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**TURKISH PRISONER OF WAR IN 1913'S SOFIA:  
THE MILITARY ARTIST MEHMET ALI LAGA  
(1878–1947)**

**ТУРСКИ ВОЕННОПЛЕННИК В СОФИЯ ОТ 1913 Г.: ВОЕННИЯТ  
ХУДОЖНИК МЕХМЕТ АЛИ ЛАГА (1878–1947 Г.)**

Мехмет Али Лага е турски военен художник, живял през един от най-непокойните периоди в турската история. Той е изпратен в армията по време на Балканските войни и Дарданелската операция. През първата Балканска война Лага е в Одрин и бива пленен от българите. По време на едногодишното си пребиваване като военнопленник в София той не престава да рисува. Среща се с Антон Митов и така получава възможността да попадне в Художествената академия и да се запознае с творбите на български художници. Картините, които Лага създава по време на войните, особено пейзажите от София и Дарданелите, имат общи черти и някои различия. В настоящата статия се спираме на местата, които Лага е нарисувал в картините си по време на пленничеството си в България. Отделено е внимание и на статии, посветени на тези картини и на българското изобразително изкуство от този период, публикувани в някои турски списания.

**Ключови думи:** Балканските войни, Дарданелска военна операция, София, военен художник, Антон Митов.

Being an important Turkish military artist who had a significant role in the development at the beginning phases of the Turkish painting, Mehmet Ali Laga (1878–1947), had lived in one of the most active periods of the Turkish history and these lifetime traces are reflected on his paintings. Having joined both of the Balkan and Dardanelles Wars as a fortified area painter his assigned work station was changed continuously. It is known that he had lived and painted in Istanbul, Edirne, Sofia, Bursa and Qanakkale as well.

Born in 1878, Mehmet Ali Laga (Pic. 1), graduated from Military School in 1898. Having appointed in 1906 at the art atelier of the Imperial Army War Academy in Istanbul initially, Laga was re assigned as an art teacher to Kuleli Military High School towards the end of 1911<sup>1</sup>. Due to the Balkan War in 1912 he was first recruited in the army as a captain in Edirne-Iskece, where he was later assigned as the fortified area painter. In 1913 after the battle of Malkara was lost, he was taken as a prisoner of war by Bulgarian army and was sent to Sofia where he was kept for one year. When released, he returned to Istanbul back to his job in Kuleli Military School as an art teacher. At the beginning of the 1<sup>st</sup> World War, between 1914–1918, he was assigned as the fortified area painter in (Janakkale (Dardanelles)<sup>2</sup> and was promoted to the rank of major in 1918.

Mehmet Ali Laga (1878–1947), was captured as a prisoner of war during the Second Balkan War together with his artist friend Mehmet Sami Yetik (1878–1945). They continued to paint both during their assignments in Edirne and when taken to Sofia as well. That has been narrated by Mehmet Ali as follows:

“We were both assigned to Edirne fortified area at the Balkan War. Sami was assigned to join the troops in the Military squadrons, whereas I was sent to the court-martial headquarters. Being located in Edirne town center, I was able to practice painting all day and Sami was only able to sketch drawings of the soldiers in the troops whenever he had the chances. ... We were taken to Sofia as slaves upon falling of Edirne. When the slavery convoys were relocated we tried with our full efforts to cling on to each other in order not to fall apart and soon after we arrived at Sofia, we were lined up in troops. This time we held on to each other even more. Thank God, once again we did not fall apart. Again, we kept together while despatched to the hotels, In summary, we continued that way until we ended up in the same room with beds next to each other. Then finally we were both relieved and sighed (oh). (Boyar 1948: 134).

