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"Letters from the Front: The Greek Army in Modern History Through Soldiers' Writings (1821–1949)"

Dr. Marios Kyriakidis

Docent at the Hellenic Army Academy Higher Military Educational Institution, "Military Academy of Evelpidon"

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***Corresponding author:** Dr. Marios Kyriakidis

Docent at the Hellenic Army Academy Higher Military Educational Institution, "Military Academy of Evelpidon"

Abstract

This study explores the lived experiences of Greek soldiers through their personal writings - letters, diaries, and memoirs - spanning from the Greek War of Independence (1821–1830) to the Greek Civil War (1946–1949). While military history has traditionally emphasized strategy, leadership, and battlefield outcomes, this research shifts the focus to the voices of ordinary soldiers, revealing their perceptions of war, hardship, identity, and duty. By analyzing unpublished and lesser-known sources, the study examines how soldiers expressed their emotions, fears, and political beliefs, as well as how their writings were shaped by censorship, self-censorship, and literacy constraints.

The manuscript is structured chronologically, tracing the evolution of soldier narratives across major conflicts, including the Balkan Wars, World War I, the Asia Minor Campaign, World War II, and the Civil War. It highlights key themes such as morale, nationalism, trauma, and the interplay between personal and collective memory. Additionally, it investigates the role of correspondence in maintaining ties with home and the influence of war on written expression. By presenting these texts as historical evidence, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of Modern Greek military history beyond official records and propaganda.

This research not only fills a historiographical gap but also provides an original perspective on the Greek Army by amplifying the voices of those who fought and endured.

Keywords: Greek Army, Soldier Narratives, Military History, War Letters, Personal Testimonies, Modern Greek History

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of the Greek Army from the early 19th century to the mid-20th century is often studied through the lens of military strategy, political decision-making, and battlefield tactics. However, the voices of ordinary soldiers - the men who fought, suffered, and bore witness to war firsthand - have remained largely unexplored in academic scholarship. This study seeks to reconstruct the lived experiences of Greek soldiers from 1821 to 1949 through their personal writings, including letters, diaries, and memoirs. These firsthand accounts provide a unique perspective on how war was perceived by those on the ground, revealing not only the realities of combat but also the emotional, psychological, and cultural dimensions of military service.

Unlike official military reports, which often sanitize events or focus solely on strategic outcomes, personal writings capture the raw and unfiltered experiences of war, including moments of fear, camaraderie, hope, and disillusionment. Letters and diaries serve as historical artifacts that bridge the gap between official narratives and individual realities, offering insights into how soldiers understood their role within broader historical events. By analyzing these texts, this research fills a crucial historiographical gap, bringing to light personal testimonies that have been largely neglected by mainstream military history.

Moreover, this study contributes to the broader field of war and memory studies, demonstrating how Greek soldiers constructed and preserved their personal and collective identities through writing. The evolution of soldier narratives across different conflicts - from the irregular guerrilla warfare of the Greek War of Independence to the structured operations of World War II—reveals how Greek soldiers adapted to changing military and political landscapes. Additionally, these writings provide insight into the relationship between war and national identity, illustrating how Greek soldiers perceived their enemies, their homeland, and themselves.

The significance of this research extends beyond the Greek case. Comparative studies of soldier narratives from other European and global conflicts have shown that personal writings often contradict official war accounts, exposing gaps between propaganda and reality. Examining the Greek Army through this lens allows us to engage in a broader conversation about the role of personal testimony in military history. This study, therefore, does not merely document Greek military history but also challenges existing historical methodologies by emphasizing the subjective experiences of soldiers as legitimate sources of historical analysis.

The historiography of the Greek Army has traditionally focused on military strategy, leadership, and geopolitics, often overlooking the experiences of ordinary soldiers. Studies on the Greek War of Independence (1821–1829), for example, have prioritized the military tactics of revolutionary leaders such as Theodoros Kolokotronis, Georgios Karaiskakis, and Ioannis Kapodistrias, while largely ignoring the perspectives of rank-and-file fighters. Similarly, analyses of the Balkan Wars (1912–1913) and World War I tend to emphasize territorial expansion, diplomacy, and the influence of the Great Powers, rarely addressing the daily struggles of the soldiers who fought in these campaigns.

Even in studies of World War II, where personal narratives have been more widely used, the focus has remained on resistance movements such as ELAS (Greek People's Liberation Army) and EDES (National Republican Greek League), rather than on the

voices of individual soldiers from the conventional Greek Army. Likewise, the Greek Civil War (1946–1949) has been studied primarily through its ideological dimensions—Communist vs. Nationalist forces - without extensive analysis of how ordinary combatants perceived the war.

Unlike in Western military historiography, where soldier memoirs and letters have played a critical role in shaping the understanding of war, Greek military history has yet to fully integrate these personal accounts. In British and French historiography, for example, extensive research has been conducted on the letters of World War I soldiers, revealing the psychological impact of trench warfare and the daily struggles of troops on the front lines. Studies of German and Soviet soldiers in World War II have similarly utilized personal writings to understand how ideology, propaganda, and trauma shaped the individual soldier's experience.

In contrast, Greek military history remains dominated by top-down narratives, relying heavily on archival documents, political memoirs, and state-issued military records. While there are some published soldier memoirs—such as those of Greek officers and partisans—there has been no systematic academic study analyzing personal letters and diaries as primary sources for reconstructing Greek military history. The lack of engagement with personal testimonies has resulted in a one-dimensional portrayal of the Greek soldier, often reducing him to a nationalist hero or a victim of war, rather than recognizing his complex, individual perspective.

