

'A Sting of Remembrance!': collective memory and its forgotten armies

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At the end of the library sections dedicated to the major wars of modern times one often finds titles of memoirs and studies on 'forgotten' fronts, armies, and soldiers. The considerable number of books that have actually been published in the last century attempting to introduce to the wider public what they consider as the forgotten stories of a variety of groups of combatants stands as a clear sign of a widespread feeling of exclusion that is encountered after the end of a war among a number of its participants.¹ It also indicates a particular appeal among the public of the image of the serviceman who underwent so many hardships, or even lost his life, and after the war was not awarded the honours and recognition due to a hero. It seems that the persistent use of the specific term 'forgotten' touches on a popular combination of chords of social pride and guilt.²

It was the First World War that triggered for the first time the publication of a substantial number of books representative of this particular genre. *Letters from the Forgotten Army* was the title of a book published as early as 1920, referring to the British forces that served at the Balkan front.³ The Balkan front was one of the few fronts of the Great War on

¹Recent titles on the 'forgotten armies' of the Second World War include Anthony J. Cooper, *Anti-aircraft Command: The other forgotten army* (Fleet Hargate: Arcturus Press, 2004); John Leyin, *Tell them of us: The forgotten army, Burma* (Stanford-le-Hope: Lejins, 2000); Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten armies: Britain's Asian empire and the war with Japan* (London: Penguin, 2005).

²The fact that a 'forgotten army' literature has developed in relation not only to armies that have seen military action, but also to different groups of civilians that contributed to different war efforts at the home front, and even in relation to themes that are totally unconnected to any war effort, is a good indication of the spread and the appeal of the 'forgotten' front literature and its terminology. See for example Mari A. Williams, *A forgotten army: The female munitions workers of South Wales, 1939-1945* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002); Melanie Henwood and Malcolm Wicks, *The forgotten army: Family care and elderly people* (London: Family Policy Studies Centre, 1984).

³ Jane Dare (pseud), *Letters from the forgotten Army* (London: Arthur H. Stockwell, 1920).

European soil other than the Western Front in which substantial numbers of British soldiers fought. It has also been a major source of ‘forgotten army’ literature, alongside the Italian, the Middle Eastern, and the East African fronts.⁴ It is interesting, however, that although many studies that have been published on these fronts do make use of the term ‘forgotten’ in their titles, none has actually tried to describe how this feeling of exclusion was experienced by the soldiers. Instead, as these studies are mainly aimed as tributes to the sacrifices of those who fought in forgotten fronts – reclaiming the latter from the realm of the forgotten – they concentrate on describing the history of the fronts, the soldiers’ everyday lives, their heroic achievements, the battles in which they fought, and the importance of their contribution to the general war effort.

Focusing on the story of the ‘forgotten’ British army of the Balkan front – popularly known as the ‘Salonika Army’ – this chapter will attempt to explain exactly this feeling of exclusion from public memory, the reasons behind it and the veteran soldiers’ reactions to it. In relation to the broader debates on memory, the unique context of the development of a ‘forgotten front’ experience, in which the normally well-hidden functions of image-reading and image-making lay unusually exposed, offers a good opportunity to examine the way popular culture constructs its images of war. This article will specifically look at the dynamics of the relationship between public and private memory. The background of the history of the memory of the Balkan front opens a new window of research that helps the better understanding of the ways in which popular images and memory were constructed within the context of the First World War, outside the usual framework of the Western front experience. After a description of the processes through which the Balkan front soldiers – and then

⁴ A recent wave of interest on such fronts has produced a number of studies, such as: George H. Cassar, *The forgotten front: The British campaign in Italy, 1917-1918* (London: Hambledon Press, 1998); Martin Marix Evans, *Forgotten battlefronts of the First World War* (Stroud: Sutton, 2003); Ross Anderson, *The forgotten front: The East African campaign, 1914-1918* (Stroud: Tempus, 2004), Alan Wakefield and Simon Moody, *Under the devil's eye: Britain's forgotten army at Salonika, 1915-1918* (Stroud: Sutton, 2004).

veterans – felt that public opinion sidelined them, the article will examine the reasons that led to the actual exclusion of the Balkan front experience from the British popular memory of the war. Then it will move on to look at the means employed by the veteran soldiers to counteract that feeling of having served in an army that had been forgotten.

Marching to Oblivion

The British army went to the Balkans as part of a joined Franco-British force that landed at the northern Greek city of Salonika in late 1915. The initial purpose of the allied presence in the region was to provide assistance to Serbia and to exert pressure on Greece to join the Entente. However, before they managed to establish contact with the Serbian front, Serbia was defeated. In the meantime, Greece, instead of joining the Allies, entered a long political crisis that led to the dismissal of the country's pro-British premier by the pro-German king, and the country joined the Allies only after the king's forced abdication in the summer of 1917. Nonetheless, despite failing to achieve any of its initial objectives, the allied army stayed in the region and became engaged in what came to be known as the 'Balkan', or otherwise the 'Salonika', or 'Macedonian' front. The front-line along the northern Greek border, facing mainly Bulgarian forces, saw no major battles almost until the end of the war. Only in September 1918 did the allies manage to mount a successful offensive, forcing the Bulgarians to seek for an armistice.⁵

By the end of the war a substantial number of British soldiers had spent at least part of their war in the Balkans. In 1917, at the height of the British presence there, the number of troops in the region mounted to almost 185,000, while by the end of the war almost 10,000 British soldiers had died or gone missing in the Macedonian plains and mountains of the

⁵ On the history of the fronts see Alan Palmer, *The gardeners of Salonika* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1965); Wakefield and Moody, *Under the devil's eye*.

