EUROPEAN CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN THE BALKANS DURING THE INTERWAR PERIOD

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Abstract: This chapter considers European cultural diplomacy in the Balkans during the interwar period, with a focus on France, Britain and Germany, and some mentions of Italy too. It examines not only the strategies of the cultural diplomacies of these countries but also the very reasons why French, British and German cultural diplomats invested time, money and energy in this region of Europe. In addition to the comparative framework, this chapter takes a transnational approach to examine the competition, and the rarer forms of cooperation, between France, Britain and Germany.

Keywords: France, Britain, Germany, Balkans, Competition, Cultural Diplomacy

This chapter explores European cultural diplomacy in the Balkans during the interwar period, focusing on France, Britain, and Germany, with additional references to Italy. It examines not only the strategies employed by the cultural diplomats of these countries but also the underlying reasons why French, British, and German cultural diplomats invested time, money, and energy in this region of Europe. In addition to a comparative framework, this chapter adopts a transnational approach to examine the competition, as well as the less common forms of cooperation, among France, Britain, and Germany (Bayly et al.). Transnationalism is also a crucial concept for understanding the individuals who implemented policies and programs of cultural diplomacy: academics, diplomats, teachers, artists, intellectuals, and journalists. Many of them were on the move, crossing na-

tional boundaries and working to unite two or more nations while keeping others at a distance (Gienow-Hecht; Faucher; Dummer Scheel et al.).

The story of European cultural diplomacy unfolds against the dramatic backdrop of the aftermath of World War I, the loss of empire for Germany, shifting European alliances, and growing European tensions in the late 1930s (Steiner; Hobsbawm). The Balkan region was crisscrossed by Great Power aspirations, and France, Germany, and Italy competed fiercely for influence (Jelavich, 139–143; Srđan Mićić). This rivalry manifested in a quest for power and dominance. Particularly noteworthy was the Little Entente, an alliance formed in 1920 and 1921 by Czechoslovakia, Romania, and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (renamed Yugoslavia in 1929). France emerged as the primary supporter of the Little Entente, striving to strengthen ties among the involved nations while fostering a privileged relationship between its foreign policy and the diplomacy of these three nations (Fejtö). Consequently, the Treaty of Alliance and Friendship between France and Czechoslovakia was signed in 1924, followed by the Treaties of Friendship between France and Romania, and between France and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, which were signed in 1926 and 1927, respectively. French policymakers had a long history of believing in the role of alliances for the conduct of diplomacy, and their support for the Little Entente can be understood in this context. However, the friendship extended to certain Balkan nations can also be interpreted as part of a broader post-war French strategy to guarantee the security of the country and ward off Germany (Namont).

Tensions between France and Germany were exacerbated by delays in war reparation repayment and deliveries from Germany in the immediate aftermath of World War I.

In retaliation, French and Belgian armies, supported by the British, invaded the German region of the Ruhr from January 1923 to August 1925. This invasion provoked significant German resistance, which ranged from minor acts of civil disobedience to more serious acts of sabotage (Connolly; Jeanneson). This *Ruhrkampf* was called off by the new German Chancellor, Gustav Stresemann, who led a coalition from his own centre-right German People's Party to the Social Democratic Party. However, significant damage had already been inflicted on the French economy; particularly the franc had weakened. In the early 1920s, the prevailing view held by Britain and the United States was that the economic recovery of Europe could only be achieved through the reintegration of Germany into the world economy (Fischer, 220–257). Franco-German rapprochement was officialised by the Locarno Treaties signed on 1 December 1925, opening a new phase of peaceful and friendly cooperation between France, Britain, and Germany. Issues between Germany and France over borders improved, as did economic relations (Wolfgang). It was also in the aftermath of the Locarno Treaties that Franco-German cultural, scientific, and intellectual relations resumed in earnest (Bock). Nonetheless, competition between France and Germany continued in the Balkans throughout the interwar period.