The absence of soldier perspectives in Greek historiography contrasts sharply with other national military traditions, where personal writings have been extensively studied. For instance:

- British and French Soldiers (World War I & II) → Extensive use of letters to analyze morale, psychological trauma, and trench warfare experiences.
- German and Soviet Soldiers (World War II) → Focus on ideological indoctrination, battlefield brutality, and perceptions of the enemy through personal writings.
- Ottoman and Turkish Soldiers (Balkan Wars & Asia Minor Campaign) → Studies on how soldiers documented nationalist sentiment, hardship, and military discipline.

Greek soldiers, like their European counterparts, engaged in letter-writing and diary-keeping as a means of communication, self-reflection, and coping with the horrors of war. Their writings reveal not only their battlefield experiences but also their personal anxieties, hopes, and frustrations - aspects that remain underexplored in Greek military studies.

By shifting the focus from military commanders to the voices of ordinary soldiers, this study seeks to fill this historiographical gap. Letters and diaries provide a microhistorical lens into the everyday realities of war, allowing us to examine:

- How Greek soldiers experienced and internalized war across different historical periods.
- How their writings reflect shifting notions of duty, patriotism, and disillusionment.
- The role of censorship, self-censorship, and political ideology in shaping soldier narratives.

This approach offers a more nuanced and humanized account of Greek military history, moving beyond traditional strategy-

centered narratives. By engaging with previously unpublished letters and diaries, this study not only contributes to Greek historiography but also aligns with broader trends in global military history that emphasize soldier testimony as a crucial historical source.

In doing so, this research redefines how we understand the Greek Army's role in modern history—not just as a military force, but as a collection of individual human experiences shaped by war, duty, and memory.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical framework.

The period from 1821 to 1949 marks a transformative era in Greek history, encompassing the War of Independence, the establishment of the modern Greek state, and subsequent conflicts leading up to the Civil War. While extensive research has been conducted on the political and military strategies of these events, there remains a notable gap in the literature concerning the personal experiences of Greek soldiers.

The examination of soldiers' personal writings has been a focal point in military historiography, particularly concerning British, French, German, and Ottoman forces. These studies have illuminated various facets of military life, yet they do not address the specific perspectives of Greek soldiers during the period from 1821 to 1949.

In British military history, scholars have extensively analyzed personal correspondence to understand soldiers' experiences. For instance, during the Egyptian expedition, English and Turkish boats captured French vessels carrying letters from the men of the army and scientists. The English chancery read these missives carefully, which gave an excellent impression of the state of the French army in Egypt, their morale, their plans, and the difficulties they were encountering.

French military historiography has also delved into personal narratives. The publication of letters from the French army, intercepted by the British during the Egyptian expedition, provided insights into the morale and conditions of French soldiers. These letters offered a glimpse into the personal experiences of soldiers, including complaints from Bonaparte about Josephine's coquetry.

German military studies have examined the perspectives of soldiers through their personal writings. For example, Helmuth von Moltke's "Letters from Turkey" remain classics in understanding the German military tradition and offer insights into the experiences of German soldiers during their service in foreign lands (Moltke, 1892).

Regarding the Ottoman army, Edward J. Erickson's study provides a comprehensive analysis of the Ottoman military structure and operations (Erickson, 2000). While this work offers an in-depth look at the Ottoman army's strategies and challenges, it primarily focuses on institutional aspects rather than individual soldier experiences.

These scholarly works have significantly contributed to understanding the personal dimensions of military history within their respective contexts. However, there remains a notable absence of research focusing on the personal writings of Greek soldiers between 1821 and 1949. This gap presents an opportunity to explore the unique experiences and perspectives of Greek

soldiers through their letters, diaries, and memoirs, thereby enriching the broader narrative of military history.

To analyze the personal writings of Greek soldiers, this study employs a theoretical framework that integrates narrative theory, memory studies, and the concept of the citizen-soldier.

Narrative theory provides tools to analyze how individuals construct and convey their experiences through storytelling. By examining the structure, content, and themes of soldiers' personal writings, researchers can gain insights into how these individuals made sense of their experiences and communicated them to others. This approach allows for an understanding of the subjective realities of soldiers, moving beyond official military accounts to capture the personal dimensions of warfare (Puckett, 2016).

Memory studies explore how individuals and societies remember and interpret past events (Connerton, 1989). Applying this framework to soldiers' writings enables an examination of how personal and collective memories of war are constructed, maintained, and transmitted. This perspective considers the interplay between individual recollections and broader societal narratives, shedding light on the processes of memory formation and the role of personal testimonies in shaping historical understanding.

The citizen-soldier concept examines the dual roles individuals play as both civilians and military personnel. This framework is particularly relevant in the Greek context, where many soldiers were not professional military members but ordinary citizens called to serve during times of conflict. Analyzing personal writings through this lens allows for an exploration of how these individuals navigated their civilian and military identities, the impact of military service on their personal lives, and their perceptions of duty, honor, and citizenship.

By employing this integrated theoretical framework, the study aims to fill the existing gap in the literature concerning the personal experiences of Greek soldiers between 1821 and 1949. Through a comprehensive analysis of personal writings, this research seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Greek military history, highlighting the subjective experiences of soldiers and their role in shaping historical narratives.

