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Remembering Gallipoli in a Global Context: France and Senegal

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It has become a commonplace to assert that the Dardanelles campaign has none of the resonance in French national history, public commemoration or popular culture of Gallipoli for Australia, New Zealand or even Great Britain. The French preference for the name of the Straits rather than the battlefield tends to blend the episode into the wider history of its strategic conception. Indeed, the impression that France's role has in some way been neglected or occluded has been a constant of accounts of the campaign since the earliest records, most recently in relation to the involvement of French Empire troops. On closer inspection, however, the idea that the Dardanelles belongs to the forgotten history of the First World War proves to be more trope than truth.¹ In the century since the French Navy and Army joined the British attempt to force the Straits and seize Constantinople, the history of the campaign has never fallen durably out of the public domain, but then neither has it become a singular focus for remembrance of the First World War, while the attention paid to it has fluctuated in intensity and emphasis.

A popular misconception is that France played only a supporting role in the Allied offensive under General Hamilton's command. This is not borne out by the statistics: in spite of General Joffre's initial reluctance to divert manpower from the Western Front, France eventually committed a battleship squadron to the naval assault and a march division of 20,000 troops to the Gallipoli landings.² The Corps Expéditionnaire d'Orient (CEO) commanded by General Albert d'Amade had a substantial empire component and was organised into a metropolitan brigade, including an African regiment of Zouaves and Legionnaires (175th RI and 1st RMA) and a colonial brigade made up of a cavalry regiment from North Africa (1st RCA) with two mixed regiments (4th and 6th RIC) combining Senegalese and European battalions in a proportion of two to one. By late 1915, following the diversion of French units to Salonika and the Balkan Front, the black troops from Senegal and the Caribbean formed the majority of

¹ The trope persists in the literature of recent exhibitions about Albert Londres' war reporting (Vichy, 11 June - 21 August 2011) and the Eastern Front (Marseille, 14 November 2014 - 17 May 2015) which describe the Dardanelles and Balkan campaigns 1915-19 as the "forgotten front" and their veterans as the "forgotten soldiers" of the Great War.

² If the French commitment were to be qualified, it is to the extent that the battleships were ageing and none of the troops were drawn from the Western Front.

the rearguard.³ Overall, through the reinforcement and rotation of the original expeditionary division, some 80,000 French troops served at Gallipoli in the course of the campaign. Of these, more than 14,000 were killed or reported missing in action and 40,000 wounded – a casualty rate of 68%.⁴

Why then has the history of the Dardanelles remained stuck in the minor key of public memory? The key reason is contextual. From the French perspective, Turkey was the antechamber to a longer and (unlike Gallipoli) ultimately victorious campaign in the Balkans, Greece and Macedonia from 1915-18, which was itself overshadowed in scale, immediacy and impact by the war of attrition on the Western Front. Contrary to the Australian or New Zealand experience, the principal theatre of French operations pre-dated the Dardanelles expedition and was located largely on home soil. As a front line nation under partial occupation, France has remembered the geography of the Great War as much as its history.

From this underlying explanation flow the other reasons identified by Jauffret and Dutton for the loss of the memory of the Dardanelles in France in the immediate postwar years: the belated breakthrough in Southeastern Europe was not allowed to outshine the victories on the Western Front; the continuation of the campaign beyond the Danube after 1918 to fight the Bolsheviks was politically sensitive; the casualties on the Gallipoli peninsula paled into insignificance compared to those incurred on the battlefields of France and Belgium; and the mistrust and resentment between allies jockeying for postwar influence in the Eastern Mediterranean cast the Entente in a poor light.

The historiography of the Dardanelles can be divided into four distinct phases encompassing shifting perceptions of the campaign. The veterans' memoirs which began to appear within a year of the events; the first- and second-hand accounts of the inter-war years; post-Second World War histories; and the soldiers' diaries rediscovered and published in the 1990s and

³ Saletes finds that the Senegalese made up more than half of the CEO from March to December 1915 – 5,500 Tirailleurs of 10,700 frontline troops – though the latter total appears to be an underestimate. Jean-Loup Saletes, 'Les Tirailleurs Sénégalais dans la Grande Guerre et la Codification d'un Racisme Ordinaire', *Guerres Mondiales et Conflits Contemporains* 244 no. 4 (2011): 135.

⁴ The most precise figure, derived by Jauffret from the French necropolis at Seddul-Bahr, is 14,340 dead. Jean-Claude Jauffret, 'L'expédition des Dardanelles vue du côté français', in *Les Armes et la Toge*, ed. Jean-Claude Jauffret (Montpellier: Centre d'Histoire Militaire et d'Etudes de Défense Nationale de Montpellier, 1997), 351. Dutton gives a similar estimate. David Dutton, 'Docile Supernumerary: A French Perspective on Gallipoli' in *Gallipoli*, ed. Jenny MacLeod (London: F. Cass, 2004), 87. Contemporary reports put the French dead and missing at 10,000.

