
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Skra Victory (1918): Greece's Military, Political, and Social Gain

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| ABSTRACT

This article examines the successful Greek army operation at Skra in May 1918. This battle was the first significant deployment of Greek troops during World War I. For the Greek army, this operation was of utmost importance, as it would demonstrate both its combat capability and its willingness to fight alongside the Entente. Through the utilization of primary and secondary sources, the article analyzes the preparation of the Greek divisions and the execution of the attack. However, the research is not limited to a purely military analysis. The victorious outcome of the battle had multiple ramifications. On an international level, it strengthened Venizelos's credibility with the Allies and gave the Greek army the opportunity to demonstrate its fighting capacity and its willingness to fight alongside the Entente. At the same time, the victory demoralized the Bulgarian soldiers and broke the deadlock on the Macedonian Front. Domestically, the victory at Skra strengthened Venizelos's political position and filled the divided Greek society with pride, mitigating the disagreements of the recent past. Finally, within the Greek army itself, this particular battle acted as a catalyst. It filled it with self-confidence, morale, and faith in its combat capabilities. At the same time, it inspired those loyal to the political neutrality of Constantine, who had been reluctant to participate in the war, to enlist and fight.

| KEYWORDS

Battle of Skra, Greek army, World War I, Macedonian Front, Social military history.

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1. Introduction

In the early years of the World War I, Greece officially maintained a policy of neutrality. However, Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos advocated for Greece's entry into the war on the side of the Entente. Conversely, King Constantine insisted on maintaining Greek neutrality, which in reality served the interests of the Central Powers. Additionally, the Greek General Staff, aligned with the King, prioritized the preservation of territorial gains from the Balkan Wars over the perceived risks associated with direct involvement in the broader conflict. This discord culminated in Venizelos' resignation on September 22, 1915, precipitating a profound national crisis known as the National Schism (Hellenic Army General Staff [hereafter HAGS], 1998).

The situation further intensified in May 1916 when German and Bulgarian forces invaded eastern Macedonia, resulting in the capitulation and subsequent captivity of the Greek IV Army Corps stationed in the region, which was interned in Germany. Venizelos, backed by the Entente, established a provisional government in Thessaloniki and formed the National Defense Army Corps to integrate under the Allied Command of the Macedonian Front. This move led to a de facto split in the country, with two rival governments and two armies (Leontaritis, 2000).

The political landscape changed in June 1917, when Constantine abdicated under pressure from the Entente. Venizelos returned to power and immediately declared war on the Central Powers. Nevertheless, the Greek army encountered formidable obstacles.

The National Schism had left the army demoralized and divided to Venizelists and anti-Venizelists [Royalists]. There were also serious problems with training, equipment, and supplies (Kondylis, 1979).

2. A proving ground for the Greek Army

Recognizing the complexities arising from the National Schism within the Greek military, French General Adolphe Guillaumat, Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Army of the Orient in Salonika, conducted a series of some local attacks during the spring of 1918. These operations were aimed at evaluating not only the morale of the Greek troops but also their proficiency in training and combat readiness. Such assessments held significant importance, particularly in light of Greece's recent entry into the war, demanding a swift integration of its forces into the broader Allied war effort. Additionally, Guillaumat grasped the strategic necessity of engaging German forces in Macedonia. By initiating localized offensive actions, he sought to achieve a dual objective: preventing German reinforcements from reaching the crucial Western Front while concurrently gauging the capabilities of the Allied troops under his command, including the newly incorporated Greek army (État-major de l'armée, 1933).

By the spring of 1918, the Greek divisions placed at the disposal of the Commander-in-Chief included not only the three of the National Defense Army Corps [Serres, Archipelago, and Cretan], but also those belonging to the I Army Corps headquartered in Athens. Specifically, the 1st Division of Larissa, had completed its training in Naresh [Filadelfeia, Thessaloniki] camp and was already under the British command of General George Milne in the operational zone from February 27, 1918. Furthermore, the 13th Division of Chalkis, as of April 2, was undergoing training in Naresh, while the arrival of the 2nd Division of Athens was awaited (HAGS, 1961).