Balkans, with malaria and Spanish influenza being responsible for a large number of these deaths.⁶

Almost from the start of their presence in the Balkans, the soldiers of the Salonika Army experienced a feeling of exclusion from the popular images of heroic frontline action that were being formed back in Britain. They soon felt that their war in the Balkans was very different from what the public back in Britain expected it to be. This realisation brought a gradual feeling of exclusion from the public memory that was building up in relation to the Great War frontline experience. The soldiers' private memories of the war and the public memory of the war that was being constructed back in Britain obviously diverged from the very start.

During the war the press coverage of the Balkan front was limited. The daily newspapers often included small paragraphs reporting the latest activities from the front, but any actual extensive references to the British units present in the region were hard to find and they were never as many or as lengthy as the soldiers and their families would have liked. As a Salonika Army veteran complained in a book he published on the front in 1919, tellingly titled *Salonika Side-Show*, 'you may search the daily papers from cover to cover without finding any mention of the Salonika Army [...] one might read the papers for months without suspecting our existence'.⁷ A closer look at the journals and papers of the time affirms this impression. Throughout 1916 *Punch* published thirty-seven comic-strips, notes or poems on the broader political and military developments in the Balkan peninsula, but only four of them contained small references to the presence of the British forces in the region, while a small story of half a page was dedicated to the imaginary encounter of a British officer with a Greek peasant. The rest focused on developments in the region, such as the diplomatic efforts to lure

⁶ "Appendix 21: A note on casualties" in Cyril Falls, *Military Operations: Macedonia; from the spring of 1917 to the end of the war*, vol.2 (London: HM Stationary Office, 1935), 351.

⁷ V.J. Seligman, *The Salonika side-show* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1919), 76-7.

Greece and Romania in the war on the side of the allies, that bore no reference whatsoever to the British units in the Balkans.⁸ In the first two months of 1917, *Illustrated London News* had five articles on the broader developments in the peninsula and only four on the British forces there, including, however, an extensive two-page report on the fighting conditions experienced by the British soldiers.⁹ And in the first eight months of 1918, just before the final autumn offensive against Bulgaria, *Sunday Pictorial* published notes and articles on the Balkans in twenty-one out of its thirty-four issues, but only twelve entries were actually on the British troops.¹⁰ Reporting on the British forces at the Balkan front was obviously not among the priorities of the popular newspapers and magazines of the time. It is no surprise then that many of the British soldiers serving in the Balkans felt forgotten even while their war effort was still going on.

Getting forgotten was not however the only issue that troubled the soldiers' self-perceptions. As no news of any major battles came from Salonika, jokes of the time started picking on the British forces in the Balkans, constructing an image of an army that was avoiding contact with the enemy while enjoying the good life in the Mediterranean plains of Greece. 'If you want a holiday, go to Salonika', went a popular music-hall act of the time, which was actually the only evidence of popular criticism of the Salonika Army produced by most sources that complained after the war about the public attitudes to the British forces in the Balkans. This could be taken as a sign that the authors of such sources were limited in numbers and in close contact with each other, recycling their information among them. But it

⁸ "Increasing odds" (30 August 1916), 157; "Charivaria" (27 September 1916), 213; "The great Bulgar mystery" (25 October 1916), 294; "A diversion from the west" (22 November 1916), 359; "Letters from Macedonia" (27 December 1916), 438.

⁹ "War scenes on various fronts" (13 January 1917), 30; "Campaigning in the Balkans" (3 February 1917), 140-1, 146; "Where operations have become more active" (24 February 1917), 236-7.

¹⁰ "Snow at Salonika", (6 January 1918), 2; "Salonika Patrol War", "Salonika Strength" (13 January 1918), 3; "Bulgars Repulsed" (3 March 1918), 2; "Bulgars Raided" (10 March 1918), 3; "Salonika Air War" (14 April 1918), 2; "Salonika Raid-War" (12 May 1918), 3; "Bulgars Put to Flight" (26 May 1918), 3; "1.712 Bulgar Prisoners" (2 June 1918), 2; "Bulgars Twice Beaten" (9 June 1918), 3; "Salonika Front Active" (30 June 1918), 3; "Bulgars Repulsed" (4 August 1918), 2.

is also a sign that most agents of popular culture of the time were rather totally disinterested in the Salonika Army than critically engaged with it, and hence the lack of any other offending incidents that could be used as examples of negative images of the army in popular culture.¹¹

This sense of uselessness and subsequent ridicule was felt deeply by the soldiers who were in contact with the home front. And although many of them enjoyed the opportunity to avoid the hardships of the Western front, others, under the pressure of feeling both forgotten and ridiculed, expressed their disappointment with their mission, and a desire to move to France. ‘But we must get in action / Far from the plains of Greece’, went a verse posted by a private from the 12th Cheshire Regiment to the *Balkan News*, the newspaper edited in Salonika for the British soldiers.¹²