Britain initially adopted a much more laissez-faire approach to the Balkans and did not base its foreign policy on alliances, as France was doing. Premier Austen Chamberlain believed that this was the only way to achieve peace in the region. In a circular dispatched to Vienna, Budapest, Prague, Bucharest, Belgrade and Rome in October 1925, he noted, "We will give any help that we can, but salvation comes from within. There can be no real peace but by consent. If the great powers impose peace, peace remains an outer gar-

ment, which can be thrown off at any moment. The Gov[ernmen]ts directly concerned must *will* peace. When they do, there will be real peace" (Chamberlin quoted in Finney, 323).

In the wake of the Locarno Treaty, late in 1925 and 1926, Britain strengthened its relationship with Yugoslavia and attempted to cooperate with France and Italy to achieve a "Balkan Locarno". However, complications with France, as well as issues in the Greco-Yugoslav and Yugoslav-Bulgarian relationships, meant that this ambition was quickly set aside (Finney).

The period studied in this chapter is also characterised by a European understanding of Balkans through views of "Balkanism" and Orientalism. The Western European gaze on the region considered it broadly "hopelessly and intrinsically confused and impenetrable" (Fleming, 1219) as well as "backward" (Todorova, 3). As Maria Todorova puts it, "the Balkans have served as a repository of negative characteristics against which a positive and self-congratulatory image of the "European" and the "West" has been constructed" (Todorova, 188). Certainly, this distinct discourse of Balkanism has been nuanced and historians have showed that a derogatory vision of the Balkans was not entirely dominant. For example, British policymakers oscillated between derogatory tropes depicting the Balkans as a less civilized region and admiration for certain cultural elements of some of these countries. In particular, Philhellenism and the esteem for what the British diplomat Harold Nicolson described as "high grade of culture prevalent in Romania" were characteristic of the perceptions of the Balkans among the British upper classes (Finney, 333).

The cultural turn in international history has prompted historians of international relations to examine how the identities, cultural and social affinities of policy makers (in

other terms how they saw the world) influenced foreign policy. In the case of European understandings of Balkans, scholars are still debating what the political impact of Balkanism might have been (Fleming; Vezovnik and Šarić). In comparing and contrasting the foreign cultural policies of Britain, Germany, and France, this chapter will also assess the extent to which policymakers from these countries subscribed to patronizing and infantilizing views of the Balkans, and how these perspectives may have shaped their cultural diplomacy. The chapter's overall argument is that negative perceptions of the Balkans rarely surfaced in the language diplomats used to discuss the region; quite the contrary, they took their cultural initiatives and the targeted public very seriously. This is evident in the cultural offerings they organized, as well as in their efforts to connect students from the Balkans with their own national institutions of culture and education. The contempt that other European cultural diplomats may have displayed towards audiences in imperial regions or specific European working-class communities did not extend to their attitudes towards Balkan populations. This was partly a matter of class: French, German and British cultural diplomacy in the Balkans was clearly aimed at Southeast European elites who were respected by European civil servants. Additionally, many of the cultural diplomacy programs initiated by Britain, France, and Germany originated from the central administration of their ministries of foreign affairs. Consequently, audiences in the Balkans were, in part, recipients of European cultural diplomacy that was homogenized rather than tailored to the region. To explore this argument, the chapter examines three distinct periods. It begins by investigating the initial projects of cultural diplomacy in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Next, it analyses how French and Ger-

man policymakers linked cultural affinities to commercial and political success and how this outlook motivated them to establish solid cultural networks in the Balkans during the 1920s and 1930s. Finally, it concludes with an examination of the growth of British soft power in the context of European tensions in the 1930s.