The artists were imprisoned in the hotel (Rotopi Hotel) for fifteen days; when finally released, rushed to a store selling artistic materials, spending all their money to buy essentials for oil paintings, watercolor and pastel paints. The artists who started to paint in the streets of Sofia, soon attracted the attention of the students of The Sofia School of Fine Arts, and they were commended by the students to the school head master, Anton Mitov (1862–1930), who also was an artist himself. Therefore A. Mitov, wished to see them and their paintings. At their first meeting they did not take the paintings with them and Mitov talked about Turkish Painter 3allə and mentioned his son’s friendship with Ibrahim 3allə in Paris. Mehmet Sami invited Mitov to their rooms in the hotel to show him their paintings. Seeing the paintings during his visit at the hotel, Mitov admired our painters and showed sincere interest towards them, they started to see each other more often (Boyar 1948: 134–135). This is further supported by Muallim Vahyi’s words published in the 14th issue of the Ottoman Artists Association’s newspaper in (1878–1957) (Vahyi 1914/1330: 146). But there is no indication in Bulgarian sources to support this acquaintance.

Mehmet Ali Laga’s paintings in Bulgaria, whether they were published in the books or not, were either labeled as “Sofia” or not labeled at all. It is difficult to determine the exact number of the paintings he made when he was in Bulgaria; according to Muallim Vahyi they were at around thirty to forty, but the ones I was able to come across were only fourteen and they were generally possessed by his family members. During my research in Sofia, unfortunately I was not able to recover any paintings either by Mehmet Ali Laga, or by Mehmet Sami Yetik. Those places undetermined to date in Mehmet Ali Laga’s paintings in Bulgaria will still be subject to my further inquiries, the ones clearly identified are listed according to their locations in Sofia from the north to the south and from the west to the east as follows: The bridge with the lion (Livov Most; Collection of Ie Bank, signed, Pic. 2)<sup>3</sup>, St. Nedelya Church (Sveta Nedelya, signed, Pic. 3-4)<sup>4</sup>, St. George Church/ Rotonda (Sveti Georgi, Pic.5), St. Sophia Church (Sveta Sofia, 36x29

cm., Pic. 6), St. Alexander Nevski Cathedral (Sveti Alexandir Nevski, Pic.7)<sup>5</sup>, Bali Efendi Turbeh (Pic. 8)<sup>6</sup>.

Mehmet Ali Laga's paintings in Sofia, generally are the depictions of the buildings and the streets. The majority of the paintings showing solely the buildings, reminds us the examples of the other Turkish military painters of the same period, which were mostly reflecting the landscapes and the buildings within the landscapes. The most of the drawings were done in black or coloured pencils and pastel on plain paper, indicating the technical insufficiency during times of war. The same character is observed later in his black pencil drawings during the Dardanelles war as well.

Examining Laga's paintings during the Dardanelles War, it is observed that there are lots of bombarding, fire and other war scenery without any figures apart from the usual landscapes. We do not observe similar scenes in his paintings at Sofia because, Laga never witnessed the hot war when he was in Sofia. Furthermore, Mehmet Ali's paintings in Sofia also bear no explanatory notes whereas in general he used to sign and put footnotes beneath each of his paintings during the Dardanelles War. There is no clear indication of the prescriber of the footnotes below his paintings published in the 15th issue of the Ottoman Artists Association's newspaper. As noted on the other hand, that he had also pictured landscapes other than the town center itself during the Dardanelles War, make us think that, those other unidentified drawings he painted when he lived in Sofia could possibly belong to its environs as well.

These paintings in Sofia, showing the buildings of the war with only minor differences as compared to their visions of today, not only carry a documentary value but also indicate us the realism of the artist today.

The ninety eight paintings performed by the artist when he was at the fortified area of the Dardanelles War in between 1914–1918<sup>7</sup>, are in exhibit at Dardanelles Sea Museum today. Mostly drawn with black pen, some being coloured with dry coloured pencils, whereas the others were painted with watercolor or Indian ink; almost all of them dated, with explanatory notes and signed. It is also understood from the paintings of the artist showing images while he was walking or travelling in a boat, that he was not only ambitious to document events but also had a great talent to quickly apprehend and picture the events around him.