‘After three years in the outer darkness’, the successful final offensive of 1918 finally brought some attention to the front, as Bulgaria sought an armistice and became the first for the Central Powers to be defeated by the allies.¹³ The first agent of that potential positive publicity for the Salonika army was the Bishop of London, who visited the troops at the Balkan front only weeks after Bulgaria’s capitulation. From there he sent a letter to *The Times* in which he congratulated the soldiers for their contribution to the war effort while he criticised his fellow countrymen for not showing enough appreciation for the ‘fortitude, courage, and wonderful success of the Salonika Army’.¹⁴ But his letter was published on 8 November 1918, only three days before Germany asked for an armistice at the Western front, and the days that the Salonika Army spent in the limelight of the public sphere back home were inevitably few. After the end of the war the Balkan front sank again to oblivion and

¹¹ See, for example, V.J. Seligman, V. J., *Macedonian Musings* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1918), 95; A. F. London, “Our Army In Salonika. A Gallant Force., Testimony Of The Bishop Of London”, *The Times*, (8 November 1918), 5; Palmer, *The gardeners of Salonika*, 145.

¹² “12 Cheshire Regiment”, *Balkan News*, 47 (17 December 1915), 3.

¹³ Seligman, *The Salonika Side-Show*, 144.

¹⁴ London, “Our Army In Salonika”, 5.

veterans started soon complaining about that already familiar feeling of exclusion. By 1928 General George Milne, who had commanded the British forces in the Balkans, felt so exasperated with this state of pariah his soldiers had acquired within the broader group of the First World War veterans that on the tenth anniversary of armistice he wrote to the *Times* to complain about the lack of support and interest in the sacrifices of his men, and the ‘mass of uninformed criticism [...], much of it almost vindictive in its cruelty’, that had been directed against his army.¹⁵ The fact that the few studies on the Balkan front which have been published since then consistently reiterate that the Salonika Army has been all these years, and still is, a ‘forgotten army’, seems to justify Milne’s complaints, at least in the eyes of those directly involved with the story of the Salonika Army.

The limits of public memory

Despite their sacrifices the soldiers of the Balkan front did indeed become a ‘forgotten army’ in the sphere of collective memory of the First World War that was gradually built during and after the war. This was due to a number of interconnected factors. The conditions for the existence of groups of soldiers that believe they constitute a forgotten army, the availability of public space that could be – or should – be attributed to them, and the ability offered to such groups to demand this space are all features of modernity. And it was around the time of the First World War that modernity expanded so decisively in all aspects of human life, influencing both the way wars were fought and the way popular images were formed. This is why it was the First World War that saw the proliferation of complaints over the existence of forgotten armies. On the one hand the constantly expanding mass media and the multiplying number of book publications covered war much more extensively and offered the potential of

¹⁵ Field Marshal Sir George Milne, “Macedonia: the Salonika Army’s achievement: its contribution to victory”, *The Times* (10 November 1928), 16.

much more publicity to its actors, both during and after the war. But they also offered the ability to those who felt excluded from mainstream memory to voice their discontent and to claim their place in collective memory they considered they deserved. On the other hand, the First World War saw the modernisation of warfare, an aspect of which was the mobilisation of large sections of the civilian population at the home front and, crucially, the conscription of unprecedented numbers of soldiers and the parallel multiplication of fronts in which the war was fought. Consequently, at the end of the war there were more groups of combatants who claimed a role in the war effort and hence, considering the limited focus capacity of media, there was the potential for many groups of combatants to feel ignored. It was in this context that the Salonika Army veterans came to consider themselves forgotten from collective memory.

As recent studies on memory and remembrance have pointed out, talking about collective memory is indeed a generalisation that does not seem to allow for the distinct memories of different individuals and groups.¹⁶ This applies especially in relation to the memory of events to which one can relate personally, like fighting in a particular front. Each combatant and non-combatant remembers whatever he personally experienced during the war. It is exactly for this reason that it is actually a common phenomenon among soldiers of all fronts to feel excluded from collective memory. They consider that their personal memories do not match the collective ones and hence they conclude that collective memory is not interested in their personal stories.¹⁷

But apart from ‘forgotten’ soldiers, there is also the phenomenon of the ‘forgotten’ armies. This is explained by the fact that alongside personal memories, there is still a sense of

¹⁶ Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan, “Setting the framework” in Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan, eds., *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 6-39.