1. Initial Projects

The prevalence of French language and culture in the Balkans at the end of World War I built upon decades of efforts in these areas. As elsewhere in the world, the growth of international missionary networks in the mid and late nineteenth century consolidated the presence of the French language (Burrows; Conklin). As part of their mission to "civilise" French religious catholic and Jewish groups opened religious schools where classes were largely taught in French. For example, the Alliance Universelle Israelite (*Universal Alliance Israelite*) opened 17 schools in Bulgaria in the last three decades of the nineteenth century (Cercle de Généalogie Juive). These schools were predominantly aimed at providing a religious education to the local communities, including the sons and daughters of European migrants. Particularly, in some very cosmopolitan cities in the Balkans, the children of Spanish or Italian migrants often attended schools ran by French catholic congregations. Some schools were also created by local migrants. This was the case in Serbia where, in 1913, a French school opened thanks to the efforts of local French migrant families who ran and worked for a French mining company established in the largest mining centre of the country. Most of the children were French but mine supervisors, many of who were Italians, were also keen on the school, which followed the French curriculum

and dedicated three hours per week to Serbian language and culture.[1] French catholic schools in Bulgaria also received the pedagogical support of the leading secular organization of French cultural diplomacy, the Alliance française, created in 1883, so the secular/religious divide was very porous, to say the least (Tanchev).

English language was far less central to the work of British and American protestant networks which mostly relied on texts translated in the local language. The schools they opened rarely put English at the fore and were comparatively smaller in numbers than French schools (Çeku). The influence of English in the region was very limited, to say the least. Let's take the example of Romania, which was been well-researched. In this country, French largely dominated among the elite: at its foundation in 1864, the University of Bucharest, which could only provide studies in one modern language, taught French. In the 1870s, Italian was also introduced, while Slavic languages came in the next decade. The first years of the twentieth century saw the inauguration of a German Studies Department, followed by Spanish and Russian in 1930 and 1934 respectively. It was not until 1936 that the first English department was established (Irimia).

The influence of Germany before the war was chiefly visible in the attractivity of its higher education institutions among foreign students. In a piece published in 1916, the commentator Karl Dieterich noted that "before the outbreak of the World War, around 1,400 students from the Balkan states were enrolled at the major universities in German-Austria and Germany, a number that has only been surpassed

[1] Archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères (thereafter AMEA), Service des Œuvres françaises a l'Etranger (thereafter SOFE) 155, Note sur l'ouverture d'une école française en Serbie, 5 January 1913.

by Russia" (Dieterich, 265). To him these students were under Germany's "spiritual spell" and it was the duty of German politicians to "do everything in our power to draw them closer to us politically and economically" via the creation of a "German-Turkish, a German-Greek, a German-Bulgarian society". These binational societies would serve to approach local population and help create "a large cultural and economic community that encompasses the entire Balkans" in order to strengthen the Triple Alliance (*Ibid.*, 268).

France too was investing in its academic relations with the Balkans countries. In 1912, the National Office for French Universities Abroad, which had been created two years before (Tronchet), noted that it was focusing its efforts on two specific regions: the Balkans and Scandinavia. In the former, the Office had just agreed with Serbia it would send two or three teachers to the University of Belgrade every year. The same projects were in development with the universities of Bucharest and Sofia. The Office had also obtained from the Serbian government the opening of two positions in both a secondary school for girls and for boys that would be kept for French teacher holder of the prestigious aggregation teaching qualification with the aim for them to constitute a French department.[2]

In spite of the Treaty of Versailles (1919) that concluded World War I, the competition between France and Germany remained fierce in the early 1920s. Both countries sought to maintain academic and educational relations in the Balkans, sending professors and welcoming students.[3] Germany strengthened its leading position in attracting

[2] Archives Nationales, France (thereafter AN), Office national des universités et écoles françaises (ONUEF), General Assembly 14 December 1912, report presented by M. Coulet.

[3] AMAE, SOFE 139, 14 February 1919, Ministry of Public Instruction to the War Minister.

foreign students. The directors of the National Office for French Universities Abroad were particularly concerned that over 3,000 Bulgarian students were enrolled in German universities during the 1922-1923 academic year, while only 61 Bulgarians were studying in France.[4]