On the other hand, looking at the examples of the Bulgarian drawing arts, it is seen that the artists such as A.Mitov, I.Mirkvicka and J. Vesin were of great importance in the development of their national arts; in their painting there are scenes from the daily lives of the Bulgarian public as well as the scenes from the wars. The nationalistic spirit observed among the Bulgarian and other European artists, were also tried to be constituted by the efforts of the Ottoman intellectuals of the period in our country as well and the artists such as Mehmet Ali Laga wished to progress in that direction.

Considering that the person who Sami Yetik has defined as his friend expressing his thoughts in the article titled "For Schools of Fine Art-5" (Sami 1914/1330: 205-206) published in the 15th issue of the Ottoman Artists Association's newspaper, was in fact Mehmet Ali Laga; we understand that Mehmet Ali examined the Bulgarian artists' works

of art in the Sofia Academy as well, and shared the opinion that there were no examples of artists such as J. Mirkvichka and A.Mitov in our country, and that such national artists are also required for our national art to develop, criticising the academy founded by Osman Hamdi Bey (1842–1910) and his colleagues.

Another important and distinguished publication of the period, the Şehbal Magazine; is of importance to us due to the articles in regards to our subject which were published there by especially Huseyin Arif. Even though we failed to determine his complete identity during our researches, Huseyin Arif, had written many articles about the Bulgarian School of Fine Arts, about the Departments of Embroidery, China tiling and ceramics, about the artists such as J. Mirkvicka, A. Mitov, J. Vesin and about the Bulgarian literature<sup>11</sup>. He explained the purpose of the Sofia School of Arts' foundation, the type of education given there, their activities and efforts to establish their national art and extend it to the public (Arif 1914a/ 1330: 412–416). He also wrote there that even though Mirkvicka was of Czech origin, he was considered as a Bulgarian National artists and had worked almost at every area of the country, creating examples of various art branches, emphasising that he was inspired by the Bulgarian history, life style and traditions by giving examples of his Works of art, praising him in general (Arif 1913a/ 1329: 328–330). He also praised Mitov as much as he did Mirkvicka, emphasising their friendship and joint works in the Academy also giving examples of Mitov's works of art (Arif 1913b/ 1329: 352–354). Huseyin Arif, in another article, told about another military artist Vesin, mentioning his educational background and his successes in his paintings and how he was highly evaluated by the Bulgarians due to his talents; making comparisons of them with the historical Ottoman painters and their works of art (Arif 1914b/1330: 450–452). In summary, Huseyin Arif, pointed out the Bulgarian artists and their art educations, as an example to the Ottoman artists.

As a result of all of the above, when all of the war painters in Europe are considered, comparing Mehmet Ali Laga's paintings to their works of art, which were generally highlighted by the heroism, drawn for purposes of propaganda and with lots of figures in general, we can observe different characteristics. Considering Laga was never punished for any reason during military service, and he heeded the School of Fine Art Medal that was given to him rather, evaluating himself as an artist before all else; It can be commented that, "Laga took his power of existence and endurance within the wilderness of the war, from the poetry of the paintings and from the comfort of the nature" (Erzen 1997).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Registry record filled in Bursa Secondary High School in 1340 (1924); Registry record filled in 1927 at Hahcioglu Military School (From the archives of Turkish Republic Ministry of National Defence).

<sup>2</sup> The petition submitted in 1332 (1916) by Mehmet Ali, for promotion to senior captain rank; Registry record filled in Bursa Secondary High School in 1341(1925); the registry record in 1926; and the registry record filled in 1927 at Hahcioglu Military School (From the archives of Turkish Republic Ministry of National Defence).

<sup>3</sup> Located at the crossing of the Maria Louisa Boulevard and the Slivnitsa Boulevard in Sofia and provides the connection of the town center with the Station building. Designed by the Czech architect Vaclav Prosek in 1889. The bridge is on the river of Vladaya.

