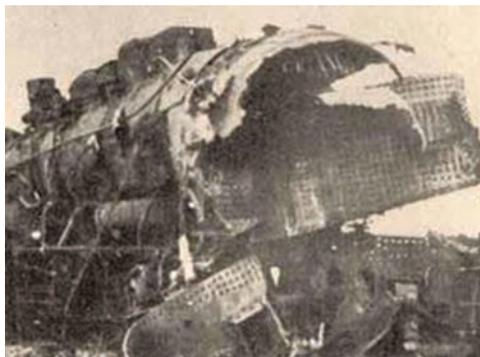


# Remembering the Great War



It is not a very well known fact that Macedonia, although not a state at the time, took a great part, or rather, suffered a lot in World War One. One of the most stable front lines of the conflict passed through the whole territory of Macedonia. The front attracted great numbers of foreign troops who fought fierce battles resulting in epic destruction, diseases and death tolls among soldiers and the local people. The Thessaloniki (Solun) or Macedonian Front stretched from the Adriatic coast to the Struma River. The Allied forces (Britain, France, Greece and Serbia) were fighting against Bulgaria and smaller detachments of the armies of the Central Powers (Austro-Hungary and Germany). Bulgaria took over Macedonian territory from the falling Serbian state. From Ohrid to Bitola, then along the rivers Crna and Vardar, and around Dojran Lake heavy bombardment and severe man-to-man battles took place. The battles of Kajmakalan, Krivolak, Kosturino and Dojran are notorious for the number of casualties and prolonged

fighting. Peaks and hills were gained and lost several times during each battle. The front line was stable for a long time until it was broken by the Allied forces in 1918, which led to the capitulation of Bulgaria and restitution of the Serbian state on Macedonian territory.

The war brought a great many new experiences to Macedonian peasants, who were not very mobile at that time. Encounters with new nations and races, strange love affairs, encounters with feminism, cross-national friendships, extreme suffering, poverty and hunger moved and inspired Macedonian writers such as Petre M. Andreevski, Ivan Capovski and Luan Starova. They wrote about brothers mobilized by rival armies at the front, brave female nurses, love affairs between soldiers and locals, the first encounters with Arab and African soldiers, unusual animals (camels), big guns etc.

Commemoration of the centenary of the Great War started in 2014 and will last until 2018. As commemorations and other



ceremonial events are held all over Europe, Macedonia is becoming increasingly aware of its part and suffering in this global catastrophe.

Military cemeteries and war memorials were built soon after the war. They were well maintained and annual ceremonies were held in many locations. Yet, these monuments mostly belonged to the winning Allied forces. As the history written by the winners has been increasingly challenged by historians and

activists there have merged new projects focusing on the memories recovered from letters of soldiers, forgotten graveyards of the loosing (Bulgarian) army have been restored, and more attention has been given to the fate of the local mobilized population.

There have always been physical remnants of the war hidden beneath the surface in forgotten trenches, bunkers, towers, and other frontline and battlefield infrastructure. New building projects,





forestry or agricultural projects on new land, and even archeological digs and river or lake bed investigations reveal dozens of guns, grenades, elements of uniforms and weapons. Such findings have attracted more local interest since administrative decentralization over the past fifteen years. Municipalities have expressed an interest in mapping their assets and unique points of interest and using them for organizing social life and promoting tourism.

Many interesting initiatives have emerged lately. The Municipality of Dojran is using EU grants for cross-border cooperation and partnering with Kjustendil, Bulgaria, to mark and revitalize the area and historical military infrastructure in the area. The project has a noble aim of uniting through what once divided the neighboring countries.

The Municipality of Novaci is developing a similar project. They are inspired by how the region of Lower Normandy in France has commemorated World War Two. Lower Normandy has established a structured bilateral cooperation programme with Macedonia, and one of the most exciting areas of the programme is the war time museichology and tourism. There are many traces of heavy fighting abound in the Macedonian municipality: trenches, machinegun bunkers, tunnels, built-up caves, warehouses and hangars. There is even a former military airport in the village of Bac. The military hospital was near the present army installation Skocivir, and

one can spot the road built by the French troops. The village of Brod was where the hardest battle in this section of the front was fought.

Bitola has already created the First World War Walk in Pelister National Park. The path offers recreation and education for the whole family. At the same time, it commemorates the hard days of war in and around Bitola. The town was under constant bombardment for two years. Historians say over 20 000 bombs fell on the city. The population loss was horrific: of the 60 000 inhabitants before the war Bitola had only 23 000 left in its aftermath.

In the hills above Valandovo on the road to Strumica, Bulgarian forces won decisive battles in 1915 and 1916 over a British (predominantly Irish) regiment. Almost every year descendants of those brave soldiers and officers visit the hills and villages of Kosturino, Sobri, Darlambos and Rabrovo. They have an internet forum where they exchange information and personal stories. They are mostly devoted amateur enthusiasts but some are professional curators working in museums in Britain. They recreate events of 100 years ago according to the private diaries of the soldiers and other records.

We hope that this World War One commemorative period will stimulate more research, care and local development in the years to come.