¹⁷ Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, *The Great War in History: Debates and controversies, 1914 to present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 82-85.

a collective, or rather public, memory. This is the memory of the broader group in which one belongs. At a first level these are the subgroups alongside which one fought the war, as for example the associations of the Balkan front veterans. At a second level, it is the memory of the broader grouping of all these sub-groups that form each country's public opinion. Through the efforts of collective remembrance that come from many different sub-groups and individuals emerges gradually a narrative of memory accepted and shared by the majority of the public, a narrative which gradually moves then into becoming a myth.¹⁸ The material of this narrative is the personal memories of selected sub-groups, privileged over the memories of other sub-groups. The bibliography on all different types of forgotten heroes, fronts, armies, and soldiers, gives a good idea of the many groups and subgroups that are engaged in the war effort and are afterwards fighting for their space in public memory. The choice of which sub-group's memories are going to dominate the public memory is not a matter of an objective judgement; it is an essential part of the myth-building process behind any dominant discourse. The narratives and images that focus on the experiences of the sub-groups with the greatest numbers or the best links to formulators of public opinion inevitably come to dominate the perceptions of the public in relation to the experience of the broader groups of combatants or non-combatants. By doing so they push aside the narratives of all other sub-groups, making the latter feel sidelined and excluded.

In the case of the First World War it was the memories of the Western Front veterans that came to dominate the public perception of what frontline experience was like. 'Ours was an entirely different sort of warfare to that of the Western Front', noted Flora Sandes, a nurse

¹⁸ Ever since Roland Barthes' semiological decoding of the myth-making process in the 1950s (*Mythologies*, 1957), researchers have been very keen to unearth, describe and explain the myths that underlie all types of cultural phenomena. The First World War has produced an extensive number of myths, which in their turn have generated a large part of the contemporary historiographical interest in the war. Dan Todman's recent description of myth as the 'the history you can remember' is on the point, and explains clearly the role of myth in the context of the public memory of the First World War; see Dan Todman, *The Great War: myth and memory* (London: Hambleton and London, 2005), xiii.

who went to the Balkans following British aid missions to the region. ‘Anything more unlike the engagements one sees in pictures, and on the cinema, it would be hard to imagine’, she continued, providing an indication of the means through which she felt that the Western front came to that dominant position, namely the press, newsreels, and the cinema.¹⁹ The popularly projected scale of the sacrifices experienced by the British during the Great War was reflected by the features attributed to the Western front: great numbers, great losses, extreme sacrifices in futile battles, and extreme material and psychological pressures in the trenches.

But though this became the popular image of the First World War frontline experience, it actually did not represent the experience of all combatants. From their first months in the Balkans there was a growing sense among soldiers that, despite the hardships they faced in their front, their war experience was quite different from what the majority of the British army experienced, at the Western front. In the case of the Balkan front, the landscape and the type of fighting were considerably different from those in France and Belgium. The living conditions of the soldiers were not dominated by trenches and mud, but by mountains and mosquitoes. And the Balkan front saw fewer major battles and far fewer casualties than the Western front. ‘The history of the squadron on the Macedonian front has no very fantastic pages. It is mostly a story of good comradeship’ noted a member of the No.47 squadron of the Royal Air Force who saw action in most major battlefields of the war and could make comparisons.²⁰ The popular image of the inactive soldiers at the Balkan front, ‘the gardeners of Salonika’ as the French premier Clemenceau called them, did not match the popular images of frontline action, full of heroism, extreme hardship and sacrifice. The

¹⁹ Flora Sandes, *The autobiography of a woman soldier: a brief record of adventure with the Serbian army, 1916-1918* (London: H.F. and G. Witherby, 1927), 32.

²⁰ H.A. Jones, *Over the Balkans and South Russia: being the history of No.47 squadron Royal Air Force* (London: Edward Arnold, 1923), 127.

inclusion of the memory of the Balkan front would challenge considerable parts of this frontline myth.

At the background of the unfavourable popular attitudes to the Balkan front lay also strategic considerations over the usefulness of the opening of a new front at the East, and the bitter antagonisms between Westerners and Easterners in Britain and France.²¹ Most of the political and military establishment were from the start critical of any idea to send British troops to the Balkans, especially after the disastrous outcome of the Gallipoli campaign which had taken place close to the other side of the Greek border, facing east to the Ottoman empire. The deployment of a large number of troops to the other corner of Europe never became particularly popular among most British strategists, politicians and their media allies who saw it as a thoughtless waste of time, money and lives. Once the front had finally opened, against all such criticism, it still did not produce any major victories or other obvious benefits for the allies in all its first three years. This was something that obviously did not help the popular image of the Salonika Army. The military and political establishments and the media stuck to their criticism, and the public never gave its full support to the Balkan campaign. Milne's 1928 article in *The Times* was in reply exactly to these persistent negative representations of the front ten years after the end of the war. The fact that during the Second World War, despite suggestions in that direction, a Balkan front was not actually opened by the allies is suggestive of the fact that the negative memory of the Balkan front experience of the British army was very much alive in military and government cycles some quarter of a century later on. Characteristically, *Picture Post's* 1941 article on the possibility of a new Balkan front opened with a paragraph describing exactly this negative popular memory of the 'endless squabbling and controversy' that had followed the last time a decision was taken to send

²¹ David Dutton, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Britain and France in the Balkans in the First World War* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 1998).

