CULTURE AND PROPAGANDA: THE FRENCH ARMY OF THE ORIENT IN THESSALONIKI DURING WORLD WAR I

Assoc. Prof. Gueorgui Peev, PhD

New Bulgarian University
Administration and Management Department
gpeev@nbu.bg

Abstract: The Macedonian front during World War I is considered a secondary one, but it's here that the interests of many of the warring countries collide. France, as a Great Power, seeks to strengthen its role and become the dominant factor in the region. In order to fulfil this goal, the commander-in-chief of the "Armée d'Orient", General M. Sarrail, has to solve different types of tasks – military, political, economic. And according to public opinion, active cultural policy and propaganda must also be pursued in order to "civilize" the Balkans and to prove French superiority over Germany in the region. Thus in Greece, which at that time is still neutral, a propaganda war begins between the two countries. The means are varied, but the main role falls to the press and newspapers – both Greek as well as publications by the French military authorities. The attention paid to French cultural policy in these publications suggests that this seems to be the main occupation of this army – which helps explain the unflattering image of the "Armée d'Orient" in France that can be summed up by the disparaging title given to it by Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau: "the gardeners of Salonica."

Keywords: World War I, French Cultural Propaganda, General Sarrail, Macedonian Front, Trench Newspaper

The arrival of the Allied armies on the Macedonian front is somewhat improvised. After their unsuccessful Dardanelles Campaign and spurred by Bulgaria's entry into the war, French and English troops violate Greece's neutrality and land in Salonika (Thessaloniki) in October of 1915. The initial goal of the newly created Army of the Orient under the

command of General Maurice Sarrail is to save the Serbian Army. In less than two months, it becomes clear that this goal cannot be achieved. However, the French and British allies decide to establish a foothold in the East and create the Salonika campaign and the Macedonian front. A year later, the new objective of the Army of the Orient is to prevent the Bulgarian troops from advancing to the North, where Romania has entered the war on the side of the Allies. Ultimately, the Army of the Orient fails here as well, and Romania is defeated and occupied by armies of the Central Powers. Another aim of the Allied occupation of Thessaloniki is to gain influence in Greece and draw Greece to the Allied side. As the war progresses, the French, British and Serbian troops are joined by Russian, Italian and Greek units. On the other side, the Central Powers include Bulgarian, Turkish, German and Austro-Hungarian troops. During the last year of the war, the new Allied objective for the Army of the Orient is to launch an offensive, which would sideline Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire from the war, an objective that ultimately succeeds (Mourélos).

While the military objectives of France and the Allies are continuously adjusted, the political ambitions of Paris remains the same – to strengthen the role of France in the region. France has trade and economic interests in Thessaloniki, an important port, even prior to the war. In 1640, France declares its interest to open a consulate in Thessaloniki and in 1781, after the French-Ottoman capitulatory treaty, France sends its first consul. The consulate is active until December 1913, when the Greek government sends an official diplomatic note to all consulates that it will no longer abide by the capitulatory treaties (Jestin).

In its quest for influence, France’s interests collide with those of the other “great powers” and many of the smaller

Balkan countries. Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia and to a certain extent Turkey all have regional interests and geopolitical goals in the region, and respective plans for achieving them. As part of its strategy to expand its influence in the world, France has a more global approach. This strategy is formulated several decades earlier by the prime minister Jules Ferry who says: "Spreading light without acting, without taking part in the affairs of the world, keeping out of all European alliances and seeing as a trap, an adventure, all expansion into Africa or the Orient – for a great nation to live this way, believe me, is to abdicate and, in less time than you may think, to sink from the first rank to the third and fourth… something else is needed for France… it ought to propagate this influence throughout the world and carry everywhere that she can her language, her customs, her flag, her arms, and her genius" (Milza, 62). Thus, the Salonika campaign creates an opportunity for France to retake its place as a European leader, a place it has lost after the Franco-Prussian war of 1870. Leading up to World War I, the endeavour to regain its central role in Europe pits France against Germany and creates a strong rivalry in every field, including science and the arts.

