

The “threat from the North” on celluloid: The anti-Slavic cycle in Greek cinema

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Abstract

The “threat from the North” was the central axiom of Greece’s national security policies for nearly three decades after the end of the Greek Civil War (1946-1949). Politicians, scholars and intellectuals saw Greece threatened by the Slavs; the enemy, as it was stressed, aimed at gaining access to the Aegean Sea and at dislodging Greeks from its territories in Macedonia and Thrace. Furthermore, the victors of the Civil War systematically conflated the external with the internal threat: that is, the old Slavic peril with the more recent one of communism. In this study, I read a series of features screened in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which constitute something like the ‘cinematic archives’ of the ‘Slavic danger in Greek cinema. The readings analyze filmic representations of the Bulgarian Occupation of Macedonia during WWII and highlight the discourses that identify communism with the Slavic threat.

Key words: Greek cinema, Modern Greek history, WWII, anti-Slavic cycle, Dictatorship in Greece, propaganda

The relationship between Greece and Bulgaria had been always complex, as the question of Macedonia and Bulgaria's claims over Greek territories brought the two countries to the verge of war many times during the 20th century. Of course, the Bulgarian occupation of the areas of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace during WWII and the atrocities committed against civilians worsened the relations. During the post-war period, Bulgaria was still seen as the incarnation of the "Northern danger." Although the iciness in the relations of the two countries began to melt in the mid. 1960s, the sensitive issue of Macedonia was always present, poisoning the attempts for further improvement. The situation deteriorated after the 1967 coup d'état that took place in Greece; the Bulgarian communist leader Zhivkov was one of the few politicians who condemned the colonels' intervention and claimed that the jingoistic rhetoric would increase the tensions between the two neighbor countries (Valden,2009). Moreover, Bulgaria boycotted the 1967 Thessaloniki International Fair, its press castigated the regime and the Bulgarian Red Cross appealed to the International Committee of the Red Cross regarding the fate of Greek political prisoners (Valden, 2009). In this negative political context, a string of anti-Slavic films was produced during the Dictatorship. The military regime showed increased interest in these features and generously supported their production. Those pictures featured the "Slavo-communist danger," and thematized the Bulgarian Occupation of Eastern Macedonia during WWII. The filmmakers vilified the Bulgarian policy, focusing on Bulgaria's long-term imperialist ambitions against Greek territory, which date back to the Macedonian Struggle of the early 1900s and WWI (Andritsos, 2004). In addition, they paid attention to the plans of "dehellenization" and "Bulgarization," which were attempted in the Greek occupied areas (Andritsos, 2004). These films portrayed the Bulgarian occupation during WWII as the extension of the Macedonian Struggle of the early 20th century. All movies depicted the Bulgarians as evil invaders, while the Greek patriots were represented as heroic fighters, who sacrificed their life for the liberation of Macedonia. The highly successful *I Genei tou Vorra* [*The Brave Bunch*] (1969, d. Kostas Karayannis) was the first in the series of anti-Slavic films which continued with *O Telefteos ton Komitatzidon* [*The Last Komitadji*] (d. Grigoris Grigoriou) in 1970 and *Pavlos Melas* in 1973 (d. Filippos Fylaktos). It could be argued that the above pictures metonymically refer to the communist plot to cede Macedonia to the Titoic Yugoslavia. At the same time, they serve as propaganda by promoting a distinctly far-rightwing and anti-communist agenda.

The plot of *The Brave Bunch* centers on the brave efforts of a group of patriots, who fight in the area of Eastern Macedonia. After the capitulation and the evacuation of the Greek government in April 1941, the Germans divided the Greek territory in three zones and Bulgaria was given political control of the area of Eastern Macedonia. In *The Brave Bunch*, shortly after the annexation of the area to the Bulgarian State, bands of komitadjis (Bulgarian armed guerillas) begin to terrorize the inhabitants into accepting the Bulgarian rule. The occupiers believed that by exercising violence against the Greek residents of Macedonia, they would compel them to desert their homeland. The feature focuses on a Greek officer who, together with a journalist friend, return to his village, which is under the rule of a notorious komitadji. There, the brave officer, adopting the name "Alexander the Macedonian," forms of group of the "Free Greeks of Macedonia" and they all manage to seize a Bulgarian military train. In the end, the group of patriots, assisted by the inhabitants, enter the occupied village and expel the enemies; their commander, the bloodthirsty Step an gets killed during the battle with the Greek patriots