British troops to the Balkans.²² Even when, in 1965, the first historical study of the Balkan front was published with the hope of providing a more positive assessment, a reviewer in the *English Historical Review* brushed off the history of the whole front as a worthless plan that had used for no reason a great number of soldiers, pointedly noting that ‘rarely have so many good soldiers been engaged in a more fruitless struggle’.²³

The all-dominant image of the Western front on the one hand, and the critical perception of the Balkan front on the other, guaranteed an at best uninterested and at worst openly critical attitude of the public towards the Salonika Army. This was a situation that was not helped by another factor that actually contributed to the building up of both above attitudes. This was the geographical and cultural distance between Britain and the Balkans. Every international war is fought against a foreign 'Other', often in a foreign land. The Balkan front was fought in the Balkans, mainly against the forces of Bulgaria. But both the Bulgarians as the enemy and the Balkans as the battlefield, were not as familiar to the British as the Germans, and France and Belgium were. They were instead pretty low in the hierarchy of familiarity that brings with it the interest of the public.²⁴ The British army that went to the Balkans opened an unwanted front in an unknown land and it was sucked further into the periphery of interests of the British public, where the Balkans already lay.

After the war, lack of knowledge and distance of the land where the soldiers had fought went hand in hand with a lack of interest in the remembrance efforts of the soldiers' fight, as the opening sentences of a Macedonian travelogue, published in 1921 by two Balkan front veterans, clearly indicate:

²² “The Balkan battlefront”, *Picture Post* (26 April 1941), 14-23.

²³ T. H. McGuffie, “Short notices”, review of *The gardeners of Salonika*, by Alan Palmer, *The English Historical Review*, 82 :322 (January 1967), 200.

²⁴ For the most comprehensive analysis of the popular western European images of the Balkans see: Maria Todorova. *Imagining the Balkans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997)

Whilst, in course of time, relatives and friends of those who fought with the British Army on the various fronts will have opportunities of paying visits to most of the theatres of war and of reviewing the scenes and surroundings in which their husbands, sons and brothers moved and fought, it is extremely doubtful whether such facilities for introduction to Macedonia will ever be available. There is one paramount reason for this; for whereas such distant fields as Palestine and Mesopotamia will in due time be opened up and exploited by British enterprise, and rendered safe for travel by British custodianship, no such happy feature is likely to wait Macedonia.²⁵

That the much more powerful images of the Western front sidelined the images of the Balkan front provides a good indication of public sphere's limited capacity to accommodate too many images referring to a common theme. Having to choose between the larger and closer-to-home Western front and the smaller and distant Balkan front – or any other such fronts – inevitably media chose the Western front. The same rule of limited capacity applied to stories on different subjects that were reported from the same foreign space, which, like the Balkans, were already of a peripheral interest for the British public. The problem for the 'forgotten' soldiers of the Salonika army was that even in the few articles, cartoons and books that were dedicated to their front, the story of the British military presence in the region was again overshadowed by other news stories, connected with more popular narratives of the time: Balkan politics and emancipated women.

Balkan politics, which had already attracted considerable British media attention for the first time during the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913, was a favourite topic for analysts and cartoonists alike during the First World War. The former concentrated on the diplomatic efforts to bring Romania, Bulgaria and Greece in the war at the side of the Entente, while for the latter the Bulgarian and Greek pro-German kings, 'Ferdie' and 'Tino', provided two very popular caricatures of hate-figures, especially as both of them were also of German origin.

²⁵ A. Goff, and Hugh A. Fawcett, *Macedonia: A plea for the primitive* (London: John Lane, 1921), v.

But even when particularly focusing on any actual British presence in the region, British media were once again distracted from reporting on the efforts of the Salonika army by the presence of another group of British participants in the war effort in the Balkans that were mostly unconnected to the British army. These were the hospital units that were sent to the region, which, considering their small number, attracted significant attention back in Britain. This was mainly due to the female members of the missions who inspired the imagination of the public, which saw them as adventurous women working not only at the front line, but also at the other corner of Europe.²⁶ Expressive of that fascination was the coverage of the story of Flora Sandes who, after going to the Balkans as a nurse, followed the Serbian army at its final withdrawal through the Albanian mountains and eventually joined its ranks as a fighting soldier. By 1916 Sandes was already a minor celebrity, giving public speeches, writing letters to the press to gather funds for aid-missions back in Serbia, being recognised in the streets by policemen and taxi-drivers, as she liked to note, and even being invited for an audience with Queen Alexandra.²⁷ In 1918 *Sunday Pictorial* considered her to be famous enough to publish the latest news of her from the Balkan front on its front page.²⁸

Sandes published two books on her wartime experience, one in 1916 and one in 1917, and these were the only Balkan front memoirs to attract any considerable interest at their time.²⁹ But that interest originated from the fact that she was *An English woman-sergeant in the Serbian army*, as the title of her first book was tellingly titled. Unlike the actual British force that served in the Balkans, which did not find its way to any fiction books or films in the years after the war, the image of the British female nurses working in the region was

²⁶ Monica Krippner, *The Quality of Mercy: Women at war, Serbia 1915-1918* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1980).

²⁷ Sandes, *The autobiography of a woman soldier*, 116-21.

²⁸ "Flora Sandes at the front", *Sunday Pictorial* (13 January 1918), 1.

