κριμαίαν υπερποντίου εκστρατείας τω 1919* (History of the Overseas Campaign to Ukraine and Crimea in 1919), Athens 1933, 32; GES-DIS, *Εκστρατευτικόν Σώμα*, 59-60.

[24] *Αρχείο Πηνελόπης Δέλτα* (Pinelopi Delta Papers), 4, *Εκστρατεία στη Μεσημβρινή Ρωσία 1919* (Campaign in Southern Russia), edited by Pavlos A. Zannas, Athens 1982 (henceforth: Delta, *Εκστρατεία*), 91. Cf. Panteleimon Fostinis, *Ο ελληνικός στρατός στη Ρωσία, Ιανουάριος-Ιούνιος 1919* (The Greek Army in Russia, January-June 1919), Athens 1956, 139.

[25] Nider, *Η εκστρατεία*, 436-8; GES-DIS, *Εκστρατευτικόν Σώμα*, 47-8, 266-7.

[26] Munholland, 'The French Army,' 49.

bribery and Bolshevik propaganda, both of which he attributed to the local Jewry.[27] If this latter tendency reflected the anti-Semitic reflexes shared by the Orthodox clergy and the Greek merchant class in southern Ukraine,[28] Fostinis correctly identified the overlapping and often competing authorities present in Odessa (municipal, Russian, 'volunteer,' French) as a major source of what his commander, Colonel Christos Tsolakopoulos-Rebelos, described as 'total anarchy.'[29] Within a month of his arrival, Tsolakopoulos asked for his replacement.[30]

In these conditions of relative isolation and discomfort, one might have expected the Greek troops to become easy prey for Bolshevik propaganda. Indeed, leaflets distributed in Odessa primarily aimed at sowing doubt in the hearts of soldiers who were not only invited to appreciate the emancipatory message of communism but, even more so, to reflect on the 'real' aims of their presence in a faraway land and among a people who had never done them any harm; there could be no explanation other than that all this meant to serve the interests of foreign 'capitalists and landowners' and a czarist restoration.[31] Yet, in late February, the Bolshevik party organisation in Odessa admitted its failure to penetrate the Greek troops. According to a Soviet-trained Greek historian, the Greek soldiers 'were more reactionary' than their French and other Allied counterparts: they had been 'strictly selected' (this could only be said about their commanders), had been subjected to 'ideological catechism,' they had seen very little service on any front, and were much less educated ('of lower ideologico-political level') than,

[27] Fostinis, *Ο ελληνικός στρατός*, 71-72. Cf. Karakassonis, *Ιστορία*, 38-40, who records at least five men of the 34th Regiment as victims of robbery and murder.
[28] Karakassonis, *op.cit*., 85, 109-10, 140-5. Fostinis was not alone in interpreting Bolshevism as 'the work of Jews,' led by Jews, who had managed to rouse the Russians, 'this beastly people, against the rich and especially the army officers' (p. 85). Cf. Nider, *Η εκστρατεία*, 365, 412; Christos Karayiannis, *Η ιστορία ενός στρατιώτη (1918-1922): Μια συγκλονιστική μαρτυρία για τις ελληνικές εκστρατείες* (A Soldier's Story: A Breathtaking Testimony on the Greek Campaigns), edited by Filippos Drakontaeidis, Athens 2013, 121. The same could be said of the perceived 'bestiality' of the Russian populace: Yiannikostas in Haratsis, *Η πρώτη επέμβαση*, 82.
[29] Fostinis, *Ο ελληνικός στρατός*, 55.
[30] Petsalis, 'Hellenism in Southern Russia,' 238-9.
[31] Avgitidis, *Η στρατιωτική επέμβαση*, 240-2.

especially, French soldiers and sailors.[32] As a result, cases of insubordination and defections were comparatively very limited.[33]

Perhaps, the most memorable episode of this early phase of the Greek entanglement was the exchange of telegraphic messages between Ilias Matthios, a 27-year old lieutenant commanding the garrison of the Kherson railway station, and Nikifor Grigoriev (Nykyfor Oleksandrovych Servetnyk, aka Hryhoriv), the 34-year old *ataman* (head) of the Bolshevik forces advancing towards the city.[34] This verbal duel took place in the evening of 1 March 1919 and has been reproduced in the official Greek accounts of the campaign as well as a number of memoirs.[35] It began with Grigoriev's ultimatum, giving the Greek garrison fewer than 24 hours to lay down its weapons and depart for Odessa. Matthios replied that there was no such precedent in Greek history, whereupon Grigoriev wondered: 'Can you tell me what the devil do you Greeks want up here in Ukraine?' He then launched into a lengthy argument in defence of Bolshevism, berating the Greeks for their part in the Allied intervention. Matthios professed lack of competence to answer questions of a political or ideological nature and focused on his soldier's duty: when asked if he would shoot at the advancing Bolsheviks, the Greek lieutenant confirmed that he would defend the station and invited Grigoriev not to forget Thermopylae.