Undoubtedly, the Anglo-French viewed the spring offensives of 1918 as a final rehearsal before the execution of the great Allied offensive on the Macedonian Front. The Allies were not yet fully convinced of the extent to which they could rely on the Greek forces. Therefore, it was deemed necessary for the Greek troops to be tested in real operations, experiencing the enemy's presence firsthand in order to gain "experience by being close to him" (Briggs, 1918).

Based on the above, the assignment of capturing the Skra heights to the National Defense Army Corps is interpreted. This particular prominence, with an altitude of 1,096 meters, served as an observation post of great strategic value, granting its holder a significant tactical advantage, in this case the Bulgarians. Its natural fortification was further enhanced by defensive works constructed by the latter, including barbed wire, communication trenches, and machine gun positions covered by rocks capable of withstanding artillery fire (Despotopoulos, 1970). Additionally, the steep slopes of the hillsides and the great distance between the enemy's defensive lines posed further challenges to the attackers (Spiers, 1918).

The complexities of the Skra heights terrain were undoubtedly known to the French Commander-in-Chief. After all, only a year had passed since the Allies' failed attempt to capture it (Vlachos, 2018). Therefore, the assignment of such a demanding operation would provide a prime opportunity for the Anglo-French to assess both the Greeks' fighting ability and willingness to fight, as well as the Bulgarian resistance (Falls, 1935). These observations were deemed critical for the Allies' ultimate decision regarding the potential launch of a major offensive in Macedonia later that year (Kondylis, 1979).

3. Recognition of National Significance and Preparations

The importance of the impending Skra operation for Greece and its army was fully understood domestically as well. As aptly noted by Kondylis, the "capture of those rocks" would effectively determine Greece's destiny within the major Allied offensive. The immense weight of this undertaking was underscored by the unprecedented visit of Prime Minister Venizelos to the Greek troops a few days before the battle, in order to personally assess the men's combat readiness and boost their morale. During his address to the assembled Greek units, he expressed his unwavering conviction that the Greek army would vanquish the enemy, a declaration that was met with enthusiastic cheers from the soldiers (*Macedonia*, 1918).

The Commander of the National Defense Army Corps was Lieutenant General Emmanuel Zymvrakakis, while the commanders of the divisions within the corps were as follows: the Archipelago Division, commanded by Major General Dimitrios Ioannou; the Cretan Division, led by Major General Panagiotis Spiliadis; and the Serres Division, under the command of Major General Epameinondas Zymvrakakis. The entire Greek army corps was under the command of the French sector commander, General Auguste Gérôme (HAGS, 1993).

The opinions of the Anglo-French regarding the Greek generals of the National Defense Army Corps differed. Specifically, for the Zymvrakakis brothers, the British military attaché, Lieutenant Colonel William Ernest Fairholme, did not hold the highest opinion. On the contrary, he considered Ioannou, the commander of the Archipelago Division, to be a capable officer. On the other hand,

the French General Gérôme appreciated all the Greek commanders but particularly singled out Spiliadis, a graduate of the French War School (Fairholme, 1918).

In the preparatory phase leading up to the Skra offensive, the participating forces were initially stationed at Berzeri camp, situated approximately nine kilometers south of the Skra heights. This French-organized and supervised training facility served as a critical ground for honing the Greek troops' combat skills. The terrain at Berzeri faithfully replicated the actual battlefield conditions that the Greeks would encounter during the attack on Skra, including all the obstacles and challenges they were likely to face. This immersive training regimen encompassed a comprehensive array of essential military subjects, including techniques for neutralizing enemy observation posts, effectively clearing enemy defensive positions, and mastering machine gun operation. The overarching objective was to equip the Greek soldiers with the most realistic possible training experience in preparation for the specific combat scenarios they would confront in the imminent operation. The training was conducted repeatedly, ensuring that "with frequent repetition, [each soldier] performed their duties like a machine" (Grigoriadis, 1920).