²⁹ *An English woman-sergeant in the Serbian army* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1916); *The autobiography of a woman soldier*. See also Joanna Bourke, "Women and the military during World War One", BBC History, http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/war/wwone/women_combatants_01.shtml (24 March 2004).

considered appealing enough to make a couple of authors include small references to them in adventure stories they wrote during and after the war. As early as 1916, for example, John Buchan mentioned in his spy-story *Greenmantle* that, while in Belgrade, Richard Hannay heard 'English spoken' and saw 'some Red Cross nurses in the custody of Austrian soldiers coming from the railway station'.³⁰

The fascination of the press, publishers and the public with the women heroes of the Balkan front is indicative of the popular theme of the liberalisation of the roles of women during wartime. It shows not only the increasing visibility of women, but also the projection of an acceptance of the adoption by them of more adventurous roles. It is interesting to note, however, the somehow safe distance of the field of their actions, away from the home front, and the fact that, for Sandes, the breaking of the roles meant the actual wearing of the uniform of the soldier, something that could had only been done in the context of a Balkan rather than a British army. Whatever the reasons behind it, the publicity attracted by the presence of British women in the Balkans, which for these women was a sign of a much needed inclusion in the popular discourses of the time, must have had accentuated the feeling of exclusion and frustration among the Salonika Army veterans. Marketing and cultural priorities of contemporary popular media seemed to push themes related to them even further to the periphery of public attention.

³⁰John Buchan, *Greenmantle* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1917) [first published in 1916], 160. Almost twenty years later, Stephen Graham, in his children's historical adventure *Balkan Monastery*, set in Serbia during the war, talks of the nurses of a Scottish ambulance that took a bullet out of the hand of a Serbian boy. Stephen Graham, *Balkan Monastery* (London: Ivor Nicholson and Watson, 1936), 193.

A forgotten army fights back

Part of the role of commemorative efforts is to protect the victims and to help them cope with their war traumas by constructing a positive memory of their war experiences.³¹ This positive memory comes for the veterans and their families as they feel compassion and sympathy, admiration and acknowledgement of their contribution to the war effort by the broader community. By getting these positive reactions, they can face their personal traumas, explain their personal sacrifices and take pride in their role in the war effort. Hence, for the Balkan front veterans and their families – at least those who let collective memory influence their private memories – this feeling of exclusion from public memory negated for them the chance to construct their own positive memory of their personal experiences of the war. In his letter to *The Times*, General Milne drew attention to the consequences for his men and their families of the exclusion and the criticism faced by the Salonika Army, talking about how it ‘had saddened the last days of many who gave their sons only too gladly to the service of their country’.³² The soldiers and their families were denied the acknowledgment and what they considered as the appropriate dignified closure of their war trauma. When the Bishop of London visited the British units at the Balkan front, he noted with alarm that the soldiers were disappointed at the way they were neglected by the British public. The day the *Times* published his letter on the Salonika Army, the newspaper’s editorial affirmed pointedly what it was exactly that these soldiers were being denied, noting that the ‘men in our Eastern Armies have had the dust and toil, without the laurel, of the race to victory’.³³ But this laurel was never given to them. Alan Palmer, the author of *The Gardeners of Salonika*, wrote in

³¹ Winter and Sivans, “Setting the framework”, 17-8.

³² Milne, “Macedonia”, 16.

³³ “The Salonika Army”, *The Times* (8 November 1918), 7.

1965 on the common fate of the French and British veterans of the Balkan front, pointing out that no medals had been issued and no streets had been named in honour of their victories.³⁴

Many veterans, keen to leave the wartime experience behind them, or feeling unable to react to the overwhelming pressure of public discourse, chose to retreat to their private memories, accepting their exclusion from the collective memory of the war that was building up without their consent. Others, however, in order to counteract that feeling of exclusion, engaged in actions to incorporate their private memories into the broader collective memory. On the one hand the story of these veterans is the story of the Balkan front veteran as '*homo agens*' – to use Jay Winter's and Emmanuel Sivan's term – taking his private memories into the framework of actions of collective remembrance.³⁵ On the other hand it is also the story of the veterans' communities, as groups of cultural contacts breaking the isolation of the private memory, but still distant from the recognition of the community of the wider public, from which they always felt excluded.

The lack of 'laurels' being a central reason for the veterans' feeling of exclusion, one of their first common activities was to organise in 1922 a parade by the Cenotaph on the fourth anniversary of the request for an armistice by Bulgaria. From then on, the veterans organised similar ceremonies every year on the Sunday closest to September 30. These would be attended by General Milne, while few lines notifying the public of the event would appear in the newspapers.³⁶ As Milne pointed out in 1928, this was not an officially organised parade but depended instead on the 'spontaneous instinct' of some 4,000 veterans who were ready to use any opportunity to show 'respect' and 'remembrance' to their fallen comrades.³⁷ Milne, who after the war had a successful military career serving as Chief of the Imperial General

³⁴ Palmer, *The gardeners of Salonika*, 238.

³⁵ Winter and Sivan, "Setting the framework", 29-39.

³⁶ "Heroes of Salonika: Tributes at the Cenotaph", *The Times* (30 September 1922) 11.

³⁷ Milne, "Macedonia", 16.

Staff, consistently provided his full support to such official forms of commemoration, having always been popular among his soldiers. However, by assisting in such commemorative efforts, and by arguing in a few articles for the strategic usefulness of the Balkan front, he understandably also attempted to protect the memory of his own role in the war.