The commander-in-chief of the Allied forces in the Salonika campaign, General Maurice Sarrail, is a controversial figure. To some, he is one of the most talented and charismatic generals of the French army. To others, he is a politician, who mistakenly becomes a general, while using his political connections. Like the government in Paris, initially Sarrail does not have a clear position regarding the Balkan region. Later, Sarrail recalls that he arrived in Thessaloniki without any information, without any official strategic directions, not knowing anything about the country, the people and the events that transpired in the beginning of the war (Sarrail, 1919, 685). The opinion of the French public about the region and the Salonika cam-

paign is mostly influenced by the commentary of the French press. French journalists describe the mission of the Army of the Orient as one striving to "civilize and enlighten", similar to other French colonizing expeditions. Furthermore, after the Balkan wars of 1912 and 1913, the predominant view in France is that this "exotic" region is on the border between civilization and barbarism, a semi-developed, semi-civilized, semi-colonial, semi-oriental territory that needs to be enlightened by France's cultural superiority.

The French mission to "civilize' the Balkans during World War I is a continuation of the centuries old policy towards the Levant, which according to some authors begins as far back as the Crusades. The first capitulation treaty of the Ottoman Empire and France in 1535 enables Catholic missions to appear on the Balkan Peninsula. The Jesuits become active in Thessaloniki in 1693 and continue their mission there until 1773 when Pope Clement XIV abolishes the Society of Jesus. The vacuum created by the departure of the Jesuits is filled by the mission of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, known as the Vincentians. The Daughters of Charity, or Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, is also founded to serve the poor and spread Christianity among the youth. In spite of the separation of church and state that begins in France in 1789, during the 19th century the French ministry of foreign affairs often collaborates with Catholic missions abroad to further French interests and spread French culture and education. In addition to Istanbul and Smyrna, Thessaloniki becomes a useful location for Catholic indoctrination, with the goal to "civilize" the youth with religious and secular education. The first all-male school in Thessaloniki opens in 1834 in the Frank district (Frenk mahal). The Frank district is where foreigners live as well as the location of the majority of churches, banks, merchant and artisan shops. Soon

French educational and religious influence spreads beyond the local Catholics and the Frank district (Zaimova, 2019; Zaimova).

Before the start of World War I, there is a French Catholic college in Thessaloniki. The college has approximately 400 students and 30 faculty members. The faculty is mostly French, but there are also some Greek, British and two German faculty members. General Sarrail, known for his anticlerical and anti-Catholic sentiments, becomes a supporter of the French School of Thessaloniki established in 1906 and encourages the students to issue two newspapers titled *Cocorico* and *Tricolore* (Le Musée et l'encyclopédie de la guerre, 180).

General Sarrail is a vain person and his ego is initially hurt when he is offered a corps-sized force for the Salonika campaign. He insists on changing the name of his force to "Army of the Orient", analogous to other successful armies in the region, such as the army of Napoleon's campaign in Egypt between 1798 and 1801, and the Army of the Orient that participated in the Crimean War in 1853. In June of 1916, Sarrail becomes the supreme ruler of Thessaloniki when he imposes martial law. Under the pretext that France has to prepare for post-war order and must establish favourable economic and political standing in the region, the general takes steps that go beyond his purview as a military leader. For example, he imposes a rule that 75% of the imported goods for the 200 000 citizens of Thessaloniki need to be French. This highlights the already existing French economic policy in the region, which is "colonial" as acknowledged by the French participants in the conflict themselves.[1]

[1] In his memoirs, *Les travaux et les jours de L'Armee d'Orient*, one of the architects of French geopolitics and participant in the events Jaques Ancel has an entire chapter called "The Colonization of Macedonia" (Ancel, 147-168).

In this case, Sarrail simply follows the policy principles of the influential politician Edouard Herriot, a long-term mayor of Lyon, the second biggest city in France and a future prime minister in three governments. During the course of 1916, Sarrail asserts that his goal in the Balkans is to continue French colonialism. He declares that World War I is a war of merchants and will decide the entire economic future of the world. He further states that France cannot give up its policy of trade and economic influence in the region, to which Thessaloniki is central, unless it is ready to accept irreparable damage to its interests. On August 1, 1916, a French trade bureau opens in Thessaloniki. It prints a monthly publication promoting French economics and politics. This becomes a reason for discontent for France's allies from Britain and Italy since they also have ambitions for influence in the region.