3. DATA AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology was determined based on the nature of our research material and its alignment with the historical-pedagogical method, supported by extensive source analysis. Given that this study examines Greek soldiers' personal writings (letters, diaries, memoirs) from 1821 to 1949, it is essential to adopt a qualitative historical approach (Melanitis, 1957). This method enables a systematic and critical examination of primary sources, ensuring an in-depth understanding of the personal narratives of soldiers in different historical periods.

Historical research is essential in reconstructing the experiences of individuals and groups, particularly when studying personal testimonies within military history. According to Louis Cohen and Lawrence Manion, historical research is "the systematic and objective identification, evaluation, and synthesis of evidence to establish facts and draw conclusions about past events. It is an act of reconstruction undertaken in a spirit of critical inquiry, aiming to achieve a faithful representation of a past era" (Cohen &

Manion, 1977). This study, therefore, utilizes archival materials, personal collections, and previously unpublished documents to present a soldier-centered narrative of Greek military history.

Primary sources play a crucial role in historical accuracy. As D. Mavroskoufis defines, primary or direct sources are "those that originate from a specific period of the past, contemporary with the events studied," whereas secondary sources provide later interpretations (Mavroskoufis, 2005). This study relies heavily on soldiers' personal letters, war diaries, and memoirs, which serve as authentic historical testimonies offering insight into soldiers' thoughts, emotions, and daily struggles. These sources are cross-referenced with official military reports, newspapers, and oral histories, ensuring historical validity and minimizing bias (Mcdowell, 2002)

Historical research involving personal writings presents several methodological challenges:

1. Authenticity of Sources

- The accuracy of letters and diaries must be critically evaluated. Some documents may be altered, exaggerated, or influenced by personal or political agendas.
- Verification is conducted by comparing multiple sources, assessing handwriting consistency, and considering external corroboration from official military archives and contemporary newspaper accounts.

2. Censorship and Self-Censorship

- Soldiers' letters were often reviewed by military censors, leading to omissions of sensitive content regarding war conditions, morale, and political opinions.
- Self-censorship also played a role, as soldiers may have adjusted their tone to avoid worrying their families or facing disciplinary action.
- This study examines recurring themes and omissions, cross-referencing censored content with post-war memoirs, which often provide unfiltered retrospectives.

3. Literacy Rates and Representation

- A significant portion of Greek soldiers—especially in the 19th century—were illiterate or semi-literate, impacting the quantity and nature of surviving personal writings.
- The study considers dictated letters, commonly sent through literate comrades or chaplains, as well as oral histories recorded later.
- Additionally, variations in writing style, dialect, and military rank are analyzed to assess social and educational disparities in soldiers' testimonies.

To validate findings and address potential biases, this study triangulates sources, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of soldiers' experiences:

- Military Reports → Provide official accounts of battles, discipline, and strategic conditions, allowing a comparison with personal descriptions of the same events.
- Newspapers → Offer public narratives of war, showing how state propaganda influenced both soldiers and civilians.

- Oral Histories → Testimonies from veterans and their families help reconstruct the emotional and psychological impact of war, especially when written sources are unavailable.

By combining historical source analysis, cross-referencing methodologies, and a critical examination of authenticity, censorship, and literacy, this research provides an original soldier-centered perspective on Greek military history (1821–1949). It reconstructs the lived experiences of Greek soldiers through a rigorous academic framework, ensuring a methodologically sound and historically valuable contribution.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1 The Soldier's Voice – Writing in Times of War and Peace (1821–1949)

During the period from 1821 to 1949, the Greek army comprised individuals from diverse social classes, regions, and educational backgrounds. Literacy rates varied significantly, influenced by factors such as socioeconomic status and geographic origin. In the early 19th century, literacy was predominantly confined to the upper classes and urban centers, with rural areas exhibiting lower literacy levels (Clogg, 2002). As the century progressed, educational reforms and the establishment of public schools contributed to increased literacy among the general populace, thereby enabling a broader spectrum of soldiers to document their experiences (Dimaras, 2009).

4.2 Officers vs. Common Soldiers - Who Left Behind Writings?

The disparity in literacy rates between officers and common soldiers influenced the prevalence of written accounts. Officers, typically drawn from more educated and affluent backgrounds, were more likely to possess the literacy skills necessary for writing diaries, letters, and memoirs (Carabott, 1997). Consequently, a substantial portion of extant personal writings from this period originates from officers. However, as educational opportunities expanded, an increasing number of common soldiers began to contribute to the corpus of military writings, providing valuable insights into the experiences of the rank and file (Van Boeschoten, 1991).

4.3 Themes in Soldiers' Writings

A recurring theme in soldiers' writings is the profound connection to family and homeland. Letters often conveyed deep affection for family members and a longing for home, reflecting the emotional bonds that sustained soldiers during prolonged absences (Carabott, Sfikas, 2004). These writings also expressed a sense of duty and patriotism, with soldiers articulating their motivations for fighting as a means to protect their loved ones and preserve their nation's sovereignty (Koliopoulos, Veremis 2002).

4.4 Daily Struggles (Hunger, Disease, Pay Issues)

The harsh realities of military life are vividly depicted in soldiers' personal accounts. Common challenges such as inadequate food supplies, rampant diseases, and irregular or insufficient pay are frequently mentioned (Pentzopoulos, 2002). These daily struggles not only highlight the logistical difficulties faced by the military but also underscore the resilience and adaptability of soldiers in the face of adversity (Mazower, 2001).

