

## **361st Infantry Battalion – A Chronicle of Defending the Betrayed Homeland**

**[361 Τάγμα Πεζικού – Χρονικό Προάσπισης Προδομένης Πατρίδας]**

**Dr Charalambos Alexandrou**

**Cyprus Institute for Scientific and Historical Research**

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Dr Charalambos Alexandrou's monograph is one of the very few publications that chronicle the history, the action, and the experiences of a military unit; and in this case the 361st Infantry Battalion of the Cyprus National Guard. This book was more than necessary in order to shed light on this battalion, which suffered the most casualties during the 1974 Turkish invasion, with many of its soldiers dying or missing. It was very important to chronicle the battalion's story as well as its action during that tragic summer of 1974. The story of the battalion is chronicled over many the pages of this bulky book, which covers the period of summer 1974, yet offers more than a description of the events.

The biggest part of the book offers a chronological account of that tragic summer's events. This is the best method that the author could have used, as he presents and analyses the events in a way that it is comprehensible both chronologically as well as in terms of substance. Alternatively, the author could have selected the thematic approach, but this would have taken away from the gradual progression of events, rendering the book much more incomprehensible for the reader.

Initially, and for the reader to comprehend the structure, the hierarchy, the geographical location, and the armament of the battalion, the author provides a detailed analysis and presentation of the above themes in the first chapter. The author's initial presentation contains many military terms, which could be difficult to understand for the wider public or readers that have never studied military history before, however it is deemed a necessary foundation for the development of the book. The same chapter provides a detailed account of the period leading up to the EOKA B' coup, under the directions of the Athens military junta and its local collaborators. Subsequently, in the third chapter, the author goes on to describe the action of the battalion in detail during the coup, when some of the units of the battalion had their baptism by fire,

in what is perhaps the most difficult period in the modern history of the Republic of Cyprus.

The fourth chapter details the action of the battalion during the first phase of the Turkish invasion, with testimonies of surviving soldiers offering a first-hand account of what took place. In order to help the reader understand each given location of the battalion, the author offers maps with the location of each unit. Without these maps, the geographic location of the units would be difficult or even impossible to understand for someone who has never visited and is not familiar with the area which fell under the battalion's responsibility.

The fifth chapter describes the retreat of the National Guard and the advance of the Turkish troops, while it emphasizes the deadly battle east of the village of Koutsoventis, where the troops of the battalion suffered huge losses. The next chapter (6) focuses on the reorganisation of the battalion near Kythrea, while the remaining troops received orders to reorganise near the village of Klepini. In this detailed description of the reorganisation in the seventh chapter of the monograph, it is shocking to think of the close proximity of the National Guard to the Turkish troops. The start of the second phase of the Turkish invasion, found the battalion ready for battle on the north side of the Pentadaktylos Mountain. At first, their battle stations seemed to be well-positioned. This, however, gave the soldiers a false sense of security. The superior capacity of the Turkish army proved decisive, since after a few hours of fighting and with the Cypriot soldiers having limited ammunition left, their retreat could not have been prevented. The retreat was unorganised, while some units were not informed and were left behind. The same chapter describes the actions of a section of the battalion south of Pentradaktylos, specifically in Mia Milia, in the district of Nicosia. The eighth chapter describes how the battalion fled from the action area, after the retreat to the Government-controlled areas.

The last chapter, which contains the testimonies of soldiers who were cut off during the retreat and stayed back wandering around, looking for an escape route towards the areas that were not controlled by the Turkish military, creates a feeling of suspense for the reader. The author manages to convey the feelings of the soldiers who managed to get away, while others were not so lucky and were captured. However, I believe that the same chapter can be rather confusing for the reader, since in order for them to catch up on the story of the units who got separated from the others and remained on the north side of the island, they need to go back and forth through the pages to find a point of reference. The author did try to address this problem by

referencing the numbers of the pages where the story continues. However, this method is still problematic for the reader.

An important element which adds to the credibility of everything told in the monograph is the combination of multiple sources, and the author's effort to cross-check and corroborate the information he provides. The 163 interviews of soldiers and officers of the battalion that were conducted for the purpose of this book, and the material drawn from the archives of the military, and especially the archive of the National Guard History Office, are a source of inspiration for further research, making Dr Alexandrou's research particularly praiseworthy.

One of the most emotionally intense moments for the survivors, was the fact that two of the four units on the frontlines of the Klepini battle had not been informed about the retreat. The testimonies of the surviving soldiers are so descriptive that no reader can remain unmoved, while many questions remain unanswered. Another element we need to point out as we conclude this review, is the title of the book. Even though the title is '*361st Infantry Battalion – A Chronicle of Defending the Betrayed Homeland*', the author does not provide any information that leads to the conclusion that the homeland was betrayed. However, someone would expect that the title would be reflected in the book's content. What can be deduced from the stories recounted in the book and the way they are written, is rather the high incompetence and the bad judgement calls of high-ranking officials than a betrayal. However, to the author's credit, the aim of the book is not to analyse the reasons that led to the coup and the Turkish invasion, but the action of the specific battalion. In order for the reader to come to the conclusion that the homeland was betrayed, they will need to read other books and analyses that are not limited to the actions of a specific regiment of the National Guard in 1974.

This detailed account of the events of 1974, through the experiences and actions of the 361st Infantry Battalion is a well-written monograph and is definitely an essential read for both historians studying the period of 1974 and members of the wider public interested in the history of Cyprus. Using the lens of military history, we can certainly argue that Dr Alexandrou's book constitutes an important addition to the bibliography of the history of Cyprus. In conclusion, it would be a welcome process if more units (divisions, battalions, and others), who were active in the summer of 1974 and were immediately implicated in the Turkish invasion, provided their own account of the events, based on the story of the 361st Infantry Battalion, as recorded in the monograph of Dr Alexandrou.

**Marios Siammas**