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The Salonica theatre of operations and its part in the outcome of the First World War

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Salonica and World War I are a pairing that inevitably brings specific images to mind: the existence, for instance, of a curious medley of races and cultures, to which the circumstantial presence of foreign troops (many of them coming from the distant colonies) added a rather exotic note; the great fire of 1917 and the planning and rebuilding of the city; the upsurge of political passions and confrontations that led to the eruption of the Venizelist National Defence movement and the formation of a provisional government; images, finally, like the existence in the same space of an international expeditionary force that enjoyed the luxury, in time of war, of gardening -to repeat the expression of France’s government- and whose overriding concern was not to add to the already long list of losses due to malaria. But is this how it really was?

Undoubtedly, the name of Salonica cannot be compared with those of Verdun, the Somme, Dannenberg, Caporetto and Gallipoli, which have become landmarks in the history of human self-destruction. Yet, Salonica can, and should claim a share both in the collective endeavour of 1914-1918 and, especially, in its eventual outcome. Let me explain.

First of all, at a purely operational level, we have here all the components that made the First World War an all-out conflict that was quite unprecedented (in the most negative sense of the term): involving static war, poison gas, air bombardments, and wide-range torpedo attacks.

At the level of wider planning, the Salonica theatre of operations was a classic example of peripheral strategy in the context of a widespread war. In other words, it provides an answer to the question of what is the precise role and the value of secondary fronts which, after a long period of comparative inaction, are activated at just the right moment with a view to dynamically overturning the current situation and even forcing the final outcome.

It therefore behoves us historians to set the record straight. I am talking about Salonica’s substantial role as a springboard for the Allies’ final counter-attack in September 1918, the victorious counter-attack, which, with successive capitulations of Bulgaria, the Ottoman Empire, Austro-Hungary, and, finally, Germany, confirmed the domino theory before it was even formulated.

So the Salonica theatre may have been one of the least conspicuous in terms of concentrated military power, strategic priorities and even loss of life, but it fully repaid its three-year existence in the most effective possible way.

Now if one were to isolate a single feature that constantly characterised the existence and maintenance of this particular operational theatre, I think one would have to focus on justification. Why was the theatre established? What was to be gained from maintaining it? What prospects did it offer for the future? After all, for three entire years, choices, negotiations and decisions revolved around these three considerations, often, indeed, in an atmosphere of heated inter-Allied confrontation and disagreement.

The first question, why the front was formed, is the easiest to answer. It was to help Serbia, which was being sorely tried in 1915 and was in the throes of a disorderly retreat.

Things started to grow more obscure once there was no longer any justification for the presence of Allied military forces in the area. The collapse of Serbia towards the end of



General Maurice Sarrail bestowing medals on French officers.

1915 gave cause for endless wrangling among Allies, which all stemmed, ultimately, from different perceptions and priorities. The fact is that, with the way the war was now developing -from a war of movements and manoeuvres to a war of positions- the various army staffs were inevitably starting to develop peripheral strategies. But in the specific case of Salonica views and preferences diverged and conflicted.

As far as the French, for instance, were concerned, on whose national territory perhaps the most decisive operations were being carried out, and who, for precisely this rea-

son, were desperately seeking alternative solutions that could defuse the situation by creating a diversion, Salonica offered promising prospects. Paris believed that a bridgehead maintained in the Balkans could distract enemy forces and keep them there. Furthermore, such a bridgehead could theoretically be turned into a base for aggressive initiatives, circumstances permitting, in association with other fronts nearby (such as the Eastern, the Italian, or the Middle Eastern front). We have here the very essence of peripheral strategy.

Diametrically opposed, though equally dictated by strategic priorities, was the prevailing view across the Channel. The key concern of the British security system was not so much to decongest the main front as to protect maritime communications between the colonies and the metropolis. This was the only way to maintain a constant supply of manpower and raw materials, prerequisites for war attrition. Consequently, interest in the wider area of the Eastern Mediterranean focused solely on keeping the Suez Canal open.

An embroilment in the Balkans, by contrast, with all the military factors against it (a numerically stronger enemy, a lack of reliable allies in the region, political conditions that



Carrier ships in Salonica's port.

threatened the security of an Allied bridgehead in Salonica), was fought with danger as far as British interests were concerned. After all, the painful experience of Gallipoli was still fresh and influencing choices and perceptions.

