FRENCH ARCHITECTURAL CHOICES AS CULTURAL DIPLOMATIC TOOL IN THE BALKANS BETWEEN THE TWO WORLD WARS

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Abstract: Diplomacy needs convenient and dignified monuments. On this point, France struggled to find a clear strategy, often renting existing buildings that were not designed for diplomatic purposes. The two cases of French representations in Yugoslavia and Bulgaria are particularly emblematic. In Belgrade, France was able to evolve diplomatically and culturally, whereas in Sofia, outdated traditions of diplomatic pomp remained strong. This sharp contrast between the two approaches reflects the hesitations of the Paris Foreign Ministry regarding the degree to which it should accept changing times. It reveals the political tensions of the interwar period, in which old diplomatic practices and new models clashed. Architecture became part of this struggle, as French cultural diplomacy sought to use it to enhance its international image. While tradition prevailed in Sofia and modernity emerged, at least in part, in Belgrade, the erratic image this projected demonstrated that France had yet to establish a consistent cultural diplomacy in the Balkans.

Keywords: Architecture, French Cultural Diplomacy, Balkans

The imperative of national representation abroad meant that diplomacy required buildings that were both functional and dignified. Initially, France did not have a clear strategy in this regard, often renting or buying existing buildings that were not purpose-built. However, around 1900, increasing administrative demands revealed the limitations of this approach. This led to projects such as the construction of the French embassy in Vienna, a building that blended classical architecture with elements of Art Nouveau. This combination

of tradition and modernity was highly contested at the time. After World War I, the subject became even more sensitive, particularly in countries that had re-emerged or been re-established, such as Poland, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. As a result, the Paris Ministry of Foreign Affairs became more careful in selecting legations or embassies, sometimes planning purpose-built monuments as clear symbols of France's strength – economically, politically and culturally.

However, it was never an easy path due to the complexities of the Third Republic, existing (1870-1940). On one hand, during this period France achieved scientific and artistic heights, notably with Louis Pasteur's anti-rabies vaccine and Emile Zola's social novels. On the other hand, French colonial policy allowed for greater territorial expansion. However, it was originally a fall back solution, which attempted to mask the humiliating defeat against Germany in 1870. Furthermore, the parliamentary regime led to recurring ministerial instability, often causing the fall of governments, which sometimes lasted very briefly. Under these conditions, French diplomacy struggled to maintain coherence. The decision to rent, buy, or build quality diplomatic facilities thus depended on external political circumstances, which could shift abruptly. This uncertainty partly explains the prudence of Parisian decision-makers, who tended to favour established traditions and to avoid bold architectural choices.

The rather asymmetrical diplomatic relations with Balkan countries must also be taken into account. Mutual respect between France and Yugoslavia fostered a more favourable relationship. On the contrary, Bulgaria suffered a certain disfavour, which had an impact on intentions, in regard to both political and cultural representation. Consequently, how did French diplomacy proceed in Belgrade and Sofia? The im-

age that France sought to project in these two capitals was shaped by both the local context and international perceptions.

Belgrade: Difficult beginnings of cultural diplomacy through architecture

Despite close links between France and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (official name from 1929 to 1941), Paris hesitated for years regarding the Belgrade legation.[1] Indeed, the redrawing of maps and influences during the interwar period required the expansion of diplomatic facilities, especially in new countries where French influence could potentially be extended. In Yugoslavia, the construction of a French legation followed a rather tortuous path during the 1920s, when two capable and recognized architects ultimately withdrew – frustrated by unusual aesthetic demands and a persistent lack of budget.

Actually, the plenipotentiary in Belgrade had demanded from them an almost literal copy of an 18th-century Parisian mansion, immediately poisoning relations between the client and these builders who were unwilling to compromise their reputation by producing such an absurd monument. Following these setbacks, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs became aware of the negative impact of these procrastinations: "We are the last, in a country where our political importance is the first" (*Diplomatic Archives, La Courneuve*, accounting records, J9 1317, correspondences of 1928-1929, unpaginated). Diplomats here argued that other countries – for instance England and Germany – already had diplomatic

[1] The French diplomatic representation in Belgrade did not obtain embassy status until 1941 – when France was occupied by the Nazis, and Yugoslavia had also fallen under Hitler's orbit.

