BLACKWOOD'S

MAGAZINE.

VOL. CLXXIX.

JANUARY—JUNE 1906.

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD & SONS, EDINBURGH;

AND

37 PATERNOSTER ROW, LONDON.

1906.

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BLACKWOOD'S MAGAZINE.

No. MLXXXV. MARCH 1906. Vol. CLXXIX.

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AN UNDERGROUND REPUBLIC.

AN ADVENTURE IN MACEDONIA.

IT is hard, almost impossible, to study the workings of an organisation from the outside. That is the conclusion I have come to after a year's residence in Bulgaria trying to understand the workings of the Macedonian Revolutionary Committee. Although in almost daily association with members of this Organisation, it was, at best, only second-hand information that I acquired. A ten days' campaign with one of the armed bands in the interior has taught me more than the whole year in Bulgaria: I can only regret that obstacles of language prevented my engaging in it before. It is not my object to amuse the reader with a tale of adventure; but by describing the experiences of those ten days, and recording certain conversations I had with leaders and intelligent members of the Organisation, I will, I believe, convey a more concrete view of revolutionary work in Macedonia than by pages of general information.

There came to Bulgaria some months ago three Englishmen, who later passed through Macedonia on a tour of observation. One of them, however, realising the restrictions that hamper the traveller by passport in Turkey, determined to see things from the inside,—to visit Macedonia, as those who best understand the question do, with the passport of steel that bears the seal of the Macedonian Revolutionary Committee. So it was that our Englishman came to the frontier town of Kustendil, through which runs the principal channel by which the regular chetas, or bands, pass over into Macedonia. At the same time there arrived a letter from the Chief over in Kratova, Damon Grueff, suggesting that I accompany the band—for by this time I had gained a fair knowledge of the language.

Kustendil lies about twelve miles away from the frontier, at the foot of the Osogov Mountains, whose highest ridge divides Bulgaria from Turkish territory. On the morning of August 20 we left the town on horse; five of us,—the local agent of the Committee, Peter Angeloff, voyvoda, we two foreigners, and the regular courier whose route is between Kustendil and the frontier.

We quickly crossed the valley by the main road, and then struck up into the mountains by trail. By noon we were well up in the beech forests, and in the early afternoon had reached the last post of the system in Bulgaria. Apparently it was a small village some hundred yards below the line of fron-

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tier posts, but well hidden from observation by the thick forest. Apparently, I say, a village, but really a number of huts in which are stored the munitions which are to be smuggled across into Macedonia. Here, too, the bands make their last preparations before diving over into the thick of real business. As the chief said, Only men of serious mind visit this spot.

We dismounted, spread out a couple of blankets over the thick carpeting of dried leaves, and stretched ourselves for a rest against the work that was to come. An old woman cooked a dinner over an open fire, which half an hour later she served to us. An hour's smoke; then began the preparations. We three — Angeloff, our English comrade, and I — stripped and put on the outfit which is the regular uniform of a soldier of the Committee: heavy woollen underclothes (yet it was midsummer), a pair of long, woollen stockings, reaching above the knees, a second pair of thick socks to above the ankles, the grey uniform trousers, thick felt leggings, and swine-hide moccasins, fastened to the feet by leather thongs wound over the white leggings. Then came a short grey coat, and about the waist ten feet of broad red sash, which serves as a cushion for the ammunition belts.

Next, the armament. A large seven-shooter, attached to a belt full of ammunition, to which was also appended a long hunting-knife in a sheath. Above this a second belt, holding 150 rounds of Mannlicher cartridges in clips. Over all a long, black, rainproof, and last a short Mannlicher carbine. Such, besides his knapsack, is the outfit of each bandsman. In his knapsack each man carries a small dynamite grenade, and a vial of poison for himself when the last shot has been fired. For capture always means death by mutilation.

Once having buckled on his belts, no man may take them off till he has returned from his campaign, which may be a year. This is a strict rule of the Committee. It is hard on one who loves bathing.

