


ARTICLE

‘A Rightful Share of Prestige and Influence’: The Russian Brigades in Macedonia and Russia’s Ambitions in the Balkans during the First World War

Gwendal Piégais 

Centre for War Studies, University College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland

gwendal.piegais@gmail.com

In 1916, a Russian contingent of 24,000 men landed in Salonika to fight alongside the French, Serbian and British armies on the Front d’Orient. Until December 1917, these troops fought against the Bulgarian troops, occupied Greek territory, and helped to bring Greece into line with the Entente. This article explains the reasons that prompted the Russian command to send such a contingent to a distant theatre, at a time when the Russian army was facing a manpower crisis. It reassesses the meaning that the imperial elites gave to the conflict and the role they attributed to Russia in the Balkans.

‘We heard that some army is coming to us from Russia, and that they are already landing. ... To what extent this is true, I don’t know.’ With these words, Svetislav Barjaktarović, who served in the Serbian army’s medical service in the autumn of 1914, recorded in his notebook this rumour circulating in the ranks. A few days later, NCO Slavko Joksimović relates that ‘the Russians are coming to our aid, and with three army corps.’ During a Serbian counter-offensive in December, he adds: ‘It is said among the officers that the Russians have arrived anyway, but they are being hidden.’¹ This rumour, mentioned in many diaries of Serbian combatants, can be considered as one of the ‘*fausses nouvelles*’ described by Marc Bloch – news and rumours which encapsulated the soldiers’ hopes.² But these expectations were fuelled by real discussions about sending a Russian contingent to the Balkans, as requested by the Serbians.

The Russian diplomats and generals took an intense though lesser-known part in this debate. According to them, launching Allied offensives in the Balkans would make it possible to join forces with the Russian fronts, to form a continuous southern front against the Central Powers and break the strategic deadlock in the West. An intervention against the Ottoman Empire or in the Balkans also corresponded to diplomatic and political ambitions of Russian imperial elites. Since the Congress of Berlin in 1878, Saint Petersburg had repeatedly tried to lead Slavs and Orthodox to build a Russian influence in the Balkans to the detriment of the Ottoman Empire. But the Russian Empire had not succeeded in uniting the Balkan powers under its aegis, and had even lost the favour of Bulgaria – its greatest ally in the region – during the Balkan Wars.³ The First World War jeopardised Russia’s strategy of penetrating the Straits, with Bulgaria opting for the Central Empires and Greece adopting an ambiguous neutrality. Constantinople’s entry into the war in October 1914 brought to

¹ Svetislav Barjaktarović, *Ratni dnevnik Dr Svetislava Barjaktarovića* (Belgrade: Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti, 1987), 57; Slavko Joksimović, ‘Ratni dnevnik 1914–1918,’ *Poz’es’ki godis’njak: prilozi za politič’ku, vojnu, ekonomsku i kulturnu istoriju Poz’ege i okoline*, no. 11 (2013): 75.

² See Marc Bloch, *Réflexions d’un historien sur les fausses Nouvelles de la guerre* (Paris: Éditions Allia, 1999).

³ Ronald P. Bobroff, ‘Behind the Balkan Wars: Russian Policy toward Bulgaria and the Turkish Straits, 1912–13,’ *The Russian Review* 59, no. 1 (Jan. 2000): 76–95.

the fore the question of what would happen to the *Sublime Porte* once defeated. Petrograd⁴ saw this as an opportunity to finally seize the Straits, opening access to the Mediterranean ‘to replace the moon crescent with the cross on Saint Sophia’s dome’.⁵ During the Balkan Wars (1912–13), when Bulgarian troops threatened to break through the Ottoman lines and seize Constantinople, the fate of the Straits was the major issue in all diplomatic exchanges between Russia and its Balkan interlocutors. Saint Petersburg considered sending troops to take part in the capture of the city, and at the very least to take the credit from the Bulgarians.⁶ Similarly, when the British and French announced their intervention in the Dardanelles, Russian diplomats were quick to put forward their post-war demands, which resulted in the Constantinople Agreements (March 1915), a secret convention concluded between Britain, Russia, and France stipulating the transfer of Constantinople to Russia. Petrograd even strongly opposed the Greek army joining the Allies at Gallipoli, demonstrating its definite interest in operations in the region.⁷ Thus, as soon as Serbia requested intervention in the autumn of 1914, it immediately found favour with diplomats such as Alexander Izvolsky, the Russian ambassador to Paris, according to whom such an action ‘could indeed be decisive’.⁸ An intervention in the Balkans was always associated with further action against the Ottoman Empire, as in the case of two Russian brigades sent to fight in Macedonia alongside French, British, and Serbian troops in the spring of 1916, with the landing of 24,000 men at Salonika.⁹ By studying the case of Russian participation in the Allied operations in Macedonia, this work seeks to uncover what Petrograd’s ambitions were in the Balkan peninsula during the First World War. What means did it use to achieve them? And more generally, what does this project tell us about the late Russian Empire?

Such a topic – the negotiation, setting up, and actions of a Russian contingent in the Balkans – allows the reconsideration of the Russian agenda at several levels (ministries, military staff, on the field, etc.) in the region at the crossroads of French and Russian diplomatic and military archives, which has never been done before. This work shall reveal why the Russian decision makers sent such an important contingent to a remote theatre, at a time of acute manpower shortages for Russia. This operation will be placed in a cultural history of the Russian Empire. The Serbian soldiers, along with the diplomats and generals who designed this project, were not immune to Bloch’s ‘*fausses nouvelles*’ and collective illusions – decisive ones, for they had a real effect. Such a study of Russian ambitions in the Balkans will make a contribution to a ‘cultural history of command’.¹⁰

Several recent monographs have analysed the Russian ambitions in the Ottoman borderlands on the eve of the First World War.¹¹ But little work has been carried out on the articulation between Russian military action and the imperial agenda in the Balkan area, the theatre closest to

⁴ Saint Petersburg was renamed as Petrograd in 1914. We will use this name for the First World War period.

⁵ Such a declaration is printed in the business newspaper *Birževye vedomosti* via a re-edition of the poem ‘Tsargrad’ by Sergěj Goroděckij.

⁶ Ronald P. Bobroff, *Roads to Glory: Late Imperial Russia and the Turkish Straits* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co., 2006), 45; 60–61; 155.

⁷ Pinar Üre, ‘Constantinople Agreement,’ in 1914–18 online *International Encyclopaedia of the First World War*, eds. Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Olivier Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer and Bill Nasson (Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, 2018); Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 126.

⁸ Miroslav Perisic, et al., eds., *Prvi svetski rat: u dokumentima Arhiva Srbije*, Vol. 1 (Belgrade: Arhiv Srbije, 2015), 500; *Meždunarodne otnošenija v epohu imperializma: dokumenty iz arhivov carskogo i Vremennogo pravitel'stv 1878–1917 gg.*: Serija 3: 1914–1917, tome VI, volume 1, Telegram no. 423 from Russian Minister at Sofia to Russian Foreign Minister, 16 Oct. 1914; Andrei Pavlov, ‘*Russkaja odisseja*’ epohi Pervoj mirovoj. *Russkie ekspedicionnye sily vo Francii i na Balkanah* (Moscow: Veche, 2011), 15; *Konstantinopol’ i proliv po sekretnym dokumentam byvshego Ministerstva inostrannyh del*, tome II, Telegram from Izvolsky to Sazonov, 3 Feb. 1915 (Moscow: Litizdat NKID, 1926), 137.

⁹ Pavlov, ‘*Russkaja odisseja*.’

¹⁰ See John Horne, ‘End of a Paradigm? The Cultural History of the Great War,’ *Past and Present*, no. 242 (Feb. 2019), 155–92.

¹¹ Mustafa Aksakal, *The Ottoman Road to War in 1914: The Ottoman Empire and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Bobroff, *Roads*; Michael A. Reynolds, *Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, 1908–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Constantinople, which was specifically targeted by Petrograd's war aims. Focused on the Caucasus theatre, on the operations at Erzurum, Anatolia or Mesopotamia, the research disjoined different areas yet linked in the minds of Russian decision makers, while the Balkans kept on attracting their attention.¹² The history of this contingent – until now solely studied from a military point of view – will be reintegrated into a broader history of Russian influence building in the Balkans, first by assessing the significance of the region for Russian decision makers. Second, this work will demonstrate that Russia's action in the peninsula served concrete long-standing goals of the imperial agenda, demonstrated by the occupation of Mount Athos. And finally, the participation of Russian troops in an Allied coup in Athens in 1917 will make clear to what extent Russian diplomacy remained impregnated with imperial ambitions well anchored in the Russian elites.

A Southern Persistence

The organisation of a Russian contingent for the Balkans is often presented as the gift of a 'pound of flesh' from Russia in exchange for increased French arms deliveries.¹³ This inter-Allied issue does not fully explain the energy that Russian diplomacy deployed to direct these troops towards Macedonia. It can be explained by the persistence of a Southern design in the expectations of Russian decision makers.