To be successful in its economic endeavours, France has to win over the local community by proving it is superior to its competition in all areas, including culture. Following the tradition of Napoleon in Egypt, French scientists and archaeologists begin archaeological excavation, study, and supposed preservation of the cultural heritage of the region. The term "cultural heritage preservation" is very popular and widely used in France during this period. It is often used in contrast to the destruction of monuments, such as the Reims Cathedral, during the German invasion of France of 1914, proving the barbarism of the enemy. In contrast, "civilized" armies preserve the cultural heritage of the territory where military actions are taking place (Horne).

Beginning in 1870, French and German archaeologists compete in the territory of the Ottoman Empire as well as Greece. In 1911, French scientists study Thasos. The military campaign in the Dardanelles also leads to the discovery of many ancient ruins, demonstrating once again the

rich archaeological heritage of the region. Encouraged by the French School in Athens, which practically serves as a French cultural institute in Greece, General Sarrail officially establishes an archaeology unit in the Army of the Orient on May 20, 1916. Its objective is to formalize and regulate archaeological sites where digging has often begun randomly and without sanction or expertise. To justify the imposition of martial law, he declares: "To show my overall interest in Greek affairs, I began archaeological excavation and studies" (Sarrail, 1920, 109).

The archaeology unit creates an inventory of the discovered artefacts, and detailed descriptions of the archaeological sites. According to some historians, the unit's focus of activity goes beyond the end of the war. This includes the discovery of new places where the influence of the French School in Athens and that of France can be expanded and become stronger than the influence of the other Allied or Central powers. The archaeological works of the army quickly become well-known to the general public thanks to photography. The reports and pictures published in the press and in specialized scientific publications always include compulsory praise of the Army of the Orient. They exemplify the desire to highlight the ability of the Allied army to save cultural heritage even in times of war, in stark contrast to the German and Ottoman "barbarism" and disregard of culture. Scientific publications also serve as international publicity with an ambition to highlight France's continuous cultural and scientific work despite the war. The Army of the Orient thus gains a certain humanitarian appeal, which is essential for a favourable image of the French army. This positive perception is useful to influence neutral countries in the conflict and is especially important in Greece, where the legitimacy of the Allied forces presence is continuously questioned.

At the same time, the request of the Greek government to include Greek representatives at archaeological sites is denied.[2]

General Sarrail transfers much of his energy from military to political endeavours, especially in the realm of propaganda. Initially the objective of his propaganda campaign is to discredit Berlin's claims that the occupation of Thessaloniki, a strategic city in a neutral country, is equivalent to Germany's attack on neutral Belgium. The second goal of French propaganda is to dispel the myth that the German army is invincible and to win over Greek society. To achieve that, it employs various means, including publishing the newspapers *Makedonia* and *Hellas*, which is directly financed by the command centre of the Army of the Orient, printing numerous pro-French brochures, organizing concerts, movie screenings and art exhibitions, and bribing five of the seven national newspapers (*Patri, Hestia, Nea Hellas, Ethnos* and *Astir*) (Montant 61-87; Varfis 101-109). The purpose is not only to promote all French achievements but also to support the agenda of the former Greek prime minister Eleftherios Venizelos, who openly supports the end of Greece's neutrality and its entry into the war on the side of the Allied forces. The Greek government itself also subsidizes some French publications, such as *Le Temps* (Lemonidou, 2013, 179-198).

Even before the arrival of the Army of the Orient forces in Thessaloniki, the Allied and the Central powers are already waging a propaganda war. On the German side, the effort is coordinated by Baron von Schenck, representative of the Krupp Company in Athens via the newspapers *Nea Alithia* and *Embros*. France responds with its own efforts led

[2] Concurrently in October 1917, 11 cases with archaeological artefacts are sent to the Louvre (Krempp; "Les sites préhistoriques de la région de Salonique", 11].

primarily by the French School in Athens, the "Radio" news agency led by Henri Turot, and the *La Progres* newspaper published in French. The French efforts are all coordinated by Henry de Roquefeuil, the French naval attaché in Athens (Pitsos, 273-285).