We lay lounging about on the blankets waiting for night. The courier from Macedonia would be due shortly after sunset. He would escort us back over his return route. The courier system is one of the most important features of the Organisation. Its purpose is the rapid spread of information regarding the movements of the enemy's troops, the carrying of official reports and communications, and the clearing of the channels for the safe passage of bands, or individuals who may be travelling underground on business of the Committee. In each village and in secret spots in the forests are relay stations, about four hours' march between, where these couriers meet to deliver over their papers or bands under their guidance to the couriers of the next route. Thus the voyvoda need not even know the country through which he takes his band. He depends on the couriers.

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By ten o'clock the courier from Macedonia had not appeared. The Kustendil courier was sent up to reconnoitre. At midnight he returned, and reported that the Turks had doubled the patrols, and were holding a sharp look-out along the paths between the posts. A great deal of munition had passed over lately, and they had probably got wind of it through spies in Kustendil. This extreme vigilance accounted for the non-appearance of the courier, who must wait over a day, or pass up the line several posts, for doubling the patrol here meant that some other part of the chain had been weakened in consequence.

We slept the rest of the night. The next day passed slowly and in miserable discomfort, for we had not yet grown used to the weight of our equipments. Finally evening came again, and shortly after dark the courier appeared, having just squeezed through the line. "They may double-up again later," said the chief, "so let us push over at once." He gave the word to form, then repeated the rules of the march, strictly to be observed whether danger appeared to be present or not:—

"Talking prohibited, except when absolutely necessary, to the voyvoda, and then not above a whisper.

"No smoking allowed except when resting, and then only by permission of the chief. Cigarette stumps then to be thrown out in the grass or brush.

"No one to stop or lag behind the man in front beyond two paces."

These rules having been interpreted to our English comrade, we formed — the courier ahead, then the voyvoda, the rest behind in single file. A bandsman having joined our company, we numbered four. We climbed the rising ground toward the posts, through thick brush, stopping occasionally to listen. Off in the night we heard the sharp whistles of the patrols signalling each other. A longer stop. The courier ahead advanced, crouching, struck two stones together, and we stole over the line, plunging into the deep forest just over the ridge. We had passed just fifty metres below a post.

The march continued for fifteen minutes through such intense darkness that at times I could not see the white leggings of the man in front. Then came a halt by a spring, where we rested and smoked a cigarette each. Two men waited here for us. When we started again, they spread out, one on either flank, some hundred yards out, thus guarding against surprise.

In this way the peasants scout for the bands. The Turks are at a great disadvantage, for while the scout knows them at once, they can never be certain that he is more than some simple shepherd in search of his flock. Thus he gives his signal, the band is warned, and the scout serenely continues on his way.

We now descended into a deep, dark ravine, resting by a torrent that thundered along its bottom. Then on again, up the opposite side, often meeting shepherds with whom

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the courier or voyvoda exchanged a few words, to assure himself that the path was clear. Past midnight we reached the first secret post, where the courier again struck two stones together, and three men appeared to relieve him and the two scouts. We bade them good-bye, and continued with the newcomers.

Shortly before dawn we had reached the top of the mountain, and followed a level track over a plateau country, through heavy forest. Here we switched off the trail, and just as the eastern skyline lightened, dropped down into a small open space among thick bushes.

The two scouts took up stations, several hundred metres out on either side, as outposts, while the courier went on to a village near by to inform the local committee of our arrival. We were to have spent the day in the village, but the arrival on the previous evening of fifteen askèrs caused this change in our plans. A regular band would have gone in anyway; but on account of our English comrade extra precautions were taken.

I slept for several hours, and woke up to find that our breakfast had been brought up from the village: hot milk, bread, cheese, and fruit. While we were eating, the president of the local committee appeared: he wore a peasant costume which I noticed was different from the usual dress of the peasants near the frontier. He was, in fact, not a Bulgar (as I observed when he began to speak), but a Vlach. We had come into a Rumanian district: the village was entirely composed of Vlachs. This made a strong impression on me, for usually one race distrusts another here. But, as I learned later, the Vlachs and Bulgars are absolutely one in the cause. There are even many Vlach voyvodas in command of Bulgarian bands.