The debate on the Balkan intervention among them can be summarised as a quarrel between military and diplomats. On the one hand, generals pointed out how costly such an operation would be, with no direct gain for Russia. On the other hand, politicians and diplomats wanted to strengthen imperial influence in the Balkan theatre and on the margins of the Ottoman Empire. Before the First World War, Russia's position towards the Balkans was very cautious and hesitant, aiming to contain Balkan nationalism to its own ends, but rarely with agreement on the means. On Serbia alone, the military and diplomats disagreed on the nature of the support to be given to Belgrade.¹⁴ As for policy towards the Straits (closely linked to that of the Balkan states), the Russian Foreign Minister Sazonov feared an end of the status quo: Bulgarians taking control of the Straits; Austria-Hungary and Germany entering the war in the region, etc.¹⁵ The Ottoman Empire's entry into the war – which Sazonov had sought to avoid – put the issue back on the agenda. Nevertheless, Constantinople remained a secondary war aim, conditional on German defeat.¹⁶

Izvol'sky and Sazonov saw the intervention project as a means of securing territorial gains in the Straits region and believed the intervention could sway the Balkan states towards the Entente. This lofty belief and the symbolic value attributed to this contingent were such that on 3 February 1915, following Serbian requests, the Grand Duke Nicholas Nikolaevich, head of the Russian army, and the tsar immediately agreed to send a Cossack unit to support Serbia.¹⁷ The military had little taste for this interference in strategic matters, and General Nikolai Yanushkevich was quick to point out that sending large forces to the Balkans would lead to a weakening of the Russian and Allied fronts against 'the most elementary rule of strategy': the concentration of forces.¹⁸

¹² Oleg R. Airapetov, *Poslednaia voïna imperatorskoi Rossii* (Moscow: Tri Kvadrata, 2002), 166; Sofya Anisimova, 'Russia's Military Strategy and the Entente during the Planning of the Allied Offensive 1915–1916,' lecture given at the University of Brest, 20 Sept. 2019.

¹³ Jamie H. Cockfield, *With Snow on Their Boots: The Tragic Odyssey of the Russian Expeditionary Force in France during World War I* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1999).

¹⁴ Dominic Lieven, *Towards the Flame: Empire, War and the End of Tsarist Russia* (London: Allen Lane/Penguin, 2015), ch. 5: 'Crisis follows crisis, 1909–13 – The Second Balkan War and its aftermath.'

¹⁵ Lora Gerd, *Russian Policy in the Orthodox East: The Patriarchate of Constantinople, 1878–1914* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 17; Denis Vovchenko, *Containing Balkan Nationalism: Imperial Russia and Ottoman Christians, 1856–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 293.

¹⁶ Bobroff, *Roads*, 57.

¹⁷ Pavlov, 'Russkaja odisseja,' 17–18.

¹⁸ *Meždunarodnye otnošenija...*, tome VI, vol. 1, no. 147, Telegram from General Yanushkevich to Goremykin, 6 Feb. 1915.

It was in Paris that Russian diplomats found attentive ears to this meridional inclination. Théophile Delcassé, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, assured Izvolsky and Sazonov of the Allies' willingness to support a Russian intervention in the Balkans.¹⁹ The French diplomats only focused on the many advantages: once the troops of the tsar would have disembarked, Romania would enter the war on the side of the Entente, retaining numerous troops on the Central Empires' southern flank. Bulgaria would finally put an end to its conciliatory manoeuvres with Vienna and Berlin, paving the Allies' way towards Constantinople.²⁰ Here, Russian pan-Slavism met with French imperial certainties, persuaded to go to war in Turkey as in a colonial expedition against poorly trained and under equipped armies.²¹

Delighted to finally be able to set a foot in the Balkans, Sazonov hastened to resume contact with the Stavka – the high military command of the Russian army – and emphasised the political importance of assisting Serbia.²² When in February 1915 Grand Duke Nicholas announced that a detachment would be sent to the Balkans, Sergei Sazonov hastened to change the course of this operation: 'the French and British ambassadors ... insist that our fleet and troops participate in the capture of Constantinople. [They] consider undesirable that the historic event of the Turks' expulsion from Tsargrad takes place without our participation.'²³

Asking then to use troops on their way to Serbia for this purpose, Sazonov easily converted this expedition into an offensive on the Bosphorus – under the guise of Allied demands – confirming that the Balkans were indeed, to quote Ronald Bobroff, 'the antechamber to the Straits'.²⁴ But the Gallipoli landing stalled and lost all favour. Moreover, the diplomatic balance of power in the Balkans was reversed with the resignation of the pro-Entente Greek Prime Minister Elefthérios Venizelos, replaced by his rival, the pro-neutrality Dimítrios Goúnaris.²⁵

Nevertheless, the Entente was soon forced to reconsider the project. In October the Central Empires, supported by Bulgaria, took Belgrade. Franco-British troops landing in Salonika could not stop the enemy's advance. Delcassé approached Izvolsky to convince him to send Russian troops to the side of the Armée d'Orient. French President Poincaré even addressed the tsar, saying that, at a time when the Allies were stepping up material deliveries to Russia, France and Britain might no longer feel bound by promises to share the Ottoman territories.²⁶ On the Russian side, several diplomats, such as Prince Trubetskoi and the Plenipotentiary Minister in Serbia, called for a Russian intervention in the Balkans.

The former director of the Department of Near Eastern Affairs at the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Grigori Trubetskoi, was a close friend of Sazonov and a key figure among Russian diplomats and publicists. Before the war, he fed the Russian press with numerous articles on the importance of

¹⁹ Pavlov, '*Russkaja odisseja*,' 19.

²⁰ Telegram, Delcassé and Cambon to Président du Conseil, 9 Feb. 1915, Archives du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères (AMAE), Guerre 1914–1918, vol. 219, no. 200.

²¹ John Horne, 'A Colonial Expedition? French Soldiers' Experience at the Dardanelles,' *War & Society* 38, no. 4 (2019): 286–304.

²² *Meždunarodnye otnošenija...*, tome VI, vol. 1, no. 173, Telegram, Foreign Minister to head of Stavka's diplomatic chancellery, no. 291, 11 Feb. 1915.

²³ Telegram, Paléologue to Minister of Foreign Affairs, no. 271, 17 Feb. 1915, AMAE, Guerre 1914–1918, vol. 219; Telegram, Colonel Fournier to Minister of Foreign Affairs, 28 Feb. 1915, AMAE, Guerre 1914–1918, vol. 219, no. 111; Telegrams, Boppe to Minister of Foreign Affairs, 2 and 4 Mar. 1915, AMAE, Guerre 1914–1918, vol. 219, no. 117 and 123; *Meždunarodnye otnošenija...*, tome VII, vol. 1, Note by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, 1 Mar. 1915, document no 271.

²⁴ Bobroff, *Roads*, 3.

²⁵ Telegram, Paléologue to Minister of Foreign Affairs, 5 Mar. 1915, AMAE, Guerre 1914–1918, vol. 219, no. 370; Telegram, Boppe to Minister of Foreign Affairs, 5 Mar. 1915, AMAE, Guerre 1914–1918, vol. 219, no. 216; Telegrams between Stavka and Imperial Russian Navy, May–June 1915, Rossijskij Gosudarstvennyj Voenno-Istoričeskij Arhiv (RGVIA), f. 418, op. del. 4397, lis. 1–10; Yannis Mourélos, *L'intervention de la Grèce dans la Grande Guerre (1916–1917)* (Athens: Collections de l'Institut Français d'Athènes, 1983), 22–3.

²⁶ Pavlov, '*Russkaja odisseja*,' 22–4.

an ambitious imperial policy in the Balkans. His vision of Russia's 'national foreign policy' was based on the assumption that Russia and smaller Slav peoples needed each other if they were to preserve their independence against the Germanic powers.²⁷ His diplomatic activities in Serbia reflected the tensions in Russian strategy in the Balkans. In August 1915, he tried to persuade Serbia to make concessions, to prevent Bulgaria from joining the Central Empires, causing stormy discussions with Serbian Prime Minister Pašić over a possible division of Macedonia.²⁸ He alerted Petrograd about the 'extreme seriousness' of the situation. 'All hopes rest on the Allies', he warned Sazonov, urging him to support an intervention, which was also meant to maintain Russian influence in the Balkans and to defend the territorial gains promised to Petrograd, while Russia appeared weakened after the Great Retreat of 1915.²⁹ The Straits remained on Trubetskoi's mind, as evidenced by his exchanges with Sazonov, reminding the minister that, once the Ottoman Empire was defeated, the post of Imperial Commissioner in conquered and renamed Tsargrad would be his.³⁰

Trubetskoi was already at the forefront of a Russian humanitarian intervention in Serbia, among other Allied medical units.³¹ The general mobilisation, and the call for all doctors to serve in the army, made Serbia very dependent on Allied aid (namely Russian, French, and Scottish). The military hospital named 'Moscow', set up in the high school of Niš, was thus equipped and managed by Russian personnel. This Russian preponderance even found an administrative consecration when a Russian, Professor Sergei Sofoterov, took charge as the head of Niš' sanitary organisation, and of all the Russian medical detachments in Serbia. He was assigned to the Serbian supreme command, and even sat on the restricted municipal council, an assembly made up of military and civilian authorities of the Serbian war capital.³²

Russian aid was provided by the medical corps in close collaboration with the same diplomats involved in the decision to intervene on the Macedonian Front. Thus, the prince and his wife Maria Troubetskaya, and the Russian ambassador Nikolai Hartwig's widow, took a very active part in the organisation of orphanages and popular canteens. In addition to heading a committee that coordinated financial aid from Russia, Trubetskoi took charge of all Russian charitable activities in Serbia and Montenegro. These deployments of Russian care for Serbia were mediatised to highlight the ties between the Russian elites and Serbia. As in various warring monarchies, the aristocratic tutelage was systematically valued in line with the charity practised in the Russian Empire, as well as in the Balkans.³³

This support was part of the longer-term deployment of Russian influence in the region. Sergei Sofoterov perfectly embodies this humanitarian investment in Serbia. His activities dated back to the Balkan Wars, on Russian Red Cross missions with Serbian soldiers in Skopje, Scutari, and finally in Salonika.³⁴ Far from being an *ad hoc* action, the support to Serbia in 1915 was a remobilisation of

²⁷ Grigorii N. Trubetskoi, *Notes of a Plenipotentiary: Russian Diplomacy and War in the Balkans, 1914–1917* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2016), 175–7; Eric Lohr, 'The Papers of Grigorii N. Trubetskoi,' *Cahiers du monde russe* 46, no. 4 (2005), 851–4.