buildings that reflected their significant positions. However, the vote for sufficient funding in 1928 revived the aesthetic quarrel, with King Alexander I expressing his preference for a legation in "an essentially French style and in keeping with the most elegant period of French architecture." (*Ibid)* At the Quai d'Orsay, Aristide Briand relayed the king's request to the supervisory authority for Civil Buildings and National Palaces in these terms: "The plans must receive your high approval, because it is essential that the new construction honour French art and taste." (*Ibid)*

These comments showed that the aesthetic aspect was considered important to both the host country – the monarch being very Francophile – and to French diplomacy, which remained visibly attached to a traditional vision of its own culture. This debate also had the disadvantage of increasing exchanges between the Ministry of Fine Arts – responsible for French architectural choices – and that of Foreign Affairs, the client. This forced the newly selected architect into an unstable negotiation between two administrations that were supposed to be allies but were, in reality, often jealous of their respective prerogatives. Finally, the project was entrusted to Roger Expert (1882-1955) – *Second Grand Prix de Rome* in 1912 – who was then directing his research towards an alliance between classical compositions and formal modernization.[2] Clearly, France was not yet ready to be represented diplomatically by the most modern architecture of its time. However, during the 1925 Paris exhibition, Robert Mal-

[2] In France, architects were generally trained at the School of Fine Arts (*École des Beaux-Arts*) in Paris. The School offered a series of exams, the most prestigious of which, the Grand Prix de Rome, allowed the winner to spend five years in Rome, living in the Villa Medici at the State expense. In addition to this additional period of cultural apprenticeship, upon their return, the Grand Prix de Rome winners automatically joined the corps of architects of the Civil Buildings and National Palaces. This priority ensured their official status and often important commissions.

let-Stevens (1886-1945) had supervised the interior design of the Tourism Pavilion, known as a "French embassy", in a distinctly Art Deco style (Klein, 84). This alliance between traditional influences and aesthetic modernization opened doors to a more evolving international representation, a development confirmed by Expert's design of the embassy in Belgrade.

This culture of compromise was, in principle, appropriate for the diplomatic milieu, certainly more so than the radical architectural responses of the Franco-Swiss Le Corbusier (1887-1965). The latter was then seen, above all, as a provocateur who was vilified during the controversial 1926 competition for the Palace of the League of Nations. The academic Henri Nénot (1853-1934) – *Grand Prix de Rome* in 1877 and well known for his work on Sorbonne University in Paris – contemptuously denounced modern architecture as anti-French. Several newspapers with a nationalist position did not hesitate to see Le Corbusier as a Trojan horse of Bolshevism, given that he was then erecting the *Centrosoyouz* building in Moscow, the headquarters of the USSR trade unions. Moreover, Nénot later contributed to the final project of the Palace of the League of Nations with Camille Lefèvre (1876-1946), winner of the *Grand Prix de Rome* 1905, Swiss architect Julien Flegenheimer (1880-1938), Hungarian modernist Jozef Vago (1877-1947), and Italian architect Carlo Broggi (1881-1968). With its rather heavy neo-classical style, vaguely tinged with Art Deco, this international edifice demonstrated France's difficulty in renovating its architectural self-image and adapting to the evolving modern, global landscape.

However, a change in the diplomatic team in Belgrade spared Expert the difficulties experienced by his colleagues, and he took advantage of the administrative delays to refine

his plans (*Pictures 1 & 2*). While he took into account the desire to salute the architectural heritage of French classicism – particularly in terms of the distribution of volumes and rooms – he avoided creating a boring replica. Instead, he placed diamond-shaped staggered lounges at the corners of the building, giving an almost Baroque dynamism to the whole structure. Its central rotunda brilliantly continued this visual animation, paying tacit homage to the Château de Vaux-le-Vicomte – built in in 1658 by Louis Le Vau (1612-1670), considered essential in the development of the French classical style – while integrating more abstract forms in line with the Art Deco style then in vogue.

This abstraction of the walls was necessary due to economic constraints, and allowed the architect to find an imaginative spatial organization for the embassy, located on a steeply sloping site. The building's strong base with corner bossages gave it a rather military appearance (*Picture 3*) – another salute to French tradition, echoing the citadels designed by the engineer Vauban (1633-1707) under Louis XIV's reign. This robust lower level effectively housed the administrative spaces, thus serving as a base for the upper floors where the reception rooms and diplomatic apartments enjoyed magnificent views of the Danube (*Picture 4*).

