

The Soldier's Sister

By [Charalampos Minasidis](#)

Greece's Long Great War witnessed the mobilization of its young women as caretakers of its armed community. The "sisters" were volunteer pen pals that battled soldiers' alienation and boredom and through their patriotism tried to heal the divide caused by the National Schism. The initiative spread quickly and was welcomed by both soldiers and officers.

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The Battle for Morale

The Great War proved to be a war of stagnation, where patience and adaptation to life in the trenches were more important than [bravery](#) and fighting skills. Soldiers were valued for their [discipline and endurance](#) in highly dangerous situations. However, as the actual fighting was much deadlier and less frequent than in previous wars, and the war was prolonged with no imminent end in sight, the soldiers had to deal with the dull daily life in the trenches, bad weather conditions, bad quality food, [unhygienic living conditions](#), alienation, homesickness and brutalization. Most crucially, they had plenty of time to think, evaluate their situation, and question the war and their participation. Morale had become the key to this new kind of war. Thus, initiatives, such as the "[marraines de guerre](#)", namely "godmothers of war," aiming to boost soldiers' morale and prevent any desertions were introduced in [France](#) and adopted by several of its allies. This initiative allowed [women](#) to correspond with soldiers in order to provide moral and material support. In [Greece](#) it was introduced as "The Soldier's Sister."

Mobilizing Young Women

"The Soldier's Sister" was also a way to democratize the war effort by mobilizing those who would not bear arms, such as young women. It was not the only initiative to mobilize society and women in particular. As [total war](#) required the mobilization of the whole society, many such associations appeared, such as "the Soldier's Sock", addressing soldiers' clothing needs, "the Soldier's Home", addressing soldiers' leisure needs, while [Anna Mela-Papadopoulou \(1871-1938\)](#), a volunteer [nurse](#) since the [Balkan Wars](#), was known as "The Soldier's Mother". Soon, through the Patriotic Institution of Healthcare, previously known as the Patriotic Association of Greek Women, and in cooperation with [YMCA](#), young bourgeois women and soldiers at the front began corresponding with each other in 1917. On 18 February 1918, "The Soldier's Sister" was officially established in Athens. Among its founders were liberal feminists, such as [Avra Theodoropoulou \(1880-1963\)](#), who sought women's [emancipation](#) through their active participation in the war effort. As in the rest of the world, the war had become a medium for the promotion of women's rights.

The success of “The Soldier’s Sister” led to the establishment of twelve branches and similar initiatives around Greece, under the YMCA, “Lyceum Club of Greek Women” or local bourgeois women’s associations, and even abroad, such as in Alexandria, Egypt. During the Greek-Turkish War of 1919-22, the second phase of the *Long Great War* for Greece, similar initiatives were established in Asia Minor and Constantinople, such as the “Soldier’s Sister” sector of the “Greek Women’s Association of Constantinople,” the “Soldier’s Kydonian Sister” in Kydonies/Ayvalık, the “Soldier’s Asia Minor Sister” in Smyrna/Izmir, from which some members seceded founding the “Soldier’s Ionian Sister,” and the “Soldier’s Sister” of Kasaba, modern-day Turgutlu. The state, the press, and even school teachers welcomed and promoted these initiatives asking young women to do their part for the war effort. In that respect, as Panagiotis Grigoriou argues, a “symbolic kinship” was established between a “mother,” several “homes,” numerous “sisters,” and thousands “national brothers.”

The “Sisters”

Three of these “sisters,” Nepheli (1895-1982), Georgia (1900-1978) and Ioanna (1905-1977) Despotopoulou managed to correspond with at least 203 “national brothers,” from July 1917 until the end of the *Long Great War* in 1923, and with a few even until the mid-1930s, which shows how strong the ties developed through this initiative were. Nepheli and Georgia’s archive - Ioanna had migrated to the USA - was discovered in 1988 in Athens by Fondas Ladis. It consists of 2,020 letters and around 700 postcards, photographs, and handwritten newspapers, with several soldiers and officers having written between 90 to 140 letters, making it a unique source for soldiers’ everyday life and their subjective experiences.