²⁸ Trubetskoi, *Notes of a Plenipotentiary*, 175–7.

²⁹ *Meždunarodnye otnošenija...*, tome IX, no. 10, telegram n.o 949, Russian Minister in Serbia to Russian Foreign Minister, 17 Oct. 1915; no. 130, telegram no. 982, Russian Minister in Serbia to Russian Foreign Minister, 1 Nov. 1915.

³⁰ *Meždunarodnye otnošenija...*, tome VIII, vol. 1, no. 256, Letter from Trubetskoi to Sazonov, 7 July 1915.

³¹ Galina Ševcova, 'Dejatel'nost' komiteta pomošči Serbam i Černogorcam (konec 1914 – oktjabr' 1915 g.),' *Istorija i arheologija*, no. 6 (2020), 114.

³² Galina Ševcova, 'Sofoterov i Rossijskoe Obščestvo Krasnogo Kresta v Serbii (1910–1940 gody),' *Novaja i Novejšaja Istorija*, no. 6 (2020), 192.

³³ Adele Lindenmeyr, 'The Ethos of Charity in Imperial Russia,' *Journal of Social History* 23, no. 4 (1990): 679–94; See Andrew J. Ringlee, 'The Romanovs' Militant Charity: The Red Cross and Public Mobilization for War in Tsarist Russia, 1853–1914' (PhD diss., University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 2016); Evguenia Davidova, 'Monarchism with a Human Face: Balkan Queens and the Social Politics of Nursing in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,' *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 64, no. 3 (2022): 788–819.

³⁴ Ševcova, 'Sofoterov,' 191.

Russian humanitarian actors – Sofoterov, but also all the Russian doctors present in the Balkans before 1914 – for the benefit of the Serbian ally, thereby prolonging an earlier diplomacy.

Faced with the emergency, the principle of an intervention was approved by Nicolas II on 6 October 1915.³⁵ But immediately after the approval, General Mikhail Alekseev, who became head of the Stavka in August 1915, opposed the project, which he found to be of ‘dubious and insignificant military and moral importance’. But he added that such an undertaking ‘does not at all correspond to the seriousness and immensity of the military task. [...] Our situation, the demands of the Allies and the expectations of Serbia incite us to make our participation a great undertaking’, which must be ‘numerically important’.³⁶ This refusal does not indicate a lack of interest in the project. Alekseev even believed that a southern front could provide a decisive strategic advantage.

Aware of the Russian army’s weaknesses and of the political danger into which the war was plunging Russia, he was convinced that only a united Allied strategy could bring strategic success. The Balkans were central to this strategy. In October to November 1915, in the context of preparation for the Chantilly conference,³⁷ Alekseev defended the idea of reinforcing the Salonika front and launching a simultaneous offensive by Franco-British forces in Macedonia and Russian troops in Galicia, to form a continuous southern front against the Central Powers.³⁸ Thus, although he disagreed with the plan to send Russian troops to Serbia, he asked Sazonov to support his military proposals.³⁹ The project was not adopted, but the Allies nevertheless approved the reinforcement of Franco-British troops in Salonika.⁴⁰ In later exchanges between Briand and Izvolsky, the French minister returned to the issue with the project of Russian support in Macedonia. The French emphasised the fear that this contingent could arouse in the Bulgarian troops, and the comfort that it would bring to the Serbian ally.⁴¹ But this time, even Sazonov and Izvolsky could no longer support such a project, as winter paralysed the Russian ports for several months.

But the French kept on insisting. Senator Paul Doumer came to Russia to discuss arms and equipment delivery. In the Great Retreat following the German-Austrian offensive at Gorlice–Tarnów (May–June 1915), the tsarist state had lost industrialised areas of the Empire, forcing Russia to compensate with Allied deliveries. Doumer asked Russia to provide 400,000 men to fight on the Western Front, in exchange for increased supplies of equipment.⁴² Sazonov knew that Russia had only meagre diplomatic means to oppose its first arms supplier. He skilfully raised his concern about the situation in Salonika with Maurice Paléologue, the French ambassador in Petrograd, and renewed his support for the idea of reinforcing the Armée d’Orient, and was ready to do so with Russians.⁴³

Negotiations for the formation of the Russian Expeditionary Force (around 40,000 soldiers divided into four brigades, two for France and two for the Balkans) were studied by Jamie C. Cockfield and Andrei Pavlov, who traced the series of agreements and disagreements around this matter: General Alekseev initially agreed to transfer an infantry brigade, in order to maintain good relations; the

³⁵ Pavlov, ‘*Russkaja odisseja*,’ 22.

³⁶ *Meždunarodnye otnošenija*..., tome VIII, no. 902, telegram no. 4901, General Alekseev to General Beljaev, 19 Oct. 1915; *Meždunarodnye otnošenija*..., tome IX, no. 67, telegram no. 5060, General Alekseev to Russian Foreign Minister, 23 Oct. 1915; telegram, General Alekseev to General Beljaev, 12 Oct. 1915, RGVIA, f. 2003, op. 1, del. 503, l. 14.

³⁷ François Cochet, ‘6–8 décembre 1915, Chantilly: la Grande Guerre change de rythme,’ *Revue historique des armées* 242 (2006): 16–25.

³⁸ Telegram, General Alekseev to General Joffre, 20 Oct. 1915, RGVIA, f. 2003, op. 1, del. 1167, l. 5; Telegram, General Alekseev to Russian Foreign Minister, 19 Oct. 1915, RGVIA, f. 2003, op. 1, del. 503, l. 108. *Armées françaises dans la Grande Guerre* (AFGG), tome VIII, vol. 1, annexes 2, annexe no. 644, 639–40, telegram from General de Laguiche to commandant en chef des armées alliées, 22 Nov. 1915.

³⁹ Anisimova, ‘Russia’s Military Strategy.’

⁴⁰ AFGG, tome VIII, vol. 1, annexes 3, annexes no. 820, 73, Chantilly conference minutes, 8 Dec. 1915.

⁴¹ *Meždunarodnye otnošenija*..., tome IX, no. 127, telegram no. 697, Izvolsky to Sazonov, 1 Nov. 1915; tome IX, no. 29, telegram no. 149, Stavka to Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, 19 Oct. 1915.

⁴² Joshua A. Sanborn, *Imperial Apocalypse: The Great War and the Destruction of the Russian Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 73–87; Pavlov, ‘*Russkaja odisseja*,’ 30–33.

⁴³ Maurice Paléologue, *Le crépuscule des tsars. Journal, 1914–1917* (Paris: Éditions du Mercure de France), 5 Dec. 1915.

Russians then did everything in their power to prevent the agreement from being implemented.⁴⁴ Added to the requests from Paris for more soldiers for the Western Front were those of the Armée d'Orient. General Maurice Sarraïl, who was at its head, warned the Allies about the manpower crisis in Macedonia. From Paris, Izvolsky once again emphasised the beneficial effect that Russian soldiers would have on the course of events: they could reinvigorate the morale of the Serbs, whose army was being reorganised in Corfu, and cause unrest in the ranks of the Bulgarian army.⁴⁵

These assertions were not perceived as mere flattery by Russian decision makers. They met a belief in Russian pre-eminence among the Slavic peoples. Several leaps of faith were punctuating the Franco-Russian negotiations. The belief was fed throughout 1915 and 1916 by a continuous stream of reports provided by Serbian military intelligence to General Viktor Artamonov, the Russian military agent at the Serbian General Headquarters, consisting of Bulgarian deserters' interrogatories after their surrender to the Serbs or to the Greek gendarmerie. The Russian recipients of these reports could easily conclude that the adversary was weak and assume their loyalty to be fragile. Serbian intelligence played on these elements and underscored all the advantages that the impressive Slavic big brother's intervention could have.⁴⁶ They went so far as to transmit documents presented as Bulgarian letters addressed to the opposing trench: 'Serbian brothers! We would like to meet you so that we can get along. [...] You tell us that the Russians have arrived in Salonika, and we look forward to seeing our [Russian] liberators to surrender [to them].'⁴⁷

These reports, also transmitted to the French,⁴⁸ reinforced the conviction of the Russian ambassador in Paris, who believed that 'the appearance of Russian troops [...] will produce the strongest impression'. Izvolsky stressed that such a contingent would have negligible military or diplomatic value on the Western Front, while in Macedonia it 'can immediately hold an exceptional position [...], provide valuable assistance, but also offer us a rightful share of prestige and influence'.⁴⁹ Although opposed on strategy, generals and diplomats spoke the same language, which betrayed common concerns. In his refusal to send a contingent to the Balkans, Yanushkevich said he feared that a failure of Russian troops would produce 'the opposite of the desired effect, namely a loss of our prestige'.⁵⁰ The mention of Russia's prestige is significant here and refers to a shared representation of the Empire's role in the Balkans.

