

**Grigoris Afxentiou. The Life and Actions  
of the Golden Eagle of Machairas**  
**[Γρηγόρης Αυξεντίου. Η Ζωή και η Δράση του  
Σταυραετού του Μαχαιρά]**

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Penning the biography of such an emblematic figure in modern Greek history as Grigoris Afxentiou is not an easy task. Perhaps the best-known fighter of the liberation struggle of 1955-1959, Afxentiou is undoubtedly a personality that has been imprinted in the collective historical memory of Greek Cypriots like very few others. As such, a book about his life, actions and sacrifice -which have assumed legendary proportions- is expected to be received with keen interest.

The so far three-volume monumental biography of Afxentiou is the result of a long and arduous work, typified by the painstaking effort of the author, journalist and current mayor of the occupied village of Lysi, Andreas Kaouris, to collect data from personal interviews with people who came in contact with the leading member of EOKA. This is evident in the long interval between the publication of the first three volumes (bearing the same title), the first having been published back in 1996, the second in 2010 and the third in 2022, to be followed by the fourth and fifth.

The second volume consists of 663 pages. The first pages include, among other things, poems by Afxentiou's father and mother and by folk poets from Lysi about their fellow villager and fighter, as well as the author's second letter -full of mixed emotions- to Grigoris, modelled after the first one, which was published in the first volume. The introductory part retraces the key milestones of Afxentiou's life and actions -from his birth, on 22 February 1928, to the historic battle of Spilia, on 11 December 1955- which have been covered in the first volume. What follows next is a summary of the contents of the second volume, covering the period of Afxentiou's actions immediately after the battle of Spilia until May to June 1956, a time when the wanted guerrilla was hiding in the monastery of Machairas, disguised as 'Archimandrite Chrysanthos'.

The author himself admits, in his introduction, that he did not exhaustively con-

sult the archives in Cyprus and abroad, especially the British archives. His goal, as he notes, was to capture the greatness of Afxentiou with the unadulterated colours and simple brushstrokes of the humble people who had first-hand experiences of him, many of whom were speaking for the first time about their contribution and their association with him. He also tried to interfere as little as possible in the narratives he quotes, adhering, as he explains, to exactly the same method that he had used in the first volume of the book. He notes that there are also testimonies that do not entirely agree with each other, which is perfectly normal, as memory fades over time. He quotes them vividly and unaltered, avoiding interfering with their speech and expression, in order to preserve their authenticity. The author's aim has been to enable those who participated in the events to describe what they saw and lived, without expediency and evasion, something that was not an easy task, given the time distance from the events and what followed after the end of the EOKA struggle.

In addition to these narratives, personal and public archives, newspapers and part of the literature, personal diaries, published testimonies, and evidence of the written word of Afxentiou are also utilised, in an effort to provide a multifaceted view of the Lysian fighter and his actions.

The rich photographic material, which frames the narrative and documents the events, is also crucial to this publication. The text is interspersed with hundreds of photographs of areas, villages, houses, mountains and the surrounding area in general, but especially of people. The author writes:

In particular, however, I focused with religious reverence on the individuals. On the sacred individuals that are our heroes and martyrs. But also on those who went along in their own way on the journey of life and death with Grigoris Afxentiou, most of whom, after the Struggle was over, preferred and preserved their anonymity, humbly returning to their villages, families and jobs, just as humbly and quietly as when they had joined the Struggle. I make no secret of it, they made it difficult for me. Many a time I was discouraged by hearing the phrase 'It is not necessary after so many years. What are we and what have we done compared to Afxentiou?'

The author tried to fill the void left behind by those who did collaborate with Afxentiou but passed away before he could talk to them, by relying on their own kin, books, and other sources through which their testimonies were available.

The second volume consists of 28 chapters. The narrative begins with Afxentiou's wanderings in the villages of Agia Irini of Kannavia, Kannavia and Lagoudera, after

the battle of Spilia, and then with his attempt to organise the area of Pitsilia, where the Leader of EOKA, Georgios Grivas Digenis, had appointed him sector commander, with Palaichori serving as a refuge and base. With the establishment of his group in the Papoutsia hideouts, he began a great effort to organise, initiate and train fighters, and later moved to the Forestry Station in Kionia, the highest mountain peak of the Machairas forest. The volume also presents, to some extent, the organisational structure and operation of EOKA: the way of communication and correspondence, the movement and supply lines of the guerrillas, the transport and concealment of ammunition, the ingenuity of the fighters, which was necessary for the unorthodox way of conducting the Struggle and the equipment of the guerrilla groups, the construction of hideouts in houses and in remote parts of the Cypriot mountains. Among the incidents, in which particular emphasis is given, it is worth noting the Christmas celebration of 1955, in a hut in the mountains of Lagoudera, the Cyprus-wide campaign of EOKA to collect hunting weapons in January 1956, the battle of Agridia - Chandria (16 March 1956), where Christos Tsiartas was killed and which was the largest ambush of EOKA (one of the most important chapters of the volume), the daring transport of Afxentiou to Limassol for an appendectomy. A separate chapter, interspersed with a wealth of photographic material, is dedicated by the author to Lysi, and the wider contribution of its inhabitants to the Struggle. Various chapters, of course, remark on the participation and contribution of various villages and regions.