Grigoriev's army attacked the on 7 March. Abandoning the advanced positions, including the railway station, the 700 men of the 7th Regiment, barricaded themselves inside the old citadel of Kherson. As they were vastly outnumbered and running low on ammunition, their commanders considered a desperate breakout. However, warships carrying a battalion of the 7th Regiment arrived in the nick of time. The Allied force was evacuated in the early hours of 10 March 1919, under the protection of naval guns. However, the cannonade set ablaze a warehouse, where the Greek garrison had confined two thousand local

[32] Avgitidis, *op.cit*., 246-7.
[33] Avgitidis, *op.cit*., 176, 178-9.
[34] Grigoriev, a former captain in the Imperial Russian Army who had risen from the ranks, had joined the Bolsheviks only four weeks earlier, after serving various Ukrainian nationalist factions.
[35] Karakassonis, *Ιστορία*, 65-9; Nider, *Η εκστρατεία*, 160-3; GES-DIS, *Εκστρατευτικόν Σώμα*, 306-8; Delta, *Εκστρατεία*, 166-8.

people, suspected of aiding the enemy. Perhaps as many as 500 people lost their lives in that incident.[36] Obviously, the Greeks had borne the brunt of the fighting: more than one-third of their original force lay hors de combat, counting 120 dead (two of them officers) and 140 wounded (among the latter, Lieutenant Matthios, shot by a woman from inside a house). In sharp contrast, French casualties numbered only four dead and 22 wounded.[37]

There followed the loss of Nikolayev, on 14 March. Next the Bolsheviks attacked Berezovka, a strongpoint and railway station some 100 km west of Nikolayev and 80 km northeast of Odessa. The situation was becoming so critical that d'Espèrey appeared on the scene and briefly took over command of the campaign himself.[38] In order to shore up his defences, the French commander-in-chief counted on the XIII Division, which had just received its 3rd Regiment, in a second wave of reinforcements.

An Infantryman's Experience

Serving with the 3rd Regiment of XIII Division (Chalkis) was a 24-year old conscript, Christos Karayiannis, a newly-wed, poor peasant from Steveniko (Agia Triada), at the foot of mount Elikon, in Boeotia. After being drafted the previous February, he was trained in modern weapons and then sent to the Struma (Strymon) sector of the Macedonian Front where malaria was a more dangerous hazard than enemy fire.[39] His division was not deemed trustworthy enough to be assigned to the line of d'Espèrey's final assault. During the general mobilisation decreed by the Venizelos government, conscripts of the 2nd Regiment and artillery units had mutinied at Lamia and Thiva.[40] In August, a plot was uncovered, allegedly aiming to turn the entire division over to the enemy.[41]

[36] Munholland, 'The French Army,' 52. Fostinis offers a vivid description of the eight-day battle of Kherson as a kind of 20th century Missolonghi: Fostinis, *Ο ελληνικός στρατός*, 191-233.
[37] Munholland, op.cit., 54. A French military author mentions ten dead, including two officers: Bujac, *Les Campagnes*, 199.
[38] Petsalis, 'Hellenism in Southern Russia,' 340.
[39] Karayiannis, *Ιστορία ενός στρατιώτη*, 50; Delta, *Πλαστήρας*, 6.
[40] Leontaritis 213; Grigoriadis in Delta, *Εκστρατεία*, 139.
[41] Delta, *Πλαστήρας*, 10.

Perhaps, as a 'reward' for its questionable record on the Macedonian Front, the XIII Division was earmarked for the 'Russian' campaign. The same was the case with II Division (Athens).

As a result, the units sent to Ukraine consisted of conscripts of the 1910-18 classes from Central Greece (Sterea Ellas or Roumeli),[42] the majority of whom were royalists and had very reluctantly responded to the call to arms. The reaction of the men of the 34th Regiment to the news of their 'Russian' mission was probably typical of the general mood: they tended to dismiss it as unfounded rumours, quipping 'Hell no, next thing we go and takeover China!'[43] The same reluctance was shared by many of their officers. Major Konstantinos Vlachos, battalion commander in the 34th Regiment, recalled that many of his colleagues 'resorted even to (political and military) connections in order to be exempted being transferred from their units.'[44]

As a result, once assigned to the expeditionary force, units were liable to a change of command: officers were invited to participate on a voluntary basis, their immediate reward being an 1,000 drs. special monthly allowance, and a battle record which could expedite promotion. A one-off pay of 1,000 drs. was also allocated to the rank and file, who, however, were offered no opting-out. This process also meant that the servicemen's political outlook and interpretation of patriotism were very different from that of their commanding officers, veterans of the 'National Defence Army' (NDA), i.e. the three divisions which the Provisional Government of Salonika had contributed to the war effort in 1916-17.[45]

