

D I S T O M O
PLACE OF MARTYRS
PLACE OF PEACE

FOR THE MURDER VICTIMS OF DISTOMO

*We have not forgotten you.
Our hearts are a limitless field of resurrection.
You were covered with blood,
strewn with bullet holes and crumbs of earth,
we washed and dressed you.
If you can understand our silence, hear it,
sisters and brothers. Forgive us.
We shall not forget you!*

NIKOFÓROS VRETTÁKOS

The events of June 10, 1944

At 08.15, five German military lorries set forth from Levádia to Distomo. On them were 76 men of the 2nd company of the 7th regiment of the 4th SS-Police Armoured Grenadier Division as well as an NCO of the GFP (Secret Field Police). It concerned an “Action for the liberation of the Levádia-Aráchova road blocked by bandits.”

15 minutes earlier, two other lorries had left Levádia. They were two commandeered Greek lorries with Greek drivers, in which there was a so-called Civilian Commando, i.e. 14 German soldiers, 4 NCOs and a GFP interpreter, who had dressed themselves in such a way as to give the impression that they were Greek black-marketers. These were armed with heavy weapons, just like those that followed them. On the way, for no reason at all except for their own pleasure, with carefully aimed shots, they killed animals and people in the fields beside the road who were on the way to their daily work.

At 08.50, at the Levádia-Aráchova-Dístomo crossroads, the 10th and 11th companies of the same regiment coming from Ámfissa and Aráchova followed in support of the action. This big convoy, with the Civilian Commando as the vanguard, arrived in Distomo at about 10 o'clock in the morning. Even before reaching the village, they arrested twelve young farmers who had been busy harvesting in their fields and, on seeing the German military, had hidden themselves in an underground bunker. They tied them up and then placed them, firmly bound together, on the lower village square in front of the school building.

On seeing these happenings, the residents of Distomo were very alarmed. They feared for the twelve hostages. An immense fear gained ground. In spite of the war, occupation and repeated raids by the

Germans throughout the village, they felt that something completely unusual was unfolding, something dreadful, something frightful.

The commander, SS-Hauptsturmführer Fritz Lautenbach, summoned the priest and the mayor and asked them whether Greek partisans were active in the neighbourhood. Georg Koch, NCO in the GFP, wrote in his report of 12.6.1944, "*Action for the liberation of the Levádia-Aráchova road on 10.6.44*":

" ... In Distomo the mayor and secular priest of Stiri were informed that, on 9.6.44 at about 10.00, ca. 30 bandits appeared in Distomo from the direction of Desfina and towards 15.00 of the same day withdrew again in the direction of Stiri. On 10.6.44 towards 10.00, the bandits apparently moved off in the direction of Kiriaki. It was moreover reported that the well-known guerrilla leader, known under the cover name of 'Mawrojannis' of the III/34 ELAS Rgt., had fallen, apparently during the fighting in Desfina ..."

The Germans then demanded food. The inhabitants brought the very best they could come by, so as to placate them, put them in a humane mood and release the twelve young countrymen held as hostages. But nothing like that came to pass. The Distomo people had to resign themselves, therefore, with very great anxiety, to enduring the following events, without having the slightest possibility of any influence whatsoever upon them.

The Germans now posted guards at the most important positions around the beleaguered village. At 14.30, after the 10th company had been withdrawn from Distomo, Lautenbach decided to advance further with a lightly motorised convoy "*for a reconnaissance of the terrain and the road conditions*" in the direction of Stiri, the small locality situated between Distomo and the famous cloister of Ósios Loukás. Once more, both the commandeered Greek vehicles with the soldiers dressed as civilians – the so-called *Civilian Commando* – were out in front in order to mislead possible attackers, and at a distance behind them were the other vehicles of the small German convoy.