Paléologue, through the benevolent intermediary of Sazonov, sent Nicholas II a note about sending a brigade to Salonika, where it 'could prove particularly useful for joint actions with the allies in the Balkan peninsula'. The tsar, seduced by a project that diplomats skilfully directed towards the south, approved.⁵¹ 'For political reasons', Sazonov refused to pay any attention to Alekseev's reservations. To defend the project, he relied on Nicolas de Bazili, a diplomat at the head of the Stavka's diplomatic chancellery. Sazonov found in Bazili a fervent defender of Russian imperial ambitions in the Ottoman neighbourhood, since he was the author of a memorandum advocating a cession of Constantinople and the Straits to Russia, as well as extensive control of the European and Asian

⁴⁴ Pavlov, '*Russkaja odisseja*,' 35; Cockfield, *With Snow*, 25.

⁴⁵ Telegram Russian consul in Salonika to Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, 16 Feb. 1916, AVPRI, f. 151, op. 482, del. 4275, l. 2 published by Pavlov, '*Russkaja odisseja*,' 39.

⁴⁶ Report, intelligence officer Colonel Beskovitch at Serbian Headquarters, 12 Oct. 1915, RGVIA, Fond 15237 op. 1, del. 1, lis 220; See other reports, RGVIA, f. 15237 op. 1, del. 5, lis. 4–5, 22, 28–29.

⁴⁷ Letter, Boyovitch to Artamonov, 16 Aug. 1916, RGVIA, f. 15237, op. 1, del. 5, lis.124.

⁴⁸ 'Note au sujet de l'utilisation de la brigade russe envoyée sur le front français,' 6 Mar. 1916, Service Historique de la Défense (SHD), 16 N 3057.

⁴⁹ *Meždunarodnye otnošenija...*, tome X, no. 369, telegram no. 175, Izvolsky to Russian Foreign Minister, 15 Mar. 1916.

⁵⁰ Telegram, General Januškevič to Goremykin, AVPRI, f. 151, op. 482, del. 4026, l. 9, published by Pavlov, '*Russkaja odisseja*,' 17–18.

⁵¹ *Meždunarodnye otnošenija...*, tome X, no. 369, telegram no. 175, Izvolsky to Russian Foreign Minister, 15 Mar. 1916, note 3.

shores. They both feared that Russia could be seen as a power not daring 'to act against the Bulgarians'.⁵² Here we can see that the image and prestige of Russia in the Balkans was certainly a powerful fuel.⁵³

The mission's political dimension is confirmed by the rank of the general officers sent to lead the contingent. The second brigade's command was given to Mikhail Diterikhs. Before 1916, he served during the Russo-Japanese War, then in military intelligence, and at the General Staff Directorate's mobilisation section. During the First World War, he was quartermaster general of the southwestern front, where he collaborated with Generals Alekseev, Ivanov and Brusilov.⁵⁴ For a general of this rank, the command of a brigade (12,000 men) could be seen as a demotion. But the energy Diterikhs invested in this task shows that the Russian contingent in Macedonia was not regarded lightly.⁵⁵ The other brigade was commanded by General Maksim Leontiev, who was a successful military attaché in Bucharest (October 1901–January 1905), Sofia (January 1905–January 1911), then a Russian military attaché in Constantinople, which was a very sensitive position in the eyes of imperial diplomacy.⁵⁶ Sent to the Balkans to play a role in the regional game, this contingent soon found itself a captive of this theatre rather than an agent of the coalition.

A Russian Foot in the Balkans

The diplomatic negotiations showed the importance of the Balkan issue for Russian decision makers. Once there, some of the contingent's operations confirmed the weight of pan-Slavic ideas and Russian imperial pre-eminence on the course of operations.

As soon as they arrived in Salonika, General Mihailo Račić, the Serbian military attaché to the Armée d'Orient, asked to attach the Russians to the Serbian army in order to solve manpower issues and to consolidate the political gain occasioned by their presence.⁵⁷ This political use of the Russians is evident in the dramatisation of their landing in Salonika, which was abundantly captured by the photographers of the Armée d'Orient. During a celebration presided over by the Prince Regent of Serbia in Sedes, a sober 'scenario of power' celebrated the link between the Russian army and the Serbian troops, represented by a regiment that conquered Skopje in 1912, then was routed through Albania in 1915, and was back in Macedonia alongside the Russians.⁵⁸ Russia was coming to find influence in the Balkans, but the Serbians were confident in capturing Russian prestige for their own agenda. Several telegrams from Paris and Petrograd reminded the general of the significance of the Russians' arrival: the strengthening of Serbian morale and the erosion of Bulgarian confidence. In one of Sarraïl's letters, the paragraph devoted to the Russian brigades – eloquently entitled 'Showing the Russians at the front'⁵⁹ – recommends 'bringing forward some elements to encourage Bulgarian defections'. This pseudo-strategic approach proved to be very convenient for the Serbian command as it coincided with their ambition to swallow the Russians. In order not to offend anyone, Sarraïl

⁵² *Meždunarodnye otnošenija...*, tome X, no. 400, telegram no. 2012, Russian Foreign Minister to head of Stavka's diplomatic chancellery, Nicolas de Bazili, 23 Mar. 1916.

⁵³ Ronald Bobroff, 'En Garde! The Influence of Elite Masculinity on Russia's Decision for War in July 1914,' in *Women and Gender in Russia's Great War and Revolution, 1914–22*, eds. Adele Lindenmeyr and Melissa K. Stockdale (Bloomington: Slavica Publishers, 2022), 152–71.

⁵⁴ Jonathan D. Smele, *Historical Dictionary of the Russian Civil Wars, 1916–1926* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 329–30.

⁵⁵ Gérard Fassy, *Le Commandement français en Orient, octobre 1915 – novembre 1918* (Paris: Economica, 2003), 134–5. See also Maurice Sarraïl, *Mon Commandement en Orient* (Saint-Cloud: SOTEC, 2012).

⁵⁶ Reynolds, *Shattering*, 110; Aksakal, *The Ottoman Road*, 126–31; Bobroff, *Roads*, 100–7; Oleg R. Ajrapetov, *Učastie Rossijskoj imperii v Pervoj mirovoj vojne (1914–1917). 1914. Načalo* (Moscow: Kučkovo pole, Voennaja kniga, 2014), 340–48.

⁵⁷ Telegram, general head of French Military Mission in Russia, no. 589, 29 July 1916, SHD, 5 N 120.

⁵⁸ Richard S. Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy from Peter the Great to the Abdication of Nicholas II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 3–4; 397.

⁵⁹ Letter, General Sarraïl to General Cordonnier, to the Directeur de l'Arrière chief of staff and to head of the French Military Mission at the Serbian Army, 16 Aug. 1916, SHD, 20 N 133.

therefore proposed that the Russians be placed alongside the Serbs, while leaving them under French command.⁶⁰

The ambiguity of the situation did not satisfy Diterikhs, who intended to defend the Russian troops' autonomy. He understood this contingent as 'an important political force for [future] resolutions in the Balkans',⁶¹ but he soon realised that it was difficult to get much out of it: its strength was small, and it depended on the good will of the French generals. Diterikhs did his utmost to oppose a move to Serbian authority and the ultimate forming of the two brigades into a division reinforced by new troops.⁶² Russian brigades took part in important offensives on the Macedonian front, including the capture of Monastir alongside the French and Serbs.⁶³ But soon the stagnation of the front condemned them to simply record losses due to fighting and a devastating malaria outbreak.⁶⁴ After a gruelling autumn in terms of combat, and a harsh winter in the mountains of Macedonia, the contingent was given an opportunity to weigh in on regional issues important to Russian diplomats.

In March 1917, the Deuxième Bureau of the Armée d'Orient was concerned about armed groups of deserters and possible supply points for enemy submarines on the coast of Chalcidiki. In this region, Mount Athos, with its twenty Orthodox monasteries (seventeen for Greek monks, one for Serbs, one for Bulgarians and one for Russians) seemed the heart of local subversion. On 17 January 1917, a military contingent, mainly composed of Russians, landed on Mount Athos under Franco-Russian command.⁶⁵ Its mission was to establish strict control over the peninsula and to arrest the deserters of the Greek army.⁶⁶ The Franco-Russian troops also investigated the actions of some monks in connection with local partisans hostile to Venizelos. The latter had formed a government of national unity in Salonika, opposed to King Constantine and entering the war on the side of the Allies. But his authority was more than contested, even in the north of the country, where, for example, conscription remained unpopular. Securing the Armée d'Orient's rear was an occasion for him to bring northern Greece into line. The men who fled the conscription were sent to Salonika and subject to forced labour or else faced military trials.⁶⁷ In the monasteries, the soldiers discovered tens of thousands of rounds of ammunition.⁶⁸ Only after investigation did it become clear that these arms caches dated back to the Balkan Wars, when the Greek army had supplied arms to the monks. Mount Athos was not the spy nest the French had suspected.⁶⁹

But for the Russians, the action on the peninsula did not stop there. They took advantage of their presence to support the Russian monks, to the detriment of the other monasteries. These actions were organised by four Russian officers, in liaison with the Russian consulate in Salonika,⁷⁰ which was glad to 'regain the ascendancy on the peninsula. The arrival of our troops on Mount Athos will undoubtedly impress the Greeks'.⁷¹ The diplomats were very insistent that Russian soldiers should intervene,

⁶⁰ AFGG, tome VIII, vol. 2, Annexes vol. 1, annexes no. 298, 108.

⁶¹ Report, General Diterikhs, Sept. 1916, RGVIA, f. 15230, op. 1, del. 2, lis. 7.

⁶² Letter, General Diterikhs to Stavka, 23 Jan. 1917, RGVIA, f. 2003, op. 1, del. 1195, lis. 210.