Resuming relations with countries such as Bulgaria, which had been part of the Triple Alliance, was a delicate matter for French diplomats. However, a few years after the end of World War I, the French civil servants responsible for academic and cultural foreign relations rallied around the official position of the French government, advocating to "let bygones be bygones regarding certain facts that former enemies were clearly expressing regrets over". This approach did little to conceal the clear ambition to contain the spread of German influence in Bulgaria, where, as one civil servant noted, the only French bookshop in Sofia was owned by a German.[5] The efforts to resume cultural relations with Bulgaria led to the opening of the French Institute in Sofia, which drew on the important networks of French catholic schools in Bulgaria to develop its work throughout the country (Velichkova-Borin). French Institutes were figureheads of French cultural diplomacy and still are. It is no wonder that, given the Little Entente, the early 1920s witnessed the creations of institutes in Zagreb (1921) and Romania (1924). It is also around this time, in 1923 that Viorel Tilea, a fervent champion of the British and later Romanian minister to London (1939–40) set up an Anglo-Rumanian society in Cluj, and four years later a similar society was established in Bucharest (Deletant).

[4] AN, ONUEF, General Assembly, 13 February 1923.
[5] *Ibid*.

2. Improving cultural diplomacy: Commercial and political motivation

As noted above in the case of the German-owned French library in Sofia, culture and commerce were closely linked. Dragos Jipas has studied well the cultural and educational competition that grew in Romania between France, Germany and Italy in the 1930s (Jipas). In the late 1920s already, the influential Franz Thierfelder, secretary-general of the Deutsche Akademie (the ancestor of the Goethe Institute) crafted a convincing argument to explain why his Ministry of Foreign Affairs should intensify its language policy. The crux of it came to economic and political influence. The making of Thierfelder's analysis about German soft power was highly transnational: it was based on a series of trips he had undertaken through Yugoslavia, Greece, Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary in the summer of 1929 and which had been secretly financed by the German Minister of Foreign Affairs.[6] It was also based on his observation of France's practices in the domain of international cultural relations, and in particular his reading of *Die französische Kulturpropaganda* (*The French cultural propaganda)*. Published in 1927 by Karl Remme and the lawyer Margarete Esch, this study had already alerted public opinion and civil servants about Germany's lack of a solid cultural and linguistic policy targeting Southeastern Europeans. In the book the authors showed that Germany had no apparatus that compared with French private and public propaganda systems and it ought to act rapidly to avoid losing the support of a significant audience since linguistic loyalty also offered certainty as to economic loyalty, they believed (Remme and Esch).

[6] Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts R63806, 'Die Lage der deutschen Sprache auf dem Balkan: Ergebnisse einer Studienreise' (report by Thierfelder, summer 1929), cited in Michels.

The study conducted by Thierfelder for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1929 emphasized France's pioneering role in "employing its language with the aim to develop its political power." It was only due to the dominant position of the French language globally that "France can call itself the consciousness of the world and the pioneer of humanity" without encountering any opposition. Thierfelder believed this situation resulted from extensive efforts to achieve this leadership, rather than stemming from the intrinsic superiority of the French language, as the French wished the world to believe. Meanwhile, German was gaining popularity among European societies, particularly in countries along the shores of the Baltic Sea, as well as in Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey, and Hungary. However, Thierfelder expressed concern that English and French were becoming more prevalent in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia. He was convinced that an increased knowledge of German worldwide could bolster German power and commerce.

As a result, he set out to cast the German Academy as the institution that could lead such policy. In 1930, the Academy received formal support from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which recognized that a linguistic policy was central to Germany's cultural diplomacy. The German Academy's new language-focused strategy revolved around two key elements: the establishment of language schools abroad, the first of which opened in Yugoslavia and Sofia in 1931. Thierfelder noted that while German was widely spoken in these regions, it was endangered by the rising influence of French. By 1934, there were 20 such schools, including 12 in the Balkans. Additionally, the Academy developed teaching materials for German as a foreign language, which were utilized within the Academy's new department that opened in 1932: the Goethe Institute (Michels).