Three kilometres from Distomo, before reaching Stiri, the Germans were trapped in a partisan ambush entrenched on the mountainside before Stiri and awaiting the enemy. The subterfuge with the commandeered lorries and the death commando disguised as black-marketers had been revealed by the Germans themselves when they opened fire in transit on the animals and farmers peacefully going about their daily tasks beside the road. The partisans were informed by their spies that the disguised people were in fact heavily armed SS-Commandos, and the latter were consequently received before Stiri with intense machine gun and rifle fire. During this surprise attack some Germans and one of the Greek lorry drivers were killed. A counter attack was only possible after the rest of the German vehicles remaining in Distomo had been alerted and moved up. The combat developed and lasted an hour and a half. The partisans, with small losses, then withdrew up into the mountains. To the German officers, it appeared that "*a ... further pursuit of the bandits would be irresponsible ...as the combat group had been severely weakened*". With eight dead and 14 wounded, they returned to Distomo. The vanquished and humiliated "*German supermen*", who had fallen into a trap for which they were themselves responsible, were now to take their revenge in their very own derisive way, to the utter disregard of not only every war and international right but of every moral and military honour.

It was 17.30, zero hour for unfortunate Distomo. Everyone was ordered to return to their houses. To begin with, the twelve shackled hostages were placed in front of the school wall and shot down in cold blood. After that the Germans poured out in groups like rabid wolves in all directions through the alleys towards the houses. One after another the houses were broken into.

These German soldiers were completely obsessed, hard-hearted and merciless. They were savage, gory beasts. They had completely rejected and banished from their hearts the European culture to which they presumably belonged. This was not just their way of wreaking vengeance in order to "atone for" their comrades fallen in battle, for they were not killing a "surplus population of sub-humans", but

blinded by their self-illusion as supermen, completely unfettered in their Germanic barbarity and totally devoid of any human feeling, they destroyed every trace of life, and wiped out any human emotion – around them and within themselves.

They slaughtered the elderly, the men and women, they stabbed and trod over children and babies in their cradles. They beheaded the priest, cut off the breasts of young women – after having raped them – and thrust these into the disfigured mouths of the babies. The unrestricted desire to murder was allied to every form of animal craving and completely immoral impulses.

They plundered the houses, set fire to the best of them, and destroyed every possession that they could not carry away with them, and slaughtered the animals. The sole object of their barbaric passage was death and destruction. And these short descriptions are but small details from their revolting activities that lasted for less than an hour, and will go down in world history as one of the deepest depths of human depravity:

The German massacre in Distomo.

Some German soldiers posed for a proud group picture, soaked in blood, and satisfied with their triumphant action.

As the day was drawing to a close, the bigger part of the village still remained unmolested. But the Germans were to leave their dreadful work uncompleted behind them, for the twilight also brought the anxiety of darkness and the fear of possible attacks by the partisans on the way back. At 18.30 they left for Levádia.

218 victims – 47 children from babies to 12-year olds,
91 women,
60 men,
10 couples.

Slowly the coming darkness covered the icy silence in the lifeless village. No sound, no breathing. Dead, mangled corpses beside and lying over one another. The few wounded choked down their groans and stroked the lifeless bodies of their loved ones.

After the first night of death, the sun revealed a frightening scene. Lament, cries of pain and curses. Groans and frightful laughter from those whose minds could not endure the immense pain. Howls of torment, moaning and outcries.

Yet the pain had to be contained, for it had to give way to the holiest duty towards the dead. For days they were digging the hard earth in the gardens and forecourts, in the nearby fields and in the cemetery, in order to bury their precious dead ones ...

Distomo, a place between Delphi and Helikon, the Muses' mountain, a peaceful, resigned community, experienced this incomprehensible massacre, this apocalypse during a time of frightful decline in European culture, *"when the wolves were silent, because mankind was bawling"*.

Today, now that ideologies appear outdated, we wish to bring these beloved figures back before our eyes, those who had to leave us then without a farewell. They speak to us. They ask us to believe once more in mankind and its possibilities. They ask us to accord mankind an important place within ourselves, so that we can dream once more under the starry sky and perceive the timeless steps of freedom.