⁶³ Order no. 1, 2nd Russian infantry brigade, 13 Aug. 1916, SHD, 20 N 228; Telegram, General Sarraill to general chief of staff of the Serbian Army, no. 19/3, 17 Aug. 1916, SHD, 20 N 228; Mémoire by Colonel Aleksandrov, head of the 4th special regiment, 4 Dec. 1916, RGVIA, fond 15230, op. 1, del. 2, lis. 27–8.

⁶⁴ In 1917, three-quarters of Russians losses were due to malaria, and many soldiers were subject to evacuation. See: Report, Evacuation hospital no. 1, Jan.–Mar. 1917, RGVIA, fond 15237, op. 1, del. 6, lis. 70.

⁶⁵ Telegram, General Sarraill to War Minister, no. 1214/3, 17 Jan. 1917, SHD, 5 N 110.

⁶⁶ Secret and personal instruction, no. 2338/2, 13 Jan. 1917, RGVIA, f. 15327, op. 1, del. 7.

⁶⁷ Note, 22 Jan. 1917, SHD, 20 N 194; De Billy to Briand, 5 Feb. 1917, AMAE, Guerre 1914–1918, vol. 269; 'État des armes reçues pour chaque monastère,' 18 June 1917, SHD, 20 N 194.

⁶⁸ Telegram, General Sarraill to Contre-Amiral Salaün, head of the Orient Naval Division, 14 Jan. 1917, SHD, 20 N 194.

⁶⁹ Telegram, General Sarraill to War Minister, no. 1275/3, 28 Jan. 1917 and no. 1288/3, 31 Jan. 1917, SHD, 20 N 230; 'État des armes,' 18 June 1917, SHD, 20 N 194.

⁷⁰ See different reports sent to Russian consul Kal' between Jan. and Sept. 1917, Hoover Institution (HI), *Russia Missiia* (Greece) records, Box 71, folder 9–10.

⁷¹ Maksim Chiniakov, *Boevye dejstvija russkikh vojsk vo Francii i na Balkanah (iyun' 1916 g. – janvar' 1918 g.)* (Moscow: self-published, 2018), annex 28.3, Telegrams from Kal' to Russian Foreign Ministry, 29 Jan. 1917.

and that this occupation should be made permanent.⁷² They found there the means to establish Russian influence on a monastery archipelago that had been disputed for several years.

Russian politicians and diplomats have regarded Mount Athos with great interest since the nineteenth century. The flow of Russian pilgrims to the Mount kept on increasing until 1914, draining numerous donations from the Russian Empire and arousing the jealousy of the Greek monks, who had pre-eminence on the peninsula.⁷³ But the Russian vigour had been eroded by the condemnation of a theological doctrine promoted by Russian monks, the so-called 'Glorifiers of the Name', defending the idea that God was in the very name of God, which was deemed heretical by the Patriarch of Constantinople Joachim III in 1912 and by the Synod of the Russian Church in 1913. The Russian government even had to intervene militarily to expel the heretical monks in Russia. This quarrel illustrates the proximity between Eastern Orthodoxy and the Empire elites, since several Russian intellectuals, journalists, and deputies of the Duma mobilised in favour of the monks.⁷⁴

The two Balkan Wars (1912–13) reshuffled the deck as the peninsula became one of the stakes of the conflict. In November 1912, Greek troops occupied Mount Athos before the Bulgarians, an occupation that was greeted with hostility in Russian chancelleries. On learning that several Greek monks were campaigning for unification of Mount Athos with Greece, Sazonov declared that Russia could not 'allow Athos, one of the main centres of the Orthodox world, to pass into the hands of a single power'.⁷⁵ At the London Conference, convened in December 1912 to decide the new territorial settlement, Russia proposed to constitute Mount Athos as an autonomous republic, dependent on the Patriarchate of Constantinople, but under the international protection of the Orthodox states (Bulgaria, Greece, Montenegro, Russia, Romania and Serbia). These plans were drawn up by diplomats Alexei Beliaev, Alexander Petriayev and Boris Serafimov.⁷⁶ In the years leading up to the First World War, they represented a pan-Slavist diplomacy trying to strengthen Russia's influence in the Balkans. They defended a reorganisation of Mount Athos' government into a Russian protectorate. The jurist Andreï Mandelstam, who gave a legal formulation to these claims, applied here in the Balkans a well-known practice in the Ottoman Empire of humanitarian intervention under the guise of minority protection, which naturally provoked an outcry in the patriarchate as well as among Greek diplomats.⁷⁷

The Greek monasteries became the scene of a very strong mobilisation in favour of unification with Greece. This issue was linked to the important question of the ecclesiastical future of the Ottoman territories wrested from the Sublime Porte – the New Lands, '*Neai Choraï*' – formerly under the

⁷² Sarraïl, *Mon commandement en Orient*, 274–6; Telegram, General Sarraïl to Jugal, no. 1193/3, 12 Jan. 1917, SHD, 20 N 229; Note, Direction politique Europe, 13 Jan. 1917, AMAE, Guerre 1914–1918, vol. 287.

⁷³ Gerd, *Russian Policy in the Orthodox East*, 85–6; I.A. Papaggelos, 'Ekthesi tou proksenou G. Dokou peri tou Agiou Orous (1887)', *Hronika tis Halkidikis* 40–41 (1985–6): 67–125.

⁷⁴ Pierre Nivière, *Les glorificateurs du Nom. Une querelle théologique parmi les moines russes du Mont Athos, 1907–1914* (Geneva: Éditions des Syrtes, 2015), 113–38.

⁷⁵ A.V. Paršincev, *Afonskij vopros vo vnešnej politike Rossii s 1912 po 1917 gg.*, qualification dissertation for the MID, Moscow, 2008, 20–21.

⁷⁶ Beliaev began his diplomatic career in 1895, as secretary of the Russian consulate in Usküb (now Skopje), then at the Erzerum consulate (1897–9), and as vice-consul in Prizren, Albania. In 1903, he finally became consul in Usküb. A convinced pan-Slavist, he wrote a report to the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs entitled 'Note on the Serbs trained in Russia' (1906) in which he pleaded for strengthening Russian-Serbian relations via elites' rapprochement. In 1907, he was appointed Consul in Smyrna, then in 1911 in Salonika; Petriayev, after having started his diplomatic service in Persia, served as the *drogman* of the Russian ambassador in Constantinople. He took part in the reform projects imposed on the Ottoman Empire, particularly those concerning Macedonian. From 1913, he represented Russia in Albania, then became Consul in Macedonia. During the First World War, he was commissioned by Sazonov to study the situation of the Slavs in Austria-Hungary and to draw up a project for the political reorganisation of the dual monarchy in their favour; Serafimov was adviser on ecclesiastical matters to the Constantinople embassy. Before that, he was secretary of the Russian consulate in Aleppo (1911–14).

⁷⁷ See Davide Rodogno, *Against Massacre: Humanitarian Interventions in the Ottoman Empire, 1815–1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

authority of the Patriarchate of Constantinople.⁷⁸ The petitions of the Greek monks were opposed by the Russians, and the tone became increasingly harsh, until the Russian project was rejected.⁷⁹

The Second Balkan War intensified this nationalisation of confessional issues on Mount Athos. Several prelates of the Greek Church became involved in mobilising the monks. Meletius Metaxakis, metropolitan of Kition, in Cyprus, where he had distinguished himself against the British authorities, went to the Mount in September 1913 and preached hostility towards Russia.⁸⁰ Close to Venizelos, he was used to fierce struggles after years spent in Jerusalem, where competition for influence between Russians and Greeks was severe. Under his impetus, an Athonite deputation went to Athens to present the king and the government with the request to be attached to the Hellenic kingdom. They even proposed to remove Mount Athos from the Constantinople Patriarchate's jurisdiction, and to annex it to the Hellenic Church. On the way back, the delegation participated in the first anniversary of Salonika's capture by the Greek army. In a worried report to the Russian ambassador, Serafimov presented the Hellenic kingdom as a direct competitor in the Russian enterprise to revive Byzantium.⁸¹

Sazonov opted for a delaying diplomacy: he hoped to maintain ambiguity regarding the status of the Mount, and only agreed with the Greeks on a provisional settlement, believing that sooner or later Mount Athos would fall into Russia's sphere of influence.⁸² This issue remained in discussion until the summer of 1914. But the dialogue was tense, especially on the question of Russian monasteries outside the peninsula in Macedonia, Bessarabia, and Eastern Thrace. Russia categorically refused to allow Greece to exert authority in these lands, and even considered setting up a naval base on the shore of the Russian hermitage of Nuzla, near Kavala. Far from taking note of an erosion of influence in the region, imperial diplomacy still tended to consider this Russian isolate in the Balkans as a possible stepping stone for the consolidation of its action in the region.⁸³

The Russian landing in Salonika revived these hopes. Serafimov had already written to Sazonov that an occupation of Mount Athos would break the deadlock. The Russian diplomats once again believed that the simple presence of these troops would contribute to the revival of imperial influence on the peninsula. But the soldiers quickly began behaving very aggressively with the inhabitants. Lieutenant Ditch, the main Russian officer, put a lot of pressure on the Greek monks to give up monastic cells to the Russians. He allowed many Russian hermitages to expand beyond their assigned land, and to seize food and equipment. Russian officers attempted to revoke contracts owned by Greek merchants, foresters, and farmers for the benefit of Russian monks.⁸⁴ Expropriation, extortion and theft became ordinary.⁸⁵

A Russian order was established *de facto* under the leadership of officers. The Russian troops controlled the local population's movements, censored correspondence and newspapers, or otherwise simply confiscated the mail. They questioned Greek monks about their contacts with supposed spies of the Central Empires and threatened them with deportation.⁸⁶ To justify these practices, Ditch spoke

⁷⁸ Anastassios Anastasiadis, 'Sisyphian Task or Procrustean Bed? Matching State and Church Borders and Promised Lands in Greece,' in *Spatial Conceptions of the Nation: Modernizing Geographies in Greece and Turkey*, eds. Nikiforos Diamandouros, Thalia Dragonas, and Caglar Keyder (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010).