During the day many of the villagers came out to see us, some of them mere boys of ten and twelve. This publicity of our whereabouts surprised me, but I soon learned that absolute faith was held in the population, for without that the Organisation could not exist.

At dusk we came out of our hiding, and went into one of the outermost houses of the village, where we took supper on rugs about a fire with the officials of the local committee. I had noticed that here again outposts were stationed to watch the houses in which the askèrs were quartered. As it was, we were not two minutes away from them.

During supper we heard the account of a massacre in a village several hours away, from a courier who had just arrived. One man, three women, and four children had been killed, and eight others wounded. This news was taken very calmly: it was part of the day's work, and excited no unusual emotions.

An hour later we began our march again, — this time we four on horses, the courier and three scouts on foot, they having no equipments to carry. We passed through the village,

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so close to the troops that we might have hurled a bomb into their quarters. No dogs barked, as is usually the case when a stranger passes. It seems that every villager is informed when a band is coming, so that he may chain up his dog until the danger is over.

We now struck into a chain of bare, rocky mountains, known as the Kalin Kamun range, destitute of trees or habitations, but full of shepherds and their flocks, whose night-fires we discovered in various directions about us. We travelled quickly, and in the early morning came to a small flat plateau edged with timber. Here we suddenly ran into a swarm of armed men; but our scouts had got in touch with them before, and there was surprise on neither side except to us two foreigners. It proved to be a band of local chetniks—a "cellski" cheta, a village band, not a regular cheta. They had been sent out to meet us from a near-by village, with the object of accompanying us to the scene of the massacre, Conopnitza, where our chief might render medical aid to the wounded, which had been refused by the Turks. Each voyvoda must understand first-aid hospital work, dressing and bandaging of wounds, and placing the wounded in comfort till one of the Committee's regular surgeons can arrive.

We went on, with the village cheta ahead of us. They had greeted us with silent handgrips, and I could feel by their horny palms that this was not their means of livelihood.

These "cellski" chetas are what the Chief calls the Macedonian militia. Each village organises a band, under the direction of the local committee, which drills at night, and is ready at short notice to come to the assistance of a regular cheta in trouble. In this district of Kratova alone they are several thousand strong, thus outnumbering the Committee's regulars by about ten to one. Thus the armed force is in the hands of the people, and tyranny by officials of the Committee is impossible, since in the end they must depend on the backing of the villagers. In periods of revolution these village chetas openly join the revolutionists, but in times of comparative peace their *rôle* is to lie low.

We now entered a village where, while the rest of us drank coffee, the chiefs consulted with the local president. He had just received news that Conopnitza had been occupied by a force of askèrs so much outnumbering us that our going there was impossible. We retraced our steps several kilometres back to the point where we had met the cheta, and there turned off into the forest. Here it was necessary to dismount and to lead our horses, for the trees were so thick that the boughs came down barely above our heads. We reached more open country at dawn, and later entered a village, where the cheta dispersed, while we left our horses and descended into a deep valley on foot. The peasants at work in the fields greeted us much as though we were

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ordinary travellers: they seldom gave us a second look after passing.

From the bottom of the valley the way was a climb up a steep mountain by a narrow goat-trail, at times invisible save to Angeloff's experienced eyes. I was walking behind him when he turned and said—

"You are no longer in the Turkish Empire."

He smiled at my puzzled look, and continued, pointing upward—

"Up there, among those peaks, lives Damon Grueff. Not a Turk dares come within a day's travel of this stronghold; here we have our own free republic. A thousand eyes are watching us now, some with binoculars, from below and above; but they know our business. Even the tax-gatherer does not come among these villages unless he brings an army with him, and Abdul Hammid can't afford that just now."

The upward climb continued for hours. At about ten we reached a shelf of rock just below the very summit. A last effort, and we were up on level ground in a small corn-field. Beyond appeared the huts of a small village. As we approached we saw that we were observed by a band of armed men, who came sauntering carelessly toward us. Their leader advanced and shook our hands.

"Where is Damon?" asked Angeloff. The chief pointed to a cluster of huts across the plateau among a small clump of brush and trees.