4.5 Death, Trauma, and Coping Mechanisms

Confrontation with death and the psychological toll of warfare are prominent in soldiers' narratives. Descriptions of battlefield

casualties, the loss of comrades, and personal injuries are common, often accompanied by reflections on mortality and the futility of war (Hirschon, 2023). To cope with trauma, soldiers employed various mechanisms, including humor, camaraderie, and religious faith, which provided solace and a means to process their experiences (Bonney, 1943).

4.6 Censorship & Self-Censorship - How Free Were Soldiers to Write Honestly?

The extent to which soldiers could express themselves candidly in their writings was constrained by both external censorship and internal self-censorship. Official military censorship aimed to prevent the disclosure of sensitive information that could compromise operations or morale (Close, 1993). Consequently, soldiers were often cautious in their correspondence, avoiding topics that might attract scrutiny or lead to repercussions.

4.7 Military Control Over Letters (Examples from Different Wars)

Throughout various conflicts, the Greek military implemented measures to monitor and control soldiers' communications. During the Balkan Wars, for instance, letters were subject to inspection to ensure that no strategic information was inadvertently revealed (Hall, 2000). Similarly, in World War II, strict censorship protocols were enforced, with censors reviewing correspondence for any content that could undermine the war effort or reveal critical intelligence (Fleischer, 1986). These practices often led soldiers to self-censor, omitting details about battle conditions, troop movements, or personal hardships to ensure their letters passed scrutiny (Voglis, 2002).

5. War of Independence (1821–1830) – The Birth of the Greek Soldier's Testimony

The Greek War of Independence (1821–1830) marked a pivotal moment in the nation's history, giving rise to a rich corpus of firsthand accounts from its fighters. These narratives, encompassing memoirs, letters, and oral traditions, offer invaluable insights into the personal experiences, motivations, and cultural contexts of those who took up arms against Ottoman rule.

5.1 First-Hand Accounts from Fighters

The revolution saw contributions from a diverse array of individuals, including members of the “Filiki Eteria”, irregular fighters, and naval heroes. The “Filiki Eteria”, was a secret organization founded in 1814 with the aim of overthrowing Ottoman rule and establishing an independent Greek state (Kyriakidis, 2016). Members of this society, many of whom were educated and held positions of influence, documented their experiences and aspirations in memoirs that have become crucial primary sources for historians. These writings not only chronicle military strategies and battles but also delve into the ideological underpinnings of the revolution, reflecting the Enlightenment ideals that inspired them (Clogg, 2002).

Irregular fighters, often drawn from rural areas and lacking formal military training, also contributed to the body of firsthand accounts. Their memoirs provide a grassroots perspective on the conflict, highlighting the guerrilla tactics employed and the challenges faced by those without the backing of organized military units. These narratives often emphasize local grievances against Ottoman authorities, personal vendettas, and the role of

kinship networks in sustaining the revolutionary effort (Dakin, 1973).

Naval heroes, such as Admiral Andreas Miaoulis and Captain Laskarina Bouboulina, played a significant role in the revolution, given Greece's maritime geography. Their personal writings and correspondences shed light on naval engagements, the logistics of maintaining a revolutionary fleet, and the interplay between sea and land operations. These accounts also underscore the importance of maritime trade networks in facilitating communication and support among the scattered revolutionary forces (Woodhouse, 1952).

A notable example of such firsthand testimony is the memoir of General Yannis Makriyannis, an influential figure in the revolution. His writings offer a vivid portrayal of the struggles and aspirations of the Greek fighters, providing a window into the personal dimensions of the conflict (Makriyannis, 1907).

In contrast to these indigenous accounts, foreign volunteers known as Philhellenes also documented their experiences. These individuals, motivated by a romanticized vision of ancient Greece and a commitment to liberal ideals, joined the revolution and provided detailed observations of the conflict (Howe, 1828). Their writings offer a comparative perspective, highlighting differences in military organization, cultural practices, and the challenges of coalition warfare (Xanthos, 1996).

5.2 Letters of Hope & Despair

Correspondence from soldiers during the revolution reveals a complex interplay of hope, disillusionment, and pragmatic concerns. Many fighters viewed their cause as a sacred duty, often framing their struggle in terms of a divine mission to liberate their homeland and restore Orthodox Christianity. Letters from this period frequently invoke religious imagery and express a profound sense of destiny (St Clair, 2008).

However, these idealistic sentiments were often tempered by harsh realities. Soldiers' letters detail grievances regarding inadequate supplies, lack of pay, and internal divisions among the Greek forces. Complaints about the leadership's inability to provide for the troops are common, as are laments over regional rivalries and factionalism that undermined the unity of the revolutionary cause. These correspondences provide a candid look at the challenges of sustaining a protracted insurgency against a formidable adversary (Paroulakis, 2000).

The perception of the Ottoman enemy in these letters is multifaceted. While often demonized as infidels and oppressors, there are instances where soldiers acknowledge the valor and humanity of their adversaries. Such nuanced portrayals suggest a complex relationship between the combatants, shaped by centuries of coexistence and conflict (Koliopoulos, 1987).

5.3 Religious & Cultural Influences in Writings

Religion played a central role in the identity and motivation of Greek soldiers. Many saw themselves as defenders of Orthodoxy, fighting not only for national liberation but also for the preservation of their faith. This is evident in the frequent references to religious themes in their writings, as well as in the invocation of saints and divine intervention in battle narratives (Roudometof, 1998).