The new commander of Karayiannis' 3rd Regiment was Lt. Colonel Georgios Kondylis, a die-hard 'Amynite' (NDA veteran) with a record

---

[42] GES-DIS, *Εκστρατευτικόν Σώμα*, 40, 43.
[43] Fostinis, *Ο ελληνικός στρατός*, 10.
[44] Delta, *Εκστρατεία*, 103.
[45] Plastiras described his reaction to the news of the Ukrainian expedition as follows: 'It was only natural that this news […] would fire our imagination and inspire us with unrestrained desire for new adventures. I shall never forget the emotion I felt upon receiving this piece of information. I could not contain my joy. I turned into a different man, I recovered my morale, which had been crashed by four months of inaction.' And at the end of it all, there shone the vision of 'a great and prosperous Fatherland, which would soon replace the Byzantine Empire.' Delta, *Πλαστήρας*, 4, 8.

of brutal persecution of draft evaders in Macedonia. Karayiannis offers the following description of his new CO: 'of average height, a little dark-skinned, his head tilting towards his chest, a hunchback quite visible. His demeanour totally unsympathetic. He did not raise his head to look at us, but we realised that he was sizing us up.' The following day, Karayiannis had the opportunity to draw a sharp contrast between Kondylis (a future dictator) and Major General Konstantinos Nider, the newly appointed commander of A Corps: 'He was looking at us too,' Karayiannis observed, 'but in a fatherly manner.' Before leaving for their new front, the Regiment received new apparel from allied stock, as Venizelos had requested. 'English clothes, unworn. We all look like godchildren,' the simple peasant mused.[46]

Karayiannis had his first taste of Russia aboard the ship *Imperator Nikolai*. From this point onwards, his narrative can be checked against the reminiscences of Iankos Dragoumis, an artist, which Penelope Delta, the foremost Greek author of children's books, asked him to send her some fifteen years after the events. Dragoumis was serving as platoon commander in company C, 1st Battalion, 3rd Regiment. His recollection of the sea journey differs from Karayiannis' in that the latter, perhaps on a different route, mentions a stormy second night, which was succeeded by a bright day in the Black Sea. There, he and his comrades went on deck to bask in the winter sun and were served piroshky and blini. Sinfully, they broke their Lent fast and devoured the Russian specialties.

Following their arrival at Odessa, on 12 March,[47] the men had had very little time to adjust to their new environment. Explaining the security situation, Karayiannis' company commander gave a stern warning: Men could only leave their barracks under special permit and always in groups of five or six, fully armed and finger on the trigger; they should trust no one as the entire city was teeming with Bolsheviks; women were to be feared most of all; they would 'definitely' try to seduce the soldiers and then 'definitely' murder them; Greece would not tolerate any such incident, and a Special Court Martial would definitely take action. All

[46] Karayiannis, *Ιστορία ενός στρατιώτη*, 62-3.
[47] GES-DIS, *Εκστρατευτικόν Σώμα*, 55.

this, said 'at one go,' earned the captain the nickname 'definitely.' Afterwards, the men turned their backs on him and went to rest.[48]

Officers' Privileges

Things were rather different for the officers, most of whom were billeted at the Odessa bourse. Dragoumis had time to stroll around the wealthier, resort-like, quarter of the city, which he found nearly deserted. 'These beautiful houses,' he recalled, standing fully furnished but lifeless, 'fill one with gloom.' His encounters with Russian volunteers verged on the comical. Crossing their barracks, he realised that an entire regiment consisted of officers who served as soldiers. Some of them tried to communicate in French. 'Bolchevik mauvais' was a typical phrase, and warm handshakes were always exchanged.[49] Senior officers were given ample opportunity to meet with the remnants of the upper class and partake in the city's high culture. A case in point was the head of the Greek medical unit, Major Nikolaos Sbarounis. A surgeon by training, the 31-year old Sbarounis soon found himself at the centre of attention among the wealthier part of the Greek community. His diary records several invitations to the Greek Club and private houses, where tea and dancing parties, dinners and card-games were organised to his honour. He also attended performances at the magnificent Opera Theatre of Odessa.[50]

In the evening of 23 March, Sbarounis escorted Lt. Colonel Nikolaos Plastiras, commander of the recently arrived 5/42 *Evzones* (elite light infantry) Regiment, to a fund-raising gala for the benefit of the families of Greek servicemen fallen at Kherson. The programme included a Russian version of Sophocles' *Electra*, an act of Puccini's *Manon* Lescaut and ballet dancing.51 Plastiras, a brave soldier of simple peasant

[48] Karayiannis, *Ιστορία ενός στρατιώτη*, 70-1.
[49] Delta, *Εκστρατεία*, 40-1.
[50] Nikolaos Sbarounis, *Ημερολόγιον της εις Ρωσίαν εκστρατείας* (Diary of the Campaign in Russia), edited by Ioanna Papathanasiou, Athens 2013, 31, 43-4, 48-9.
[51] Sbarounis, *op.cit*., 66.