As the formation of veterans' associations is a typical way of preserving private memories of the war, the Salonika Army veterans established in 1924 the Salonika Reunion Association (SRA) which, by 1929, prided itself that it had branches all around Britain. The association engaged in a number of activities that were primarily meant to bring a sense of collective memory to the veterans and secondarily to impress, in varying degrees, upon the broader public the awareness of the existence of the Salonika Army and its role in the allied victory. In 1969 SRA was replaced by the Salonika Society, which in its turn was wound up in 1992 due to declining membership. A few years later, at a time of broader renewed interest in the First World War, the *Salonika Campaign Society* was formed with the stated aim to 'perpetuate the memory of those of all nations who served' at the Balkan front.³⁸

In 1927 SRA started publishing its official journal *The Mosquito*, which chose the telling caption 'A sting of remembrance' for the cover of its third issue in 1929. The motto under the journal's title read 'a journal devoted to the interests of the Salonika Re-Union Association', and it must have particularly appealed to those who felt that no one until that point had shown such a dedicated interest in their story. In the inside pages of the same issue, one could find 'greetings' from Leo Amery, Secretary of State for the Dominions and Colonies, a sign of a much-needed official recognition.³⁹ In another issue that same year the journal claimed that it was 'the sole literary attempt to reach members of those forces which

³⁸ "About the Society: The 1915-1918 Salonika Campaign Society", Salonika Campaign Society, <http://www.salonika.freeserve.co.uk/> (14 Mar, 2006).

³⁹ "Greetings", *Mosquito*, 5 (March 1929), 2.

served in the Middle East'⁴⁰ In 1931 the journal had 560 subscribers and it claimed in a pride-boosting statement that Salonika was 'the only front to publish its own journal', consciously drawing comparisons to the other fronts, and especially the Western front, which in so many other ways had undermined the public recognition of the Balkan front veterans' experiences.⁴¹ By 1934 *The Mosquito* claimed more than 800 subscribers.⁴²

The journal played a key role in preserving personal memories and, most importantly, in forming a collective memory among the veterans and their families. From the start of its publication, the journal comprised mainly of announcements of branch meetings, balls and other organisational matters. It also included articles on the history of the Balkans and of the Balkan front, and on the ways in which the city of Salonika had changed in the years since the end of the war. In 1934 it invited all readers to contribute records of their memories, in the form of anecdotes, short stories, diaries, and newspaper articles, in an effort to recreate and nurture their wartime memories.⁴³ The collective remembrance effort was clearly in full swing. Although in 1966 Palmer claimed that the journal had a circulation of 'nearly 2000', three years later *Mosquito's* publication ceased.⁴⁴ Today there is a *New Mosquito*, an e-journal published biannually by the *Salonika Campaign Society* since 2000.

As has been already noted, the geographical and cultural distance of the Balkans from Britain was a discouraging factor in any efforts to establish a sense of continuity and hence of tradition in any journeys made by the veterans and their families to the Balkan Front. Nonetheless, such trips did take place, mostly organised by the SRA, and often in combination with similar commemorative efforts by the veterans of the Gallipoli campaign. A memorial to the Salonika Army was erected in Macedonia in 1924 and there followed efforts

⁴⁰ "About books", *Mosquito*, 7 (September 1929), 11.

⁴¹ "The list of members", *Mosquito*, 11 (September 1931), 39.

⁴² "Mosquito circulation soaring", *Mosquito*, 26 (June 1934), 31.

⁴³ "Balkan Brevities", *Mosquito*, 27 (September 1934), 70.

⁴⁴ Palmer, *The gardeners of Salonika*, 241.

to organise travels to a number of memorials in the region.⁴⁵ In 1928 some veterans participated in the ‘St Barnabas Pilgrimage to Gallipoli and Salonika’.⁴⁶ It was, however, only in 1934 that there was enough interest for the SRA to organise for the first time a cruise exclusively to Salonika in cooperation with the tour operator Thomas Cook.⁴⁷

All the above efforts had as their targeted audience the veterans, their families, and friends and aimed mainly at preserving and nurturing their personal memories of the war. However, apart from the periodicals, which circulated mostly within the circles of the veterans, there were other publishing attempts that had the potential of to reach wider audiences, and enter the broader sphere of public memory. The memoirs that were published in the years after the end of the war played an essential role in this effort. In its sixth issue, in June 1927, *Mosquito* proudly cited a list of twelve books that had been published on the Balkan front.⁴⁸ The number of memoirs that had been published from Salonika Army veterans was actually much bigger than that, but it was still dwarfed in comparison to the vast amount of literature produced by the Western front veterans. Additionally, this was a time when bookshops were flooded with war memoirs and few of them had any chance of attracting any special attention. It should also be noted that, as it was the case with all other fronts of the war, most of the Balkan front war published memoirs were written not by privates but by officers, belonging to the classes both familiar with writing their experiences into books and affluent enough to publish and buy them. The stories of the majority of the soldiers of the Balkan front seemed to have little chance either of getting published or attracting the public’s attention. Lastly, none of the veterans ventured into fiction writing, and hence the Salonika army, as has already been noted, remained unmentioned by the popular literature of the time.