⁷⁹ Mihail Vital'evič Škarovskij, 'Rossijskaja Politika v otnošenii Afona v načale XX v.,' *Hristianskoe čtenie*, no. 4 (2016): 320–23.

⁸⁰ Gerd, *Russian Policy in the Orthodox East*, 95–6; Škarovskij, 'Rossijskaja Politika,' 329–32.

⁸¹ Gerd, *Russian Policy in the Orthodox East*, 98; Makienko Makarij, *Istorija Russkogo Svjato-Panteleimonova monastyrja na Afone s 1912 do 2015 goda*. (Mount Athos: Izdanie Russkogo na Afone Svjato-Panteleimonova monastyrja, 2015), 138.

⁸² Paršincev, *Afonskij*, 65–7.

⁸³ Gerd, *Russian Policy in the Orthodox East*, 95–7.

⁸⁴ 'Rapport sur les agissements russes' [Report about Russian actions], pp. 170, 171, 172, no date, SHD, 20 N 194; Letter, Androikes Xenakis to Captain Six, 25 June 1917, SHD, 20 N 194.

⁸⁵ Letter, Mount Athos Kinote to French troop Commander on Mount Athos, 28 June 1917, SHD, 20 N 194; Report by Lieutenant Ditch about the troubles in the Romanian monasteries, 29 May 1917, SHD, 20 N 194.

⁸⁶ Letter, Lazaros Lavriotis to head of Hellenic police, May 1917, SHD, 20 N 194; Letter sub-directory of Athos Police to commander of the French-Russian troops at Dafne, Mount Athos, 20 June 1917, SHD, 20 N 194.

of an anti-Russian plot fomented by the Greek monks and declared that he had arrested those suspected of conspiracy.⁸⁷ The French were not fooled and stated bluntly that the Russians were only trying to acquire 'rights, liquidate the old differences between them and the Greek monks, and achieve', in a word, 'predominance on Mount Athos' thanks to their military presence.⁸⁸

Moreover, the Russian soldiers interfered in the life of the various hermitages. They claimed authority over the monastery of Iveron, where monks from the Caucasus lived. The Russian officers quickly reclassified the monks' origin from Georgian to Russian to impose their law. Similarly, in May 1917, Ditch said he had intervened to suppress what he conveniently called 'a riot' in the Romanian *skete* (a monastic community) of Prodomou.⁸⁹ He obtained the dismissal of several Romanian monks on the island of Thassos and tried to control the Romanian monks' activities in all Macedonia.⁹⁰ Throughout the reports sent to the French, the Russian-Romanian diplomatic correspondence is regularly used to present the Russian contingent as the Romanian ally proxy.⁹¹

The Russians also showed a great interest in controlling the peninsula's heritage: the Russian Academy of Sciences recommended to General Sarraill that all the Athos treasures should remain under the exclusive supervision of Russians.⁹² The interest of a belligerent in this heritage is not atypical. The French and British armies thus carried out a military-scientific mission in Macedonia through archaeological excavations and ethnographic campaigns.⁹³ Most of the officers had a classical culture and were sensitive to the ancient Greek and Byzantine past.⁹⁴ General Sarraill even set up an Archaeological Service of the Armée d'Orient to highlight the French attachment to cultural heritage, as opposed to the alleged Central Power barbarism.⁹⁵

But unlike the French and British – whose archaeological projects were circumstantial – the Russian project can be linked to a series of imperial academic and archaeological activities from the shores of the Black Sea to Palestine since the middle of the nineteenth century, aimed at assimilating Petrograd and Byzantium within the same cultural space under Russian patronage. Prior to the conflict, this was the ambition of researchers at the Russian Archaeological Institute in Constantinople, where they undertook a series of scientific expeditions to Mount Athos, and to several high places of Eastern Christianity, from Bulgaria to Syria, passing through Anatolia, Greece and Macedonia: collecting manuscripts, making sketches of monuments, taking photographs of buildings, excavating and collecting objects, some of which were taken to Russia.⁹⁶ These activities continued in the context of the Russian occupation of the Ottoman territories. In the region of Trebizond, Russian archaeologists took part in a 'scientific occupation'⁹⁷ to revalue the Christian heritage.⁹⁸ Moreover, the troops' interest in

⁸⁷ Report by Ditch, 20 Feb. 1917, SHD, 20 N 194.

⁸⁸ Report by Mahevé to Special Commissariat in Salonika, 13 Mar. 1917, SHD, 20 N 194.

⁸⁹ Report by Lieutenant Ditch about the troubles in the Romanian monasteries, 29 May 1917, SHD, 20 N 194.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Weekly report by Ditch, no. 24, 25 Mar. 1917, SHD, 20 N 194.

⁹² Letter, general head of the Armée d'Orient to War Minister, no. 3492/2, 13 Mar. 1917, SHD, 5 N 110.

⁹³ Thérèse Krempf, 'L'armée française d'Orient, nouvelle expédition militaro-scientifique?', in *Front d'Orient, 1914–1919. Les soldats oubliés*, ed. Jean-Yves Le Naour (Marseille: Éditions Gaussen, 2016), 63–82; Andrew Shapland and Evangelia Stefani, eds., *Archaeology Behind the Battle Lines: The Macedonian Campaign (1915–19) and its Legacy* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

⁹⁴ John Horne, 'A "Civilizing Work"? The French Army in Macedonia, 1915–1918,' in *Militarized Cultural Encounters in the Long Nineteenth Century: Making War, Mapping Europe*, eds. Joseph Clarke and John Horne (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 320–21.

⁹⁵ 'Instruction sur la conservation et la recherche des antiquités,' SHD, 20 N 77; Edmond Pottier, 'Fouilles archéologiques sur l'emplacement de la nécropole d'Éléonte de Thrace,' *Bulletin de correspondance hellénique* (Athens: École Française d'Athènes, 1915), 151.

⁹⁶ Pinar Üre, 'Byzantine Heritage, Archaeology, and Politics Between Russia and the Ottoman Empire: Russian Archaeological Institute in Constantinople, 1894–1914', PhD thesis, London School of Economics, 2014, 146.

⁹⁷ Alit Dündar Akarça, 'Imperial Formations in Occupied Lands: The Russian Occupation of Ottoman Territories during the First World War', PhD thesis, Princeton University, 2014, 151.

⁹⁸ Pinar Üre, 'Byzantine Past, Russian Present,' *Byzantium's Other Empire: Hagia Sophia in Trebizond*, ed. Antony Eastmond (Istanbul: Koç University Press, 2016), 226–33.

the Macedonian heritage was as much cultural as it was religious, as Russians reinstated churches to celebrate masses. All of these actions were a way of Russifying the holy places.⁹⁹

Russian diplomacy mobilised to perpetuate this occupation. In this struggle one can find the same protagonists as during the negotiations on the internationalisation of Mount Athos. Petriaev insisted that everything should be done so that 'the detachment would remain there until the end of the war, for the safety of our spiritual institutions and our numerous monks'. At first, the Russian diplomats were optimistic, because the French welcomed the project.¹⁰⁰ But Venizelos soon demanded the military detachment withdrawal and denied the Russian allegations of subversive activity in the Greek monasteries. The fear of a prolonged occupation was strong in Salonika, and Venizelos' political credibility in Greece could be damaged if he did not oppose Petrograd's ambitions.¹⁰¹ In his demand for the evacuation – claiming the 'Hellenity' of the Mount – he was even supported by the Serbs.¹⁰² The Franco-Russian position became difficult to hold when, in March, the Greek monks declared their support to the Venizelos government and proclaimed the deposition of King Constantine, who opposed Greece's entry into the war. This sudden support for the Venizelist movement belied the last suspicions about the Mount and attests to the consolidation of Venizelos' power in Macedonia. It took place in a context where, throughout the month of April, the Greek government in Salonika orchestrated a series of *coups de force* to remove the royalist gendarmes and civil servants loyal to Constantine in several Greek cities. The return of Venizelos to Athens – against Russia's will – was the culmination of this struggle.¹⁰³

The Greek Equation

The refusal of subordination to the other Balkan armies, and the attempt to perpetuate a Russian presence in the region, reveal the imperial dimension of Russian action. Petrograd's position during the Allied coup in Athens confirms long-standing ambitions in the Balkans, clearly expressed in diplomatic correspondence and in the Russian press.

In the summer of 1917, units of the Russian expeditionary corps also took part in the Entente coup in Athens – unbeknownst to Petrograd. A neutral state at the time of the Allied landing in Salonika, Greece was divided into two factions, giving rise to what the Greeks called the National Schism (*Ethnikós Dikhasmós*). Closer to the Central Empires, and to Germany, King Constantine wanted to keep his country out of the conflict. Venizelos, on the other hand, was at the head of a rival government in Salonika. Venizelos defended the idea that entering the war on the side of the Entente would allow the Greeks to achieve the *Megáli Idéa*, the reunion of all Hellenes in a single state. Greek neutrality made him fear that territories which he considered to belong to Athens would be offered to Russia or to Italy.¹⁰⁴ During the Bulgarian offensive against Serbia, Venizelos invoked the treaty binding Serbia and Greece, obliging Athens and Belgrade to assist each other in case of aggression. He pushed the king to sign a decree introducing conscription and invited the Allies to land in Salonika to help the Serbs. Despite a vote of confidence in the Greek parliament, the king definitively disowned him and demanded his resignation on 5 October 1915. The opposition between the monarch and his head of government became complete when the latter became head of the national defence government in Salonika in September 1916 and joined the Entente.