Once established in Thessaloniki, General Sarrail becomes an active participant in the media and propaganda war. The French foreign ministry and the specially created institution in charge of international propaganda, Maison de la Presse, begin to send daily telegrams to General Sarrail, the newspapers *Ethnos*, *Patris*, *Hestia,* and the Havas news agency. In addition, there is an attempt to offer a "line of credit" to the neutral newspaper *Embros* and the pro-German publication *Nea Imera*. When the news about a one million franc "credit" offer to these publications (to change their editorial policy) reaches the official Venizelos publication, *Patris*, its editorial board immediately goes to the French legation and threatens to stop supporting the Allied forces unless they offer them the same sum. Consequently, Venizelos is accused by his political rivals of receiving a bribe of two million francs (Pitsos, 280; Lemonidou, 2014, 281].

The rivalry between pro-German and pro-French publications exists not only at the national level, but also locally in Thessaloniki. Local publications include two Pro-German newspapers published in French, *L'Echo De Salonique* and *Nouveau Siecle*, the newspaper *La Liberte*, representing the Greek government, and the oldest daily publication in French, *L'Indépendant*, which supports the Allied forces. Another daily newspaper supporting the French, *L'Opinion*, is the most popular local trade and finance publication.

The French command in Thessaloniki also encourages and aids members of the Army of the Orient to create new publications. Besides materials that support the official propa-

ganda campaign and describe military operations, these publications include social and culture news. One example is *Le Camp Volant* (meaning the Flying Camp, named after reconnaissance and intelligence units sent behind enemy lines), which describes itself as a satirical and "couldn't-give-a-damn" (je-m'en-foutiste) journal. It is published for the officers stationed near Thessaloniki and its contents include editorials about the problems in Thessaloniki, such as the lack of art museums and the strange uniforms some officers wear when frequenting local coffee shops, news about cinema and art, and ads of Parisian companies, but they rarely explore any real military themes. One more newspaper with similar subject matter is *Paris-Balkans*, created and sponsored by the French consulate and primarily penned by French officers. Another official publication called *Le Clairon* is a weekly newspaper geared towards the French officers in Thessaloniki and is published by the French school in the city. It circulates military news but also social news, such as articles about the Thessaloniki Art Salon. It publishes poetry side by side with political analyses.

The most famous of these local publications is *Revue Franco-Macedonienne*, which publishes 12 editions between April 1916 and December 1917. Subsequently it changes its name to *Cahiers d'Orient* and publishes four more editions between July and October of 1918. The magazine is one the preeminent instruments of the Army of the Orient and includes articles about the military, political and economic activity of the French in the region, as well as analysis and communications about social life and culture. It is primarily authored by French officers. One such officer Ricciotto Canudo is a popular French-Italian writer, philosopher, and cinema critic, famous for coining the term "the seventh art", referring to cinema. He serves as a lieutenant and commander

of the Zouave regiment,[3] participates in the Dardanelle campaign and later fights on the Macedonian front, for which he receives highest military honours. Under the pen name Capitaine Oudanc, he publishes his memoirs of his first battle against the Bulgarian forces in the fall of 1915, as well as an analysis of the spread and influence of French language in Macedonia. In this analysis, he describes the impact of different religious and secular Francophone schools in the region, and quotes an English officer saying that thanks to this influence "in Thessaloniki, the French feel at home."

