

MILITARY CEMETERIES OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR IN MACEDONIA REGION: ROUTES OF READING HISTORY IN SEARCH THE COMMON CULTURAL HERITAGE

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Abstract

The present paper aims to present the status of the military cemeteries of the First World War in Macedonia region, in the Balkans, as a sample of common cultural heritage in this very area. In the introduction, there are certain points raised concerning mainly: the historical knowledge and report on the present condition of military cemeteries (as far as spatial organization, architecture and sculpture are concerned), the status of their contemporary function, as well as the relation between these monuments and both the local communities and the greater area. In addition, the framework of a corporate planning for the launching of the cemeteries in the countries of this area is also presented along with their incorporation in the contemporary urban environment, the promotion of scenarios and actions towards the cooperation of the two countries – where the monuments are traced– in order to facilitate and methodize the visitors' transportation there.

1. Historical and geographical framework

1.1. Typically, the First World War started in the Balkan area with the Austro-Hungarian crown prince's assassination by Serbs nationalists in Sarajevo and the consequent ultimatum of Austro-Hungary to Serbia. The internationalization of the war took place in late 1915, when the two opposing parties of the Germans, Austrians and Bulgarians (Central Powers) on the one side and the French, British, Serbs, Russians, Italians and Greeks on the other (Entente Cordiale) came to a conflict in the center of the Balkans and especially in Macedonia, creating thus the third Front.

1.2. The Macedonian Front was created in October 1915. It was the second attempt of the Entente troops – the first one took place in February 1915 with an attack against Dardanelles which led to the slay of the British-French troops – to break the Front of the Central Powers troops and help Russia, which was receiving successive blows by the Germans and the Austrians. This Front by no means shared any of the significance of either the Western or the Eastern Front; while

the course of the operations in the former front left the course of the First World War completely unaffected. However, it was a front where about 1.000.000 soldiers were caught in and where several lethal combats took place. The most significant combats of this front aimed at the conquest of the town of Bitola in western Macedonia, in Kaymakcalan Mountain, in the Lake Doiran district in the east, and in Skra di Legen in central Macedonia.[1]

1.3. The first organized burials in the Macedonian Front were held in November 1915 in Thessaloniki, at the Zeitinlik area. Two were the reasons: First, Entente had founded a military hospital there and second, there was a Catholic civilian cemetery already founded in the same area. The first French soldiers were buried in the Catholic cemetery, but soon the whole surrounding area started being used as a cemetery as well. [2] Depending of the movement of the military outfits, the location of the front and the location of hospitals, many areas for the soldiers' temporary burial were created.

1.4. France, Italy, Russia and Serbia preferred to create as few as possible cemeteries close to big cities, where their dead soldiers from all battlefields were buried. Thus, the big cemeteries of Thessaloniki and Bitola were created. Exception was only the Serbian cemetery on the Kaymakcalan Mountain, where, due to the upland topology and its altitude (at 2.524 m.), as well as the fact that the borders between Yugoslavia and Greece passed from that point, in 1925 a temple – dedicated to Prophet Elias – was finally erected in 1925, where the skulls and bones of 5.000 Serbs soldiers, who had been killed in the battle of Kaymakcalan in 1916, were placed.[3]

1.5. Great Britain from the very first start systematically founded permanent military cemeteries in the Macedonia region. Anyway as early as the 21st May 1917, by means of a Royal Decree, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission was created for this reason. Great Britain's policy concerning the founding of cemeteries was different than that of the other countries. Instead of establishing big cemeteries, where all the dead soldieres would be gathered, it preferred to create many smaller ones close to the battlefields and the big military hospitals.[4] This way, after the truce, the Commission proceeded to the removal of relics from those temporary cemeteries in order for them to be permanently buried in new ones. However, the reason why the British had chosen to establish all their cemeteries within the Greek region of Macedonia remains unknown; even in the case of the Lake Doiran district, when the crucial battles took place in a distance of about 15-20 km within the territory of the then Serbia and the Greek military cemetery as well as the Bulgarian – nowadays ruined – ones, are located in FYROM close to the villages of Valadovo and Fourka, 20-25 km away from the borders.