<sup>4</sup> The building is located at the intersection Maria Louisa Boulevard and the Vitosh Boulevard in Sofia. Also named as St. King (Sveti Kral) Church. Reconstruction work on the church started in 1856 but due to the earthquake in 1858 was only completed in 1863, also was subject to restoration work in 1898 and the new domes were added then. But later at 16 Apr. 1925' was subject to a terrorist bomb attack against Tsar III. Boris ruling when at around 200 people died and 500 were wounded. Another bigger restoration took place in between 1927–33 which enabled the building to reach to our days.

<sup>5</sup> The building, serving as a Bulgarian Orthodox Cathedral in Sofia today, is one of the biggest Orthodox cathedrals in the world. Construction was planned in 1879 and took time in between 1882–1912, The building was dedicated to the honours of the Russian soldiers who fought for their independence in Bulgaria in 1878 and it is named after the Saint Alexander Nevski, who protected the Russian Tsar Alexander II and his family at the period. Many Bulgarian artists (including A. Mitov and I. Mirkvicka) as well as artists from other countries took part at it's construction and restoration. It was renamed in 1916–20 and is called the Cyril and Methodius Cathedral today.

<sup>6</sup> Bali Efendi, died and was buried in Salahiye (Knyajevo) at the environs of Sofia in 1551/53. Later a mosque, a türbe and a cookhouse was erected there in his honour. Renovated in 1943' the türbe was damaged in 1990 due to a fire but was restored once again in 2006 and is serving to the guests today.

<sup>7</sup> The petition submitted in 1332 (1916) by Mehmet Ali', for promotion to senior captain rank; Registry record filled in Bursa Military School in 1341 (1925); Registry record from 1926 (From the archives of the Turkish Republic Ministry of National Defense)

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Registry record filled in 1927 at Hahcioglu Military School;

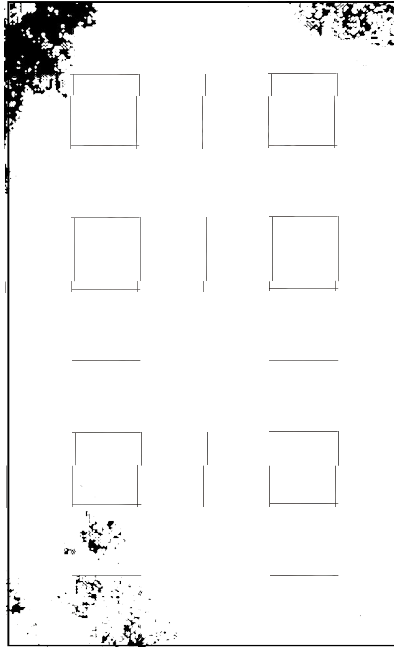
The petition submitted in 1332 (1916) by Mehmet Ali, for promotion to senior captain rank;

Registry record filled in Bursa Secondary High School in 1341 (1925);

Registry record in 1926;

Registry record in 1334/1918;

Registry record in 1326/1910.



