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## **Macedonia in the 1940s**

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### **I. The War, 1940-1941**

On the eve of the Italian invasion, Greek military preparations still largely focused on Eastern Macedonia: until Mussolini annexed Albania in April 1939, Greek defence planning provided only for a conflict with Bulgaria. In spite of recent developments and the ominous appearance of non-Balkan powers on the scene, the Greek political and, in particular, military leaders remained almost obsessed with the intentions of the Sofia governments, which no longer concealed their revisionist aspirations. Greek planning was clearly defensive and, in accordance with the conventional military thought of the time, laid particular emphasis on the network of fortified strongholds along the Greek-Bulgarian frontier, the so-called 'Metaxas line'. The bulk of the Greek army in northern Greece remained orientated towards the same sector.

This situation did not substantially change after the outbreak of the war in Europe. Naturally, the Italian presence in Albania had led the Greek General Staff in May 1939 to modify its contingency planning so as to cover an attack from Albanian soil. However, the spectre of Bulgarian aggression still loomed large enough for the fortifications programme to continue on an even greater scale: between April 1939 and October 1940, the 'Metaxas line' absorbed funds and human labour far in excess not only of the meagre expenditure on defences along the Greek-Albanian border but also of the total expenditure on defence constructions during the previous three years. Moreover, no significant transfer of troops was effected west of the Aliacmon river, as the Greek government wished to avoid any action that might be interpreted as a provocation by the Italians. 1

As had been the case a quarter of a century earlier, the strategic importance of Macedonia, and especially the key position of the port of Thessaloniki, was not missed by the belligerents. This time it was the commander of the French forces in the Eastern Mediterranean, General Maxim Weygand, who canvassed the idea of repeating the precedent of the First World War and setting up a Balkan front based on Thessaloniki; from there, the Allied forces could strike at the Romanian oil-fields, the main source of fuel for Germany's mechanized army. In fact, such a prospect seriously preoccupied Hitler, but the forces available to the Allies were totally insufficient for the scheme to be successfully carried out. Locally, only the Greek military leadership appeared

inclined to discuss the French plans seriously. The British, for their part, remained seriously sceptical throughout, preferring instead to promote a bloc of neutral Balkan states. They believed, moreover, that an Allied initiative in the Balkans would push Mussolini, still neutral, into the War on Hitler's side. In the event, the French collapse in June 1940 put an end to all talk on a Balkan front.

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As the Italian attack looked imminent, Greek defences in Macedonia were better organized with the setting up of the Army Section of Western Macedonia (ASWM), which on 28 October 1940 consisted of the IX Division, the 4th Brigade and the Pindus detachment. Upon the outbreak of hostilities, the ASWM command was entrusted to Lt General Ioannis Pitsikas, until then commander of the Third Army Corps. As the main Italian offensive took place in Epirus, the troops in Macedonia did not face serious problems in carrying out their defensive tasks. The Pindus detachment, however, which covered a most sensitive sector in the centre of the front, had to bear the full thrust of the Giulia mountain division. Although heavily outnumbered, the Greek unit managed to arrest and then repel the Italian assault, at the cost of heavy casualties, including its seriously wounded commander, Colonel Davakis. Subsequently, as there were no indications of an imminent threat from Bulgaria, two divisions from Eastern Macedonia were added to the ASWM, which, on 14 November, successfully took part in the Greek counter-attack. Within a week, its troops triumphantly entered Korytsa.<sup>3</sup>

On the home front, after some initial panicky reactions to Italian air raids on urban centres (Thessaloniki in particular) the civilian population displayed remarkable courage and calm firmness, while the young people of Macedonia, along with those in the rest of the country, enthusiastically responded to the call-up. The dictatorship, of course, continued its strict control of every social and political activity. Yet during the first days of the war, its administrative apparatus in the Macedonian capital was reported to be in a state of paralysis, with the work of civilian relief passing into the hands of private organizations assisted by the Army. The security forces, however, displayed remarkable efficiency in the case of the sizeable Italian community of Thessaloniki. Its more suspect elements had already been under surveillance and were rounded up in the wake of the Italian attack. The rest of its members, at least those unable to follow the Italian consul on his way home, were confined to camps near Athens.<sup>4</sup>

The Italian *débâcle* drew the attention of the German High Command to northern Greece. The chances for a Balkan front with British participation, in the rear of the Axis, were extremely limited. Yet, Berlin was particularly

concerned with the possibility of the RAF operating from bases in northern Greece against the valuable Romanian oil-wells, especially in view of its plans for a Russian campaign in the coming spring. In fact, in early 1941, the supreme commander of the British forces in the Middle East, General Archibald Wavell, proposed to Metaxas the sending of a token British force to Thessaloniki. As no serious contribution to Greek defence was to be expected, the Greek Premier, shortly before his death, politely turned down the offer. 5

In view of a German intervention in the Balkans, the British attempted to reach an understanding with the Greek Command on a common defence strategy. At this point, a fundamental difference of opinion became manifest which tended to undermine the chances of effectively defending at least part of the Greek soil. The Greek High Command, and above all the commander-in-chief, General Alexandros Papa-gos, insisted upon maintaining the Greek positions in Albania while concentrating the main defensive effort in Macedonia on the 'Metaxas line'. In contrast, the British stressed the need for a less extended front, which, however, would mean abandonig parts of the Greek homeland to the enemy. 6 What was more, the British hardly concealed their own inability to mate a decisive contribution. Yet at a summit meeting in Athens on 22 February 1941, the withdrawal of the Greek forces to a line along the Aliacmon was agreed as the basis of joint defence planning. The British party left with the impression that preparations were to begin forthwith, accompanied by the gradual transfer of troops from Eastern Macedonia to the new line. Instead, the Greek Command considered that the intentions of Yugoslavia and Turkey, still Greece's partners in the Balkan Pact, had to be ascertained first. 7