From the beginning of *The Brave Bunch*, the Slavic threat is perceived as the dangerous one and the Bulgarians are delineated as the embodiment of evil and are blamed for crimes against innocent civilians. The film begins with a scene of panicked crowds, including women and children, dashing away for safety and falling over each other in their bid to escape from the komitadjis who invade their village. The film is filled with violent scenes, beginning with the rape of a Greek woman by a Bulgarian man. Adopting an almost “pornographic” representation of violence (Paradeisi, 2005), the director obsessively shows the enemy’s brutal actions (abductions, murders, cutting off tongues) and viewers see close-ups of the terrified faces and the wounded bodies of victims, especially of women who are tortured and raped by the conquerors. Furthermore, references to the abduction of Greek children by the komitadjis in the early 20th century alludes to the sensitive theme of the children’s transfer to countries of the Eastern Bloc by the communists during the Greek Civil War. In *The Brave Bunch*, Step an, the Bulgarian commander is of Greek origin; when he was a young boy, he was abducted by the Bulgarians and was brainwashed into becoming a “killer komitadji.”

By contrast, in *The Brave Bunch* Greek patriots prove themselves heroes through great deeds. Much like many WWII films of the period, the picture begins with an already established hero, personified in Lt. Nikos Devetzis, decorated for his bravery during the Greco-Italian War of 1940-1941. The protagonist makes all the right decisions, risks himself for the good of his village, and exhibits strong leadership, all evidenced in his actions throughout the feature. For instance, instead of staying in the hospital for the period of recovery, the officer, after the annexation of the Eastern Macedonia into Bulgaria, decides to leave Athens and return to his village so as to fight the enemy and claims that he prefers “to die than surrender. [...] Peace can only be achieved through sacrifice.” His risk-taking actions are also made evident through various actions. Most notably in his decision to secretly enter Bulgaria so as to free more than sixty Greek hostages. Notable as well is the hero’s leadership. Devetzis leads a group of patriots in an effort to harass the Bulgarian occupation forces by sabotages or surprise raids all the way up to the liberation of Macedonia from the enemy. Like *The Brave Bunch*, *The Last Komitadji* appropriates stereotypes of the evil Slavs and the courageous Greeks. The typically Manichean script by Yannis Tziotis represents the Bulgarians as the “Other”, the Enemy as the embodiment of evil and “Us” as the incarnation of heroism and self-sacrifice. The invaders are delineated as satanic, villainous and sadistic torturers of patriots, while resistance members are portrayed as brave fighters who sacrifice their life for the common cause and suffer tortures. When, for example, the film’s protagonist, Grigoris, a Greek resistance member, is ruthlessly tortured by sinister Bulgarians, the images are framed in the iconography of shots with dim lighting, focusing on the wounded body of the young fighter. The iconography of the hero, who is bound hand and foot, creates an impression of heroic suffering and martyrdom, as in depictions of Christian martyrs (St. Sebastian). Close-ups on the Bulgarian officer, by contrast, focus on his sinister characteristics and convey his sadistic pleasure from other’s suffering. As noted, these films shed light on the perennial imperialist dream of the Bulgarians to annex the territories of Eastern Macedonia. In *The Last Komitadji*, this ambition for the rebirth of the “Great Bulgaria” is related to broader political situations (Theodoridis, 2006). According to the film, Bulgaria never gave up its plan to occupy Macedonia, as the interior monologue of the Bulgarian Colonel Anton Paiko reveals:

I finally return to you, Macedonia, after twenty-four years. When we left you in 1918, full of shame, I knew that we would be back. Bulgaria always returns to Macedonia. And this time we should stay forever. [...] Things are different now. Hitler dominates Europe, France is enslaved, England won’t last long; even Russia seeks to find a shelter behind the Urals. Nothing can stop us. Our fathers’ dream will eventually come true. Because, even if Germany loses the war, we must not forget that the Russians are our brothers. Therefore, one way or another, Bulgaria will stay in Macedonia forever. (*The Last Komitadji*, 1:55 – 3:17).