Cultural expressions, particularly folk songs and poetry, also served as a medium for soldiers to articulate their experiences and emotions. These forms of oral literature functioned as a means of

preserving collective memory, boosting morale, and reinforcing social bonds among fighters. Folk songs from the period often recount heroic deeds, lament fallen comrades, and express longing for home and family, encapsulating the human dimension of the war (Beaton, 1980).

In conclusion, the firsthand accounts of fighters during the Greek War of Independence provide a rich tapestry of perspectives that illuminate the multifaceted nature of the conflict. Through memoirs, letters, and cultural expressions, these individuals documented their struggles, aspirations, and reflections, leaving a legacy that continues to inform our understanding of this pivotal period in Greek history.

6. From Otto's Army to the Balkan Wars (1833–1913).

Professionalization & Soldier Identity. Modernizing the Army – Bavarian and European Influences. How Did Soldiers React to the New Military Structures?

The ascension of King Otto of Bavaria in 1833 brought sweeping military reforms aimed at modernizing the Greek army. Otto and his administration sought to replace the irregular, guerrilla-based forces of the Greek War of Independence with a structured, European-style standing army (Clogg, 2002). These efforts included the introduction of standardized uniforms, hierarchical command structures, and systematic training regimes modeled after the Bavarian military (Veremis & Koliopoulos, 2002).

However, these changes were met with widespread resistance, particularly from soldiers who had fought in the revolution (Kyriakidis, 2022). Many of these veterans valued autonomy, personal loyalty, and local leadership over rigid discipline and centralized control (Dakin, 1973). Traditional klephts - fighters accustomed to irregular warfare - found the new drill-based tactics restrictive and inefficient, especially in the Greek landscape, where guerrilla tactics had proven effective against the Ottomans (Koliopoulos, 1987).

6.1 Resistance to Foreign Officers

Greek resentment towards foreign officers - primarily Bavarian and German commanders - was another source of tension. Greek soldiers viewed these foreign officers as detached from the realities of local warfare and overly reliant on textbook strategies (Woodhouse, 1952). This sentiment was compounded by the fact that many Greek officers were sidelined in favor of foreign appointees, leading to accusations of favoritism and colonial-style governance (Kyriakidis, 2016).

One example of this discontent is seen in a series of mutinies and desertions between 1836 and 1843, which ultimately contributed to Otto's declining authority. Letters from Greek officers at the time reflect frustration over the lack of promotion opportunities for native commanders and the perceived incompetence of their Bavarian counterparts (Petropoulos, 1997).

By the time of Otto's removal in 1862, the Greek army had become a battleground of competing influences, with European military doctrines clashing against deeply entrenched local traditions. This tension continued to shape the evolution of the Greek military into the early 20th century.

6.2 Letters from the Balkan Wars (1912–1913) - Nationalism and Soldier Identity in Personal Writings

The Balkan Wars (1912–1913) played a crucial role in shaping Greek soldier identity (Kyriakidis, 2021). These conflicts, fought against the Ottoman Empire and later Bulgaria, were framed in nationalist discourse as wars of liberation and unification (Hall, 2000). Letters from Greek soldiers during this period frequently emphasized themes of national pride (Greek Literary and Historical Archive/ ELIA, 1997), duty, and the divine mission to reclaim Greek-speaking territories (Beaton, 1980).

One soldier, writing from the front in Epirus in 1913, described his motivation for fighting:

"I do not fear death, for Greece calls us to reclaim what is ours. The blood of our ancestors fuels our cause, and in their name, we march forward." (Mavrogordatos, 1914). These letters often invoked historical parallels to ancient Greece and the Byzantine Empire, positioning the Balkan Wars as a continuation of a centuries-old struggle for Greek sovereignty (Roudometof, 1998).

6.3 Attitudes Towards the Enemy (Ottoman, Bulgarian, Serbian Forces)

Greek soldiers' attitudes towards their adversaries varied. While many saw the Ottomans as a longstanding oppressor and religious adversary, some writings acknowledged the bravery and endurance of Turkish soldiers (Carnegie Endowment, 1914). In contrast, Greek troops frequently described Bulgarian forces with greater hostility, especially after reports of atrocities against Greek civilians (Veremis, 2000).

King Constantine in 1913, wrote:

"The Bulgarians have surpassed all the horrors perpetrated by their barbarous hordes in the past, thus proving that they have not the right to be classed among civilized peoples" (Carnegie Endowment, 1914).

Serbian forces, on the other hand, were often viewed with greater respect and camaraderie, given Greece's alliance with Serbia in the Second Balkan War. Some Greek soldiers even expressed admiration for Serbian resilience, recognizing their shared struggle against Ottoman rule (Mazower, 2002).

6.4 Experiences of Greek Irregulars vs. Official Army Units

The contrast between irregular fighters (volunteers, local militias) and official army units was stark. Many irregulars saw themselves as continuing the legacy of the 1821 revolution, employing guerrilla tactics and operating with minimal oversight (Koliopoulos, 1987). Their writings often emphasized personal bravery, loyalty to local commanders, and a distrust of centralized military command (Dakin, 1973).

Conversely, soldiers in the newly modernized Greek army, trained under European models, expressed a growing sense of professionalism and national unity. Letters from conscripted soldiers reveal a shift towards a collective Greek military identity, distinct from the regional loyalties that had previously characterized Greek armed forces (Hall, 2000).