On the façades, the decorative elements remained sober, the rotunda being crowned by a statuary group signed by Carlo Sarrabezolles (1888-1971), embodying the republican motto of "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity" in three elegant female figures. This contribution to finely modernized classicism gave the French embassy a distinguished presence in the capital of the Yugoslav Kingdom.

The interior decorations followed the same logic, exalting both France's historical legacy and its contemporary republican present. Without ideological exclusivity, the architect –

who was responsible for the iconographic choices, as diplomatic correspondence confirms – cited Vercingetorix for the Gallic origins, Joan of Arc as a medieval heroine (recently canonized), and Louis XIV as a brilliant monarch, all under the aegis of *Marianne* girded with the laurel of peace and the golden wheat of prosperity. This majestic republican allegory crowned an iconographic program that skilfully combined the various national sensibilities.[3]

However, this monument perhaps came too late, as the work was being completed just as the monarch Alexander I was giving his reign a distinctly authoritarian character. His policies made him a prime target for nationalists – Croatians, Macedonians, and Bulgarians – who finally succeeded in assassinating him in Marseille during his state visit to France. During the attack, Louis Barthou, French Minister of Foreign Affairs, also died, hit by a bullet fired by a panicked police officer. His successor, the shifty Pierre Laval, did not share Barthou's firm objective of countering Nazi Germany through a series of diplomatic agreements with several Balkan countries and even with the USSR. On the contrary, Laval's first meeting as the head of French diplomacy with Mussolini in 1935 had disastrous consequences. Apparently, the dictator of fascist Italy interpreted Laval's captious words as a green light for his conquest of Ethiopia. French diplomatic efforts in Belgrade thus came to a halt over a new political assassination, the long-term consequences of which emboldened totalitarianism in its international ambitions, including the Balkan countries as a zone of influence to be controlled.

With this legation in Yugoslavia, French cultural diplomacy had a complementary instrument – perhaps a useful tool

[3] I explain more about this embassy in my book, *French Embassies of the 20th Century*. Éditions du patrimoine, 2020, pp. 38-54.

of influence, but one of insufficient weight in front of more pressing geopolitical threats. Admittedly, the Quai d'Orsay no longer employed old *Grand Prix de Rome* winners from Nénot's generation, but – even with progressive figures like Expert – French diplomacy remained undeniably attached to traditional aesthetics, still seen as enduring symbols of national pride. This continuity would guide diplomatic choices even more strongly in neighbouring Bulgaria.

Sofia: The cultural ambiguities of French diplomatic action

As a former ally of Germany during World War I, Bulgaria was not well regarded by Paris during the 1920s and 1930s: No French government was willing to spend money to build a legation or an embassy in Sofia.

Other European countries were already diplomatically better equipped in the city. Austria initiated diplomatic architectural activity in Bulgaria as early as 1882. That year, the Austrian diplomat appointed to the new Bulgarian state had his compatriot, Peter Paul Brang (1852–1925), build a luxurious villa at his own expense on land offered by the monarch, close to the royal palace. This residence was remodelled in 1908 by another Austrian builder, Ludwig Richter (1855-1925), who gave it the current neo-Baroque Germanic façade. On the adjoining land, the Italian embassy is a Venetian Renaissance-style work done in 1905 by Enrico Bovio (1868-1943), who was also involved in the Italian legation in China (Renard). Strangely enough, in 1925, Austria and Italy exchanged their respective buildings in Sofia.

England was the third country to establish a diplomatically dignified presence in Bulgaria. London managed to negotiate the acquisition of a substantial plot of land in 1910 in

a rapidly developing residential area north of the city centre. The following year, the plans of George Reavell (1866-1943), an architect attached to the Office of Works, were accepted and implemented (Bertram). The British Legation has the appearance of a beautiful suburban villa, in a sober Georgian neoclassical style. In this, it broke with the Baroque exuberance of the Edwardian period, heralding the dignified restraint of King George V's reign. At the same time, one of Great Britain's major architects, Edwin Lutyens (1869-1944), then began to move away from his initial Arts & Crafts approach, now designing large rural classical-Baroque residences, such as Heathcote in 1906. Later, Lutyens would also serve British diplomacy, designing the majestic British Embassy in Washington in 1928, still with classical references, but more pomp. In short, the legation built by Reavell in Sofia confirmed a fairly traditional vision of England and of the diplomatic profession in general. The same architect also built a very similar legation in Belgrade in 1925. This conventional-looking building signalled how many European countries were struggling to integrate the political and cultural upheavals that immediately followed World War I. While France managed to take a step forward in Belgrade, French representation in Sofia appeared to be lagging behind both diplomatically and architecturally.