origins, would later describe the singing and dancing as a once-in-a-life-time experience. 'All the star artists of Russian melodrama,' he recalled, had sought refuge in Odessa, 'fleeing the Bolshevik scourge.'[52]

There existed other, more prosaic, forms of entertainment for those who could afford it.[53] In the evening of 18 March, Dragoumis escorted Kondylis to a restaurant and then a 'tavern' (probably a cabaret). They were joined by a Greek major, 'soon to be sent to base […] because he had messed things up.' At the tavern, where a revelry was in full swing, a Russian officer with one arm in a sling approached them and made a toast to the 'Греческие офицеры,' raised his glass, emptied it and then broke it on the floor in tribute. The merriment reached its apex when a female Gypsy band appeared onstage. At that point, Dragoumis was called outside, where he met a messenger carrying an order for Kondylis. When the Colonel read it, his relaxed expression was gone. The front at Berezovka had been broken through and the Allied forces were retreating in disarray – the French by train, the Greek II/34 Battalion on foot. General d'Espèrey was calling upon the two regiments of the XIII Division to stave off a catastrophe.[54]

In the Frontline

The first to go was Kondylis' 3rd Regiment, despite the fact that it had no artillery and was still waiting for its machine-guns and mules to arrive. Some 1,700 men in all boarded a train on a frosty morning.[55] They had not had the chance to wash, as the water in their flasks had frozen overnight, but at least they had been served warm tea.[56] However, after two hours of constant manoeuvring and whistle blowing, their train found itself back at its starting platform. The obvious conclusion was that the engine driver was a Bolshevik agent. The train resumed its route only after the French officer in charge stuck his revolver on the driver's temple. It was snowing heavily and the big stoves inside the roomy wagons (the Russian track gauge being nearly double the size of

[52] Delta, *Πλαστήρας*, 21.
[53] Karayiannis, *Ιστορία ενός στρατιώτη*, 71.
[54] Delta, *Εκστρατεία*, 42-43.
[55] GES-DIS, *Εκστρατευτικόν Σώμα*, 128.
[56] Karayiannis, *Ιστορία ενός στρατιώτη*, 71.

its European counterpart) were extinct. In Dragoumis' eyes, the men were shivering, hungry and disorientated.[57]

At a small station, the Regiment had to wait for a southbound train, overflowing with 'panick-stricken' French fleeing Berezovka. Kondylis paid a visit to the train, where he was recognised by Lt. Colonel Geay, commander of the Mixed, Franco-Greek, Detachment that had been covering Berezovka. The two men had served next to each other on the Macedonian Front. 'C'est ce vieux brigand de C[ondyli]' said the French officer, half-smiling. Asked to provide information, he appeared at a complete loss, repeating: 'C'est mauvais. C'est très mauvais!' On their way back to their train, Kondylis asked Dragoumis to translate the term 'brigand.' The latter assured him that it was 'a rather friendly, and not at all offensive expression.'[58]

As the train approached the zone of operations, it was the turn of retreating Greeks to appear, following the railway line on foot and back to presumed safety. According to Karayiannis, only a few of them looked 'in one piece.' Suddenly, Kondylis jumped off the train, pistol in hand, and began shouting at them: 'Traitors of your fatherland, turn back. Turn back or I shall have you shot.'[59] After the fugitives ignored three such calls, Kondylis took aim and shot. Dragoumis saw a soldier near him make a few steps as if there was nothing amiss, and then, all of a sudden, drop dead upon some old railway sleepers.[60] Most of the strugglers carried on their flight. About a hundred did board the train. Predictably, they spread defeatism: 'Brothers, where are you going? You'd better not go to the Front, the Bolsheviks are scores and you, like us, are lost.'[61]

After spending the night at a small station –the officers squeezed inside the premises, the men outside in tents– the Regiment took battle positions around Serbka, a large but nearly deserted village some 35 km south of Berezovka. During the same night, Dragoumis and a number of Greek soldiers escorted five French sappers on their mission to destroy an iron railway bridge north of the village. The plan was to

[57] Delta, *Εκστρατεία*, 44.
[58] Delta, *op.cit*., 45.
[59] Karayiannis, *Ιστορία ενός στρατιώτη*, 73.
[60] Delta, *Εκστρατεία*, 45.
[61] Karayiannis, *Ιστορία ενός στρατιώτη*, 73.

prevent the enemy from launching a surprise attack, using an armoured locomotive – a trademark assault vehicle of the Russian Civil War.[62] Low temperatures, perhaps as low as -20°C, tormented the Franco-Greek party. One of them, a Frenchman, turned blue and nearly paralysed, before he was administered a dose of cognac and sent to Serbka. Karayiannis, who also participated in the escort, recalls the men 'arguing about who would carry the Frenchman on his back, thus benefitting from the warmth of his body.' The first attempt to blow up the bridge failed. The sappers returned to their task and, at dawn, a massive explosion cut it in two.[63]