In the event, despite strenuous British efforts to win them over into a common front, both Belgrade and Ankara proved unwilling to commit themselves. Moreover, the regime of Prince Paul and Premier Dragisa Cvetkovic already negotiated the accession of Yugoslavia to the so-called Tripartite Pact of the Axis and its associates: as a quid pro quo, Belgrade sought part of Greek Macedonia including Thessaloniki. 8 Sofia had been involved in similar talks, too: on 1 March 1941, having received promises of territorial acquisitions in Macedonia and access to the Aegean, the Bulgarian government of Bogdan Filov acceded to the Tripartite. On the following day, German troops began to flow into the country. 9

It was clear that a German offensive in the Balkans was only a matter of weeks away. London put pressure on Athens to accept British troops on Greek soil and to proceed without further delay with the organization of the Aliacmon line. General Papagos reiterated his previous opposition to giving up the front in Albania and the Metaxas line. Eventually, a compromise was reached,

whereby the Greek government consented to the despatch of a British Expeditionary Force (BEF), which would take up positions along the Aliacmon line. The idea, however, of the withdrawal of the Greek forces to this line was still rejected, contrary to the suggestions of the local commands in Western and Eastern Macedonia. 10 In the event, some precautions were taken in Eastern Macedonia, as the authorities started to remove livestock and material which could be of use to the invader. These measures had a dis-heartening effect on the local population, which already faced with dread the spectre of invasion. Those who had the means began to leave, while the government sent a party of ministers to distribute foodstuffs and assurances in a last-minute attempt to shore up faltering civilian morale.11

Events moved rapidly: on 25 March, Cvetkovic signed the protocol for the accession of Yugoslavia to the Tripartite, only to be overthrown by an army coup two days later. The new government of General Simovic repudiated the protocol and decreed a general mobilization. On 6 April German troops invaded Yugoslavia and simultaneously the 12th German Army, commanded by General Wilhelm von Liszt, commenced its attack upon Greece. In Macedonia the situation had remained almost unchanged, except for the addition of two British infantry divisions and one armoured brigade, which had only in part arrived on the Aliacmon line. The hastily assembled Army Section of Central Macedonia could do little to contribute to the defence of the area, as its units, according to an official assessment, were of "seriously diminished fighting value". Instead, the battleworthy troops in Eastern Macedonia were kept static behind the Metaxas line, in spite of the request of the local command to have them transferred to the Aliacmon line: Papagos had made it clear that he expected from them "only to keep high the honour of Greece and that of the Greek arms". Indeed, the forts put up a stout resistance for three days, but the 40th German Corps, moving west through the Vardar valley, penetrated deep into Greek territory, thus outflanking the troops defending Eastern Macedonia. The ASEM commander, Lt General Georgios Bakopoulos, after informing the Greek High Command of the desperate position of his units, took the initiative of surrendering to the commander of the 2nd German Armoured Brigade, which had already reached the outskirts of Thessaloniki. The protocol of capitulation was signed at the city's German Consulate on 9 April, and on the following day the defenders of the forts laid down their arms.12

Meanwhile, the Army in Albania continued to hold its positions while the Germans ominously approached its right flank. Only on 12 April, after the Aliacmon line had been broken through and the Greek forces were threatened with encirclement, was the order for withdrawal given. Yet under the

circumstances, confusion and disorder prevailed as the troops began their hasty retreat. Many men deserted and went home as their units withdrew. On 23 April the ASWM commander, Lt General Georgios Tsola-koglou, against the objections - and the inertia too - of the High Command, signed the final protocol of surrender in the presence of the commanders of the German and Italian troops. By that time, Macedonia was under the complete control of von Liszt's Army, at the mercy of Hitler's designs for a `New Order' in Europe. 13

## **II. Occupation and Resistance, 1941-1944**

### ***The Triple Occupation. The Bulgarian Penetration***

The German conquerors perceived a special strategic interest in Macedonia. Thessaloniki and its environs, in particular, were of crucial importance for the control of the airspace in the Eastern Mediterranean, while the main lines of communication and important supply routes to the rest of Greece and North Africa passed through the area. For these reasons, the Germans maintained direct control of the region between the Strymon and Axios rivers, making the Macedonian capital the centre of their military activity in the southern Balkans and the seat of the Saloniki-Aegaeis Command. Moreover, the Macedonian lands were of significant economic value. Tobacco, cotton and other agricultural products as well as the considerable mineral wealth attracted German interest: systematic exploitation of the region's resources was carried out by means either of wholesale acquisitions for valueless occupation currency or outright confiscation. Mines, even in the Bulgarian-occupied zone, were placed under direct German control, while businesses producing goods or services of value to the conqueror were obliged to collaborate. At the same time, the occupation authorities undertook various construction projects, roads in particular, in order to meet their military requirements. Many Greek citizens were used as forced labour on these projects.<sup>1</sup>

The so-called Triple Occupation was effected with the transfer of Western Macedonia to Italian hands, while on 17 April Bulgaria was allowed to occupy the region east of the Strymon as well as Western Thrace. In both the German and the Italian zones, the Greek administration and police authorities were preserved, except for the non-recognition of prefects by the Italians. The occupation regime set up by General Tsolakoglou entrusted to reliable army officers the unrewarding task of representing the last vestiges of Greek sovereignty in those zones. The former military commander of Thessaloniki, Lt General Nikolaos Rizos Rangavis, was appointed governor-general of

Macedonia. Tsolakoglou's former aide, Colonel Athanasios Chrysochoou, was appointed inspector-general of the prefectures of Macedonia with the specific task of dealing with foreign propaganda and secessionist activities, which became pronounced even in the first year of Occupation.