4. Execution and Casualties

Upon completion of their rigorous training, the Greek units repositioned closer to the enemy trenches, poised to launch the offensive. On May 7th, 1918, General Gérôme issued the official attack order, designating the capture of the Skra heights as the primary objective. The Archipelago Division was entrusted with the main attack, while the Cretan and Serres Divisions were tasked with executing supporting maneuvers. The offensive actions of the Greek divisions would be supported by French artillery (HAGS, 1993).

The operation commenced on May 16th, 1918, with a preparatory artillery barrage. The following morning, the Greek infantry initiated their attack. Despite challenging weather conditions and the formidable nature of the enemy's entrenched positions, the Greek forces made significant progress. The rapidity of their advance surprised the Bulgarians, who were either compelled to surrender or abandon their positions in a disorderly retreat, relinquishing weapons and equipment in the process. The enemy's troops were thrown into complete disarray. Within a mere eighteen minutes, the Greek forces secured their initial objective, capturing their first Bulgarian prisoners (Archipelago Division, 1918).

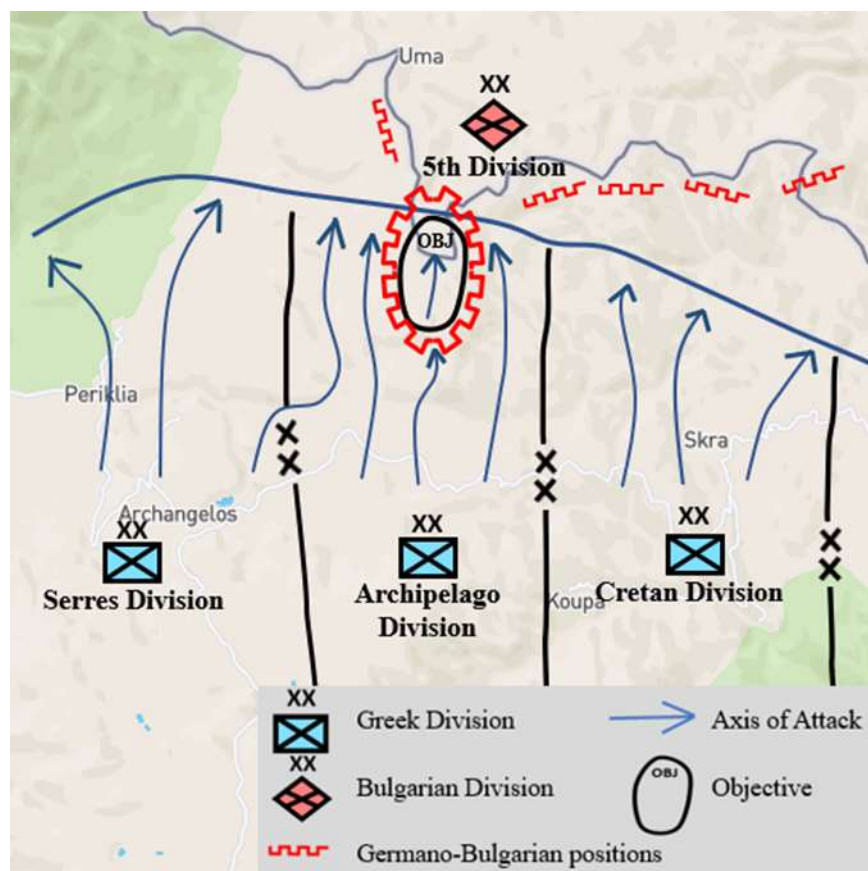


Figure-1: The battle of Skra

Corporal Alexandros Volakis, who served with the Archipelago Division, vividly described the scene of utter disarray amongst the Bulgarians:

We were catching the Bulgarians like rabbits; as soon as they surrendered, they fell upon the *galéte* [French hard biscuit] and the tins that our soldiers gave them. They were all hungry, naked, and barefoot with their uniforms in a deplorable state (Ethnos, 1918).