1.6. It is worth mentioning that the military cemeteries of the First World War were the first ones to be established in the Macedonia region as permanent burial

sites for the dead, where the latter were graced; as, traditionally, by then the dead of the wars were not buried in separate cemeteries and only monuments were erected in battlefields in memoriam of heroic wars. The dead of the wars were either temporarily buried in massive tombs, or they were separately sent to their homelands.

2. Description of architectural features or spatial “reading”: a monumental approach in terms of aesthetics

2.1. Thus, nowadays, in the greater region of Macedonia (in Greece and FYROM) there are several military cemeteries, where more than 50.000 soldiers (Italians, French, British, Germans, Russians, Greeks, Serbs, Bulgarians, as well as from the colonies) are buried. The monumental cemeteries are the following:

Name	Place-Country	Nationality	Number of Deaths
Zeitnik	Thessaloniki-Greece	French	8089
Zeitnik	Thessaloniki-Greece	Serbian	7565
Zeitnik	Thessaloniki-Greece	Italian	3000
Zeitnik	Thessaloniki-Greece	Russian	400
Zeitnik	Thessaloniki-Greece	Commonwealth	1694
Mikra	Thessaloniki-Greece	Commonwealth	1962
Mikra Memorial	Thessaloniki-Greece	Commonwealth	475
Monastir Road Indian	Thessaloniki-Greece	Commonwealth	353
Monastir Road Indian Memorial	Thessaloniki-Greece	Commonwealth	161
Kirechkoi-Hortakoi	Thessaloniki-Greece	Commonwealth	663
Lahana	Serres-Greece	Commonwealth	299
Struma	Serres-Greece	Commonwealth	962
Sarigol	Kilkis-Greece	Commonwealth	711
Karasouli	Polikastro-Greece	Commonwealth	1422
Doiran	Doiran-Greece	Commonwealth	1384
Doiran Memorial	Doiran-Greece	Commonwealth	2000
Doiran	Doiran-Greece	Greek	101
Prophet Elias	Kaymakalan-Greece	Serbian	5000
Valadovo	Valadovo-FYROM	Greek	118
German	Bitola-FYROM	German	3406
French	Bitola-FYROM	French	15000
Bukovski	Bitola-FYROM	Serbian	1320
Skopje	Skopje-FYROM	Commonwealth	124
Skopje	Skopje-FYROM	French	1230

2.2. As far as the spatial features of these military cemeteries are concerned, an initial general classification, on the basis of the spatial and environmental scale, where they are located, allows for a potentially initial typological classification/ “reading” in cemeteries of (a) the big cities and (b) the greater countryside. A second typological classification could be based on criteria such as nationality or religion, depending on the aesthetics and the type of monumental ex-

pression, concerning both the site of the organized burial and the main monument as well (cenotaph or main war stone).

2.3. In the military cemeteries of the big cities [category (a)], [5] features of monumental style and corresponding architecture or even spatial organization are usually evident. These cemeteries, placed nowadays within the urban tissue, [6] have their boundaries clearly determined from the rest of their urban surroundings. [7] Also in these cemeteries, the monument/ cenotaph is of distinctive size, of a special artistic design and often of a “manneristic” symbolism. [8]

2.4. Different architectural monumental features as well as a rather severe spatial organization are evident in the respective military cemeteries of category (b), i.e. those of the greater countryside. Their boundaries – not merely as a tracing, but rather as an organized “arrangement” or precinct – in relation to the greater natural environment seem to be somewhat indefinite, incomplete or even under-emphasized. They are being rather “assimilated” by the landscape – in correspondence to those of the former category, i.e. of the big cities – usually constituting, from a “semiotic” point of view, by nature and location, succession/ trace/ sign/ symbol of the battlefield itself.

