



The Death of Macedonia's Apostle of Freedom

By Dimiter Talev

Editor's Note:

Dimiter Talev (1898-1966). Born in Prilep (Macedonia under Ottoman rule), Talev was one of the most popular contemporary Bulgarian writers. For a number of years he was editor of *Macedonia*, the organ of the Macedonian émigré organizations in Bulgaria. His first words were published in 1928, but his most important books, which will live forever in the Bulgarian literature were written after the Second World War. His works are: *Difficult Years*, a novel (1928-1930), *Under a Dark Sky*, a play (1932), *The Golden Key*, short stories (1935), *The Old House*, short stories (1938), *The Return*, short stories (1942), *Iron Candlestick*, a novel (1952), *Ilinden*, a novel (1953), *Kiprovetz Rose in Arms*, a short novel (1953), *The Bells of Prespa*, a novel (1954), *Samouil*, a novel (1958). *The Bells of Prespa* is part of a *trilogy*, the remaining two parts are *The Iron Candlestick* and *Ilinden*.

For a period of time Talev suffered under the communist rule in Bulgaria, being one of the martyrs of the struggle of the Bulgarians for free and independent Macedonia who went through the ominous system of prisons and labour camps. Accused of "chauvinism", "anti-government propaganda and conspiracy", for a number of years his books were blocked from publishing and are even now in his native Macedonia attacked and dismissed as being "pro-Bulgarian". Still, after the huge success of his trilogy, Talev remains one of the most beloved authors describing the life in Macedonia during the national upheaval, a true colossus of the Bulgarian literature.

The following excerpt on Gotzé Delchev is from the novel *Ilinden*.

Vassil Popvassilev

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It was the beginning of summer in 1903.

In April, at the village of *Smilevo*, situated in the folds of the Bigla Mountain, a congress was held of the instructors from the entire Bitola revolutionary region. Representatives had been sent from all over the country. Presiding at the congress was Damé Grouev. A well-armed detachment moved about in the village district to keep the representatives from being taken unawares. Other people in arms stood watch over the village itself, kept up postal connections and every other kind of service that was needed. Others who were also armed were sent by two's and three's toward the neighbouring villages, roads and passes. Everyone in Smilevo, man and woman, had been given an assignment in connection with the congress. To the people of Smilevo the days of the congress were a feast, days of common joy and pride.

At the congress a debate got under way as to whether there should be an uprising or not.

"An uprising!" the representatives of the district of Kostour, Ochrid and Demirhissar raised their voices first: "And quick, without delay."

There were other voices as well:

"Don't be in a hurry. We're not ready yet. Let us stow away the harvest from the fields first."

The representatives of the Prilep district were in the opposition:

"We are against a general uprising. It would be downright madness for us to rise with bare hands. We have no arms."

Hearing everything through, Damé Grouev rose from his seat and said in his ringing voice:

"Well, people! Don't waste any more time trying to decide the question because it has already been decided. The thing is finished. Now you'd better talk about the uprising – how to carry it through, and when."

More talk and arguments began: about the arms, the fighting readiness, the problem of food, the day of the uprising, whether it should be on a mass scale, or just the detachments to be involved. The general staff of the uprising was elected and was headed by Damé Grouev. It was decided that the poorly equipped regions be helped with arms; there were army men in the detachments, and they were to see to the training of the fighters, and to work out the strategy. The general staff was to contact the central committee of the organization as well as the rest of the revolutionary regions so that a common decision could be taken as to the day of the uprising. This was not to be earlier than July in view of the harvesting. A statute for revolutionary discipline was framed. Then the question of the peaceful Turks population was brought up and Grouev said:

"Turk or Christian, if he's not an obstacle, if he does no evil we're not to touch a hair of his head!"

And there was another thing that was decided on: the uprising was to be carried out by the detachments, each region sending out 20, 30 or 50 people, so that not all people would be exposed to the ferocious Turk, and that the struggle might go on longer. Then a lively voice was heard to say: "Aha! You only just start it, and we'll see who's going to hold the people back."

At the same time, while decisions were being taken in Smilevo on the forthcoming uprising, over the steep hills of Bigla the crash of gunfire could be heard. The struggle of the Macedonian people was in full swing, the course of events going forward.

On the 15th of April, the activities of the “Gemidjiyas” in Salonika began; the bustling, discordant, mercantile capital of Macedonia was horror-stricken by the rising flames of the foreign ship of *Gwadalkivir*, by the explosions under the Ottoman bank, by the exploding bombs in the different parts of the city for days on end, and at last by the heroic death of the assailants – men of 16, 18 and 20 years old.

On the 21st of April in a fight with the Turkish soldiers Gotsé Delchev fell dead in the village of Banitsa, in the Ser district. The apostle had come to Banitsa on the 19th of April. Here too was the detachment of Ser with its Chieftain Georgi Brodaliya, and the detachment of Drama with its Chieftain Dimiter Goushtanov. Twenty rebels altogether, they were billeted in two houses, one opposite the other; Deltchev was in one with the *voivoda* and two rebels, while the rest were in the other house.