In Eastern Macedonia the complete abolition of the Greek authorities was the first step in Sofia's plan towards the consolidation of the Bulgarian presence throughout Macedonia until the time of final frontier arrangements. Organs of the Bulgarian government manned all public posts and undertook to implement a policy of systematic 'Bulgarization' of the occupied territories. At first, the use of the Bulgarian language was made compulsory in both the civil service and church and education, while its knowledge became a prerequisite for practising most professions. Under these conditions, many clergymen, teachers and professional people were obliged to flee to the German zone. In the economic field, those businessmen who were not deprived of their concerns were forced to accept Bulgarian partners. In the city of Kavala alone seven hundred firms and shops passed into the hands of Sofia's favourites. Moreover, as it quickly became clear that propaganda was totally ineffectual among the solidly Greek population, a reign of violence and terror was imposed in an effort to provoke a mass exodus of the inhabitants, those of refugee origin in particular. 2

Almost from the first days of Occupation, unimpeded by the Italian authorities, Sofia's agents infiltrated Western Macedonia, too, in order to prepare the ground for the realization of further Bulgarian claims. The disruption of Greek authority allowed local pro-Bulgarian elements to set up 'liberation committees' and even to replace Greek local authorities in some Slavophone villages. In the German zone 'Bulgarian Clubs' were set up in every major town, starting in Thessaloniki, the centre of their activity, in May 1941. The cruel daily reality of Occupation, the acute problem of subsistence and people's fear for their own safety, enabled the instruments of Sofia to make some headway, particularly in the countryside, by distributing essentials and special membership cards which provided some security vis-à-vis the Occupation authorities. 3

The reaction of the Tsolakoglou government to the continuous erosion of Greek sovereignty in Macedonia was mainly expressed with representations and protests to the Germans. At the same time, its representatives in the region, assisted by the clergy, intellectuals and former politicians, were active in setting up societies and committees which undertook to sustain materially and morally the Greek population. In mid-July 1941, a group of officers encouraged by Chrysochoou founded a secret organization named 'Defenders of Northern Greece' (Yperaspistai tis Voreiou Ellados, YBE). This group initially desisted

from dynamic forms of resistance and many of its members shared the view of the occupation regime that the Bulgarian menace could be met by winning over the Germans in favour of the Greek interests.<sup>4</sup> However, these tactics soon reached a dead end. In spite of the conscientious effort of the local Greek authorities to be as cooperative as possible, the Occupation authorities tolerated, when they did not actually abet, Bulgarian activity which was orchestrated by liaison officers placed at the headquarters of German and Italian garrisons; among them, lieutenants Anton Kalchev and Nikola Mladenov who were notoriously active in the districts of Edessa and Florina, respectively. The Italians overtly encouraged secessionist activity in their zone. As to the German attitude, it became unequivocally clear in November 1941, when, after another protest concerning Bulgarian excesses, Governor-General Rangavis was forced to resign on grounds of 'anti-Axis policy'.<sup>5</sup>

### ***The First Acts of Resistance. The Revolt in Eastern Macedonia***

Armed reaction to the enemy occupation was not long delayed. Even in the first days after the Germans' entry, leaflets were circulated calling on the populace to resist; civilians offered shelter to stranded British soldiers; and acts of sabotage were not uncommon, culminating in the bombing attempt against the premises of the Fascist EEE organization and the destruction of the railway engine depot in Thessaloniki in late summer 1941. Behind these acts was Eleutheria (Liberty), the first resistance organization founded in Macedonia in May 1941, on the joint initiative of the local KKE organization, the so-called Macedonian Bureau, and a group of cashiered Venizelist officers led by Colonel Dimitrios Psarros and Captain Merkouriou. Contacts with local Venizelist politicians were unproductive and control of Eleutheria remained largely in Communist hands. Yet sharp differences arose regarding the organization's course of action: those members who had just returned from internal exile and expressed the views of the KKE leadership considered that organizational ground-work and the pressing daily problems of the people should be given absolute priority. In the event, the trend towards armed resistance prevailed, and, in the summer 1941, the first guerrillas appeared on the scene. Based on Mt Kerdyllia, two bands, 'Odysseus Androutsos' and 'Athanasios Diakos' - named after heroes of the 1821 Greek Revolution - became active in the regions of Nigrita and Kilkis, respectively. Other bands appeared in the districts of Kozani and Florina. In search of arms, they first concentrated their activity on police stations. However, their first raids against the occupying forces were met with atrocious Nazi reprisals. An ambush on a German vehicle along the road from Thessaloniki to Serres on 22 September was followed by the burning of ten villages on Mt Kerdyllia and the mass

execution of their adult male population. The brutality of the German reaction terrorized the villagers into refusing supplies and shelter to the guerrillas. At the same time, the security mechanism of the Occupation authorities dealt severe blows to Eleutheria's network in Thessaloniki. Military barracks were used as concentration camps for hundreds of civilians, many of them rounded up at random and detained as hostages. By October 1941 armed resistance in the German zone had virtually paralysed. 6

The tragic outcome of the first mass uprising in occupied Europe which became known as the 'Drama events' also contributed to the setback of early resistance activity in Macedonia. In Eastern Macedonia, the intolerable conditions created by Bulgarian tyranny and the ruthless economic exploitation in which the Germans were directly involved, favoured a violent outburst. The events were preceded by persistent rumours to the effect that a rebellion in Bulgaria itself was imminent. On the night of 28 to 29 September 1941, groups of armed men fell upon the Bulgarian authorities at Doxato, Agios Athanasios, Horisti and other villages in the district of Drama. Members of the local KKE organization, led the militant secretary for Drama, Alekos Hamalidis, played a leading part in the uprising. On the morning of 29 September the Bulgarian army was withdrawn from the city of Drama, while in the countryside it looked as if the Bulgarian authorities had been abolished. After a dubious two-day pause, the occupying forces set about the systematic and merciless suppression of the uprising. At first, they swept through Drama indiscriminately shooting at civilians; then followed an orgy of mass arrests and executions. In the countryside, the Bulgarian troops did not confine themselves to the persecution and annihilation of the rebels: their artillery and air force pounded at many villages, forcing their inhabitants to take to the hills. Destruction was completed by army units, which, after looting, set fire to dozens of settlements. The town of Doxato, where the revolt first broke out, became the target of Bulgarian venom for the third time since 1913. All male inhabitants between 16 and 60 years of age faced the firing squads and the town was set ablaze. Bulgarian reprisals soon extended to the rest of Eastern Macedonia. Mass arrests took place in Serres, while in Kavala thirty prominent citizens, including a number of Jews, were executed. The bloody result of the 'suppression campaign', which went on for several days after all armed resistance had been quashed, was appalling: the representatives of the occupation regime in Macedonia as well as sources of the Greek government-in-exile reported 15,000 dead, while the lowest estimates gave a number of no less than 4,000-5,000. Many thousands of civilians, stripped of all their belongings, had to abandon their homes and seek refuge in the German zone. Their property was confiscated and given to Bulgarian settlers. The acuteness of the problem