The situation in Bulgaria would nevertheless have merited a real analysis of the forces at play. Since the reformation of the country, Sofia had developed by combining two leading architectural influences: those of Germanic circles, with Austrian builders such as Viktor Rumpelmayer (1830-1885) and Friedrich Grünanger (1856-1929), and that of the French sphere. Indeed, in the absence of a local training center for architecture, Bulgarian builders trained either in German-speaking institutions, or in those seen as very pres-

tigious in France.[4] This was particularly the case for Nikola Lazarov (1870-1942), who received a royal scholarship to study at the *École Spéciale d'Architecture* in Paris. After graduating in 1893, Lazarov worked several years for the Bulgarian monarchy, preparing plans for a new royal palace in 1914, meanwhile submitting a design to the competition for the Sofia Palace of Justice (*Pictures 5 & 6*). His drawings remained very marked by the French eclecticism of the end of the 19th century. Likewise, the project by Edmond Thoumy (1867-1924) for the same Palace of Justice illustrated how some French architects whose careers had not been particularly successful yet, viewed Sofia as a potential territory for large commissions (*Picture 7*). This was a strong trend, as the excessive number of architects in France forced many of them to seek work opportunities in Central Europe or even Latin America. In nearby Romania, the achievements of Paul Gottereau (1843-1924), who notably remodelled the Royal Palace and built the grandiose headquarters of the CEC Bank, and Ernest Doneaud (1879-1959), architect of the National Military Circle, attested to the rich opportunities in Balkan countries undergoing full development. In return, many Romanians came to train at the *École des Beaux-Arts*, such as Duiliu Marcu (1885-1966), who then contributed to the emergence of modernity in Bucharest. This necessity contributed indirectly to the diffusion of French culture: the pangs of unemployment in France succeeded in spreading the skills of French specialists throughout the world – much more so than any public policy lacking either voluntarism or competence.

Moreover, this Bulgarian duality between German and French influence naturally weighed on French authori-

[4] The Sofia Higher Technical School opened only in 1942, and became a Polytechnic center of teaching in 1945, with Belkovski as rector.

ties when it came to representation in Sofia. The Alliance française opened its first branch in Bulgaria in 1904, but it was not until July 14 (Bastille Day), 1924 that work finally began on a suitable headquarters. The chosen architect, Stancho Belkovski (1891-1962), perfectly illustrated the tensions of the Bulgarian creative scene – but also the indirect effect of a legal affair, which irreparably tarnished the image of French builders in Bulgaria.

Indeed, the architect Jean Bréasson (1848-1927), primarily known for designing several town halls in the Parisian suburbs, won a competition in 1906 to build a principal structure for Sofia's St Kliment Ohridski University. The realization of these grandiose plans immediately posed budgetary difficulties, especially since the university had strained relations with the authorities. Unsurprisingly, construction was halted at the start of World War I. With Bulgaria suffering the economic repercussions of its defeat in 1918, building work did not resume until 1920 – a decision that had serious consequences. Bréasson's plans were used by his Bulgarian colleague Yordan Milanov (1867-1932), who had trained in Vienna, as a basis for a simplified version of the monument. Milanov retained the main features of Bréasson's work, including the curved central pavilion with its engaged Ionic columns inspired by the porch of the Chantilly castle stables (built by Jean Aubert in 1719). In addition, Milanov retained the side pavilions, which featured pediments with interrupted architraves, derived from those of the Petit Palais made by Charles Girault (1851-1932), winner of the 1880 *Grand Prix de Rome*, for the 1900 Paris World's Fair (*Picture 8*). However, clearly angered by his ouster and the modification of his project, Bréasson filed a lawsuit for copyright infringement. Not only did the Parisian judges agree with him, but they also ordered Milanov to pay 130 million gold francs in damages.

Although legally justified, Bréasson's financial demands gave French architects a disastrous reputation in Bulgaria.