The Bolsheviks responded with an artillery barrage which lasted all day. On the 26th of March, they attacked in force. When the attack began, Karayiannis was roasting a goose. He came to the decision that he would better let his lunch burn than have it eaten by the Bolsheviks. The latter's tactics of attack, described by Karayiannis as 'human ocean waves,' paid off. Fearing encirclement, the 3rd Regiment temporarily withdrew from Serbka.[64] For Karayiannis, who had felt the Bolsheviks breathing down his neck and come out alive, this particular enemy had displayed the rarest of human virtues: he did not shoot on the back the retreating enemy.[65] Plastiras and other sources, however, report the wholesale killing of wounded prisoners.[66]

Ironically, on that very day, General Nider arrived at Odessa to try and improve co-ordination between his troops and the French. Having

---

[62] Armoured cars were also used, by both the Bolsheviks and their opponents. The French also employed Renault light tanks, apparently to little effect. Some of them may have fallen into Bolshevik hands. Dragoumis mentions that his retreating unit observed 'very clearly in the horizon two huge grey tanks, like elephants, advancing:' Delta, *Εκστρατεία*, 62.

[63] Delta, *op.cit*., 48-51; Karayiannis, *Ιστορία ενός στρατιώτη*, 78-9. On the debilitating effect of the freezing cold on the men and their weapons, see GES-DIS, *Εκστρατευτικόν Σώμα*, 127.

[64] Colonel Manetas recalled his encounter with Kondylis, which indicates that the dour commander of the 3rd Regiment was not devoid of self-sarcasm: 'Do I not look like Napoleon returning from Moscow?,' he quipped when, completely white after retreating in snowfall, he reported to Manetas' headquarters: Delta, *Εκστρατεία*, 86-7.

[65] Karayiannis, *Ιστορία ενός στρατιώτη*, 82.

[66] Plastiras in Delta, *Πλαστήρας*, 3; Manetas in Delta, *Εκστρατεία*, 95; GES-DIS, *Εκστρατευτικόν Σώμα*, 116.

received Tsolakopoulos' reports with considerable delay (as Petsalis notes, throughout the campaign, Venizelos in Paris and his associates in Athens were without accurate information owing to unreliable communications), the Greek prime minister had instructed the A Corps commander 'to ensure, even to the extent of refusing Greek co-operation, that all future expeditions were undertaken by mixed Franco-Greek contingents.' However, when Nider reached Odessa, the Bolsheviks were about to launch their final attack.[67]

On the following day, the 27th, the 3rd Regiment, supported by French and Greek artillery, counter-attacked and retook Serbka. On the 28th it was relieved by the 5/42 *Evzones* Regiment under Plastiras, an 'Amynite' and ardent Venizelist like Kondylis, but of a very different demeanour. After ten days of continuous moving and fighting, Karayiannis recalls:

> 'Lice were festering, they had reached our eyelashes, and we could barely recognize each other, we all had grown beard, we were all clad in greatcoats with the collars raised, all of us wearing something around our head to keep warm, as if we were suffering of toothache.'[68]

An *Evzone* of Plastiras' regiment also left a vivid account of his experience at the Odessa front. He described, for instance, the high-handed methods used in disarming villages and interrogating suspected Bolshevik sympathisers, before sending them off to Odessa. When they did not march or fight, his fellow *Evzones* helped themselves to food and clothes left behind in abandoned homesteads; nor were they above acts of sexual harassment and random violence.[69]

Retreat

The Serbka line was finally abandoned on 31 March. The regiments of Kondylis and Platiras undertook to defend a new line, from Kubanka, to the east, to Mal Buyalik, to the west. By then, the Greek military

[67] Petsalis, 'Hellenism in Southern Russia,' 239.
[68] Karayiannis, *Ιστορία ενός στρατιώτη*, 84.
[69] Sotirios Alexopoulos in Drakontaeidis, *Η εκστρατεία*, 556-7.

leaders had good reasons to doubt the French resolve, and were considering an exit strategy. Already on 26 March, Nider had requested his government to prepare transports for the evacuation of Greek troops. As the infantry commander of the XIII Division, Colonel Konstantinos Manetas, put it, the only point for continuing the fight was 'to keep the honour and prestige of Greek arms high.'[70] Lacking reinforcements and fearing a local uprising, d'Espèrey finally sent orders for the evacuation of Odessa.[71] The French were the first to go. The protection of the port and the line of retreat was entrusted to the Greek II Division.[72]