created by the influx of the famished fugitives forced the Germans to intervene with the Bulgarian authorities and the exodus was temporarily arrested in mid-November 1941. 7 The suppression of the revolt meant for the KKE the destruction of its most numerous and solid organization in Macedonia: many of its members were killed, including Hamalidis, while the rest were instructed to pass into the German zone. As a result, the party was not to recover its ability for action in Eastern Macedonia until the last stage of Occupation.8

There are many questions regarding both the causes and the actual circumstances of the revolt of Drama, which may remain unanswered possibly even after Bulgarian sources become available. The existing evidence, mainly the reports of the Greek government-in-exile and the occupation authorities, both Greek and German, and the accounts of KKE members points at a significant measure of Bulgarian involvement in instigating the revolt. What is more, local Communists such as Hamalidis, who played a crucial part, maintained contacts with Bulgarian soldiers and policemen and could be easily provoked. 9 As it happened, the revolt clearly served the designs of the Sofia government for a surgical operation in the national composition of the occupied territories. In October 1941 a decree provided for the resettlement of Bulgarians who had left Macedonia under the terms of the Neuilly Convention of mutual emigration. The settlements of the Greek refugees became the primary target of this policy: following the Drama atrocities, some 90,000 inhabitants of refugee origin were forced from their homes in Eastern Macedonia and Thrace. After June 1942 the politics of 'ethnic cleansing' were stepped up with the imposition of Bulgarian nationality on all residents of the occupied Greek and Yugoslav territories. Those who refused to comply were obliged to leave 'Greater Bulgaria' within a fixed period, losing at the same time their rights to real property. Their place was taken by Bulgarian settlers, whose number in the Greek lands reached 50,000. 10 This policy aimed at securing at least part of the occupied territories regardless of the outcome of the war. The threat was perceived by the Greek government-in-exile, and, in March 1943, its repeated representations led the British government to declare that "all [Bulgarian] measures..., for which the Bulgarian Government must be held responsible, will have to be undone at the end of the war".11

### ***The Conditions in the German Zone. The 'Final Solution' in Greek Macedonia***

The inhuman reality of Occupation was most painfully felt in the German zone from the severe winter of 1941-1942 onwards. The population already suffered from shortages or a total lack of most essentials and fuel. Although the privation did not assume the tragic proportions of famine, as it was the case in Athens,

the relentless exploitation of local resources by the conqueror along with the dramatic contraction of imports seriously undermined the living standards of the population, the urban population in particular. Requisitions and the lack of raw materials debilitated production and boosted unemployment, while the galloping inflation obliterated the purchasing capacity of the working classes. Privation and the fall in the standards of medical care resulted in a dramatic increase of mortality. Under the circumstances, from which foreign agents - such as the Bulgarian Club - sought to benefit, a significant number of persons, approximately ten thousand, were driven by despair into accepting the 'offer' of the occupation authorities to find employment in Germany. 12

The Jews in Macedonia, as in the rest of Europe, became the tragic symbol of Nazi brutality. Even in the early days of Occupation, the German authorities arrested the most prominent figures of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki and replaced its leaders with their own stooges. All Jewish newspapers were banned, while the Community's library and historic records were seized and subsequently destroyed. Many Jews were deprived of their homes and were crammed into strictly designated quarters. Oppression intensified in summer 1942, when thousands of Jews were subjected to forced labour on various projects, mainly road building, while the Community was forced to pay exorbitant amounts for exemptions. On 15 March 1943 the Nazis commenced the concentration of the entire Jewish population in the 'Baron Hirsch' suburb, from where, by August of that year, 49,000 persons were deported to the death camps.<sup>13</sup> In Bulgarian-occupied Eastern Macedonia the Jews met with no better fate: in March 1944 the Bulgarian authorities deported the bulk of the community, nearly 4,500 persons, and then supervised their transportation to the Katowice and Treblinka camps, from where no one was to return.<sup>14</sup>

### ***The Growth of the Resistance Movement***

Against this bleak background, the most important Greek resistance movement, the National Liberation Front (Ethniko Apeleutherotiko Metopo, or EAM) set up its organization in Thessaloniki in April 1942. Again, the initiative came from the - reorganized after Eleutheria's demise - Macedonian Bureau of the KKE and minor socialist and agrarian groups. It was preceded by the establishment of the Labour EAM, which already controlled the most important trade unions. There followed the emergence of EAM's military arm, the guerrilla bands of the National People's Liberation Army (Ethnikos Laikos Apeleutherotikos Stratos, ELAS). Mts Olympus, Pieria, Hasia and Tzena provided shelter to the guerrillas, who were initially organized in small groups of ten to fifteen men. Besides EAM and YBE, a number of resistance organizations without a clear political outlook were active in Macedonia: they

never acquired a mass character, being primarily charged with the collection and transmission of information and acts of sabotage in collaboration with the British secret services. Even in sorely tried Eastern Macedonia, information reaching the Greek government-in-exile indicated the rekindling of the resistance movement as early as in spring 1942. 15