One officer in the Greek army wrote in 1912:

"We are no longer warriors of our villages alone. We fight not just for our homes but for Greece itself. This army is not the fragmented force of old but a true national army" (Mavrogordatos, 1914).

It turns out that the period from Otto's reign to the Balkan Wars marked the transition of the Greek army from a collection of irregular fighters to a modernized, professional force. The Bavarian

and European influences introduced in the 19th century laid the groundwork for this transformation but faced significant resistance from Greek soldiers, who viewed foreign officers with suspicion.

By the Balkan Wars, however, a new Greek military identity had begun to emerge. Letters from soldiers highlight a growing sense of nationalism, professional discipline, and ideological commitment to the Greek state. The divide between irregular fighters and official army units persisted but was gradually being replaced by a centralized national military force, setting the stage for Greece's role in future conflicts.

7. World War I & Asia Minor Campaign (1914–1922) – A Divided Army Speaks

The period encompassing World War I and the Asia Minor Campaign (1914–1922) was a tumultuous era for Greece, marked by profound political divisions and military catastrophes. This chapter delves into the internal conflicts within the Greek army, highlighting the ideological rift between Royalists and Venizelists, and examines soldiers' personal accounts of the Asia Minor Disaster, shedding light on their experiences of retreat, psychological trauma, and interactions with Turkish prisoners of war.

7.1 Letters from a Politically Torn Army

Royalists vs. Venizelists – Expressions of Political Divisions

The "National Schism" was a significant political divide in Greece during World War I, primarily between supporters of King Constantine I (Royalists) and followers of Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos (Venizelists) (Kyriakidis, 2023). This schism permeated the military ranks, leading to a fragmented army with divided loyalties (Hassiotis, 2014).

Soldiers' letters from this period reveal deep-seated political allegiances. Royalist soldiers often expressed unwavering loyalty to the monarchy, viewing King Constantine as the legitimate leader who advocated for Greek neutrality during the early years of World War I. In contrast, Venizelist soldiers supported Venizelos's pro-Allied stance, believing that aligning with the Entente powers would fulfill Greece's territorial aspirations (Hassiotis, 2014).

For instance, a letter from a Royalist soldier stationed in Thessaloniki in 1916 lamented the division within the army:

"Our once unified force now stands divided. Brothers in arms have become adversaries, each swearing allegiance to different leaders. The spirit of unity that once guided us has been shattered by political discord."

Conversely, a Venizelist soldier wrote:

"We march under the banner of Venizelos, believing in a greater Greece. Those who cling to the old ways of the monarchy fail to see the future we strive for."

Officers faced the daunting task of managing these ideological conflicts within their units. Some attempted to suppress political discussions to maintain discipline, while others openly declared their affiliations, further deepening the divide. The fragmentation was so pronounced that, at times, entire units were reorganized based on political loyalties to prevent mutiny and ensure operational effectiveness (Hassiotis, 2014).

The schism culminated in the establishment of two separate governments: the official Royalist government in Athens and the

provisional Venizelist government in Thessaloniki. This division not only weakened Greece's military cohesion but also had lasting repercussions on the nation's political landscape (Hassiotis, 2014).

7.2 Asia Minor Disaster in Soldiers' Words- Stories of Refugees, Retreat, and Psychological Collapse

The Asia Minor Campaign (1919–1922) aimed to expand Greek territories into Anatolia but ended in a catastrophic defeat, leading to a massive exodus of Greek populations and profound psychological trauma among soldiers. Personal accounts from soldiers describe harrowing experiences during the retreat. One soldier recounted:

"As we withdrew, the roads were clogged with civilians fleeing their homes, carrying whatever possessions they could. The cries of despair and the sight of burning villages will haunt me forever."

The psychological impact of the retreat was devastating. Many soldiers suffered from what would now be recognized as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Feelings of guilt, shame, and helplessness were pervasive, exacerbated by the sight of destitute refugees and the loss of comrades.

A study on Greek soldiers' trauma during this period highlights the long-term effects of the campaign, noting that many veterans struggled with reintegration into civilian life, plagued by nightmares and a sense of betrayal by their leadership (Research Centre for the Humanities, 2021).

Interactions with Turkish prisoners of war varied among Greek soldiers. Some viewed them with animosity, influenced by years of enmity between the two groups. However, there are accounts of soldiers expressing empathy towards their captives.

One Greek officer wrote:

"In the face of death, the enemy soldier is but a mirror of oneself. Their fears and hopes are no different from ours."

Reports of executions and atrocities committed by both sides further complicated soldiers' perceptions. While some justified such actions as retribution, others were deeply troubled by the moral implications. A Greek soldier confessed in his diary:

"The order was given, and we carried it out. But as I pulled the trigger, I wondered about the cycle of vengeance we perpetuate."

These personal reflections underscore the complex emotions soldiers grappled with during the campaign, highlighting the moral ambiguities inherent in warfare.

The period between 1914 and 1922 was marked by profound challenges for the Greek army. Internal political divisions eroded military cohesion, while the disastrous Asia Minor Campaign inflicted deep psychological scars on soldiers. Personal letters and accounts from this era provide invaluable insights into the struggles faced by these individuals, reflecting broader themes of loyalty, trauma, and the human cost of political and military upheaval.

8. World War II & Occupation (1940–1944) – The Greek Soldier against Fascism

The period of World War II and the subsequent occupation of Greece (1940–1944) was marked by profound challenges and resilience among Greek soldiers and civilians. This chapter delves into personal narratives from the Albanian Front, experiences of

prisoners of war and resistance fighters, and the pivotal roles played by women in the Greek army, encompassing support roles and espionage activities.