After several days of delaying action, the two regiments of the XIII Division were permitted to disengage. Physically exhausted and dispirited,[73] their men reached Odessa on 6 April. Karayiannis recalls the outskirts of the city being decked with red flags, ready to welcome the Bolsheviks. At night, the warships in the harbour were scanning the city with their blinding searchlights – 'the Eye of Polyphemus,' as the Greek soldiers dubbed them. Their guns were the principal insurance towards the safe evacuation of troops and civilians. At some point, Bolshevik activists scattered brochures in Greek, calling the troops to give up the fight and leave.[74] Five days later, the Regiment crossed the Dniester into Bessarabia. In all, 15,000 men and 1,000 vehicles crossed the Dniester, losing only one man and a two-wheel cart.[75] Among them were the patients, sick and wounded, of the II Military Hospital. For these men's nursing and safe exit, Eleni Vasilopoulou, Angeliki and Oliga Fikiori, members of the Athenian aristocracy who had volunteered as nurses and possibly were the only female presence in the Greek expeditionary force, were awarded the Greek War Cross.[76]

---

[70] Manetas in Delta, *Εκστρατεία*, 83; GES-DIS, *Εκστρατευτικόν Σώμα*, 162.
[71] According to Bujac (*Les Campagnes*, 209), the order was issued on 2 April. Petsalis ('Hellenism in Southern Russia,' 241) dates it a day earlier.
[72] Munholland, 'The French Army,' 57.
[73] First-hand accounts record the acute lack of rest and sleeplessness rather than battle fatigue as the main source of physical exhaustion: Plastiras in Delta, *Πλαστήρας*, 42-3; Dragoumis in Delta, *Εκστρατεία*, 65-8; Karayiannis, *Ιστορία ενός στρατιώτη*, 80, 96; Alexopoulos in Drakontaeidis, *Η εκστρατεία*, 556-7.
[74] Karayiannis, *Ιστορία ενός στρατιώτη*, 97.
[75] GES-DIS, *Εκστρατευτικόν Σώμα*, 215-6.
[76] Karakassonis, *Ιστορία*, 197.

Some thirty thousand civilians also left the city, following the retreating Allies or boarding ships at the harbour. Perhaps one third of them were ethnic Greeks – out of a pre-war population of 25,000.[77] Despite strong initial reservations, the Greek government eventually accepted them, as well as those who would later leave Crimea. About half of these refugees disembarked in Salonika.[78]

Once again, horses proved their value as an apple of discord, this time between Greeks and French. Amidst the chaos of the river crossing, a Greek private spotted a beautiful, unsaddled Hungarian horse. He mounted it, intending to offer it as a gift to his company commander. Yet French soldiers intervened, forced the Greek to dismount and took the horse. When the incident became known to the Greek soldier's unit, his comrades took up arms and lined up for battle before the French camp. Then Kondylis turned up with a lieutenant as an interpreter. They sought out the French commander, a 'stocky' man who did not reciprocate his visitors' military salute and pretended not to recognise their status. When they told him they were Greek officers, he allegedly grumbled 'Mes couilles' or something similar. This provoked the sturdy Greek lieutenant to punch the Colonel in the head, throwing his kepi several yards away. Kondylis pulled out his revolver and stuck it on the Frenchman's temple, repeating to him his favourite punch line: 'In the name of the law and of Kondylis.' The French officer relented and ordered the horse returned to the Greeks who, according to the narrator of this story, used it as pack animal.[79]

A whole herd of horses was the prize in the case of Plastiras' 5/42 Regiment. Once in Bessarabia, the French sought to sequester the White Russian officers' horses and ship them to Denikin's forces at Batum. Indignant at such treatment, several Russian officers chose to offer their

---

[77] Soviet sources give an estimated population of 600,000 in Odessa: Avgitidis, *Η στρατιωτική επέμβαση*, 158.

[78] Petsalis, 'Hellenism in Southern Russia,' 241-2; Dendramis, *Akropolis*, 10/23.4.1919, in Drakontaeidis, *Η εκστρατεία*, 578; Konstantinos G. Diogos, *Περί ανοήτου ταύτης εκστρατείας: Ο Ελευθέριος Βενιζέλος και η συμμετοχή της Ελλάδας στην εκστρατεία της Ουκρανίας (Νοέμβριος 1918-Απρίλιος 1919*) (About this Stupid Campaign: Eleftherios Venizelos and Greece's Participation in the Ukrainian Campaign), *Βαλκανικά Σύμμεικτα*, 14-15 (2003-4), 134-5.