It is argued that the hero's monologue clearly shows that Bulgaria, in order to fulfill its plan, is willing to ally itself with different political forces. These words prove that Bulgarians will seek opportunities to revive the "Macedonian" question and make territorial claims. Therefore, the problem will affect the Greco-Bulgarian relations in the years to come. This is clearly shown in the end of the film, where, after the defeat of the Axis powers, the Colonel accepts the new order and becomes a member of the Bulgarian Communist party, after he is reassured that the communist regime will not forget the issue of Macedonia. For, as the film suggests, the "Slavo-communist" danger for Greece has not been eliminated; Bulgaria, under the communist government and with Soviet support, is willing to return to Greek territory (Theodoridis, 2006). The director, through his revealing monologue, promoted and celebrated the Dictatorship's mission; the colonels saw themselves as saviors from "Slavo-Communism," the perennial threat of Slavs endangering "the existence of the Greek nation and communism threatening the Greek state" (Karakasidou, 2000: 238). Furthermore, the policy of "Bulgarization" is also highlighted in the aforementioned films. In *The Last Komitadji*, the village's mayor, as he recollects past traumatic events, mentions that the Bulgarians' evil plan, which proved to be consistent through time, was to eliminate all Greeks from Macedonia. The hero also claims that, if this attempt failed, enemies would try to "Bulgarize" Greeks by force. According to Theodoridis:

The plan of Bulgarization is the same with the plan that was attempted during the Macedonian Struggle and the first Bulgarian occupation. [...] It aims at forcing local citizens to adopt Bulgarian consciousness, the Bulgarian language and become parts of the Exarchate. The groups of Komitadjis, apart from brutalities against innocent civilians, attempt to assimilate teachers, priests and notables, in order for Bulgarization to gradually succeed. (2006: 208)

The release of those films caused Bulgaria's reaction; in March 1970, Bulgarian officials complained to the Greek ambassador in Sofia for the anti-Bulgarian content of both *The Great Bunch* and *The Last Komitadji* (Valden, 2009). Moreover, Bulgarians highly objected to the production of *Pavlos Melas*. The Greek dictator Papadopoulos himself paid attention to the shooting of the film and insisted that the script should be scrupulously re-mastered (Valden, 2009). However, *Pavlos Melas*, a chronicle of the life and the skirmishes of the legendary Greek officer against the Komitadjis during the Macedonian Struggle, focusing on the Bulgarian atrocities against innocent Greek civilians, was not released during Papadopoulos' rule; it premiered during dictator Ioannidis' regime (early 1974) and, as Karalis states, it was "heavily promoted by the Dictatorship" (2011:175), topping, thus, the box-office of the season with 432,000 admissions. As noted, the Bulgarian side protested; the ambassador Popov characterized the film as anti-Bulgarian, since it portrays Bulgarians as "wild beasts" and murderers (Valden, 2009).

Concerning the cycle of anti-Slavic films, *The Last Komitadji* was seen by critics as a "suspenseful story with passionate performances – a strong proof of the aesthetic and political versatility of its director" (Karalis, 2011: 139). Moreover, *The Brave Bunch* was praised for its "fast tempo and good action, somewhat resembling Italian westerns" (Tzavalas, 2012: 130). All in all, during the Dictatorship period in Greece, a few films attempted to represent the sensitive topic of the Bulgarian Occupation of Eastern Macedonia during WWII. Under the auspices of colonels' regime, the Slav conquerors were represented as the embodiment of evil and were blamed for atrocious crimes against innocent civilians. The crux of such features was usually the moment when Greek soldiers died as heroes with epic music playing in the background, or when Greek women were raped by invaders, as by Bulgarian irregulars (Karalis, 2011).

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