The year 1943 was a turning point for the resistance movement, not only because of its considerable growth but also owing to civil strife, which in Macedonia broke out with particular vehemence. During that same year, the British factor made its presence felt. As the Allies were increasingly preoccupied with the opening of a front in the Old World, their interest in Greece revived. In the case of the British government, there were important post-war interests in the Eastern Mediterranean to be taken into account. When Italy was finally selected as the target of the Allied invasion, a diversion in the Balkans was deemed necessary. Greece was the obvious location. 16 The success of the plan, of course, postulated the cooperation of the local resistance forces, and such could mainly be produced by EAM/ELAS. Its strength was considerable, particularly in Western Macedonia, where it had already scored spectacular successes against the Italians. In fact, after a decisive encounter at Phardykamos in early March 1943, which ended in an entire battalion being captured, the Italian military presence was limited to guarding the main urban centres: for a while, the whole area west of the Aliacmon effectively came under guerrilla control. 17

Therefore, it was ELAS units with which the British Liaison Officers (BLO), who were dropped on Macedonia in the early months of 1943 first came into contact. Their principal mission was to promote the Allied diversion plan, code-named 'Animals'. At the same time, however, they undertook to examine the possibilities for the development of alternative, non-leftist organizations, which, if need be, could be used as a counter to EAM/ELAS. In the German zone there was YBE, which in June 1943 was renamed the Panhellenic Liberation Organization (Panellinios Apeleutherotiki Organosis, PAO). Yet, this predomi-nantly career officers' organization was handicapped by its belated recognition of the importance of armed struggle. This had already cost it many adherents, lower ranking officers in particular, some of whom subsequently joined ELAS. Moreover, in Thessaloniki an effort was made towards establishing a local branch of the National Republican Greek League (Ethnikos Dimokratikos Ellinikos Syndesmos, EDES), an Epirus-based organization headed by Colonel Napoleon Zervas, with the participation of retired Venizelist officers. It did not come to much, though, as some of the leading figures

involved were soon apprehended, while the attempts at organizing armed bands or concerting action with PAO failed.<sup>18</sup>

The British plan provided for the cooperation of all resistance groups under the banner of 'national bands', a device aimed at both pooling their resources for the success of operation 'Animals' and checking the virtual monopoly of ELAS in the countryside. Thus, in July 1943, while a Joint General Headquarters (GHQ) for all national guerrilla bands was being set up under the auspices of the British Military Mission, Major Nicholas Hammond, the commanding BLO in Macedonia, secured the agreement of EAM, PAO and EDES representatives to co-ordinate their activities under the supreme direction of the Allied General Headquarters, Middle East (GHQME). According to the agreement, each organization had the right to set up its own units anywhere and to be represented to the Joint GHQ on the sole condition that it was recognized as a 'national band' by the GHQME. This accord was a significant - however short-lived - achievement considering the mutual distrust, even hostility, that characterized relations between EAM/ELAS and the other resistance groups.<sup>19</sup>

On the basis of that agreement PAO proceeded with the formation of armed units, while an EDES band appeared in the district of Kilkis. Independent bands also emerged in Central and Eastern Macedonia, mainly composed of refugees, from Pontus in particular. In the region of Drama, nationalist guerrillas had already been active under the local chieftain, Antonios Phosteridis (alias Anton Tsaous). In the rest of Macedonia, however, the domination of EAM was indisputable. In June 1943 ELAS was restructured on the model of a regular army and its command in Western Macedonia was renamed the IX Division, in correspondence with the unit of the Greek Army based in the same region before the war. The intention was mainly political as, at that stage, neither the strength nor the composition of the ELAS units, understaffed as they were with professional soldiers, justified regular army pretensions. EAM, having taken the initiative in organizing a mass resistance movement and controlling the most powerful guerrilla force in the country, increasingly appeared as a political movement with a particular set of ideas regarding Greece's post-war course. In this respect, it promoted institutions of self-government and justice - in the form of 'people's tribunals' - in the areas controlled by ELAS.<sup>20</sup> Understandably, the EAM leadership saw the formation of armed bands by rival organizations with unease. Before long, ELAS started to disarm and disband the outnumbered units of PAO and EDES. These actions, not always bloodless, provoked the sharp reaction of the British Mission, which saw the feuds of the Greek guerrillas as endangering the success of the Allied plans. Thus, when in August 1943, only a month after the Thessaloniki

agreement, ELAS went ahead with the dissolution of all PAO bands west of the Axios, Major Hammond asked for the immediate suspension of supplies to ELAS in Macedonia, save those required for the execution of certain operations against the enemy.<sup>21</sup>

### ***The Slavophones, Bone of Contention***

The mopping-up operations of the occupation forces came as the nemesis in the drama of the Greek civil strife. In summer 1943 the Germans launched their first major operation against ELAS in Western Macedonia, which resulted in the fall and destruction of Siatista and a large number of villages in the regions of Kozani and Grevena. Meanwhile, Bulgarian penetration had assumed dangerous proportions. Taking advantage of Italian incompetence and the German need for releasing more troops for service on other fronts, since early 1943 Sofia had been seeking to extend its control over the rest of Macedonia. As the activities of Bulgarian agents intensified, Bulgarian units from occupied Yugoslavia often entered Greek soil and terrorized the population. In spite of their initial reservations, the Germans, under the pressing requirements of the Eastern Front, conceded on 8 July 1943 to the extension of the Bulgarian zone of occupation over the area between the Strymon and Axios rivers. At once, popular reaction broke out in mass demonstrations and strikes throughout the German zone, while the desperate representations of the Athens regime to the occupation authorities had only a temporary effect. Eventually, the capitulation of Italy in September 1943 forced the Germans to take control of Western Macedonia themselves with the occasional 'assistance' of Bulgarian forces.<sup>22</sup>

Bulgarian penetration had grave implications for the Resistance, EAM in particular. In Western Macedonia, the Italians had allowed Kalchev, Mladenov and their associates, among them many former IMRO members, to arm pro-Bulgarian elements and to set up the notorious Ohrana (Defence) bands in order to combat the increasing guerrilla activity. These bands, a resurgence of the komitaji legacy, became the nightmare of the local population. At the same time, arms were distributed to a number of 'reliable' Slavophone villages for use against the guerrillas.<sup>23</sup> The situation seemed to dictate an effort on the part of the Greek resistance to try to win over at least part of the Slavophone element, all the more so as a new challenge had emerged: increasing Yugoslav interference. Tito's partisan movement was already engaged in an effort to gain a foothold in southern Yugoslavia, where the Slav population had initially greeted the Bulgarian occupying forces as liberators. Soon, the partisans' attention turned to Greek Macedonia too.