[79] Karayiannis, *Ιστορία ενός στρατιώτη*, 98-9.

beloved animals to the Greeks. Plastiras gratefully accepted. As a result of this offer and a number already seized as spoils of war, his *Evzones* should be able to form a mounted detachment of some 80 horses. Once again, the French intervened and tried to take the animals. Plastiras categorically refused to turn them over and reproached the French emissary for the 'inexcusable and unkind conduct of [his] general.'[80]

Assessing this phase of the campaign, Petsalis attributed its failure 'to the casual character, the poor strength and erratic strategy of the allied effort in general, and to the indifference and corruption of the French troops in particular.' In his view, the Greek troops 'fought with great bravery but they found themselves greatly outnumbered.' Petsalis acknowledges that Venizelos and the Greek government were ultimately responsible 'for the misery and hopelessness' of the men: they had acceded to the French demand in order to improve Greece's image in Paris and promote her irredentist claims.[81]

Sebastopol

Following the evacuation of Odessa, the only Greek units remaining on Ukrainian soil were those belonging to the 2nd Regiment, XIII Division, under Lt. Colonel Neokosmos Grigoriadis. Based in Sebastopol, the Regiment had to cover far-flung outposts as well as to keep order in Sebastopol which Grigoriadis described as a hotbed of Bolshevik subversion.[82]

Nearly two weeks after the Regiment's arrival, the Bolsheviks broke through the White Russian defences of the Perekop Isthmus, threatening to advance on the southern ports held by the Allies. In early April, the pre-dreadnaught battleship *Limnos*, while patrolling the south-east coast of the Crimea, moored outside the port of Feodosiya (Theodosia). A landing party from the ship found itself in 'a dead city, deserted,' where 'only animal sounds were heard and wild cats were roaming the dark streets.' On the following day, a Greek lieutenant turned up, es-

[80] Delta, *Πλαστήρας*, 49-50.
[81] Petsalis, 'Hellenism in Southern Russia,' 239.
[82] Delta, *Εκστρατεία*, 150-1.

corted by men of the signal corps and asked to be taken aboard the battleship. Once there, he gave the flag a military salute, kneeled and crossed himself and kissed the deck floor as if it was the soil of the fatherland. He then reported to the captain and asked for the embarkation of his *Evzones*, who had retreated from the railway station of Taganash,[83] some 170 km to the north. According to the warrant officer's description, after repeating their commanding officer's ritual, the *Evzones* spent the entire day on the deck, 'sitting around the gun turrets, preferably right under the axis of the 12-inch guns, which offered them the sense of complete safety.'[84] They were joined by civilians, among them Kleon Triantafyllou, alias 'Attic.' soon to become the most famous Greek popular composer of his day, who had chosen to tour the Greek communities of the region at a rather turbulent time!

A few days later, on 17 April 1919, the Bolsheviks offered a truce. The French High Command decided to accept it and started preparations for the evacuation of Sebastopol.[85] The city was being defended by 2,000 Greek and 2,400 French troops. On the previous day, the French 175th Regiment had mutinied, leaving the Greeks to hold the line with the aid of Algerian and Senegalese *tirailleurs*. With the Bolsheviks in sight, the 'mutiny virus' spread to the crews of the French fleet, including the battleships *France*, *Vergniaud*, and *Mirabeau*, which lay in a drydock awaiting repair. On the 17th, when ordered to fire against the enemy, the gunners of the *France* refused to man their posts and took refuge in the ship's latrines. Two days later, they declined to uncover before the flag.

On the 19th, Easter Sunday, French sailors joined locals in a demonstration, complete with red banners and Bolshevik slogans. When they reached the Panorama Gardens, at the centre of the Greek Regiment's defence line, they began shouting 'Down with Greece,' 'Down with Romania,' and the like. Then, they passed from the Greek garrison headquarters, where a company of the 2nd Regiment was billeted. According to the Regiment's account, the demonstrators became 'extremely provocative.' The company's orders were to repel crowds even

[83] Avgitidis, *Η στρατιωτική επέμβαση*, 164.
[84] Haratsis, *Η πρώτη επέμβαση*, 88-9.
[85] GES-DIS, *Εκστρατευτικόν Σώμα*, 241.

with the use of arms, but matters were complicated owing to the presence of French sailors, quite recognisable despite their having removed the red pom-poms from their bonnets and wearing them as red badges on their chest. The Greek captain in charge sought and failed to get instructions from Grigoriadis. He then contacted the French garrison commander, who told him to disperse the demonstrators. As exhortations and warnings were not heeded, the soldiers shot in the air. Thereupon, demonstrators allegedly opened direct fire. In the ensuing melee, Greek fire killed five civilians and three French sailors. The demonstration was eventually broken up, but the mutineers threatened revenge against the Greek units and warships in the port.[86]

Eventually, in the morning of 21 April 1919, the arrival of four British battleships under Vice-Admiral Somerset Gough-Calthorpe, Commander of the British Mediterranean Fleet, helped to restore order. Upon arrival, Calthorpe saw it fit to pay tribute to the discipline of the Greek units. In a cable to the Greek government, he stated: 'Today, the Greek soldiers and sailors can be proud of being Greek.'[87] On that same day a delegation from the Red Army visited Vice Admiral Kakoulidis on board the *Kilkis*. Professing friendly feelings towards the Greek nation, they sought to dispel anxiety regarding the fate of the Greek communities of Crimea. In fact, Ioannis Stavridakis, the diplomatic agent of Athens in the region, without consulting his government, had already instructed the Greek consular authorities to establish relations with the local Soviets. For their part, the Bolsheviks gave him a signed declaration in which they accepted most of the demands made on behalf of the Greek communities.[88] By way of reciprocation, Grigoriadis set up a committee of indemnities and agreed to pay the city Soviet the rather symbolic sum of 10,800 roubles (or 1,860 drs.) out of the officers' coffers for damages caused during the recent fighting.[89] The city was eventually turned over to the Bolsheviks on 29 April.