Seeking to exploit the discouraged state of the Bulgarian army, Greek commanders of advancing units requested permission to pursue the enemy beyond the originally designated line. However, this request was denied due to the absence of preparatory artillery bombardment on the subsequent Bulgarian defensive position (Archipelago Division, 1918).

Despite these explicit instructions, the Greek units pressed forward beyond their designated boundaries, incurring significant casualties from accidental friendly fire from the Allied artillery. The Greek General Staff attributed the lack of coordination to "the unparalleled impetus of the Greek infantry". However, this incident also provided an opportunity for certain individuals with "doubtful good faith [...] to attack the morale of the Greek soldier rather than serve the truth". Indicative is the extreme perspective of the fervently anti-Venizelist officer Georgios Tsontos-Vardas. While Vardas acknowledged that friendly fire casualties were not uncommon on the battlefield, he nonetheless argued that in this specific case, the Greeks "were deliberately shot, out of fear that they might defect to the enemy" (Tsontos-Vardas, 2006).

The casualties of the Greek army during the battle of Skra have not been fully clarified. Falls reports a combined figure of 2,659 Greek dead and wounded for the battle (Falls, 1935). However, the Hellenic Army General Staff's History Directorate provides a lower total casualty count of 2,573, broken down as follows: 434 dead, 164 missing, and 1,975 wounded. Notably, 90% of these casualties are attributed to the Archipelago Division (National Defense Army Corps, 1918). In contrast, Bulgarian losses are estimated at roughly 800 dead and 2,500 captured soldiers (Kondylis, 1979).

5. The Imprint of the Battle

In the immediate aftermath of the battle, the fallen Greek soldiers were rightly hailed as national heroes by Greek society and received the corresponding honors. Without delay, the press recounted the exploits of the "legendary heroes" who had "dyed with their honest blood the slopes and peaks of the Macedonian mountains" (*Ethnos*, 1918). The first names of the fallen were quickly published. Undoubtedly, the identification and public chronicling of the Skra fighters' bravery served the purpose of shaping social and military ideals around the concept of glorious death in service of the nation (Kopanitsanou, 2018).

In truth, the disclosure of details about fallen soldiers serves to project examples of heroism and dedication to duty to society, especially military circles. A particularly noteworthy case was that of Major Vasilios Papagiannis, whose death assumed near-mythical proportions. Not only was he the highest-ranking Greek officer to fall in the battle, but he was also the nephew of the Chief of the Greek army, General Panagiotis Danglis. The General recounted his nephew's fervent desire to participate in the Skra offensive, stating that Papagiannis "begged him with tears [...] to take part in this attack". Danglis ultimately granted his request, and the Major found himself leading a battalion of the Archipelago Division in the ensuing battle (Danglis, 1965). During the attack, "the divine Papagiannis reached the top of Skra with his entire battalion and made that hill his glorified Mausoleum when he found himself wounded - but still pushing forward and leading his battalion - to the enemy trench" (Grigoriadis, 1920).

The resounding victory at Skra, hailed as "the most significant battle in Macedonia to that date", served as an initial vindication of Venizelos's decision to align Greece with the Entente (Grigoriadis, 1920). From an operational perspective, the successful attack yielded a clear improvement in the Allied position, granting them greater depth and control over strategically vital observation points. In essence, the victory at Skra marked the end of the military stalemate that had gripped the Macedonian Front. Concurrently, it bolstered Venizelos' prestige on a domestic and international level. As Falls aptly observed: "Brilliant feat of arms as it was, few actions so small made so much stir". The Greek victory demonstrably illustrated "how much a well-planned military action could be made to contribute to political ends" (Falls, 1935). It is thus unsurprising that the Prime Minister, overcome with emotion, announced the victorious outcome of the battle to his cabinet with tears in his eyes (*Macedonia*, 1918).