During June and July 1943, Svetozar Vukmanovic-Tempo, Tito's lieutenant in southern Yugoslavia, at successive meetings with representatives of EAM and the Albanian resistance put forward the idea of a joint Balkan Headquarters to exercise supreme control over the partisan movements of Yugoslavia, Albania, Bulgaria and Greece. Moreover, with the professed aim of combating Bulgarian propaganda, Tempo asked for the recognition to the 'Macedonian people' of the right to self-determination as well as permission for the partisans to extend their activity among the Slavophone element in Greek Macedonia.<sup>24</sup> On the question of the setting up of a joint Balkan Headquarters, Andreas Tzimas, the EAM representative in the talks with Tempo, signed an accord on 25 June and the command of ELAS issued orders to this effect. The leadership of EAM, for its part, although perceiving certain advantages in cooperation with Tito's powerful movement, in the event rejected the apparent Yugoslav bid for leadership. Only a few days after Tzimas signed the accord, Georgios Siantos, secretary-general of the KKE and the EAM Central Committee, in a meeting with Tempo in Thessaly, repudiated the signature of his representative and the whole scheme was abandoned. EAM also rejected any reference to the 'national question' in Macedonia, since, according to Siantos, this "could blow (EAM's) whole work to pieces". To the Yugoslav slogan of self-determination, EAM and the KKE countered the recognition of equal rights to all minorities. There was an agreement, however, for political and military cooperation between Greek, Yugoslav and Albanian resistance units in adjacent areas. This meant in practice the unimpeded movement of Yugoslav partisans and instructors in the sensitive borderlands of Western Macedonia. Although it did not accept Yugoslav involvement in the organization of guerrilla bands in Slavophone areas, EAM consented in late 1943 to the establishment of a distinct organization, the Slav-Macedonian National Liberation Front (SNOF), which it attempted to keep under its control. Moreover, some ELAS officers, particularly those formerly serving in the Greek Army, undertook to check the activities of SNOF in the military field.<sup>25</sup> However, it soon became clear that EAM's decision had opened Pandora's box.\*

### ***The Outbreak of Civil Strife***

The fall of the fascist regime and the capitulation of Italy to the Allies in September 1943 proved advantageous to the EAM movement in northern Greece. In Macedonia the Italian units, already confined to Florina and Kastoria, surrendered to the Germans. However, on 12 September, only four days after the Italian armistice, four thousand troops of the Thessaly-based Pinerolo Division turned up at the ELAS headquarters in Western Macedonia, and, despite the orders of the Allied Command, handed over down all their

arms to the guerrillas. This heaven-sent arsenal contributed substantially to the strength of ELAS, yet it was to be used mainly in the fratricidal conflict which shortly broke out. 26

The simmering antagonism between EAM/ELAS and the rest soon culminated in a show-down. In Macedonia, EAM accused PAO of collaborating with the enemy. In fact, the regular contacts between some of its leading members and officials of the occupation regime had given cause for concern to both the Joint GHQ, where the admission of PAO was being postponed, and the GHQME. Soon, however, the Joint GHQ of the Greek guerrillas was to be a thing of the past. On 9 October ELAS launched a general offensive against the forces of EDES in Epirus, while in Macedonia it proceeded to disband the remaining PAO units. There were clashes on Mts Pieria and Krousia. Yet when the IX Division was ordered to take part in the assault against EDES, many of its professional soldiers, including its commander Colonel Sokratis Dimaratos, resigned their posts. British reaction led to the complete suspension of all supply missions to ELAS. The Germans took advantage of the situation to launch a large-scale operation against the guerrillas in Western Macedonia, code-named 'Panther'. ELAS retreated to Pindus as German reprisals once again took a heavy toll of the local population. Harshly pressed by the common enemy, the rival resistance camps held their fire for a while. Yet the fratricide was resumed once the Germans withdrew and went on until early 1944. Although EDES managed to hold its positions in Epirus, the remnants of PAO either dispersed or agreed to collaborate with the occupation authorities against ELAS.<sup>27</sup>

The civil strife in Macedonia was not limited to resistance organizations. It was most intensely felt in the countryside, where whole communities were involved in the controversy between EAM/ELAS and its rivals. The Germans, for their part, were quick to add fuel to the flames. Prior to the culmination of passions, the efforts to attract Greeks for service in the occupation forces had produced only small bands of ill-reputed elements, most notably the so-called 'volunteer battalion' of Lt Colonel Poulos. However, by the end of 1943 matters had changed. In southern Greece the occupation regime of Rallis had proceeded with the formation of the notorious Security Battalions. In Macedonia no such units were formed after an ill-fated attempt which was undone by the Germans themselves.<sup>28</sup> Instead, during 1944, whole villages were armed by the occupation authorities and developed into the most formidable enemy of ELAS. It was not only the Slavophone irregulars of Ohrana; on the initiative, often, of local leaders, refugee settlements, Turkish-speaking from Anatolia or Pontus, were issued with arms by the Germans, which they used not only to

protect themselves against ELAS incursions but also in raids against pro-EAM neighbours. These phenomena did not exclusively result from the high-handed methods of EAM/ELAS or the activity of enemy collaborators. The Occupation, rather, provided the catalyst for the underlying divisions between natives and refugees as well as a host of local enmities and conflicting interests, personal feuds and family vendettas to find expression with unprecedented violence in the drama of civil strife.<sup>29</sup>