Kaouris also presents the persistent efforts of the British to create a network of informants that would lead to the tracks of Afxentiou (and, generally, the practices and means they used to collect information and infiltrate the Organization), while approaching the complex issue of his betrayal. Moreover, he makes special reference to the horrific torture suffered by EOKA fighters, citing relevant accounts/testimonies, and touches on the very sensitive issue of the executions of traitors-collaborators with the British, which has been plaguing Cypriot society for many decades.

The last chapter is dedicated to Afxentiou the man and the leader, outlining his ethos and his multidimensional personality through accounts and recollections of past events. Finally, there is a preface to the third volume, followed by a reprint of the author's letter to Afxentiou, which was included in the first volume, a glossary (with the explanation of words in the Cypriot dialect), sources and bibliography, and a table of contents.

The third volume, comprising 560 pages, was published only recently, in 2022. Evidence of the written and spoken word of Afxentiou, an excerpt from an account by his

friend and classmate, Kyriakos Plisis, and poems by his parents, are listed in the first pages of the book. In lieu of a prologue, the author re-sketches his leading personality and points out the impact of his death on the course and evolution of the Struggle.

This is followed by the 'third letter to Grigoris' and then an extensive introductory chapter for the third and fourth volumes, covering the period from June 1956 to February 1957. The third volume follows exactly the same practice and methodology as the previous two volumes, with the author deriving all the data and information about the historical course and actions of Afxentiou from people who lived through his lesser and greater moments. As he himself notes, there are chapters in the volume that cover vital aspects of the Struggle, without necessarily referring solely to the Pitsilia sector commander, such as the importance and construction of hideouts in houses and mountains (see chapter 6). And, while referring to the small tributes to villages and heroes who acted under Afxentiou, he notes: 'It may seem at first that I am straying and moving away from the path of Afxentiou. Far from it. In every corner of Pitsilia, there is a sign of Grigoris'. Back to the subject of the chain of treason against Afxentiou, the author emphasises that it is not his intention to vilify and belittle anyone and that what he has always been interested in is historical truth, considering the revelation of the identity of traitors a historical necessity and not an end in itself. An important contribution to the volume is the personal diaries of Afxentiou's fellow fighters, which they entrusted to the author.

The first chapter records key milestones in the life and actions of Afxentiou in chronological order, as they are presented in the first two volumes, up to May 1956; these are indeed useful for the reader. This is followed by a short chapter on his pseudonyms and noms de guerre, which leads to the main content of the volume. Being in the last stage of his recovery after the appendectomy, Afxentiou was appointed by Digenis second in command of EOKA, by a letter-order on 3 June 1956, taking charge of the city and district of Limassol, Pitsilia and the area of Machairas, and with the Leader assigning him more and more responsibilities and duties. The author follows his tracks in the villages of Pitsilia and in the wine-producing villages of Limassol, while highlighting the role and participation in the Struggle of the people in the area. Special mention is made of the contribution of Chandria, as well as of the action of the hero Stylianos Lenas, with whom Afxentiou worked closely; of the villages of Agios Mamas and Agios Theodoros Pitsilias; of Agros, where he set up his new headquarters (in the house of priest Christodoulos Avgousti) in the summer of 1956; and of other villages in the area. An extensive chapter is devoted to the Omodos hideout,

which was betrayed to the British on 21 January 1957, resulting in the arrest of Nikos Spanos' group and the subsequent conviction of those arrested.

Separate chapters are devoted to Afxentiou's associates, such as Andreas Stylianou, one of his four companions in the Machairas hideout; his liaison, Dimitris Nikolaidis; his deputy, Giorgos Matsis; the station master of the Agros police station Polydoros Polydorou; Dimitris Polycarpou; his childhood friends, Antonis Papadopoulos and Pavlos Pavlakis. There are also references to Kyriakos Matsis and others (as was the case in the first volume). The third volume concludes with the chapter on the general offensive of EOKA, on 2 November 1956, without an epilogue.

Through the pages of these two volumes parade dozens of personalities, men and women, ordinary people of the rural and mountain villages, known and unknown fighters, clerics, policemen, and others, persons who collaborated with and helped Afxentiou in various ways, either on the battlefield, or as caterers, messengers, liaisons, people who hosted and hid him and his comrades.

The sizeable two volumes cover a period of only about 11 months (December 1955 – November 1956) and are, therefore, very detailed. It is a fact that the author does not avoid some repetitions or prolixity and digressions. There are references and elements that are not directly related to the subject of the research or that interrupt the flow of the narrative -but they also seem to serve the broader purpose of writing the book. In any case, Kaouris largely succeeds in keeping the reader's interest undiminished -the rich photographic material and the simple language do help in this regard- by illustrating, through the authentic testimonies that he records, the multifaceted personality and character of Afxentiou.

The author, of course, is not a historian, nor does he claim to be one. He does not aspire to deliver a comprehensive scientific study on the life and actions of Afxentiou (the limited use of archival sources makes this *de facto* impossible), and sentimentality is evident in places. After all, Kaouris makes no secret of his admiration for his heroic fellow villager, whom he wants to highlight as a model of life. The book, as he characterises it, is a reverent tribute to Afxentiou. Undoubtedly, however, it is the product of systematic and laborious research.

In the final analysis, and despite any drawbacks one may point out, this biography of Grigoris Afxentiou is irrefutably a reference book, necessary for any relevant historical research, with the author deservedly securing the title of the hero's main biographer.

**Thomas Papageorgiou**