

# LASKARINA BOUBOULINA

Certainly, in the history of nations is a very rare fact of a woman to take arms, a very special woman, a wealthy woman, who on behalf of her country, offered as a sacrifice to the altar of freedom her ships, her money and her own sons. This woman was Laskarina Bouboulina, one of the most celebrated figures of the modern Greek history, whom the free nations of the world have saluted as the first woman admiral.

Coming from the island of Hydra, Laskarina was born inside the prisons of Constantinople on May 11<sup>th</sup> 1771 while her mother Paraskevo, was visiting her ailing husband Stavrianos Pinotsis, who had been imprisoned there by the Turks. Soon after Pinotsis death, widowed mother and child returned to Hydra, where they lived for four years, thereafter moving to the island of Spetses on the remarriage of her mother to the captain Dimitrios Lazarou-Orlof of Spetses.

From childhood, Laskarina had a passion for the sea and loved to listen to the stories of sailors and to their talk of freedom for the Greek nation, which had been under Turkish occupation for almost four hundred years.

With a dark complexion, a regal stature and an untamed character, she married twice, first at the age of seventeen to Dimitri Yiannouzas and again at the age of thirty to Dimitri Bouboulis. From the second husband's last name she became known as Bouboulina. Life though was very cruel to Laskarina and both her husbands, captains of their own ships, died in sea battles with the pirates, who were then raiding the coasts of Greece.

The year 1811 finds Bouboulina being 40 years old, twice widowed and the mother of seven children, but at the same time, extremely wealthy from the fortunes of ships, land and cash inherited from her husbands. She manages not only to keep this fortune intact, but also to increase it, due to her successful business trading. Initially, she became a partner in several vessels and in time managed to build three of her own, one of which was the later famous 'Agamemnon', a corvette to be armed with eighteen heavy cannons, the first and largest Greek fighting ship during the 1821 War of Independence against Turkey. Her choice to name her flagship "Agamemnon," after the Homeric King of Mykinae who led the Greeks to the Trojan War, is interesting for the symbolism it signifies and the historic heritage it seems to honor.

In 1816, Turkey attempts to confiscate Bouboulina's wealth, using the excuse that her second husband had taken part in the Turko-Russian wars, using his own vessels alongside the Russian fleet. In her efforts to save her fortune, Bouboulina traveled to Constantinople where she met the Russian Ambassador Strogonoff, known to be a Philhellene. She seeks protection from the Russian Ambassador in consideration of her husband's services to Russia, but also because her ships were under the Russian flag at the time. Strogonoff, in his efforts to protect her, and save her from imminent arrest by the Turks, sends her to Crimea, in the South of Russia on the Black Sea, to an estate given for her use by Czar Alexander. Before leaving for Russia she managed to gain an audience with the Sultan's mother, Valide-Sultana, who is extremely impressed by Bouboulina's character and her pleas for help. Bouboulina stayed in Russia for approximately three months while she waited for the crisis to defuse. Finally, the Sultana convinced her son, Mahmud II to issue a special declaration by which Bouboulina's fortune is left alone. Being no longer under threat of arrest, Bouboulina left immediately for Spetses.

Whilst in Constantinople, Bouboulina had become a member of the underground organization, "Filiki Etairia", known as "The Friendly Society," which for a number of years was organizing and preparing the Greeks for the revolution against the Turks. On her return to Spetses, she begins her preparations for the upcoming revolution. These preparations include the illegal buying of arms and ammunitions from foreign ports, which she then brings to Spetses in secrecy with her own ships and hides them in her own house. She also commences construction of her flagship "Agamemnon."

By the beginning of the revolution, she had assembled a small private army made up of men from Spetses – "her brave pallikaria" as she used to call them – an army which she herself arms, feeds and pays; she also supports her

own vessels and their crews. This continues for a number of years and she spends vast amounts of money on food and ammunition, which she sends to help the Greek armies surrounding the Turkish strongholds of Nafplion and Tripolis. These activities explain why Bouboulina spend all her large fortune during the first few years of the revolution.

On March 13<sup>th</sup> 1821, in Spetses, Laskarina Bouboulina raised the first revolutionary flag on the main mast of the corvette “Agamemnon.” She salutes it with cannon first! By May 3<sup>rd</sup> 1821 the island of Spetses, together with the islands of Hydra and Psara, composed the leading naval forces of the Greek Revolution. Bouboulina herself commanded besides her own fleet other ships and with eight large vessels sailed towards Nafplion, beginning the naval blockade of this massive fort, which was armed with 300 cannons at the time. Landing her forces at nearby Mili (by ancient Lerna), her forceful words and great enthusiasm gave courage to the Greek land forces to press on with the siege of Nafplion. Her naval attacks on the seaside fortifications were actions of unrivalled heroism.

On board her own vessel, she alone was giving orders for the boats to attack the fort. The boats were sailing forward in a rain of bullets and cannon fire from the seaside fortifications that made her brave men fall back. As an angered Amazon, watching the battle over the bulwark of her boat, standing fearless and undaunted, with her piercing look, pointing to the fortifications of Nafplion, urging her sailors to charge, yelling the command to fire against the forts! The men constantly regrouping and attacking, they fight and die in vain, since the fort was impregnable by sea. Changing her tactics, she landed with her forces on shore and participated in the siege until the fall of the fort, constantly leading her men in battle.

Apart from the naval blockade of Nafplion, Bouboulina also took part in the blockade of Monemvassia and the surrender of its castle, also at the battle of Haradros near Nafplion, where her eldest son, Yiannis Yiannouzas died heroically. She also took part at the siege and fall of Tripolis, where during the massacre that followed the fall of the city, Bouboulina managed to save the harem of Hoursit Pasha, the city’s ruler. This she did at the risk of her own life, after she received a plea from the Pasha’s wife to save the lives of the harem women and their children. It is said, that Bouboulina kept a promise given back in 1816 to the Sultan’s mother in Constantinople when she intervened to save Bouboulina’s fortune, that if ever a Turkish woman was going to ask for her help, she would not refuse and would do her best to help.

After the fall of Nafplion to the Greek forces, Bouboulina stayed on there, in a house given to her by the state as a reward for her services to the nation. Later though, due to fighting between opposing factions for the leadership of the newborn county, and the imprisonment of General Theodore Kolokotronis, one of the leading figures of the Greek revolution, and a man whom she always deeply respected and followed, Bouboulina, as a protest, gave her house in Nafplion back to the state and returned to the island of Spetses.

The dreaded year of 1825 finds Bouboulina living in her house in Spetses, bitter with the politicians and without her fortune, while the nation is again in grave danger. The Egyptian admiral Ibrahim Pasa, commanding a massive Turko-Egyptian fleet, landed on the port of Pylos in Peloponnese in a final effort to put down the Greek Revolution.

While Bouboulina was again making preparations to take part in the new fighting, death came in a sly and unexpected way. From a bullet she fell, in a dispute with members of the Koutsis family of Spetses. The reason for this was the running away of a Koutsis daughter with Bouboulina’s son, Yeorgo Yiannouzas. Her unyielding and angry words were enough to offend the Koutsis family and arm the hand of her killer.

Thus, an unjustified and inglorious end destined for this woman. A woman who did so much for her country, whose love for a free Greece was above all in her life and filled her heart. Her name remains forever linked with the liberation of the Greek people from the Turkish yoke and the creation of the Nation of Hellas.

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