⁹⁹ Elena Astafieva, 'Russian Policy in Palestine in the Late Imperial Period, or How to Transfer "Holy Russia" into the Holy Land?', *Jerusalem Quarterly* 71 (2017), 7–18.

¹⁰⁰ Note by Petriaev, 22 Feb. 1917, HI, Box 62, folder 7; Secret telegram, Izvolsky to Kal, 14 Feb. 1917, HI, Box 62, folder 7; Secret telegram, Izvolsky to Kal, 3 Mar. 1917, HI, Box 62, folder 7.

¹⁰¹ Report by Barrère about the Greek fear of a Russian occupation on Mount Athos, SHD, 20 N 194.

¹⁰² Telegrams received by the Quai d'Orsay, 1 Feb. 1917, AMAE, Guerre 1914–1918, vol. 269; Letter from the Serbian consul in Salonika to General Sarraill, 23 June 1917, SHD, 20 N 194; De Billy to Briand, 30 Mar. 1917, MAE, Guerre 1914–1918, vol. 271.

¹⁰³ Mourélos, *L'intervention*, 71.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 19–22.

The near civil war situation was a permanent concern for General Sarraïl, who was constantly worried about an attack by Constantine's troops towards the north. He kept asking Paris to give him the means to install Venizelos definitively in power. French diplomacy constantly urged Constantine to at least disarm Thessaly and to hand over the armaments in Greek ports to the Allies. This approach was met with limited success, as Paris resorted to disarmament *manu militari* in Athens in December 1916, when French troops met resistance from the Greek army and the population, resulting in the death of 194 French soldiers. After this setback, France imposed a blockade on Greece and decided to recognise the government of Salonika.¹⁰⁵

The situation greatly embarrassed the Russian diplomats. Prince Demidov, the Russian minister in Athens, was a friend of King Constantine. He asked Paris and London to show more restraint and advised amicable negotiations with the Greek authorities.¹⁰⁶ But the minister was above all worried about Russia's loss of influence in the Balkans, to the benefit of France.¹⁰⁷ After the tsar's abdication in March 1917, the news caused concern at Constantine's court, as the monarch lost an influential defender within the Entente. In Salonika's government, however, the revolution was very well received. Venizelos' entourage considered that the abdication of the tsar could result in the end of the monarchy in Greece. And according to Venizelos, a democratic Russian state would tend less to reconstituting imperial and Orthodox Byzantium under its aegis, a competitor project to his Hellenic *Megali Idea*. Even though the Russians firmly maintained their claim to the Straits, Caclamanos, Venizelos' representative in Russia, received the warmest welcome from the Russian Foreign Minister Milyukov. The Provisional Government then assured that it intended to send a diplomatic agent to Salonika. The feelings of Venizelos' government of national unity towards Russia also softened as soon as Milyukov, reputed to be an imperialist, was replaced by Tereschenko, who had been the First Finance Minister of the Russian Provisional Government.¹⁰⁸ But Tereschenko, like Milyukov, harboured the same fears about the advent of a more ambitious and conquering Greece in the Balkans. He was also afraid of seeing a collapse of the Serbian army at the same time. Tereschenko, as Milyukov, even considered renewing contacts with Bulgaria.¹⁰⁹

The grip on the Greek monarch tightened even more when Alexandre Ribot, who favoured an energetic policy in Greece, became Président du Conseil and Minister for Foreign Affairs in March 1917. From then on, Paris gave clear support to the various landings of Venizelos' troops to depose the royal officials. Following the Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne conference, Italy was assured of French and British approval for its acquisitions in Asia Minor in exchange for support for the eventual deposition of Constantine. Sarraïl thus had a free hand. This conference illustrates the increasing isolation of Russia on the Eastern question. Petrograd insisted on Paris maintaining 'unity of action in Greek affairs', hoping that Paris would exert its moderating influence on the Venizelist ambitious territorial aims.¹¹⁰ But the Russians' position remained very distrustful of the Venizelist government. In a report sent to Petrograd, Mukhanov, the Russian military attaché in Athens, sketched out an analysis of the situation, which undoubtedly represented the state of mind of many Russian general officers and diplomats:

The overthrow of King Constantine by Venizelos in Athens is possible. This raises the question of how far this change meets Russian interests. As far as the resolution of the Balkan problems at the end of the war is concerned, we think it is more advantageous to keep Greece in the present

¹⁰⁵ Elli Lemonidou, 'Un front intérieur divisé. La Grèce durant la Première Guerre mondiale,' in *Les fronts intérieurs européens*, eds. Stéphane Le Bras and Laurent Dornel (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2018), 285–96.

¹⁰⁶ Mourélos, *L'intervention*, 48.

¹⁰⁷ Demidov described in countless reports the establishment of French tutelage over Greece. See for example: E. A. Adamova, *Evropejskie deržavy i Grecija v èpohu mirovoj vojny: po sekretnym materialam b. Ministerstva inostrannyh del s priloženiem kopij diplomatičeskikh dokumentov* (Moscow: Komissariat po Inostr. Delam. 1922), 203.

¹⁰⁸ Mourélos, *L'intervention*, 67.

¹⁰⁹ Anatolij Venediktovič Ignat'ev, *Vnešnjaja politika Vremennogo pravitel'stva* (Moscow: Nauka, 1974), 248–53.

¹¹⁰ Mourélos, *L'intervention*, 74; Ignat'ev, *Vnešnjaja politika Vremennogo pravitel'stva*, 160.

situation, i.e. without a say in the region. [The intervention of Venizelos' forces in Athens] is hardly desirable for us. For this will lead to the unification of Greece and the restoration of its strength.¹¹¹

But despite Russian reservations, on 11 May 1917, the British and French finally agreed to send Charles Jonnart, French senator and chairman of the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, to Greece. He was appointed High Commissioner of the Protecting Powers. France and Great Britain wanted to push Constantine to abdicate in favour of an heir or regent favourable to Venizelos, who would be recalled to Athens to head a new government. Jonnart had to arrive in Athens with a contingent of the Armée d'Orient, among them Russian troops.

The Russian Provisional Government was very resistant to the idea of an Entente intervention in Athens, and at no time gave an authorisation for its men to take part in such an operation. Petrograd was only informed of the nomination of Jonnart as High Commissioner and asked to postpone the intervention until the start of the Russian offensive in the summer of 1917. Tereschenko feared a weakening of the Macedonian Front that would enable the Central Empires to transfer troops on the Russian fronts.¹¹² He also worried about Soviet Petrograd's criticism, fiercely opposed to the Entente intervention in a neutral country.

Nevertheless, an expeditionary force disembarked in Athens and, unbeknownst to Petrograd, 4,000 Russian soldiers were placed under the command of General Charles Regnault.¹¹³ Faced with such a deployment of force, Constantine renounced power on 12 June in favour of his son Alexander. The troops of the Armée d'Orient remained in Athens to ensure the transfer of power to Venizelos. Informed of Jonnart's action, Tereschenko sent a telegram to Paris, expressing his surprise at having learned of the delivery of an ultimatum demanding the abdication of the king in the name of the three protecting powers, including Russia.¹¹⁴ Moreover, the participation of Russian troops in the operation greatly upset the Petrograd government, now exposed to renewed criticism.

As early as 19 June, Soviet workers and soldiers in Petrograd harshly criticised the Russian government for having intervened so violently in Greek political life. Minister Tsereteli first blamed the Allies and declared that everything had happened against their will, a justification which undermined even more the credibility of the Provisional Government in diplomatic matters. Tereschenko returned to his own position and that of his government: the Greeks must be masters of their own destiny, in accordance with the right of peoples to decide their own fate. In Athens, Demidov sent a dispatch to the French government to protest the use of Russian troops and to demand their immediate return to the Macedonian front.¹¹⁵ Faced with Petrograd's insistence, the French Minister of War asked Sarraill to comply.¹¹⁶

Put on the spot, General Regnault considered such a withdrawal impossible. He feared for the stability of the security arrangements in Athens, Sarraill insisted, worrying that the German-Bulgarian troops would take advantage of the situation. General Regnault refused to move even one unit until Venizelos arrived in Athens. Events quickly proved him right. On 25 June demonstrations in favour of the king were organised in the city. The contingent of the Armée d'Orient marched on the insurgent districts and surrounded the capital. The Russians were only returned to Sarraill after having taken part in maintaining order in the capital.¹¹⁷

¹¹¹ Report by Mukanov, 12 Apr. 1917, RGVA, fond 15237, op. 1, del. 7, lis 16–19.

¹¹² Ignat'ev, *Vnešnjaja politika Vremennogo pravitel'stva*, 161.

¹¹³ AFGG, tome VIII, vol. 2, 480–85; Allied operations report, from 1 to 15 June 1917, SHD, 16 N 3145.

¹¹⁴ Mourellos, *L'intervention*, 113.

¹¹⁵ General Regnault to General Sarraill, no. 96, 20 June 1917, SHD, 20 N 154.

