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WWI-Southern Fronts

BALKAN-MACEDONIAN-SALONIKA FRONT, Oct 1915-Nov 1918

A Working Bibliography of MHI Sources

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OVERVIEW

The war in the Balkans was anything but simplistic, either then or now. The “front,” which encompassed Serbia, Albania, Bulgaria, Greece and Macedonia, evolved as a result of Allied attempts to assist Serbia against an attack of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Bulgaria, the latter of which was strategically placed on the flanks of Serbia itself. Serbia has tried to regroup from an Austro-Hungarian offensive following the declaration of war, but its overall strength and logistical situation was, at best, tenuous.

Serbia and Bulgaria has fought two wars; in 1885 the Serbo-Bulgarian War; in 1912 the First Balkan War; and 1913 the Second Balkan War. The Bulgarian felt that as a result of this latter engagement, the Serbs had unfairly stolen ethnically Bulgarian lands from them. Bulgarian King Ferdinand played both sides of the escalating European War, and shortly after the Turkish defeat of Anglo-French forces at Gallipoli and the German defeat of the Russians at Gorlice-Tarnow, Bulgaria signed a treaty with Germany. The Central Powers’ offers of land reclamation were much more enticing. The Bulgarians began a general mobilization.

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In response to the Bulgarian mobilization, the Serbs asked for Allied assistance. Britain and France sent two divisions to the Greek town of Salonika. These troops arrived too large to be effective, due in part to the Greek government's reluctance to support a multi-national force within its borders (Prime Minister Venizelos supported the Allies, but King Constantine was pro-Central Powers. On 5 Oct 5, German and Austro-Hungarian troops attacked across the Sava and Danube Rivers and four days later Belgrade fell. On 11 Oct, Bulgarian troops attacked towards Niš from the north (which fell on 5 Nov) and Skopje from the south, threatening the rail transit line to Salonika. The Serbs were forced into a retreat, through the mountains south through Montenegro and into Albania. Weather, roads and civilian refugees impacted their retreat, but some 140,000 reached Albania and transports, which carried them, ultimately, to join the Allies at Salonika.

Operations from Salonika commenced in late November (French and British troops commanded by French General Maurice Sarrail), but the British refused to cross the Greek Border. The French went alone up the Vardar River, but Bulgarian assaults convinced Sarrail to retreat and Serbia fell. The Serbs went into the winter with determination to refit and reorganize.

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(1916): A front in Macedonia evolved against the backdrop of the Austro-Hungarian Army moving south through Montenegro and Italian-controlled Albania and an, at very best, confusing political situation in Greece. Greece had demobilized on the order of General Sarrail, but this action pushed the government into the sphere of the Central Powers. Germans, having taken care not to cross the Greek border, relied on Greek intelligence operations to assess the gathering Salonika force under General Sarrail, and used that information to initiate a German-led Bulgarian offensive on 17 Aug. The Serbs held against two weeks of offensive action, and on 12 Sep they counterattacked, capturing Kaymakchalan, the highest peak in the Nidže Mountains. Hereafter, Greece had two functional governments; a royalist, ostensibly neutral, government in Athens, and a revolutionary one at Salonika, which entered the war on the side of the Entente Powers. Italy sent troops to Albania, pushing Austro-Hungarian forces further north.

(1917): Through the winter of 1916-17, Sarrail's forces were reinforced enough to commence an April offensive, but it was halted in May because of significant losses. Diplomatic maneuvers led to a reunified Greek government that sided with the allies; French Prime Minister Clemenceau replaced Sarrail with General Adolphe Guillaumat, who remained in control of the newly-formed Greed Army until his recall the next spring.

(1918): When the Ludendorff Offensive commenced in March, Guillaumat was recalled to help on the Western Front, and was replaced by General Franchet d'Esperey, who lobbied for an all-out offensive. With the help of Guillaumat at headquarters, who was arguing for the same approach, the offensive commenced in September. Battles at Dorbo Pole (14-15 Sep); Dorian (18 Sep); Vardar (26 Sep) led to armistices at Solun (30 Sep) and Mundros (26 Oct). d'Esperey's army crossed the Danube on 10 Nov.

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