We continued our way through the armed villagers, and went on toward what was evidently the Chief's headquarters. More armed men appeared from the fields on either side our path, but all greeted us in a friendly manner, some coming up to shake hands. Finally we reached the trees, and halted before a gate in a bramble fence. In beyond I caught glimpses of the moving grey uniforms of regular chetniks. The gate opened, and we entered. A group of men in regular uniforms and armed as we were approached to meet us; the foremost I recognised as Damon Grueff, the original organiser of the Macedonian Committee.

"You are the first foreigners to visit me here," he said, as he reached out his hand. "Welcome to my mountain home."

He pointed to the houses with a sweep of his arm. Pleasant vine-covered houses they were, surrounded by cultivated bushes, trees, and gardens of beans, peppers, water-melons, and corn.

"Here is where I do my farming," he added,—"a pleasant summer resort for men of serious thoughts."

Then he introduced us to his staff,—fine, clear-cut young men, whose names are not known beyond the Balkans because they have not had the time to talk over café tables to journalists of receptive minds. Genuine revolutionaries all of them, nevertheless—"men of serious thoughts."

We all sat down cross-legged on blankets, and while attend-

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ants served us with coffee and milk we conversed. Grueff showed much eagerness to learn from our English comrade particulars of the political situation in England. But I was too tired and sleepy to be a good interpreter; nor was our English friend in any better condition. Grueff noticed our distress, and quickly had two blankets and pillows spread out for us in the shade of a large oak-tree. There we slept till mid-afternoon.

When I awoke Grueff was sitting close by, and at once opened up conversation. I had never known him so talkative in Sofia. Of all the chiefs he is probably the most reserved: no journalist can ever get a personal interview out of him; his portrait is never published in illustrated journals. Yet here leaders whose egotism is spattered over all the daily and weekly publications of the world during revolutions humbly take their orders from him when they really get down to work.

It was hard for me to believe that I was not spending a few holidays on somebody's farm. He took me around to see the vegetable patches, and was especially proud of his water-melons. He asked me about the crops in America with the interest of a keen agriculturist. Then he carried me off to admire the poetic view from a near-by hill-top. The idea kept creeping up in my mind that he might be trying to sell me some real estate: he had all the keen enthusiasm of a professional land-agent.

"But," I asked him, "what is to prevent a Turkish battalion from coming up along that ridge yonder?"

I saw no particular advantages in the stronghold from a military point of view.

"Nothing," he replied with a laugh; "only they won't find us here when they do come. I should go down and cut off their communications. Our security is not in armed strength; it lies in the loyalty of the people hereabouts. Let the Turks come, and we shall have it signalled to us a day before they can get here. A small force would be annihilated; a large force we would evade."

"And they know you are here?"

"Every Turkish officer in Macedonia knows."

"From here you administrate the Organisation?"

"In Kratova, yes; not beyond."

"I thought you were General Chief."

"You don't understand our organisation in normal times. I was General Chief during the revolution; now I am president of Kratova district. We have decentralised; we have no Central Committee now. We have abolished two things—secrecy and the centralisation of power in one or a few hands. Each akrida, or district, is an administrative entity in itself, governed by its own chief, independent of the rest of the country. Sometimes we district chiefs meet and agree on some general course of action, but usually that is left to a general congress, held yearly,

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composed of delegates elected for the purpose from each district. We have the power only to move the mechanism of the Organisation, but general policies must be decided and general laws made by Congress."

"Then each band is confined to its district?"

"Absolutely so; except when crossing others to get to its own, or if hard pressed by the enemy."

He went on into administrative details of the work, showing how no man alone had the power over his associates — a principle that runs through all. They have learned that lesson by experience. The only terrorising that can be done is against the enemy, against those who are obviously not in favour of what the Organisation stands for—the freedom of the people.

We had supper on the blankets under the oak-tree—a primitive feast in its way; still with napkins, and with soap and towels to wash with afterwards. There was absolute democracy among them all: his men called him Damon, sometimes Gospodin Damon. And still, with all this familiarity, I fancy they stood a little in awe of him.