---

[86] GES-DIS, *op.cit*., 241-2; Haratsis, *Η πρώτη επέμβαση*, 93-8; Karakassonis, *Ιστορία*, 263-6.
[87] GES-DIS, *op.cit*, 242.
[88] Petsalis, 'Hellenism in Southern Russia,' 245-6.
[89] Nider, *Η εκστρατεία*, 385.

Postscript

Greek warships continued to patrol the Ukrainian coastline. At some point, on 10 May 1919, *Panther*'s sister ship, *Aetos* (Eagle), sent three junior officers ashore in a boat. As one of them later recalled, upon arrival, he noticed two 'Bolsheviks' on higher ground overlooking the Greek sailors – one of them with his rifle at the ready. Lieutenant A. Triantafyllidis got out first to tie up the boat. Then one of the two men addressed him in broken French and the following dialogue ensued:

> 'What are you?'
> 'Officers of the Greek Navy. And that over there is our ship.'
> 'Of the Greek [Navy]?,' asked the other man in puzzlement.
> The Greek officer nodded 'Yes.'
> 'And what do you want here?'

Triantafyllidis did not reply, but simply looked at his fellow officers, who might not understand French.

> 'Did you come here to wage war against us? Why? What have you got against us? What have we done to you?'

Triantafyllidis did not recall saying anything in reply. The two armed locals stood aside, staring at the Greeks who went about the business for which they had come ashore. Several years later, Triantafyllidis, by then a retired officer with a distinguished career, still remembered the look of puzzlement in the 'Bolshevik''s face.[90]

The accounts of middle-ranking and senior officers who took part in the Ukrainian campaign, all of them with service record in the Venizelist Army of 1916-17, are unanimous[91] that the campaign was ill-conceived and ill-executed, the French attitude abominable, but the Greek army had fought heroically, was not defeated, and its sacrifices[92] did not go in vain: they were the indispensable price paid for the Allied decision to authorise the Greek landing at Smyrna, in May 1919. Of course, that decision had

---

[90] Haratsis, *Η πρώτη επέμβαση*, 100.
[91] Delta, *Πλαστήρας*, ιδ΄.
[92] According to the official estimate, they amounted to 398 dead and missing, 657 wounded. In his account, Petros Karakassonis, commander of the 34th Regiment, speaks of 431 dead and missing: Karakassonis, *Ιστορία*, 205.

actually come as a reaction to arbitrary Italian landings elsewhere in southern Asia Minor. Yet it could be argued that Clemenceau, at least, would not have consented had Venizelos refused to send troops across the Black Sea, six months earlier. All along, however, the Greek prime minister had been fretting about the negative impact of 'this stupid campaign,' as he described it, on Greek public opinion.[93]

More immediate was the impact on the morale of the troops tied down in Bessarabia. As a result of inactivity, home-sickness and Bolshevik propaganda, incidents of insubordination and desertions were on the increase. The A Corps command set up a special service at the port cities of Galați and Brăila on the Danube, with the task of intercepting deserters, in co-ordination with the Romanian authorities. It also sought to enlighten the latter about the need to check the activity of 'Jewish propagandists,' apparently in the service of the Bolsheviks, who, in the eyes of the Greek command, were the prime movers of desertions.[94]

According to both official and private accounts of the campaign, the Greek landing at Smyrna, on 15 May 1919, came as a morale booster. A week later, Venizelos notified Nider that his A Corps was soon to sail for the coveted port city. Karayiannis records this 'Smyrna effect,' after Nider himself broke the news to the men of the XIII Division:

> 'We shall go to Asia Minor. We shall go to Smyrna.' He had not got the chance to say another word, his troops had seized him, raised him on their arms and shouted: 'Long live our Corps commander.' That fixed it (Εκείνο ήταν όλο το φάρμακο).[95]

[93] Diogos, *Περί ανοήτου*, 135.
[94] Nider, *Η εκστρατεία*, 412-4.
[95] Karayiannis, *Ιστορία ενός στρατιώτη*, 109-110. Plastiras refers to a similar reaction from his *Evzones*, when Nider visited the 5/42 Regiment some time between 23 and 28 May 1919: Delta, *Πλαστήρας*, 52; cf. Nider, *Η εκστρατεία*, 418-9; Karakassonis, *Ιστορία*, 269. The evacuation of the Greek expeditionary force was completed by 17 July: GES-DIS, *Εκστρατευτικόν Σώμα*, 260.