The day of April 20 came and went quietly with the men in good spirits. However, the apostle’s comrades-in-arms noticed the ghost of a shadow veiling his broad affable smile, although he tried to keep up a lively, cheerful spirit among them. Now and then he would fall silent, as if listening to his own thoughts. At length he said:

“With the life we’re leading, I’ve become a fatalist. I had a dream last night. Turks struck me in my heart. The detachment of Shtip has been crushed in Karbintsi. My brother Milan is in that detachment and he may have been killed.”

His comrades tried to disguise their own uneasiness with merry jokes, which Gotsé took up and laughed at, most of all. As a matter of fact, his ominous dream did not foretell the death of his younger brother Milan, who was killed later this summer in the village of Nemantsi, the district of Koukoush. Then came the news that soldiers had entered Gorno Brody, but that too could not spoil the cheerful mood of the rebels. The soldiers were at rest all that day in Gorno Brody, and besides it was to be expected that wherever there were *comitas*, there would also be soldiers somewhere around.

Evening fell on the 21st of April. At one point Gotsé Delchev went over to the house opposite to see the men who were staying there. Several days before that the Salonika events had taken place and Gotsé told the rebels the details of the unusually bold action on the part of a few selfless Macedonian revolutionaries. Gotsé went back to his lodgings and soon the whole village went silent.

Well after midnight black shadows loomed in the darkness and noiselessly surrounded the sleeping village on all sides. There were about a thousand soldiers, led by the Turk Tefikov – a onetime Bulgarian officer and fellow-student of Delchev in the Military School. He was well aware whom he had come to hunt down in Banitsa. At day break the Turks searched the village houses one after the other, holding the people in the houses already searched. It was only then that the guards from the village detachment took alarm. An old woman rushed into the room where Delchev and his comrades were sleeping and cried out:

“Get up, boys! Soldiers have surrounded the village and are searching all the houses.”

They all jumped up not quite awake yet, as did Delchev, who had fallen asleep very late, because of his stomach complaint.

“Get yourselves ready, and we’ll see what’s happening”, he said.

His comrades had all sent silent looks at him waiting to see what he would say and do.

“What is to be, will be,” someone muttered.

They were all getting into their clothes, strapping on cartridge belts, examining weapons. A general noise of frightened voices came from outside – the peasants were leaving their houses to the rebels. Delchev knew of the command given by the Turks, with regard to the destruction of every village where a revolutionary detachment was found. He had in mind that the villages of Baldevo in the district of Nevrokop, Karbintsi in Shtip and Smurdesh in the district of Kostour had all been burned down. He also knew that if he stayed with his comrades-in-arms and fought in the village until dusk fell, they could break the siege in the dark and run for their lives with the fewest casualties: there were many detachments which had escaped in this way, without any casualties at all. The apostle did not hesitate for a minute. He placed the bayonet on his rifle and said:

“Follow after me. We will try to get away”.

Followed by the others, Delchev went out into the yard and stopped awhile by the gate, listening hard and looking around to see what was going on outside, in the street and in the neighboring houses. Then he motioned to the men to follow after him.

The small company came out into the street. The other rebels emerged from the house on the opposite side of the street. Delchev walked at the head of the file, his gun raised and ready to fire. The village resounded with the barking of dogs, but there was not a living soul around except for the 20 armed men, walking along singly and by two's. The street was narrow and crooked, so that none of the Turks could see them before they reached the end of the village.

A little meadow opened out here and the last village house was on their left. Thirty or 40 feet away was a low wall encircling the adjacent cornfield. Suddenly some Turkish soldiers jumped out from behind the wall, aiming their guns.

“Dogs!” Delchev clenched his teeth and fired. “Get down!” he called out to his comrades and standing as he was, he started reloading the gun.

“Get down, Gotsé!” came a voice from somewhere behind him.

Delchev was about to get down, but in the meantime the Turks opposite him fired and a bullet pierced his chest. The apostle fell over his gun. Then with a last effort, he raised his body on both his hands, but immediately went limp and breathed his last.

“Gotsé, Gotsé!” one of the comrades cried out with a sob, but the crash of the intensified fire drowned the cry of desperation and anguish.

By the time the apostle's comrades managed to get inside a hayloft nearby, another five had fallen dead, the Chieftain Dimiter Goushtanov among them. Those left alive, hiding behind the walls of the hayloft, fought the Turks all day, and gave them no chance to come near the rebels who had been killed, nor to approach the body of the apostle lying stiff and cold, prostrate over his gun. As soon as darkness fell the rebels manage to leave the village, now in flames on all sides.

Gotsé Delchev was killed after having just turned 32.