*Pic. 1 : Mehmet Ali Laga*



*Pic. 2 : The Bridge with the Lion*

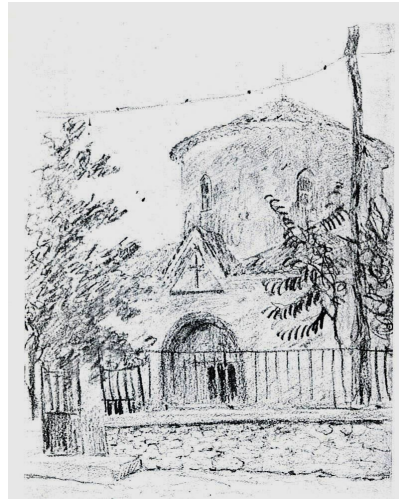




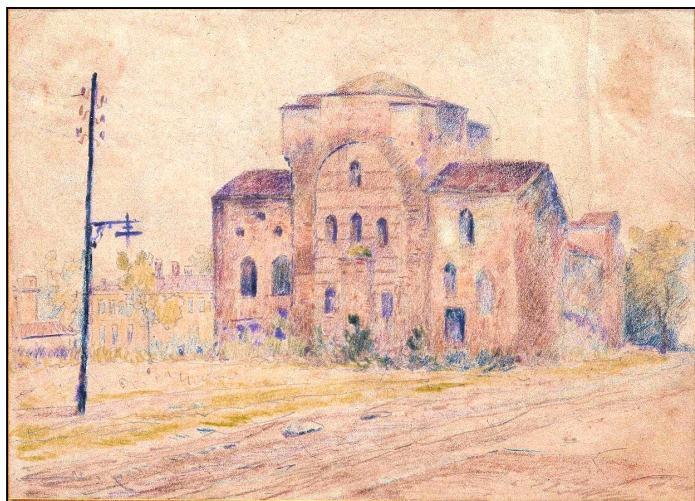
*Pic. 3 : St. Nedelya Church*



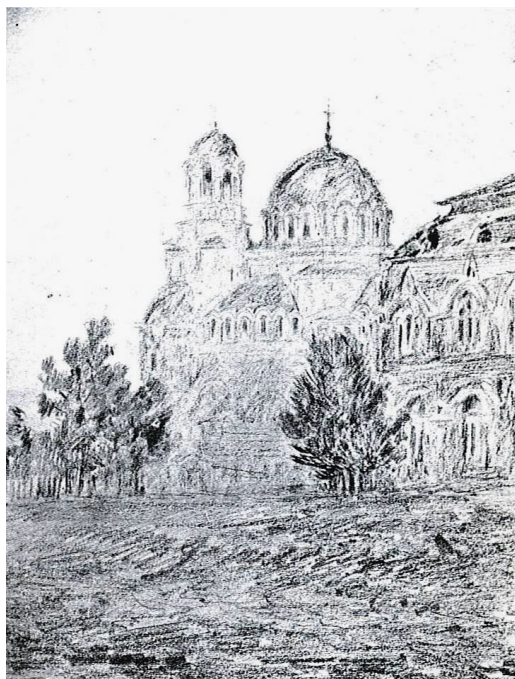
*Pic. 4 : St. Nedelya Church*



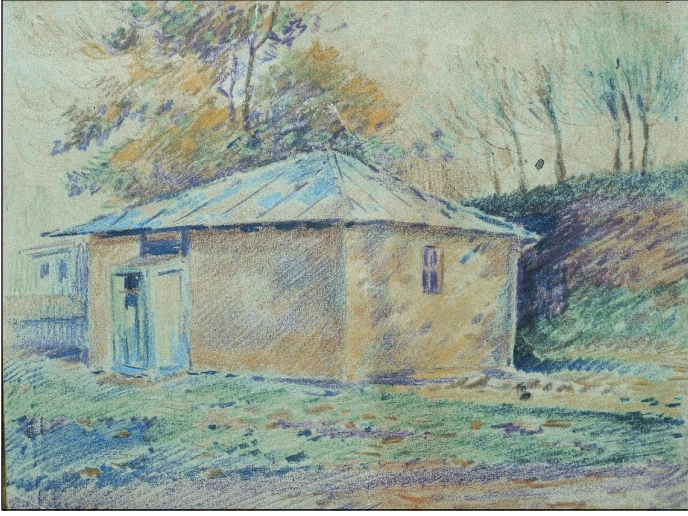
*Pic. 5 : St. George Church*



*Pic. 6 : St. Sophia Church*



*Pic. 7 : St. Alexander Nevski Cathedral*



*Pic. 8 : Bali Efendi Turbeh*