2.5. In search of distinctive typological features depending on the nationality or religion, it is worth mentioning the consciously streamlined attempt in some of these cemeteries. Apart from the basic and main function that characterizes all the reported military cemeteries (i.e. the grace and memoriam to the dead of the war), in the cemeteries of the British Commonwealth, for instance, the Government has made an attempt to streamline planning, construction, function and maintenance [9]. Flower beds of perfect mapping and clear monumental character (throughout the whole area and at its individual parts as well) are rendered into pierian gardens of the “Charites” and unutterable “remembrance”. [10] Similarly, the French military cemeteries of the same period, of an even plainer style than the aforementioned ones, of a nearly “minimalistic” aesthetic approach, merely “memorials” of a tragic historical period of the French nation, seem to long for their “silent integration” in both landscape and urban environment. With a more intensive symbolism than the previous ones, those of the German nation, “suggest”, by means of materials and construction, an architectural style of grandeur and “tribute” to the German nation. [11]

2.6. The relation of these military cemeteries with the urban tissue, regardless of category or size, depending on the initial planning and the provisions concerning their locations, seems to be usually peripheral to the main city, close to a main road (see. Kalokastro – Struma or Lahana) or even to a railway (such as the Allies Cemeteries in Thessaloniki or the British in Skopje, or those in Kristoni-Sarigol); while in some other cases, close to water bodies -such as rivers or even the sea (see. the British in Skopje and those in Mikra – Kalamaria Thessaloniki,

as well). [12] Nowadays, incorporated in the urban tissue, at least those of category (a) are roughly separated according to their boundaries or the signs that lead to them. Exceptions to this constitute the entrances to these places, which are of monumental size, an attempt of a rather semiotic rendering of the notions of “war memoriam” and historicity. As far as the access to these places is concerned, it is a rather common finding the fact that, in the case of the military cemeteries in the big cities, they are tight or even problematic. Obviously, this is due to the change of previous urban-planning standards and to the fact that their surroundings were not reformed on the basis of the recent conditions at the urban tissue, wherever encountered.

2.7. However, regardless of the size (of a big or limited scale) or their location (within the cities or in the countryside), the military cemeteries of the First World War in this region [13] follow clear planning and spatial organization principles. Firstly, all these cemeteries share certain common characteristics: an austere arrangement, clear mapping and routes, uniform tombstones, plain features of monumental style – with the exception in the case of the monument/ cenotaph, [14] plain organization and minimization of the natural verdure inside the cemeteries. The basic rules of spatial organization/ aesthetic approach/ space reading, are: the austerity/ frugality, the clarity/ distinctiveness, the solid or the “perforated” (depending on the case) character, the monumental concept/ remembrance/ grace (either personal – individual or collective – national). A common discovery is that the whole place, coming together with the “pierian features” of the historicity and the monumental style in these sites, re-determines its boundaries, with references to “memories of war” or even to “memories of silence”.

3. The contemporary function of the military cemeteries

3.1. The legal framework for the function of the cemeteries is usually determined by bipartite international agreements concerning the protection of the cultural heritage. More specifically, as far as the cemeteries of the British Commonwealth are concerned, as early as the 27th August/ 9th September 1921, there was signed the respective agreement between Great Britain and Greece, which was replaced by another agreement signed in 1969. [15]

3.2. The expenditures for the function and maintenance of the cemeteries as well as the wages of the personnel burden the local diplomacy of each country (embassies and consulates). [16] In the case of Great Britain, there is the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, which has undertaken to cover the expenditures and the maintenance of the 23.264 military cemeteries worldwide. [17] In France, the Ministry of Defense disposes a rate of its budget for the maintenance of the French military cemeteries in foreign countries. [18]

3.3. The military cemeteries, although they are easy targets, since they are unguarded, they do not often anticipate serious vandalisms. The most recent ones were the graffiti on some tombstones at the British cemetery in Skopje and an improvised explosive mechanism at the British cemetery in Faliro, near Athens, in 2003 during the Iraq war. In any case, the frequency and the importance of these vandalisms are similar to those in the military cemeteries throughout the world, and in no case greater than that. [19]

3.4. The cemeteries are not un-open to the public. Some have many visitors, while some others might not have a single visitor throughout the year. The most often visited ones are those of Thessaloniki and Skopje. The visitors are delegates of each state [20], descendants of the deceased and the veterans of the Second World War. The day on which the military cemeteries receive most of the visitors is the Armistice Day on the 11th November and especially in the case of Thessaloniki, the day after the Anzag Day, anniversary of the unsuccessful operation of the British and French to conquer Dardanelles, when about 20.000 Australians, New Zealanders and British visit the cemeteries of Gallipoli and then those of Thessaloniki in Greece.