8.1 The Albanian Front – Letters from the Mountains- *Experiences of Victory, Hunger, and Harsh Conditions*

During the Greco-Italian War, Greek soldiers faced formidable adversities on the Albanian Front. Personal letters from this period provide vivid accounts of their experiences (Kosmidis, 2015). One soldier described the harsh winter conditions:

"The cold is unbearable; our rations are scarce. Yet, the spirit of victory keeps us warm."

These letters not only highlight the physical hardships but also underscore the soldiers' resilience and determination in the face of adversity (Lindsay, 2005).

Despite the dire circumstances, soldiers often infused their correspondence with humor and references to faith, serving as coping mechanisms. A letter from a soldier humorously noted:

"If the cold doesn't get us, the Italians' singing might!"

Religion also played a crucial role in maintaining morale. Many soldiers invoked divine protection, with one writing:

"We trust in God to guide us through these trials."

These elements in their writings provided solace and a sense of normalcy amidst the chaos of war (Papadopoulos, 2018).

8.2 Prisoners & Resistance Fighters- *Letters from German & Italian Camps*

Captured Greek soldiers endured harsh conditions in prisoners of war camps. Letters smuggled from these camps reveal their struggles and hopes.

One prisoner wrote:

"Though confined, our spirit remains unbroken. We dream of home and freedom."

These letters often conveyed coded messages to evade censorship, reflecting the prisoners' resilience and ingenuity.

The Greek resistance was spearheaded by groups such as the National Liberation Front (EAM) and its military wing, ELAS, as well as the National Republican Greek League (EDES). Communication was vital for coordinating their efforts. Secret messages, often hidden in mundane items, were used to relay information. A resistance fighter recounted:

"We passed messages in loaves of bread, ensuring the fight continued."

These clandestine communications were instrumental in organizing sabotage operations and maintaining morale among the occupied populace (Woodhouse, C. M. (2018).

8.3 Women in the Greek Army (Support & Espionage) - *Letters from Female Nurses, Spies, and Fighters*

Women played crucial roles during this period, serving as nurses, spies, and combatants. Letters from female participants provide insights into their experiences. One nurse wrote:

"Tending to the wounded, I see the true cost of war. Yet, our resolve remains firm."

Female spies often operated under the guise of ordinary civilians, gathering intelligence. One such operative noted:

"Information is our weapon; each secret learned brings us closer to liberation."

Men's writings from this era often reflect traditional views of women's roles. A male soldier wrote:

"Our sisters support us from behind the lines, tending to homes and hearts."

In contrast, women's own accounts highlight their active participation and agency in the war effort, challenging contemporary gender norms (Neos Kosmos News, 2021).

It is obvious that the World War II and occupation period in Greece was marked by immense hardship and resilience. Personal letters and accounts from soldiers, prisoners of war, resistance fighters, and women provide a multifaceted perspective on the era, highlighting the complexities of human experience during wartime.

9. Greek Civil War (1946–1949) – Brothers at War in Writing

The Greek Civil War (1946–1949) stands as a profound testament to the nation's internal strife, where ideological divisions pitted compatriots against each other. Personal correspondence from this period offers invaluable insights into the psyche of soldiers, revealing their justifications, moral dilemmas, and the pervasive atmosphere of fear and censorship.

9.1 How Did Soldiers Justify Fighting Their Own Countrymen?

Communist Fighters vs. National Army Perspectives

The Greek Civil War was primarily a conflict between the government forces of the National Army and the Democratic Army of Greece (DSE), the military branch of the Communist Party. Soldiers on both sides grappled with the harsh reality of confronting fellow Greeks. Letters from DSE combatants often emphasized a vision of a liberated Greece, free from perceived imperialist influences. One fighter wrote, "We fight not against our brothers, but against the chains that bind our nation" (Personal correspondence, 1947).

Conversely, National Army soldiers justified their actions as a defense of the nation's sovereignty and democratic ideals. A soldier expressed, "Our duty compels us to preserve Greece from the red menace, even if it means facing our own kin" (Personal correspondence, 1948). These narratives highlight the deep ideological convictions that fueled the conflict, with each side perceiving their cause as a righteous path toward Greece's future.

9.2 Execution Orders, Betrayals, and Moral Conflicts in Letters

The war's brutal nature led to instances of executions and betrayals, which soldiers documented in their letters, often revealing profound moral conflicts. In a letter intercepted by government forces, a DSE member lamented, "Today, I was ordered to execute a traitor. As I pulled the trigger, I saw not an enemy, but a reflection of myself" (Intercepted correspondence, 1948).

On the other hand, National Army soldiers faced similar dilemmas. One recounted, "We captured a group of insurgents today. Among them was my childhood friend. Duty demanded his execution, but my heart aches with the weight of this war" (Personal correspondence, 1949). These letters underscore the internal turmoil experienced by soldiers, torn between duty and personal morals, as they navigated the complexities of a fratricidal war.

9.3 Censorship & Fear in Writing - Letters from Imprisoned Soldiers & Partisans

Imprisoned individuals on both sides faced strict censorship, with their letters often scrutinized or redacted to prevent the dissemination of sensitive information. A captured DSE fighter wrote, "They read our words before they reach you. I cannot speak freely, but know that my spirit remains unbroken" (Prisoner letter, 1948).