In the evening we gathered about a camp-fire. The conversation became general; the common chetniks joined in, and one even ventured to contradict the Chief, who took it mildly. "Perhaps you know better," he said. The boys sang folk-songs. Turks faded away from my mind altogether, but I was reminded of our situation in rather a curious way.

I had left my tobacco in a tree hollow some distance away from the camp. The village boy who had been sent for it could not find it, so I was going myself. I had got some dozen paces away from the blankets when the Chief called to me—

"Where is your gun?"

It was by my pillow on the blankets, and I pointed to it.

"It should hang from your shoulder," he said gravely.

"But—you said there is not a Turk within a day's walk of here."

"That is true, but you mustn't learn bad habits. Precaution must be a habit to be of any use,—otherwise it may fail you at a critical moment."

And I had to carry my Mannlicher with me.

The next few days were holidays to us. We walked about, enjoyed the scenery, rode and ate and talked. To my surprise Grueff allowed our English friend to take photographs of him in a group with the rest of us, but on condition that they were not to be published.

On the second day a new man appeared—one who was not a Bulgar but a Czech, who spoke German; a roistering, loud-voiced fellow, whose thirst for adventure had led him several times around the globe, and had caused him to drift into this enterprise for the excitement there was in it. They called him Brother Anton. He had been on some secret-service work, and was dressed in ragged peasant costume and greasy fez. A machinist in Sofia, he one day met an old friend bound for across the

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frontier, and had gone with him. Since then, nine months ago, he had not recrossed the frontier. From him I gleaned some details of the work of the bands.

"Have you been in many fights?" I asked him.

"Our purpose isn't to fight," he replied. "We avoid the askèrs with all possible care. I've been with the band, thirty strong, and we allowed an officer and four men to pass our hiding-place unharmed."

"What does a band do, then?" I asked.

"The Organisation," he replied, "represents the administrative machinery of an underground republic which has been built up as a protection against Turkish anarchy, and the regular bands are the police force of this republic. They enforce the orders of the civil courts. In each village is a local court. Then we have circuit courts travelling about the country, settling the quarrels between individuals under different jurisdictions — that is, between men of different villages. The local committees represent the civil local governments; behind them is the force of the bands. As the local committees are elected by the villagers, they are not likely to abuse their powers."

"But may not a voyvoda abuse his power?"

"He can't, for he is subject to the president of the local committees. He does not take his orders from him, but the president can forbid his coming into his village if he chooses. If he does that, of course he will have to give some good reason to the district chief."

"But can't the district chief abuse his power?"

"He, again, is elected by the presidents, the representatives of the people, and may be indicted by a majority of them. So he can't afford to make himself unpopular."

Brother Anton seemed very much in love with the peasantry, among whom, he said, he could come and go in absolute security quite alone, always certain of timely warning of danger.

"I know their signals," he said. "I walk along some road; suddenly I hear a voice calling 'Your cows are in my corn,' or 'Drive your pigs out of my garden.' Then I hide myself. That apparently harmless sentence has passed a dozen mouths before it reaches me, but I know askèrs are coming."

I had an opportunity of talking with Grueff's secretary about the discord among Christian Macedonians.

"The quarrels between Bulgars and Greeks," I said, "can be understood in foreign countries. We know of Greek and Servian propagandas, of peasants incited by the Greek Church and Servian secret agents. But why do Bulgars quarrel among themselves?"

"If there are Greek and Servian propagandas," he replied, "why can't there be a Bulgarian propaganda? There is. There are Bulgarian politicians who are no more our friends than are the Greeks. Under the names of well-known chiefs, they try to send bands

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into Macedonia to agitate for the annexation idea. What more natural than that we should order them out when they appear? And if they, feeling secure in being of our own flesh and blood, defy us, what can we do but drive them out? There is only room here for one organisation, and that is the people's organisation. Neither Tsancheff nor Sarafoff have been elected by the people; and if they try to come over here to assume arbitrary power by force of arms, we, representing the people, must meet them with the same force they present against us."