Although Francophiles, the Bulgarian investors who financed the construction of the Alliance française must have been sensitive to this issue. The painful university lawsuit and its long-delayed completion may have influenced the decision not to select a French architect, or even appoint a Bulgarian one with French training. With a tight budget, entrusting the project directly to a local professional seemed a more prudent choice, as it ensured better oversight of construction.

Belkovsky did not really seek to give a French look to his building, which was supposed to serve as a linguistic and cultural calling card for France. On the contrary, he recalled his recent German training – he graduated in 1920 in Berlin – and employed a refined neoclassical style reminiscent of renowned German architects such as Peter Behrens (1868-1940) and Heinrich Tessenow (1876-1950). Although the formula of the triple entrance surmounted by bays – surrounded by bare vertical walls, topped by an entablature with a slightly projecting cornice, crowned by an attic with a coat of arms – remained perfectly classical, the elongation of ornamental elements and the construction in painted plaster were more characteristic of Germanic design (*Pictures 9 & 10*). Apart from the name of the Alliance inscribed on the façade, nothing specifically indicated the French character of the place. The aesthetic and constructive choices were rather linked to the habits of Central Europe, often made by Germans. In this regard, Germany may have lost the war, but its ascendancy remained crucial in the 1920s. Conversely, France had triumphed militarily, but had not been able to win the peace, not only economically but also in the hearts of many European people. The inauguration of the building,

also on Bastille Day, July 14, 1925, could not symbolically erase the root of the problem: the place had been designed in a spirit marked by the culture of the enemy across the Rhine. Indeed, this perhaps minor point nonetheless constituted a relative embarrassment for French diplomacy – which called for a more culturally sensitive response.

The choice of the location to house the diplomatic services and the ambassador was therefore of particular importance. Despite this, the usual solution of renting/buying existing buildings had been the norm. However, Ambassador Jacques Labouret did make a fortunate decision when, in 1936, he bought a former mansion on Oborishte Street. This property became the ambassador's *Résidence*, which is a small palace similar to French neoclassical *hôtels particuliers* – much like the Camondo's Paris mansion, finished in 1914 under the direction of René Sergent (1865-1927), a specialist of fashionable aristocratic manors.

Originally, this residence had been designed for Angel Kouyoumdjisky, then president of the Franco-Bulgarian Bank (Mangachev). A wealthy man, Kouyoumdjisky had studied in Paris at the Sorbonne and could have easily secured the services of Nikola Lazarov, whose Francophile ties he shared. However, Kouyoumdjisky made a paradoxical decision. Apparently, he preferred to give an opportunity to two graduates of his generation, Todor Zlatev (1885-1977) and Dimitar Koev, both graduated from the Munich *Technische Schule* circa 1910-1911.[5] There they learned from their professor, Theodor Fischer (1862-1938), how to mix stylistic traditions with technical modernity. Did the client want to secure novice architects more flexible to

[5] Koev did not have as successful a career as his comrade. He seems to have settled later in Varna, where in 1928 he signed a similar villa: https://www.varnaheritage.com/en/architects/arh-dimitr-koev

his wishes? Because he demanded from them a residence whose style was now outdated in the 1920s.

The corner bossages, the arched window frames on the ground floor, in Rococo style, the mansard roof – these elements clearly show a French influence, bringing back to life references to the *Ancien régime* monuments from the reigns of Louis XIV and Louis XV (*Pictures 11 & 12*). In this, Zlatev and Koev continued stylistic devices *à la française* that Lazarov had utilized in Bulgaria before World War I. However, the interior layout differs greatly from French private mansions, which generally prefer adjoining lounges or a U-shaped plan. Its vast central hall, around which the reception rooms are grouped, is actually closer to a German villa design from the beginning of the 20th century – including some signed by Paul Baumgarten (1873-1946) or Paul Schultze-Naumburg (1869-1949) (Schultze-Naumburg). These architects contributed to the spread of the *Blut und Boden* movement under the Nazi regime. In Bulgaria, the echo of German villas aimed at balancing elegance and comfort (*Pictures 13 & 14*). This probably prompted another promising architectural duo, Ivan Vasilyov (1893-1979) and Dimitar Tsolov (1896-1970), to build another villa very close to the Kouyoumdjisky mansion, which was more clearly inspired by the heritage of German Baroque mansions.