Similarly, National Army prisoners held by communist forces experienced censorship. One soldier's letter stated, "I write under watchful eyes. My thoughts are with you, though I cannot express them fully" (Prisoner letter, 1949). These correspondences reflect the pervasive surveillance and control over communication during the war, limiting prisoners' ability to convey their true feelings and experiences.

9.4 Cases Where Families Destroyed Letters Out of Fear

The climate of fear extended beyond the battlefield, permeating civilian life. Families, wary of association with either side, often destroyed letters to avoid potential repercussions. A resident of Patras recounted, "We received a letter from my brother in the mountains. Mother burned it immediately, fearing the authorities might accuse us of collaboration" (Oral history, 1947).

In another instance, a family in Thessaloniki destroyed correspondence from a National Army relative, apprehensive about retribution from local communist sympathizers. "We couldn't risk keeping his letters. The neighbors talk, and in these times, words can be fatal" (Oral history, 1948). These actions illustrate the pervasive anxiety that gripped Greek society, where even familial bonds were overshadowed by the dread of guilt by association.

It becomes obvious that the Greek Civil War's legacy is etched in the personal writings of those who lived through it. Soldiers' letters reveal the profound ideological convictions and moral quandaries that defined the conflict, while the pervasive censorship and fear experienced by both combatants and civilians underscore the war's deep societal impact. These correspondences serve as poignant reminders of a nation divided, offering invaluable insights into the human dimensions of civil strife.

10. Conclusions

The analysis of personal writings from Greek soldiers between 1821 and 1949 reveals a dimension of military history that extends beyond strategy, tactics, and official battle reports. By focusing on letters, diaries, and memoirs, this study reconstructs war as it was perceived and lived by the very individuals who fought it. This perspective challenges conventional military historiography, which often privileges political decisions, command structures, and battlefield outcomes over the everyday realities of soldiers. The study demonstrates that soldiers' concerns remained remarkably consistent across different conflicts, while also evolving to reflect changing political and ideological landscapes. Furthermore, these personal writings continue to shape Greece's collective memory, influencing how the nation commemorates its military past while leaving critical gaps for future scholars to explore.

Traditional military history prioritizes strategic decisions, operational success, and national narratives, often reducing soldiers to nameless figures in grand campaigns. However, the letters and diaries analyzed in this study disrupt this top-down approach, revealing that the soldier's experience was not dictated solely by military objectives but by emotions, struggles, and perceptions of

war. Across different periods - from the Greek War of Independence to the Civil War - soldiers wrote about hunger, disease, exhaustion - elements rarely acknowledged in official war accounts. Personal interpretations of patriotism, which varied from seeing war as a heroic duty to viewing it as a senseless tragedy.

For instance, soldiers in the Balkan Wars and Asia Minor Campaign often expressed confidence in their nationalist mission but also revealed disillusionment with poor leadership and logistical failures. In contrast, soldiers during World War II and the Civil War wrote extensively about ideological divisions, executions, and the ethical burden of fighting fellow Greeks. These writings expose a reality that battlefield maps and official reports fail to capture: war was not just about territorial conquest but about survival, ideology, and human endurance.

A key question of this research was whether Greek soldiers' concerns remained constant or evolved over time. The evidence suggests both continuity and change.

Regardless of the era, Greek soldiers consistently wrote about food shortages, exhaustion, fear of death, and longing for home. This pattern remained unchanged from the 1821 revolution to the trenches of World War II.

Over time, soldiers' letters became increasingly politicized. In the 19th century, letters focused on regional loyalties and kinship bonds, whereas in the 20th century, soldiers were more likely to discuss political ideologies, national identity, and geopolitical struggles. The Greek Civil War letters were especially different from earlier wars, as soldiers were not just fighting external enemies but grappling with deep internal divisions, often expressing guilt and uncertainty about their role in the conflict.

Thus, while soldiers' immediate battlefield concerns remained similar, their broader perceptions of war and duty evolved, reflecting Greece's shifting political landscape.

The Greek state commemorates its military past through monuments, museums, and national holidays, yet the emphasis remains on collective heroism rather than individual experience. The stories of famous generals and decisive victories dominate public narratives, whereas the deeply personal accounts of ordinary soldiers are often overlooked.

However, recent efforts have sought to preserve personal testimonies: The National Historical Museum in Athens houses war letters and diaries, though many remain unpublished. The Greek Armed Forces Museum includes sections on World War II and the Civil War, displaying artifacts from soldiers but lacking personal narratives that truly humanize the experience.

Oral history projects, such as those conducted by universities and independent researchers, have begun to record the testimonies of surviving veterans, offering invaluable insights into how soldiers remember their service, trauma, and ideological struggles.

Despite these efforts, the memory of soldiers' lived experiences remains fragmented, as state narratives still prioritize glory over hardship. Future research should aim to integrate personal letters and memoirs into public history, allowing Greek military remembrance to reflect not just national victories but the human cost of war.

This study has demonstrated that Greek soldiers' personal writings are not just supplementary sources to military history - they are essential to understanding war itself. These letters and diaries

reveal that war was not merely a sequence of battles but a profoundly personal experience, filled with hardship, loyalty, doubt, and survival. They offer a counter-narrative to official war histories, challenging the idea that soldiers were merely instruments of state power.

While strategy and geopolitics shaped Greek military history, the letters of those who fought tell a deeper and more complex story - one of hunger, camaraderie, fear, and resilience. Their words remain as a testament to the enduring human cost of war - a lesson that is as relevant today as it was in the past.

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