4. The importance of the “funeral” of the memory and history, in collective honor and “liability” sites, or a consideration on the historicity and monumental character

4.1. Let's begin with the acknowledgement that the historical and cultural significance are equivalent factors, in an attempt to determine the content of the term *architectural heritage*. [21] What does the term *historical* mean, anyway? Or, even better, what may it comprise? It is a rather common acknowledgement and a spontaneous concept that *historical* is everything that relates to our history, i.e. political – military – religious; every artificial or artistic creation that marks and characterizes an era; a creation of nature or man, a feature of the contemporarily so called natural or anthropogenic environment, a print of certain events in space, or even a sequence of anterior human traces, in moments or periods of personal, collective or universal “value”. Under this concept, the human actions, as his prints in a specific space, either constitute or “describe history”. Additionally, historical is the site, [22] which incorporates history in its structure, maybe not always the most significant one, but every aspect of the history of humankind and its culture. [23]

4.2. But, what is a “monument”? According to the etymology of the word, [24] the monuments are indispensable parts of our historical-cultural environment and they constitute valuable evidence of our living context – significantly contributing to the shaping of its style and character. Anyway, the “Maps” and “Conventions”, from time to time until recently – expanding the notion and the context of the concepts that relate to the significance of the term *monumental*

character, through the protection and administration of the monuments [25] – enable them to include whole parts of the urban tissue or even rural sites, where the historical evolution of a cohesive or greater population group has taken place. However, apart from the spatial features – either urban or rural – one could place among them – under the expanded concept of the term “monument” – the “functions” of the site as well, altering thus the very term itself. The main evidence of such an alteration, or the turning point of such an expansion of the term, is the acknowledgment that the “functional memories” of the space are maybe the most powerful ones. And of course, it is interdependent with the very functional essence of the monument as well as with its ability to “function” even nowadays. [26]

4.3. But, how is a monument with special features – such as the monumental military cemeteries of the First World War – anticipated and how is it incorporated in the urban tissue, or – to put it in different words – in the “modern conditions”? How the aspect of its rather “loose” – up to nowadays – connection to the urban tissue or its greater region is now differentiated? How can it be “made attractive”, or “pointed out”/ underlined/ marked/ promoted by an urban-planning point of view? And how are issues of revision and re-determination of its “monumental character” drafted, in relation to the every-day life in the city as well as its whole aspect and anticipation?

4.4. The presupposition that “another, different rationale” is necessary as a starting point, in order to anticipate such an issue on the basis of which these monuments “deserve” to constitute an “active part” of our urban condition, includes also the notion of the “functional memory”, considering as functional values of protection and preservation – among others – also their educational function, the function of historical evidence or the landmark, their function as indispensable features of the urban tissue, as well as their utility, depending on their potential and individual characteristics. [27] It is self-evident that the functional re-incorporation of these monuments, as well as that of other similar monumental evidence – sites of collective honor and “liability” – presupposes a completed planning of the greater area, which necessitates an interdisciplinary approach. Suggestively, this planning could include: (i) the analysis of the historical evolution of that place, as well as an expansion of its historical alterations, (ii) the tracing of its social characteristics, (iii) the acknowledgement, tracing and evaluation of the architectural and urban planning features of the immediate and greater urban surroundings, (iv) the posing of objectives concerning the trends and the determination of the style of interventions (architectural, urban-planning, artistic, and others), (v) additional actions concerning promotion, communication and greater political support, (vi) the architectural, urban planning – on a scale depending on the intervention, (vii) the connection of the individual interventions in space (spatial planning of routes of special thematic significance).

5. Conclusions and suggestions of soft interventions

5.1. Thus nowadays, in early 21st century, there is the belief that the military cemeteries and everything they represent should find the place they deserve within each modern city and in the greater region as well. The local communities should anticipate these sites as living parts of their recent history and promote this aspect throughout the world.

5.2. How can such an intervention be realized? In contrast to what is usually the case, the promotion of the military cemeteries of the First World War via the television and the press should not be pursued as such, since this kind of temporary publicity shall merely remind the existence of these cemeteries only to those who already know them. It has actually no effect on the rest of the people, who know nearly nothing about them.