¹¹⁶ Charles Regnault, *La conquête d'Athènes, juin-juillet 1917* (Paris: L. Fournier, 1919), 57–60, 67–8; General Braquet to General Sarraill, 17 June 1917, SHD, 16 N 3139; War Minister to general head of the Armée d'Orient, 20 June 1917, SHD, 5 N 110.

¹¹⁷ Regnault, *La conquête*, 70; General Sarraill to military attaché at Athens, no 5372/2, 23 June 1917, SHD, 16 N 3139; Jonnart to General staff, 28 June 1917, SHD, 16 N 3048.

The involvement of Russian troops and the deposition of Constantine led the Provisional Government to take a clearer position on the events in Athens. On 7 July, a governmental communiqué appeared in the Russian press, to express, *urbi et orbi*, Petrograd's disagreement with the Allied methods:

In this matter we could not but disapprove of how the forced replacement of a king by another took place. Certainly, in this matter we were moved not by the desire to support King Constantine, whose personal policy we continue to disapprove, but by the inadmissibility of interference in the Hellenic people's internal affairs. ... Our view was that the establishment of a Greek government ... belonged exclusively to the Greek people. And we declared that the sympathies of the Russian people, who had just freed themselves from the dynastic yoke, support a similar solution for the Greek people.¹¹⁸

Such a declaration caused a stir in Paris and aroused the incomprehension of Russia's allies, who wondered what Petrograd had to gain by attacking the Entente's policy in this way, when the deposition of the king was a *fait accompli*. Moreover, a few days later, Petrograd finally recognised the new government. When the Provisional Government's declaration was published, the Russian-Greek relations, the involvement of Russian troops, the Athens coup, as well as the position of Russian diplomats, had in fact become a public debate topic in Petrograd. The Greek question was indeed regularly discussed in the columns of the liberal and conservative Russian press, which accredited the idea of a mainly internal vocation of Tereschenko's press release.¹¹⁹ Alexander Kerensky had published a condemnation of the Allies' actions in Greece, under the guise of self-determination.¹²⁰ In *Pravda*, Lenin was denouncing the 'pressure by starvation' imposed on Greece 'by the warships of the Anglo-French and Russian imperialists'.¹²¹

King Constantine was certainly strongly criticised in Russian newspapers, but many articles urged the Provisional Government to adopt a firm stance against Venizelos, described as too ambitious. Thus, in the columns of the conservative *Novoe Vremia*, one can on the one hand read texts of great virulence about the former Greek sovereign, still describing him as a traitor to his word given to Serbia, even of complicity with the Central Powers. But in the same newspaper, one can also read articles deploring the decline of the Slavic presence in Macedonia, to the benefit of the Greek state:

All Greek Macedonia was reconquered by Allied troops, but the denationalisation of the Slavic colony in favour of 'Hellenism' continued, and the very question of the liberation of the Slavs of the region was postponed to a later date. Europe willingly subscribes to the sacrifice of thousands of Slavs on the altar of the Hellenic idea, but these forgotten Slavs place no hope in Europe. The only [state] that intercedes on their behalf for a future peace is fraternal Russia, for they are the direct descendants of those Slavs, among whom were born Cyril and Methodius, as well as the language that they were speaking.¹²²

The sequence of events following from the agreements of Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne to the Allied intervention in Athens in the summer of 1917 thus shows the persistence of an imperial stance towards Greece. Petrograd saw Constantine as an obstacle to Allied operations in the Balkan Peninsula, a viewpoint shared by their allies. But successive Russian foreign ministers never fully supported Venizelos. Miliukov feared the overambitious Greek minister, a fear which would jeopardise the imperial agenda in the Balkans and in the Straits. Tereschenko was afraid of exposing himself to

¹¹⁸ *Novoe vremia*, 14 June 1917.

¹¹⁹ Olga Sokolobskaya, 'Russian Newspapers of 1917 on Greece Joining World War I,' *Balkan Studies* 26, no. 1 (1985): 131–49.

¹²⁰ *Dyelo Naroda*, 14 June 1917.

¹²¹ *Pravda*, 'The Laugh Is on You,' 16 June 1917.

¹²² *Novoe Vremia*, 21 Apr. 1917.

criticism from the Soviets because of interference, but did not want to displease conservative and pan-Slavic circles. Distrust also remained on the side of the government of Venizelos, which rightly feared pan-Slavism and the stubbornly imperial foreign policy despite the February revolution. The *Megali Idea* defended by Venizelos remained a competing project with the territorial aims of Petrograd. And even if old Russian ambitions were no longer expressed in speeches, the diplomats were not replaced, and the links between ministers and the pan-Slavic milieu remained strong, perpetuating rivalry with Greece.¹²³

After Venizelos' return to Athens, as a sign of confidence French troops gradually returned to Macedonia and evacuated several regions of Old Greece. The Russian contingent on Mount Athos was evacuated, while the Armée d'Orient was already disavowing the conduct of these troops and demanding the recall of the officers obeying the Russian consul.¹²⁴ Stressing that the French had agreed to an occupation until the end of the conflict, the Russian foreign minister asked not to allow the Greek authorities to occupy Mount Athos. In vain.¹²⁵ The double outcome of the occupation of Mount Athos and the Athenian intervention demonstrated the paradoxical situation of this Russian contingent in the Balkans. Russian diplomats and several generals had thought that Russian troops could have political and diplomatic value on this front. Their dependence on the Armée d'Orient reduced them to a supporting role, and in various political and diplomatic matters the French had the last word.

Conclusion

Throughout the summer of 1917, when soviets were formed among the Russian soldiers in Macedonia, the men showed increasing signs of mistrust of their generals. All the units returned to the front line only under constraint. In a proclamation written by troops gathered in a Soviet rank and file, all their grievances about their situation were summarised: heavy losses at the front, malaria wreaking havoc in the ranks, homesickness, etc.¹²⁶ Among various complaints, one directly concerned the Russian diplomats. Soldiers related the visits of the Russian consuls to the soldiers' hospitals, followed by a procession of Russian nurses, some of them in search of Red Cross medals. The text condemned the attitude of the aristocracy and Russian elites, capitalising on good deeds, while the Russian soldier suffered at the front. The meaning of the intervention in Macedonia was attacked here: the soldiers and officers knew what their presence in the Balkans owed to these dignitaries. The soldiers' delegates understood that it was for imperial diplomacy that the brigades were fighting in Macedonia. When they refused to return to combat and mutinied in November 1917, these soldiers were also refusing to continue the campaign 'for Macedonia' wanted by their rulers.¹²⁷

The metamorphosis of Russian intervention projects in Macedonia clearly shows the permanence of Petrograd's ambitions in the region, and the eminently political character of the Russian brigades. Their mobilisation on a secondary – even tertiary – front in a context of manpower shortages also demonstrates how representations of the Empire in terms of prestige and influence played a big role in Russian decision making. The hopes of conquering Constantinople and the belief in Russian pre-eminence in the Balkans fuelled Petrograd's ambitions in the region. They give us glimpses into the anxieties of imperial diplomacy ruled by an intense fear of loss of rank.

¹²³ Ol'ga Evgenievna Petrunina, *Grečeskaja nacija i gosudarstvo v XVIII–XX vv.: očerki političeskogo razvitija* (Moscow: KDU, 2010), 448–9; Ol'ga Evgenievna Petrunina, 'Russko-grečeskie otnošenija i evoljucija 'Velikoj idei' grekov v XIII – načale XX veka,' *Grečeskij mir XVIII–XX vv. v novykh istoričeskikh issledovanijah* (Moscow: Istoričeskij fakul'tet Moskovskogo Universiteta, 2006), 43.

¹²⁴ Report no. 84 by Captain Six, head of the French-Russian dispatch, sent to General Sarraill, head of the Armées alliées d'Orient, 18 June 1917, SHD, 20 N 194; 'Retrait du Mont Athos le plus tôt possible,' De Billy to Briand, 30 Mar. 1917, AMAE, Guerre 1914–1918, vol. 270; Foreign Affairs Minister to War Minister, no. 1537, 8 July 1917, AMAE, Guerre 1914–1918, vol. 275.

¹²⁵ General Sarraill to Grand Quartier Général, no. 197516, 15 July 1917, SHD, 5 N 110.

¹²⁶ *Krasnyi Arkhiv*, no. 101 (1940), 228–34.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

This mental universe made any regional competitor, be it Serbian or Greek, undesirable. The Russians refused to cede the slightest precedence to the Serbs, even if only in the order of battle in Macedonia. The Russian attempt to establish a protectorate on Mount Athos is also an eloquent example of the Russian agenda's consistencies. Russian behaviour during the Allied coup in Athens clearly shows that Russia did not tolerate any competitor to its patronage in the Balkans. From Sazonov to Tereschenko, from the Imperial government to the Provisional Government, it is striking to see constant Russian hostility to French influence in the region, as well as to Venizelos' policy.

But all in all, from the Balkan Wars to the October Revolution, Russian diplomacy had successively shown itself incapable of materialising something it called 'influence' in the Balkans. Far from dismissing the whims of Russian decision makers, the situation of imperial crisis in which Russia found itself gave rise to all sorts of hypotheses about the re-employment of the Russian brigades. General Diterikhs proposed to send them to Mesopotamia, where they could finally have greater political weight.¹²⁸ At the beginning of the Russian civil war, White diplomats and generals still considered the possibility of using these soldiers as an anti-Bolshevik legion. The imperial projects were not sunk by their unrealistic nature. The shock of reality escalated the anxieties that animated these designs.

¹²⁸ Telegram, General Diterikhs to General Artamonov, 18 Oct. 1917, no. 7366, RGVIA, f. 15230, op. 1, del. 11, lis 20.