In March 1917, the *Revue Franco-Macedonienne* publishes an article called "The French culture in Macedonia" which rejects some of Canudo's arguments. It declares that the French expansion to the East cannot succeed without exporting French culture in addition to French language, and that the spread of language alone is no guarantee that French culture will be accepted as well. The anonymous author, using the initials E.T., believes the claim that in Thessaloniki "everyone speaks French" is erroneous and that only the elites speak French, while the general public knows a few hundred French words, important for everyday activities, and they know the same few hundred words in many other languages as well. The author warns that it is a mistake to assume that Thessaloniki is part of France and urges the formation of a centralized entity, which would select books to be sent to the French bookstores in town and select the people who would be involved in propagating French ideology in neutral countries like Greece. The author concludes that the publication of brochures, pamphlets and the bulletin of Alliance française have not been effective because they only talk about France and it is necessary to address

[3] The Zouaves are a class of light infantry regiments of the French army, composed mainly of colonial military units of French North Africa.

the problems of the Greek population and to create texts that also examine local history. This anonymous article once again emphasizes the colonizing role of France in the region, even though it offers an alternative approach for implementation. Similar themes and phrasing have been used earlier in Algeria, Indochina, Morocco and Senegal, as the French culture spread to the far corners of the world. As expected, the writings of French officers in Macedonia exhibit a similar feeling of superiority over the local population (Broucke).

It is intriguing that the desire of the military command to show the French superiority in the Thessaloniki press receives criticism not only from pro-German publications, but also from the trench newspapers written and read by the soldiers on the frontline. This new phenomenon of trench newspapers begins with the start of World War I, when in addition to official publications, the soldiers and officers themselves begin to express their own opinions in publications that spread mostly within the same combat units. They begin as a means to reconcile the vast disparity between the official stance coming through authorized channels and the reality soldiers see on the frontline. Some are published only once and some are published continuously throughout the war. Some are handwritten and others are published using a cyclostyle. Some are free, while others have a fixed price or a subscription. It is believed that the number of French trench newspapers is 470, and approximately 300 different editions are kept in the National Library in France. Twelve of them are published by different units of the Army of the Orient. In the east, as in the west, there is a deep chasm between the official publications and the trench newspapers. One of the most active trench newspapers that opposes the official press in Thessaloniki is called *D'un Piton à L'Autre* (From One Peak to Another), published by the seventh com-

pany of the 148th infantry regiment. It is published as a manuscript copied using a cyclostyle. In its May 5, 1917 issue, there is an article expressing outrage provoked by the official newspapers' description of the complains of the soldiers on the Macedonian front. Such complaints, according to the official press, include the lack of interesting movies in the theatres of Thessaloniki, the delay of public transportation, and the dust on their new uniforms. This anger is soon shifted to the local press in Thessaloniki as well, to publications like the *Revue Franco-Macedonienne*, because they mostly portray civilian life in Thessaloniki and do not allow soldiers to broadcast any news from the frontline. The trench newspapers conclude that military action is not a priority for local newspapers in Thessaloniki. They also resent the newspapers that publish news of sports games between the allied military branches in Thessaloniki, and see the participants in these games as soldiers shirking their military duty. They suggest that if these soldiers from Thessaloniki come to the frontline, they can play sports there. They mock the queries they have received from *L'Indépendant* publications about what holidays are celebrated and what sports are practiced in the trenches.

In 1917, the popular journalist Edouard Helsey begins publishing *L'Echo de France*. Other French war correspondents also write for the publication. The slogan of the publication is "We will tell the truth….We will not brainwash you. On the contrary, we will show you the real truth even if it makes you uncomfortable." The goal is to allow these journalists more independence from their employers in Paris, which often revise or alter their message. This newspaper only circulates among the soldiers of the Army of the Orient. Like trench newspapers, it often criticizes the biased information published via official channels.

The propaganda of the official French publications in Thessaloniki, which aims to win over Greek public opinion by highlighting the might of the French army and the superiority of French culture, achieves an ambiguous effect. On one hand, it undoubtedly succeeds among the many Francophiles in town. On the other hand, it paints an inaccurate picture of life in Thessaloniki among both French society and the soldiers on the Macedonian front. French society is surprised by the multitude of cultural news from a place that is supposedly in the middle of a military campaign. To a certain degree, this explains the unflattering image of the Army of the Orient in France, which can be summarized with the disdainful title given to it by Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau "the gardeners of Salonika."

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