As the district had been undergoing full urbanization since the early 1920s and already housed many villas of the Bulgarian elite, and with the royal palace being nearby, this choice was spatially and politically strategic – allowing for quick access to either the monarch's residence or his principal ministers. Indeed, by purchasing Kouyoumdjisky's mansion, the French diplomats had chosen a building that recalled the international diffusion of their culture – perhaps without realizing that this decision identified them as poten-

tially backward-looking and indifferent to cultural developments in Bulgaria itself.

In fact, Bulgarian architects were now more influenced by modern Germanic references, as evidenced by the Municipal Revenue Office on Serdika Street, built in 1934 by Konstantin Djangozov (1903-1962) in a style clearly influenced by Erich Mendelsohn's (1887-1953) commercial architecture in Germany (Makarinov). However, Djangozov studied in France, in Auguste Perret's (1874-1954) studio at the *École Spéciale d'Architecture* in 1930 (Abram et al., 334). Perret always visually affirmed the reinforced concrete structure, but his Bulgarian pupil did not follow his rationalist credo, preferring to turn to a streamlined form then appreciated by German patrons (*Picture 15*).

Adjacent to this already old-fashioned residence, the diplomats acquired a smaller villa, probably also built during the 1920s, to house the embassy itself. This structure, in a simplified national style, was more aligned with Bulgarian cultural interests of the era. The identity of its architect remains unknown due to a lack of credible sources, but the building attests to the influence of architectural research in Bulgaria, notably that of Panteley Tsvetkov (1894-1954). He studied both vernacular architecture and sought to adapt its sober forms to a more comfortable modern habitat (Tsvetkov). In this way, the villa linked French diplomacy to contemporary Bulgarian architectural trends (*Picture 16*).

However, the French diplomats probably unconsciously confirmed their taste for stylistic permanence when they commissioned Lazarov to redesign the garden of the two combined properties (Letter from the Legation to Lazarov, October 17, 1938). He created a picturesque English-style layout. This choice was again quite reactionary in its design, while the best landscapers of the time were promoting (in

France) a modernized variant of the classical French garden, coupled with an almost Cubist sense of abstraction. While a new generation of Bulgarian architects contributed to the modernization of the country, French diplomats ignored this trend in their representation. It is true that developments in the host capital no longer favored French influence. In 1914, Lazarov's drawings were designed in the French Beaux-Arts style and included inscriptions in French. In 1938, the urban remodelling of Sofia supervised by Teodor Goranov (1890-1962) now used German words and urbanistic methods inspired by Hermann Jansen (1869-1945), a Berlin-based specialist who was, at the same time, in charge of plans for Ankara in Turkey (Kezer). That says it all.

Conclusion: The ups and downs of an indecisive cultural diplomacy

During the interwar period, France sought solutions to modernize its diplomatic facilities while simultaneously asserting its international image. The complex political circumstances in Paris influenced decisions regarding which diplomatic buildings to purchase or construct in host countries.

The fairly strong bilateral relationship between France and Yugoslavia allowed, for example, the creation of an exceptional legation in Belgrade. Despite rather conventional initial hypotheses, the Foreign Ministry ultimately opted for the construction of a remarkable monument that better accounted for recent cultural developments. Here, the majestic plan and Art Deco style helped to express France as a country faithful to noble traditions, yet open to cultural changes. This was widely seen as a success, enabling French diplomacy to move beyond the customs of the *Ancien régime* and to begin fostering a more modern vision of France in

foreign eyes. This soft power was almost revolutionary: the Foreign Ministry had begun to more overtly use architecture as a cultural tool.

However, this step forward remained an exception. Diplomatic habits remained well rooted. In the Balkan part of Europe, French diplomats followed similar patterns for their installations in Bucharest and Athens. In Greece, France occupied a late 19th century villa, built in a neo-classical style by an Athenian architect, which its original owner intended to offer for diplomatic use. In Romania, France was satisfied with a neo-classical mansion from the same period. Both buildings were elegant, but devoid of public character, lacking the symbolic features appropriate to their diplomatic function. This continued the monarchic practices of aristocratic diplomacy, where elitist exchanges between dignitaries and formal receptions were prioritized over newer concepts of modern bureaucratic functioning.

These same patterns applied in Bulgaria. While in Belgrade, France was able to evolve diplomatically and culturally, in Sofia, the outdated pomp of French diplomacy remained dominant. This sharp contrast between the two approaches epitomizes the hesitation of the French Foreign Ministry regarding the degree to which it should embrace change. As tradition prevailed in Sofia and modernity (at least partially) in Belgrade, the resulting inconsistency underscored how France's Balkan policy had yet to establish a coherent cultural diplomacy.