On an international level, the conduct of the Greek army elicited admiration and surprise from the Entente. Until then, the Allies had doubts about the morale of the Greek units due to the numerous mutinies and desertions that had occurred. After the battle of Skra, the Entente was convinced that it could now rely on the Greek divisions and organize a great offensive on the Macedonian Front (Pangalos, 1959). As British Prime Minister David Lloyd George astutely observed, "this victory opened the eyes of the Entente

governments to the possibilities of the Balkans”, further remarking that the battle definitively “proved that the Greek troops [...] possessed high fighting value” (Lloyd George, 1937).

The French Commander-in-Chief shared the same conviction. He had entrusted the capture of Skra to the Greek army specifically to assess “its courage and capability” (Danglis, 1965). Guillaumat noted that the operation “sealed the brotherhood in arms of our troops and is a fortunate omen for future victories”. Moreover, he did not fail to emphasize that the Greek army, thanks to its “impetus and aggressiveness”, had begun to be considered “equal to the French” (*Macedonia*, 1918; HGS 1961).

On a national level, the “glorious victory of our army in Macedonia” (*Ethnos*, 1918) was far more important than a local victory (Grigoriadis, 1920). Certainly, a military operation of such difficulty aroused enthusiasm throughout the country, softened the political disagreements of the recent past, and at the same time contributed to the unification of Greek society.

The impact of the battle on the society of the Greek army was particularly noteworthy. It was a purely Greek military victory, as all assault units - except for a French flamethrower platoon - were Greek. For the officer corps, this success served as a significant confidence booster, effectively dispelling the notion, propagated by Royalist circles, that Greek victories in the recent Balkan Wars were solely attributable to the leadership of German-trained officers. The fact that most of these aforementioned officers had now been removed from the ranks, while German staff officers were advising the defeated Bulgarians, added even greater value to the prestige of the Venizelist officers (Palmer, n.d.).

The outcome of the battle had a notable impact not only on the officers but also on the morale of the non-commissioned officers and soldiers of the Greek army. Elated by the victory, they felt they were now serving in a victorious army (Kakoudakis, 2002). Corporal Panos Gravaris' words exemplified the prevailing enthusiasm:

It is impossible to imagine the magnitude, the impetus of this battle [...] others more capable than me may depict this achievement, but they would seriously wound the splendid reality [...] our noble allies are ecstatic with us (Gravaris, 1918).

6. Conclusion

“The experience of the Front and the victory of Skra” proved to be a pivotal moment for Greek army in World War I (Danglis, 1965). It marked the inaugural Greek offensive on the Macedonian Front and resulted in a decisive victory against the Bulgarian forces. This triumph had far-reaching impacts, both internationally and domestically.

On the international stage, the victory at Skra bolstered Greece's standing among the Allied Powers. The Greek army had demonstrated its combat effectiveness, earning the trust and confidence of its allies. Internally, the operation of Skra had a significant impact on public opinion. The morale of the Greek people, previously divided on the issue of war participation, soared in the wake of the victory. This surge in national pride and unity strengthened the political position of Venizelos who had championed Greece's entry into the war on the side of the Allies (Kopanitsanou, 2018).

Specifically, within the ranks of Greek military personnel, the successful execution of a complex offensive operation served as a catalyst, instilling a sense of confidence and self-belief in the troops. Previously hesitant personnel were now inspired to fight alongside their allies with renewed vigor and determination (Spiers, 1918).

6.1 Study Limitations and Future Research

The multifaceted nature of the impact stemming from a military engagement necessitates a nuanced analysis. While this article delves into the political, military, and social ramifications of a triumphant battle for Greece, it is imperative to acknowledge that certain dimensions, such as the economic repercussions, warrant further investigation in prospective research endeavors on the subject matter.

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