

A Bulgarian Soldier's Thoughts During the Armistice of the First Balkan War

The First Balkan War, a conflict fueled by nationalist aspirations and territorial disputes, saw the Balkan League (Bulgaria, Serbia, Greece, and Montenegro) formed under Russian auspices¹ challenge the Ottoman Empire's waning control over southeastern Europe. This alliance was formed in the spring of 1912, capitalizing on the Ottoman Empire's preoccupation with the Italo-Turkish War¹. After months of intense fighting, an armistice was signed on December 3, 1912¹. This period of suspended hostilities, while offering a respite from the bloodshed, also brought a unique set of anxieties and uncertainties for the soldiers involved. Let's delve into the mindset of a Bulgarian soldier during this uncertain time.

The Aftermath of Battle

The armistice followed a period of swift and decisive victories for the Balkan League. Bulgarian troops had played a pivotal role in these triumphs, pushing through Thrace and reaching the outskirts of Constantinople¹. They had engaged in fierce battles, such as the Battle of Kirk Kilisse, where they faced the largest battle in Europe since the Franco-German War of 1870-1871², and the siege of Adrianople (Edirne), demonstrating remarkable courage and resilience¹. The armistice brought a sudden shift from the adrenaline-fueled intensity of combat to a state of relative calm. For the Bulgarian soldier, this transition likely evoked a mix of relief, exhaustion, and perhaps even a sense of disorientation. The sudden absence of immediate danger could have been jarring, leaving some soldiers grappling with a sense of emptiness or a struggle to readjust to a slower pace of life³.

Uncertainty and Anticipation

The armistice was a pause, not a definitive end to the war. The war officially ended with the Treaty of London signed on May 30, 1913¹. Its temporary nature undoubtedly fueled uncertainty about the future. Soldiers may have wondered: Would the peace talks in London succeed¹? Would fighting resume? What would the terms of the final peace treaty be? This uncertainty likely cast a shadow over the armistice period, creating a sense of suspended animation where soldiers waited, with a mix of hope and apprehension, for their fate to be decided. This period highlighted the contrast between the collective victory of the Balkan League and the individual anxieties of a Bulgarian soldier facing an uncertain future.

Tensions and Divisions

While the armistice brought a temporary halt to the fighting, it did not erase the underlying tensions and rivalries that existed within the Balkan League. Disagreements over the division of conquered territories, particularly Macedonia, were already brewing¹. A Bulgarian soldier might have harbored suspicions about the intentions of their Serbian and Greek allies, sensing that the armistice was a fragile truce that could easily shatter. This sense of distrust and betrayal was likely exacerbated by the knowledge that Serbia and Greece had formed a new alliance,

potentially jeopardizing Bulgaria's territorial ambitions ⁴. These simmering tensions would eventually erupt into the Second Balkan War, a conflict that pitted Bulgaria against its former allies.

The Psychological Impact of War and Life in the Trenches

Even amidst the relief of halted fighting, the psychological scars of war would have lingered. Soldiers would have carried the memories of intense battles, the loss of comrades, and the constant threat of death ³. The trauma of these experiences could manifest in various ways, from nightmares and flashbacks to emotional numbness and difficulty sleeping ³. Other common reactions might have included unwanted and intrusive memories, avoidance of thoughts or conversations about the war, and changes in physical and emotional reactions, such as being easily startled or experiencing heightened anxiety ³. The armistice period, while offering physical safety, might not have provided immediate relief from these psychological burdens.

During the armistice, soldiers would have continued to endure the harsh realities of life in the trenches or temporary encampments. Conditions were likely challenging, with limited food, inadequate shelter, and the constant presence of disease ⁶. Soldiers may have faced strict regulations, including the demobilization process, potential prisoner of war scenarios for those west of the meridian of Uskub, and the surrender of arms and munitions ⁷. The days would have been monotonous, filled with mundane tasks and the ever-present threat of disease. The nights, cold and damp, would have offered little respite from the physical and psychological strains of war. Despite these hardships, soldiers may have found solace in the camaraderie of their fellow soldiers, sharing stories, and offering mutual support.

A Soldier's Diary

One soldier's diary from World War I, although not specifically from the First Balkan War, offers a glimpse into the harsh realities of trench warfare and the emotional toll it takes ⁸. The diary describes the constant fear of shelling, the gruesome task of burying fallen comrades, and the struggle to maintain morale in the face of relentless hardship. This account, while not directly related to the First Balkan War, provides a poignant reminder of the challenges faced by soldiers during wartime, even during periods of relative calm.

Hopes and Fears for the Future

The armistice also provided a space for reflection and contemplation. Soldiers may have pondered their motivations for fighting, the meaning of the sacrifices made, and the future of their nation. For many, the war was driven by a desire for national unification and the liberation of Bulgarian territories still under Ottoman rule ⁹. Bulgaria specifically aimed to occupy Aegean Macedonia and the important port city of Salonica ¹⁰. The armistice offered a moment to assess the progress made towards these goals and to contemplate the potential outcomes of the peace negotiations. Would Bulgaria secure the territories it desired? Would the sacrifices made be worth it in the end? These questions would have weighed heavily on the minds of Bulgarian

soldiers as they awaited their fate.

Synthesis: A Time of Reflection and Uncertainty

The armistice period in the First Balkan War was a complex and multifaceted experience for a Bulgarian soldier. It was a time of respite from active fighting, but also a period marked by uncertainty, psychological strain, and lingering tensions. While the soldiers may have yearned for a return to normalcy and the comforts of home, they also understood that the war was not truly over, and that their future, and the future of their nation, remained uncertain. The armistice was a time for reflection, for processing the trauma of war, and for contemplating the potential outcomes of the peace negotiations. It was a period of suspended animation, where hope and apprehension intertwined, as soldiers awaited the final resolution of the conflict and the reshaping of the Balkan landscape.

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