So these discrepancies were the basis for an interminable and fruitless dialogue among the Allies over the future of the Salonica theatre of operations. The crucial questions

of what was to be gained by maintaining the front will never be clearly answered. In fact, if we trace the entire course and development of the negotiations (as the accessible contemporary archival material enables us to do), we shall be surprised by the vague and nebulous wording of the joint decisions, and especially the fact that they are open to different interpretations by either side. They are apotheosis, in other words, of the art of diplomacy and obfuscation. There are many telling examples, but unfortunately this is not the time to go into them here.

At all events, the one major opportunity to make full use of the Salonica theatre came in the first half of 1916; but, like all the others, it was allowed to slip away. The unexpected German attack at Verdun and the major Allied counter-attack planned on the Somme again raised the question of activating and co-ordinating the secondary fronts, with the aim of preventing enemy reinforcements from being transferred from the periphery to main front. The linchpin in this case was Romania, and in order to win Romania over the French mainly embroiled themselves in the process of arduous, time-consuming negotiations. From this point of view, the Allied expeditionary force in Salonica could have played a leading role, forcing Bulgaria to fight on two fronts.

Once again, however, plans and hopes were thwarted by the unequivocal opposition of the British. On the pretext that breaking up the forces could be disastrous for Allied interests, the London government for the first time brought up the matter of supplying the Salonica front and even of withdrawing the British forces from there. Romania's ill-time entry into the war in the summer of 1916 and its collapse just three months later once again plunged the expeditionary force in Salonica into a period of long and irksome inaction.

The whole affair was extricated from deadlock thanks to France's shrewd exploitation of the side-effects of Greece's political crisis. Inevitably, then we move on to the major issue of weighing up Greek-Allied relations, a question that is key, as things turned out, to understand how Allied strategy was planned and carried out in the wider region of south-eastern Europe.

The form that Greek-Allied relations were shaped and the way they were developed defy all reason. Let us recall the general situation in 1915, in the first months after Salonica theatre was established, when neutral Greece was governed by an administration that was barely able to conceal its sympathy for the coalition of the central powers. Yet this neutral country, under this specific political authority, played host on its own territory, against its will, to the armed forces of the opposing coalition, the Triple Entente: total inconsistency, not to say schizophrenia. And that was only the start. Much more critical, complicated situations were to follow, owing, mostly to the Allied military presence on Greek soil.

Greece ceased to control its own actions and, by extension, ceased to practise a self-sufficient foreign policy, while the general conduct of the Allies resembled gunboat diplomacy: ultimatums backed by the threat of canons of a navy that repeatedly sailed into the bay of Faliro, Piraeus; shows of force and military occupation of parts of the national territory; control over the most sensitive sectors of the public administration and the armed forces; imposition of a commercial blockade; support for divisive structures and groupings, and so forth. Although it was dictated by reasons connected with the security of the Salonica expeditionary force or even with waging the war more generally, such conduct could

never be perceived as an attempt at dialogue, especially with a state, namely Greece, that was supposed to be one of the neutral nations.

It would be wrong, however, to regard the forcible and provocative Allied intervention in the country's domestic affairs as an imperialist attempt to infiltrate Greece with a view to annexing territory or creating protectorates. The aim was solely to meet the strategic requirements of a given moment. In other words, the peculiar nature of Greece's relations with the Allies was dictated by the turn the war took; while those relations were a model of unequal, circumstantial diplomacy. Unequal owing to the difference in strength between the two sides; circumstantial because under different conditions the Allies would not had the slightest reason to intervene (I refer to the deposition of King Constantine in June 1917) and force the resolution of a purely domestic problem, which is what, in the final analysis, the national schism was.

At all events, Greece's decision to join the Allied camp in 1917 proved doubly beneficial to the latter. On the one hand, it removed the constant threat to the security of the ex-



The *Balkan News* and British soldiers reading the newspaper in the trenches.

peditionary force; on the other, the active participation of the Greek army (despite the usually high level of desertion) assured the Allies for the first time of superior firepower on the Salonica front.

The attack of 14 September 1918 was eminently successful and won the commander of the theatre his marshal's baton. Franchet d' Esperey was the only front com-

mander who, venturing a bold manoeuvre and carrying it out swiftly enough to prevent the enemy from regrouping, realised a dream that his French, British and German counterparts in the main theatre of operations had been vainly cherishing for years.

A mere two weeks after the attack, Bulgaria capitulated. From then on things developed rapidly and in the space of just a month and a half -after four years of static war- the Ottoman Empire, Austro-Hungary, and, finally, Germany followed suit. Having evolved from a simple bridgehead into a springboard for aggressive initiatives, it was the peripheral, the insignificant, the largely disregarded Salonica front that eventually struck the fatal blow at just the right moment, thus opening the breach that caused the central Powers' coalition to collapse.



French soldiers training their Russian colleagues in French machine guns.