In the field of operations, ELAS, which was by then organized into the Divisional Group of Macedonia (DGM), chose to concentrate its attacks upon the armed villagers, at the expense, however, of its ability to resist German incursions effectively. By March 1944, the cost in Western Macedonia alone was appalling: 171 villages had been looted and/or burned down and 85,000 persons had been rendered homeless. The worst affected districts were those of Servia, Kozani, Grevena, and Voion, where destruction ranged between 40% to 80% of all settlements. According to a report by an Agricultural Bank emissary, matters for the homeless grew worse owing to the lack of communications with the rest of the country and the inadequacy of Red Cross relief. The victims of war operations in this area, unlike in the rest of Greece, were obliged to bear part of the cost for whatever assistance they received from the Red Cross committees.<sup>30</sup> The last major German operation took place during the first three weeks of July 1944 and was directed mainly against ELAS concentrations on the northern ridges of Pindus. As Markos Vapheiadis (Markos), then kapetanios (commissar) of the DGM, admitted, 'tactical errors' cost the breaking up of guerrilla defences, and, as a result, more villages were destroyed, including Trikomo in Grevena, the seat of the DGM.<sup>31</sup>

### ***The Impact of Greek Political Developments in Macedonia During the Last Stage of the Occupation***

The political developments which followed the establishment of the Political Committee of National Liberation (Politiki Epitropi Ethnikis Apeleutherosis, PEEA) in March 1944 had serious implications for the resistance movement in Macedonia. Two months later, British uneasiness with EAM intentions, and particularly over its ability to influence the course of events in Greece after the war, led to the convening of an all-party conference in the Lebanon where the most important resistance organizations and a number of political factions were represented. Under the chairmanship of George Papandreou, the new Prime Minister of the Greek government-in-exile, the Lebanon Conference concluded with an agreement on the formation of a government of 'national unity', in which EAM should also be represented. The signatures of its emissaries notwithstanding, the EAM leadership, having been allotted only half the



cabinet posts it had originally demanded, denounced the agreement. In Macedonia, the text and the initiative of the EAM representatives in signing it were strongly condemned by the local KKE organization. The British once more reacted by cutting off supplies and drew up emergency plans for the timely sending of troops to strategic points throughout Greece once the German withdrawal commenced. 32

Eventually, in early August 1944, EAM gave ground. Its decision to accept participation in Papandreou's government coincided with the arrival of a Soviet military mission at the seat of PEEA. With the signing of the Caserta agreement on 26 September, all resistance forces, including ELAS, were placed under the supreme command of Major-General Ronald Scobie, commander of the British landing force in Greece. In Macedonia, however, relations between ELAS and the BLO remained tense to the point that restrictions were placed on the latter's movements. Following the Caserta agreement, things improved somewhat under instructions of the KKE Politburo and with the intervention of the DGM commander, Colonel Evripidis Bakirtzis. 33 As the departure of the German occupying forces was within sight, the GHQME came up with plan 'Ark' aiming at the harassment of the enemy's retreat by guerrilla action. Yet the leadership of ELAS, not without reason, suspected that the British actually aimed at pinning its forces down in remote places, and thus effectively neutralizing them at the crucial moment of the German withdrawal. Be that as it may, the German troops did not face serious trouble as they retreated through Macedonian soil. Even at that final stage, however, Nazi tactics once more took a heavy toll of the civilian population with the burning of the village of Hortiatis and the indiscriminate slaughtering of its inhabitants on 2 September 1944. 34

### ***The End of the Bulgarian Occupation***

By way of contrast to in Central and Western Macedonia, where the German withdrawal signalled both the restoration of Greek sovereignty and the ascendancy of EAM, in the Bulgarian-occupied eastern part the situation was far more complex. In summer 1944, as the Red Army rapidly advanced towards the Danube, a succession of cabinets in Sofia attempted to strike a bargain with the Western Allies. Yet on 5 September, the Soviet Union declared war on Bulgaria and the Army of Marshal Tolbuchin crossed the Danube. Within four days a new government was set up in Sofia by the Communist-led Patriotic Front. Its first act was to change camp by declaring war on Bulgaria's former ally and placing the army under Tolbuchin's command. 35

Meanwhile, the Greek government-in-exile had repeatedly expressed its apprehension regarding the future of the Greek territories under Bulgarian occupation. The British government, for its part, was particularly worried about the prospect of a Soviet descent towards the Aegean. Already in May 1944 the Soviets had consented to a British proposal to the effect that Moscow would recognize precedence to the British in Greece in return for a free hand for the Red Army in Romania. 36 The following September was the time for the understanding to be tested. In fact, the Red Army's advance stopped short of the Greek-Bulgarian frontier. The Bulgarian army, however, remained in the zone of occupation allegedly as a 'guarding force' against the Germans. This attitude clearly implied a Bulgarian intention to remain in control of the Greek territories until the final settlement of frontiers. The danger to Greek sovereignty in Macedonia and Thrace was immediate and the representations of the Papandreou government to the Allies intensified.37

During the last months of the Occupation, EAM/ELAS had managed to build up a considerable position in Eastern Macedonia. The nationalist guerrillas, assisted by the British Mission under Major Miller, were also a force to be reckoned with. Both sides hastened to take advantage from the turn of events following the Bulgarian volte-face and to prevail over their fellow-Greek rivals. Similarly, the Bulgarians sought to benefit from Greek feuds in order to prolong their military presence. As EAM started to install authorities of its own in Kavala, Serres and other urban centres, the nationalist leaders attempted to secure a modus vivendi with the Bulgarian army, which might enable them to check the advance of their opponents. An agreement was reached between Anton Tsaous and the commander of the 2nd Bulgarian Corps, General Sirakov, under the auspices of Major Miller in Drama on 18 September, but it came to nothing: emissaries of the Patriotic Front intervened and saw to it that all local authority passed to the hands of EAM. Immediately afterwards, ELAS forces supported by Bulgarian artillery set about dispersing the nationalist bands, while the members of the British Mission were detained.38