⁴⁵ Major Elliot Bell, “Salonika and Gallipoli memorials”, *The Times* (26 November 1924), 10.

⁴⁶ *Mosquito*, 5 (March 1929), 6; Eleanor M. Barker and M. Mullineux, “A Pilgrimage To The War Graves”, *The Times* (5 October 1928), 15.

⁴⁷ Supplement, *Mosquito*, 24 (December 1933), 1.

⁴⁸ “Books on Salonika Campaign”, *Mosquito*, 6 (June 1929), 7.

The final stage of the public remembrance efforts was the publication of historical studies of the front that would at least establish a place in history for the veterans. However, in the nine decades after the end of the war, only three such studies have been published. Of course, many memoirs, especially just after 1918, did contain brief histories of the front Balkan front. But they were all first hand accounts and, as they were published so close to the events they were referring to, they lacked any claim to historical authority. The first actual historical study on the Balkan front was a volume published in 1935 and it was part of the official series on the history of the war, which inevitably focused on a strict narrative of military events, excluding all references to the soldiers' experiences.⁴⁹ The second one, published thirty years later, in 1965, was *The gardeners of Salonika*, written by Alan Palmer. Using Clemenceau's mocking description of the Salonika Army as his book's title was a clear sign of Palmer's intentions in writing the book. Being the son of a Balkan front veteran he had been part of the experience of this denial of sympathy and public acknowledgment of the veterans' efforts and with his book he tried to bring a positive closure to that exclusion of the memory of the Balkan front from collective memory. As a reviewer noted, he tried to make 'memorable' what was the forgotten army of the Balkan front.⁵⁰ The last history of the Balkan front was published in 2004. Its title, *Under the devil's eye: Britain's forgotten army at Salonika 1915-1918*, contains again a clear reference to this feeling of the veterans' exclusion, implying that its aim is to bring Britain's Balkan army from the realm of the forgotten to that of the remembered.⁵¹ Interestingly, however, judging from its title, the authors of the book consider that all similar efforts undertaken in the past from the veterans, their families and

⁴⁹ Falls, *Military Operations*.

⁵⁰ Ronald Lewin, "The Gardeners of Salonika: The Macedonian campaign 1915-1918", review of *The gardeners of Salonika*, by Alan Palmer, *International Affairs*, 42 (July 1966), 485.

⁵¹ Wakefield and Moody, *Under the devil's eye*.

friends and their associations to enter the realm of collective memory seem not to have born any results.

The Salonika Army veterans remained excluded from public memory ever since they left their front, despite their complaints and all their efforts to counteract this exclusion. Their story is, however, echoed in similar stories of a number of other armies that fought during the First World War and in all other major wars that followed it. The Great War was the first war that produced a considerable number of such 'forgotten' armies because the combination of modern warfare with modern mass media created the conditions for such a congestion of images that inevitably the least popular ones were almost virtually excluded from circulation among the broader public. From the start of their presence in the Balkans, the Salonika Army soldiers were ignored or even ridiculed by different agents of popular culture. Strategic considerations, combined with the geographical and cultural distance between Britain and the lands at the other side of Europe where they fought, made it difficult for the public back in Britain to show any enthusiasm or even interest for the troops serving in the Balkans. The Western front already provided a constant supply of many more dramatic images from a land that was much closer to home. Even more, the limited space that mass media could dedicate to the Balkan front was used to cover other popular themes of the time, like the intriguing diplomatic developments in the region and the adventures of British women nurses in different parts of the Balkan front. Despite the final victory of the allied forces against their Bulgarian enemy, this pattern of exclusion of the Salonika Army from the popular memory of the war continued long after the war.

Trying to counteract this feeling of exclusion, the veterans engaged in a number of organised commemorative efforts, in an attempt both to preserve their personal memories and

to construct a positive collective memory which then could fight for some space within the broader public memory of the war. Despite the variety of means they employed, they never actually succeeded in their aims. Nonetheless, their efforts did manage to create their own mini-narrative of the war which, though it did not appeal to the broader public, still had its own audiences. The number of initiatives the veterans, their friends and their associations undertook in order to provide some space for the circulation of the memory of the Salonika Army is a good indication of the available paths that popular culture allowed for those who felt excluded from mainstream culture. It also provides a good understanding of the extent of space that exists between private memory and public memory.

So what kind of a narrative did these remembrance efforts manage to achieve? One way of finding out is by identifying the relation of that narrative to the larger one of the First World War. Any talk of a 'forgotten army' implies a power struggle pushing for the inclusion or the exclusion of the memory of the Salonika Army from the broader memory of the Great War. In this context the narrative of the memory of the Salonika Army tries to counteract those elements of the dominant narrative that suppress its own existence, such as the perception of the Western front as the only front of the war, solely responsible for the final victory. But then, any closer look at the means employed by the veterans to articulate their memory of the war shows a much closer and interactive relationship, with the Salonika Army memory working within the broader framework of the memory of the Great War, as it uses the same language, signs and methods established by the bigger narrative's myth-making process. In the end, it all adds up to the great narrative of the First World War.