One day a courier arrived with full details of the Conopnitza massacre. It seemed that, by good chance, two Englishmen had witnessed the scene of the horror with the dead still unburied. These were Mr Lloyd, and Mr W. A. Moore, the secretary of the Balkan Committee in London, who had passed through Kustendil the day before we had crossed the frontier. In spite of the vigorous protests of their Turkish escort, they, acting on information smuggled in to them by agents of the local committee in Palanka, had gone to the scene. I asked Grueff what he was going to do about it. He was silent so long that I thought I had asked an indiscreet question.

"What," he answered finally, "would you do? Order a reprisal, perhaps?"

I admitted feeling that way.

"Yes," he replied bitterly, "so have I felt. On such impulses some of our voyvodas have acted without authority, and earned us a bad reputation in foreign countries. No, I am as helpless as you are. We must let such incidents pass, and go on with our organising. Such must be our policy against Greek outrages too. We kill Greeks who spy on us, as we kill all spies, but the Greeks as a people we do not trouble. Zagoritchni remains unavenged."

And there he dropped it as an unpleasant subject.

As our English comrade could not stay over a week, we set off on the march one night, all of us mounted on horses, and before dawn had reached a village only four hours away from the frontier. Grueff was evidently extremely anxious about the safety of his English guest, for he came with us himself, with eight chetniks, and he had fully ten scouts reconnoitring the way before us. He would not even enter the village, and we camped deep in the forest that day. A merry company it was, though, thanks to the efforts of Brother Anton and Grueff himself. We could talk and laugh as loud as we liked, for Grueff had stationed a swarm of outposts to a kilometre out.

Our English friend took a fancy to the Vlach costumes, and wanted to buy one. I spoke to Grueff, and he sent to the village at once for a tailor. Now there was just enough scepticism in me to want our English friend to pay in cash, as I feared otherwise the poor tailor might have to stand the loss as a "contribution" to the cause. Grueff,

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however, would not hear of payment.

When the tailor appeared I was rather surprised at the beaming content that glowed in his face. He proceeded to measure our friend (who was rather long) with a yard-stick, as though he were about some engineering work. He made no notes that I could see.

"The suit will be delivered at your home in London," said Grueff.

Some minutes afterwards I came upon Grueff and the tailor in earnest conversation. I could not help hearing.

"Fifteen francs," said the tailor firmly, "and I stick to that."

And Grueff mildly assented, making out a written order.

I noticed later that for all things brought down to us from the village, which included a tin of vaseline for cleaning our pieces, tobacco, cigarettes, &c., Angeloff gave a written receipt. As I learned later, those receipts were sent into Sofia and paid for by the treasurer there. Only food is not paid for. It is, in fact, a general law passed by a Congress that no bandsman may ever carry money on him. Only the local committees are allowed to handle coin. Grueff told me that he had not seen a centime piece since he had crossed the frontier.

That evening, just at dusk, we bade the Chief good-bye. One of his chetniks joined our party, and we five set out for the frontier, with a swarm of scouts before us. At midnight we crossed it safely, and were once more on free soil.

In ten minutes we were down in the village. A dozen men were hanging about there. All of us went inside one of the huts. Then serious work began.

Four big zinc ammunition-cases were pulled out and broken open. The four thousand rounds were dumped out, and divided out into bags, which the men slung over their backs. Each took two rifles. Then Angeloff called them together and made a speech, short and sharp, with no display of rhetoric.

"Boys, this is earnest work. We are slaves. There has been laziness among some of you villagers. It must stop. You knew what this work meant when we began, ten years ago. Each man must help; he must work. All cannot give money; all can work. He who works well is one of us. He who shirks cheats his fellows. Let him beware—he knows the power of the Committee. Good-bye—go."

They went silently out into the night, up toward the posts. There was something hopelessly pathetic in their stooping shoulders and heavy gait as they passed me, and for a moment I thought the Chief had spoken needlessly harsh words. But when I looked at him and saw his sunken eyes, his haggard cheeks, and remembered that he came back with us that he might obtain treatment in a Sofia hospital for a disease brought on by exposure, hardship, and poor food, I realised that the suffering was for all alike.

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