Ultimately, this question was resolved only after World War II, when the new French embassies were entrusted to the best representatives of modern architecture. At that point, Paris sought to reaffirm its international position: a difficult role to hold in the face of Cold War tensions between the USSR and the USA. While both Yugoslavia and Bulgaria

were run by communist governments under Moscow's orbit, traditional French diplomatic buildings seemed vestiges of a vanished, old world. Yet, this anachronism nevertheless served French diplomatic objectives: In a politically restricted context, these buildings provided a reassuring signal.

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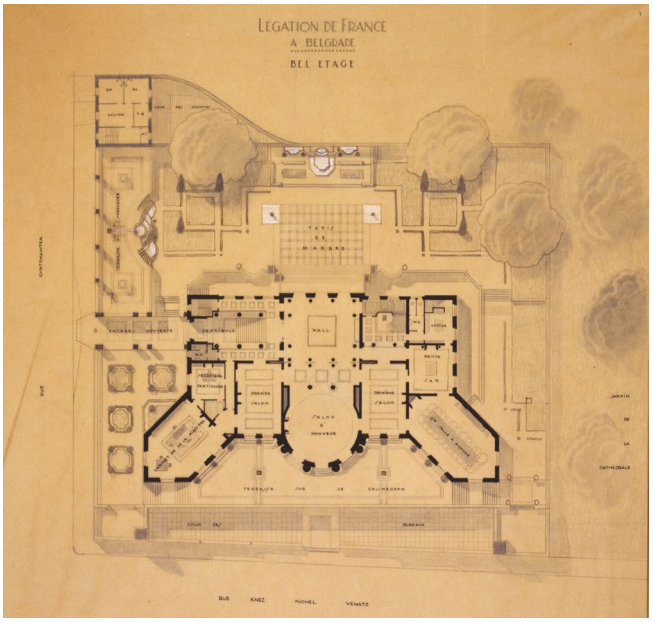
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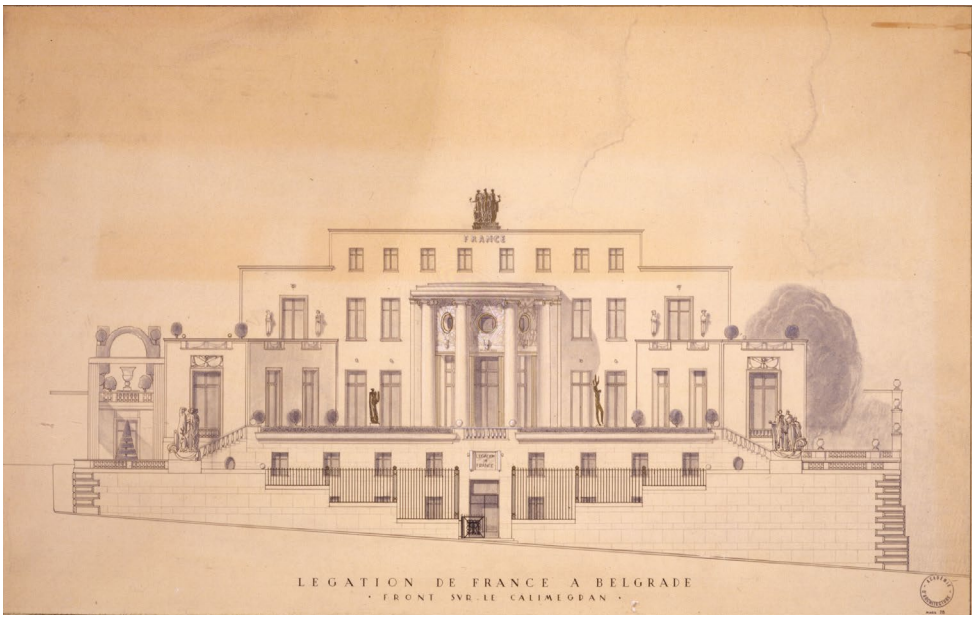
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Appendices



Pictures 1 & 2: *Roger Expert, plans for the Embassy of France in Belgrade, 1928. City of Architecture and Heritage, Paris*