5.3. Their promotion should be organized not on the basis of a temporary presentation but rather of the conscious knowledge of the adults or the knowledge provided via the educational process. The creation and broadcasting of documentaries and the incorporation of the knowledge concerning the military cemeteries in the textbooks aim at such a promotion. The documentaries will elaborate the issue of the First World War and each individual region as a stage of the military operations. Subtitled in all the languages of the countries that home cemeteries in each region, they could be broadcasted in cinemas, local TV stations, local circles and schools.

5.4. More significant and permanent – though rather long term – will be the effects of the incorporation of such information on military cemeteries in the history textbooks of Greece and FYROM. In both these countries, the First World War constitutes a part of the history syllabus, stressing, of course, the participation of each nation or state in this war rather than the extensive war operations. The illustration of these textbooks is usually inefficient mainly limited to paintings exhibited in the historical museums of these countries, representing diplomatic and military events. A couple of paragraphs in the relevant texts, two or three photographs of these cemeteries, the inclusion of the relevant sources or even better the prompt to the pupils to visit a military cemetery in their region, as part of a group work, will have a permanent result on a big share of the young generations. On the contrary, the performance of any educational game is contraindicated, since the place and the function of a cemetery are unfavorable to the principles and the function of the term “game”.

5.5. The improvement of the interaction of the local communities with the military cemeteries of the First World War will surely increase the number of the local visitors at the cemeteries. However, the improvement of the viewpoint of the local communities, as far as the cemeteries are concerned, will make them

promote these cemeteries to the general public as part of their cultural heritage and seek the attraction of visitors at them.

5.6. In order to facilitate the visitors' access, it would be advisable specific routes to be created and suggested to the latter. Such a measure is easy to implement, since the military cemeteries are located close to big roads and the passages on the Greek – FYROM borders. All the necessary complementary knowledge can be easily provided since all the nearby towns have their historical or military museum that incorporate a part of the local First World War history.

5.7. Of course, the tracing of such a route needs the cooperation of both countries, Greece and FYROM, which is by no means an easy attempt, when it comes to the preservation and promotion of local history and cultural heritage, since both parties have completely different viewpoints on these issues. However, the Macedonian Front of the First World War is maybe one of the very few points of recent history where the Balkans follow a common course with the rest of Europe. Thus, the history of the First World War is one of the very few points where the historiography of the Balkan countries converges and does not present any divergence.

5.8. Anyway, the tracing of a cultural route is actually a matter of low political profile; and the issues raised in such a low political profile are solved relatively easily via bipartite contacts. In addition, the Florina-Bitola and Doiran regions, that are located on the borders, belong to the Euroregions; justifying thus the submission of relevant financial programs for the funding by the European Union of local bodies in order to implement such projects.

References

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- [3] Interview of several villagers in this area and the prayer of the church, 18 March 2006. See also *WORLD WAR I: The Kaimakcalan Battle at Macedonian Front* <http://www.geocities.com/kaymakcalan1916/index.html>.
- [4] Interview of Mr. A. SUTHERLAND, Commonwealth War Graves Commission, Regional Manager Greece and Balkans, 21 March 2006.

- [5] See. Allies Cemeteries of Thessaloniki on Langada street, a British one in Skopje, a French one in Bitola or a British one in Mikra, at Thessaloniki.
- [6] Due to the enlarged scale of the city or the alteration of its urban-planning features in some of these regions, e.g. former suburbs that have now been incorporated in the city web.
- [7] See. an organized, usually stone built, high enough precinct.
- [8] See. German military cemetery in Bitola or the respective French.
- [9] Reference to the architects and artists that created the monuments is made above. In addition, the special service created for their maintenance, administration and proper function is also aforementioned. Recorded evidence on the planning and the construction of the military cemeteries of the First World War in the region of Macedonia do not exist, except a few ones in the relevant British Archives of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and more specifically in the http://www.cwgc.org/debt_of_honour.asp?menuid=14&searchFor=cemetery.
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- [12] See. military cemeteries in Skopje or in Mikra, at Thessaloniki respectively.
- [13] As it is maintained by the archives and the in site research.
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- [22] The city, the countryside, a city centre or a rural site.
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