Commercial competition with other European nations also influenced French cultural strategies in the region. With the rise of Italian economic and social influence in Albania during the 1930s, a journalist in *Le Petit Journal* believed that France needed to defend its "economic and moral interests." The derogatory perspective on the Balkans shaped much of this discourse. Addressing this issue he noted, for example, that Albania "owed" its new educational system to France, adding that "French teachers have educated the nation." These included the staff of the French high school in Korçë, which was then attended by two nephews of the King.[7]

3. European tensions in the late 1930 and the growth of British soft power in the Balkans

European tensions in the mid- and late 1930s meant that cultural propaganda grew higher on the agenda of European nations, in particular in Britain which had been lagging behind France and Germany as far as its cultural diplomacy apparatus was concerned. Historians have showed that British diplomats, who had been so reluctant to sponsor an office in charge of international cultural relations on the model of France and Germany, finally relented as they watched with concern the growth of German and Italian propaganda in the Mediterranean (Donaldson). In 1934, the British Council opened and initially supported existing initiatives, including in the Balkans, contributing to the expansion and institutionalization of British cultural diplomacy. In a note circulated to diplomats in post overseas in late 1935 the foreign secretary, Sir Samuel Hoare, stressed the significance of Yugoslavia, Romania, and Bulgaria in the fight against German cultural propaganda. He explained to British diplomats:

[7] AN 312 AP 10**,** *Petit Journal*, 8 April 1939.

"the danger of German cultural and commercial penetration, which may be expected to increase as the power and wealth of Germany revive, makes it particularly desirable for British cultural propaganda to secure as firm a hold as possible on the minds and interests of the population, before the counter attraction becomes too strong" (Hoare cited in Atherton).

This emphasis on the Balkans materialized in several ways. In this region, the British Council sponsored lecture series as a way to respond to German rising influence but the Council lacked firm basis comparable to French Institutes (Deletant). In line with the rapprochement between the French and British liberal democracies, cooperation among cultural institutions belonging to these two countries became more frequent. In October 1937, a School for English opened in Bucharest with the support of the British Council. In 1938 it moved to a larger building, which it rented with a French school and where a thousand pupils were taught (Deletant). According to Sir Reginald Hoare, the British Minister to Romania, maintaining the school open was necessary for two reasons relating to prestige and anti-British propaganda: "We are all agreed here that so long as there is a really eager desire to acquire a knowledge of English, by far the most effective propaganda, taking the long view, is to give all possible encouragement to would-be students; conversely there could be no more effective anti-British propaganda than the knowledge, which would undoubtedly be widespread, that the Anglo-Romanian School had had to close down, or at any rate restrict its activities, through the lack of a few hundred pounds." (Deletant, p. 7).

His reasoning found support among the British Council, which transformed the school into a British Institute opened in October 1938 where it funded the salaries of four teachers, and two teachers in provincial universities. By contrast, French authorities were funding 15 university posts in

French in Romania and the Italian government was funding ten university posts. Italy was also brandished as a competitor by British Council authorities when they reviewed the building of the British Institute in Bucharest: in the months before King Carol's abdication in September 1940, the British Council had been working strenuously with Romanian authorities to find suitable land for the building, largely motivated to build something as impressive as the Italian institute in the centre of the capital city (Deletant).

Conclusion

France, Germany and Britain had diverging attitudes to each of the different nation in the Balkans owing to different system of alliances. While many Germans regarded the Balkans as a unit, this was less so the case among Britons and the French. It is true that some derogatory perceptions about the Balkans filtered in the policies of cultural diplomacy targeting the region, but much of the policymaking also connected to the general lines of cultural diplomacy sketched out by the central administrations in foreign offices and institutions in charge of cultural diplomacy. In other words, the reliance on higher education institutions, the funding of teaching posts to promote French, English or German, or the importance of books were all elements that mattered in European cultural diplomacy in other parts of the world as well as in the Balkans. Therefore, in some ways, Wester European cultural diplomacy in the Balkans was not specific to the Balkans. Finally, this chapter also adds nuance to studies on Balkanism and to the question of how this attitude may have shaped policymaking. As far as cultural diplomacy is concerned it was the competition among Western powers that shaped policymaking much more than diplomats' perception of the Balkans and its peoples.

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