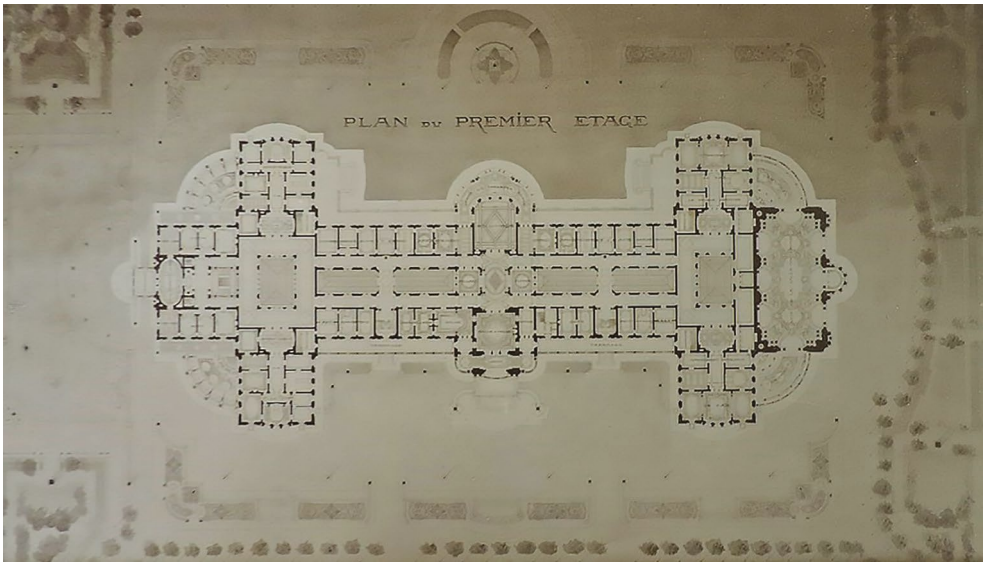
Picture 3:
Embassy of France in Belgrade, circa 1930. French diplomatic archives, La Courneuve

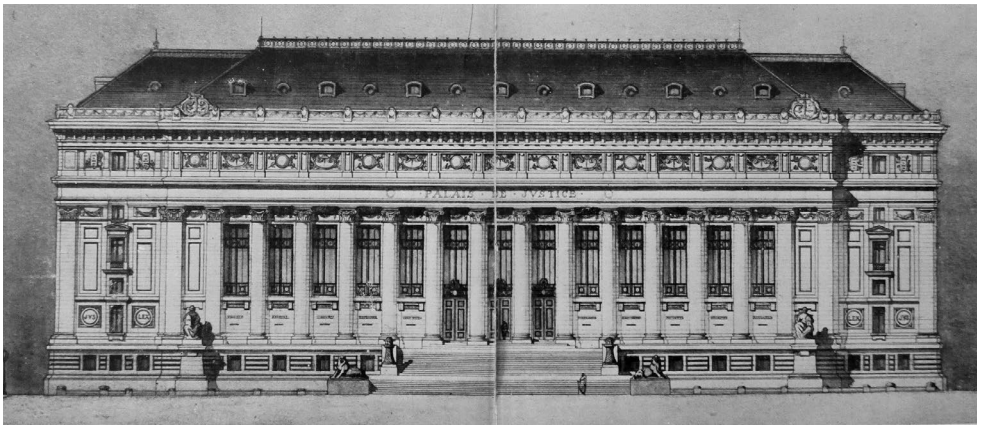
Picture 4:
Same building recently. Picture by the author





Pictures 5 & 6:
Nikola Lazarov, project for a new royal palace, Sofia, 1914





Picture 7: *Edmond Thoumy, project for the Sofia Palace of Justice, 1914. Private collection*



Picture 8: *Jean Bréasson, Yordan Milanov, Sofia University. Picture by the author, 2024*



Picture 9: *Stancho Belkovski, Alliance française Headquarters Sofia, 1925*



Picture 10: *Same building, today. Picture by the author, 2024*









Pictures 11, 12, 13 & 14: *Todor Zlatev, Dimitar Koev, former villa Kouyoumdjisky, now Residence of France. Pictures by the author, 2024*



Picture 15:
Konstantin Djangozov, Municipal Revenue Office, Sofia, 1934.
Picture by the author, 2024

Picture 16:
Architect not yet identified, former villa, now Embassy of France, Sofia, 1920s.
Picture by the author, 2024