The Chasikos-Despotopoulou family was originally from Smyrna/Izmir. They supported the Great Idea that sought the liberation and unification with Greece of all those lands considered Greek. The family moved to Athens in 1912 and during the National Schism over Greece’s stand during the Great War, sided with the pro-war and pro-Entente Liberal Party. When the liberals managed to retake power in Southern Greece in 1917 they also propagandized women’s active participation in the war effort. The Despotopoulou sisters began volunteering in hospitals by visiting wounded soldiers, but soon decided to correspond with soldiers and officers as a more effective way to support the war effort.

Like the Despotopoulou sisters, most of the young women who joined the “Soldier’s Sister” associations were of liberal affiliations and many of them were Ottoman Greeks, which meant that a Greek military success would determine the fate of their hometowns. Thus, the “sisters” letters were filled with excitement and patriotic vocabulary, while their pseudonyms followed in the same fashion. Moreover, as the army was still divided because of the National Schism, the “sisters”, like other caretakers, were on a tacit mission to heal that divide. However, as many of them were liberals and feminists, they also propagandized their ideas, receiving both enthusiastic approval, rejection and even angry responses, which, nevertheless, did not lead to an end of the correspondence.

“My Dear Sister”

On their behalf, the “national brothers” main concern was morale, and secondly, material support. The letters demonstrate the vulnerability of these men and their search for human contact outside of their everyday lives shaped by the war. Besides, military authorities promoted such communication. In their early letters, the “national brothers” explained that they craved communication, while almost all letters followed specific motifs. They begin with a complaint about the lack of frequent correspondence or its delay and they conclude by asking the “sister” to write back shortly. For some of them, these “sisters” were the only persons that they could correspond with, as they did not have any family or their family was illiterate. Moreover, the dull life of their war service and the widespread feeling that they had been forgotten, forced many to correspond with as many “sisters” as they could. There were cases of “national brothers” corresponding with six-seven “sisters” at the same time, while others chose to correspond with only one. In some cases, these “sisters” were more than simple communication. After exchanging several letters, some of the “national brothers” visited them while on leave, met with their families, and even had their families send them gifts and parcels, as happened numerous times with the Despotopoulou sisters. Some even corresponded with all three Despotopoulou sisters, and even with their brother, Panagiotis Chasikos (1896-?), who had been drafted. Of course, as the correspondence between unmarried young men and women did not follow the social norms of the era, it led to explicit or implicit flirting between them, as the letters to and from the “sisters” prove, even though the term “sister” was chosen to prevent such things from happening. However, the willingness of both parties to exchange photos, and the open discussions about “love,” “women,” “marriage,” were indirectly leading to unspoken promises, although the “national brothers” were unwilling to offer any explicit promise. Apart from photos they also exchanged other gifts. The “sisters” requested bullets,

[grenades](#) and other war materials, while the “national brothers” requested books, newspapers and food parcels. Characteristically, the “Soldiers’ Asia Minor Sister,” during the Greek-Turkish War, sent to the front around 1,400 books, 285,637 newspapers, and 23,000 parcels, while it received 20,000 letters. These numbers prove the intensified needs of the “national brothers,” some of whom, by 1922, the last year of the war, had become so disillusioned that they either ignored or scoffed at the “sisters”’ patriotic outbursts or just openly wished for the end of the war and their [demobilization](#).

In the end, both parties had to deal with the final and unexpected defeat, the shock, the survival, the [refugees](#), and the disillusionment that followed. Although most “sisters” and “national brothers” stopped corresponding with each other, either embittered by “broken promises” or because they focused on their [postwar life](#), few continued a friendship formed during the war. As they were leaving the war years behind, a similar initiative, although on a much smaller scale and scope, was revived during the next war, the Greek-Italian War of 1940-41.

Charalampos Minasidis, The University of Texas at Austin

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