The situation was to transform rapidly following the Churchill-Stalin meeting in Moscow on 9 October 1944 and the notorious 'percentage agreement' between the two leaders, whereby Greece was definitively assigned to the British sphere of influence. Two days later, Sofia was instructed to pull out its troops from Greek territory within a fortnight. The local secretary of the KKE Giorgos Erithriadis in vain appealed to Marshal Tolbuchin for the despatch of Soviet troops. On 25 October the last Bulgarian soldier left Greek soil.39 The evacuation was observed by a government party consisting of Ministers Lampros Lamprianidis and Miltiadis Porphyrogenis, a leading member of the

KKE. The immediate task of the restored civil and military authorities was to put an end to clashes between ELAS and the nationalist guerrillas. To this end, the rival forces were charged with guarding distinct sectors along the Greek-Bulgarian frontier. In the interior, however, the control of EAM over local administration and political activity was all but complete.<sup>40</sup>

### ***The Separatist Challenge in Western Macedonia. Liberation***

Towards the end of the Occupation, the threat of Bulgarian propaganda in Western Macedonia had been largely replaced by separatist activity among the Slavophones, which posed serious dilemmas for the EAM and KKE leaderships. In May 1944 EAM proceeded with the dissolution of SNOF, whose leaders had openly propagated the secession of Macedonia. Moreover, that organization had attracted many former members of Ohrana, who had hastened to change loyalties in good time. Shortly afterwards, ELAS disbanded a Slavophone unit which had been active under Naum Pegios or Pejov in the region of Korestia. Yet, in spite of its frequent condemnations of separatist activities, EAM once more permitted the formation of two purely Slavophone battalions, belonging to the strength of the 28th and 30th regiments of ELAS, respectively.<sup>41</sup> This act had been preceded by the declaration of the 'Federative Yugoslav People's Republic of Macedonia' (PRM) on 2 August 1944, which contributed to a resurgence of separatist activity in Greek Macedonia. With the German withdrawal only a matter of time, Tito's movement hardly concealed its intention of expanding southwards. The Slavophone unit of the 28th regiment of ELAS, in particular, which was active in the region of Florina and Kastoria, led by its commissar, Ilia Dimakis or Gotse, who maintained close contacts with Tito's partisans, adopted an openly pro-Yugoslav attitude. Matters came to a head in early October, when Gotse refused to comply with an order from the DGM to move his unit further to the south. Eventually, as ELAS prepared to take action, Gotse's battalion crossed into Yugoslav soil, where it was to remain. Soon afterwards, the second Slavophone unit, which operated near Mt Paiko under commissar Urdov, followed Gotse's example. After these events, the Yugoslav partisans accused EAM of oppressing the Slavophone element and relations between the two movements passed through a period of coolness. The DGM commander General Bakirtzis took steps to reinforce the positions of ELAS along the frontier, particularly after the formation of a brigade in Bitola consisting of Slavophones from Greek Macedonia.<sup>42</sup>

The German withdrawal was still under way when civil strife in Central Macedonia was bitterly resumed. ELAS concentrated upon the bands and villages armed by the Germans. Their strength was estimated at 15,000, who refused to surrender to ELAS; instead, they desperately sought British

protection. In the event, after abortive negotiations, ELAS decisively moved against them. On 4 November, following a bloody encounter near Kilkis, most of the German-armed irregulars were captured. Further clashes were avoided by British intervention. Above all, however, the Macedonian capital constituted the real bone of contention between the remnants of the occupation regime, EAM/ELAS and the British, whose plan for the liberation of Greece called for the control of all major centres. On the eve of the city's evacuation by the German troops, General Scobie and the supreme commander of ELAS, General Stephanos Saraphis, jointly ordered all ELAS units to remain in their positions until British detachments landed. However, on the initiative of the DGM Commissar Markos, that order was disregarded and, on 30 October 1944, ELAS entered Thessaloniki. Numerous officials of the occupation regime and a host of persons accused of collaborating with the enemy were immediately arrested. The gendarmerie was disarmed and those of its men who failed to escape to Athens were confined to the YMCA playground. The landing of the IV Anglo-Indian Brigade on the following day found the city completely controlled by ELAS. Soon representatives of the Greek government were installed, as British units hurriedly advanced to the major urban centres; Lt General Christos Avramidis was appointed military commander of Macedonia.<sup>43</sup> Yet, real power remained in the hands of EAM, resting on the armed resolve of the men and women of ELAS. Conditions remained extremely tense and a show-down seemed only a matter of time.

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39. With regard to the local party secretary Erythriadis' appeals to Marshal Tolbuchin, and the insistence of the secretary of the KKE Macedonian Bureau Leonidas Stringos on the immediate withdrawal of the Bulgarian troops, see: Hatzis, op. cit., vol. 3, pp. 54-56; Kofos, op. cit., pp. 446-448; Papastratis, 'The Anglo-Soviet Balkan Agreement and Greece', in A.L. Macrakis - N. Diamantouros (eds.), *New Trends in Modern Greek Historiography*, New Haven 1982, pp. 191-203.

40. Hatzis, op. cit., vol. 3, pp. 103-108; PRO, FO 371, 48252, R 2383/4/19, reports on conditions in Eastern Macedonia and Thrace; 43696, R 19119/9/19, Allied Information Service (henceforth AIS) report, 21.10.1944; 43698, R 18621/9/19, Leeper to Foreign Office, 22.11.1944.

41. Kofos, op. cit., pp. 434-441.

42. Grigoriadis, op. cit., pp. 525-528; Hatzis, op. cit., vol. 3, pp. Kofos, op. cit., pp. 441-444; same author, *Nationalism and Communism in Macedonia*, Thessaloniki 1964, pp. 121-128; Palmer - King, op. cit., pp. 111-112; PRO, FO 371, 48181, R 2302/11/67, Brigadier MacLean to Sir O. Sargent, 18.11.1944; 43649, R 22039/1009/67, British Embassy to Southern Department, Athens, 12.12.1944, enclosure; Vapheiadis, op. cit., vol. 2, pp. 200-201. For a more details, see E. Kofos' chapter in the present volume.

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