2000s which demonstrate a resurgence in interest for the expeditionary corps and its successor, l'Armée d'Orient.

The first veterans' memoirs began to appear before the war's end. One of the earliest, *Dardanelles – Serbie – Salonique. Impressions et souvenirs de guerre* (1916), written by army surgeon Joseph Vassal (and prefaced by General d'Amade) highlights the shortcomings of first-hand testimony in wartime: the account was heavily censored.⁵ It nevertheless ran to six editions and an English translation was published by Heinemann in 1916 under the title *Uncensored Letters from the Dardanelles (written by a French medical officer to his English wife)*. Vassal's book and *Combats d'Orient* (1917) by Captain Ricciotto Canudo, the French man of letters of Italian origin who coined the expression 'the Seventh Art', set a trend in combining their accounts of the Dardanelles with its sequel on the Balkan Front where the latter served in the Foreign Legion.⁶ Such early memoirs are, as Gustave Gouin puts it in the first edition of *L'Armée d'Orient, des Dardanelles au Danube* 'notes and correspondence written in the thick of the action ... for historians to come'.⁷ They evoke the heroism and the hardships of trench warfare in the exposed French sector at the tip of the Gallipoli peninsula between Cape Helles and Sedd-el-Bahr. They cite the places that might have become household names akin to the *lieux de mémoire* of the Anzac sector – Kum Kalé, the village on the eastern shore of the Straits seized in the diversionary attack of 25 April only to be evacuated, or Kérévés Déré, the 'shrapnel gully' in which repeated French offensives foundered⁸ – had they acquired equivalent narrative purchase or momentum. Unlike the manuscript diaries of the late-twentieth century, these carefully crafted memoirs are often the work of literary stylists with a self-conscious classical frame of reference: the campaign is a modern *Iliad* in the shadow of the antique Troy; Kum Kalé lies at the mouth of the Scaramander where Agamemnon's 1000 ship fleet alighted; *The River Clyde*, run aground to shield the landing at Sedd-el-Bahr, is a Trojan Horse of iron.

With increased distance from events, the uncensored writers of the immediate post-war and inter-war years introduced a critical perspective largely absent from their wartime

⁵ Joseph Vassal and Albert-Gérard Léo d'Amade, *Dardanelles, Serbie, Salonique, Impressions et Souvenirs de Guerre (avril 1915 – février 1916)* (Paris: Plon-Nourrit, 1916).

⁶ Ricciotto Canudo, *Combats d'Orient* (Paris: Hachette et cie, 1917).

⁷ Gustave Gouin and Fernand Detaille, *L'Armée d'Orient, des Dardanelles au Danube* (Marseille: Detaille, 1st ed. 1917, 4th ed. 1931), 1.

⁸ For an account of how forbidding a barrier Kérévés Déré was to the French, see Capitaine Elie, *Historique du 58e Régiment d'Infanterie Coloniale* (Toulon: impr Mouton & Combe, 1921), 7.

predecessors. In *L'Expédition des Dardanelles au jour le jour*, the diplomat François Charles-Roux acknowledges the Senegalese and Martiniquais troops (albeit with metropolitan paternalism as 'our blacks') and reports their suffering from the cold at the onset of winter,⁹ while Captain F.J. Deygas underlines the subsidiary role played by France, laying responsibility for the failures of Gallipoli squarely at Britain's door¹⁰ – a recurrent theme of the period. Both Deygas' book and the fourth edition of Gouin's (1931) are prefaced by Marshal Franchet d'Esperey, the commander of the Allied army in the Macedonian campaign, who develops a revisionist narrative: the exploits of the Armée de l'Orient have been unjustly neglected; by opening a new front and successfully pursuing a strategy of manoeuvre they precipitated the collapse of the Central Powers and hastened the Armistice.

The message is clear. The war was not won on the Western Front but in the East, where the French Army took the lead, but there is a sub-text in the early 1930s: the wars of the future will be won by movement. If this argument invites renewed interest in the Dardanelles, it subsumes it within the wider campaign in the Balkans to which it remains a static and unsuccessful prelude. Moreover, it is difficult to assess the public readership of books like these. The first editions of French library books on the Dardanelles are frequently found to have uncut pages or languish unconsulted in basement storage rooms. Gouin's had a limited print run (1500 plus 120 in two collectors' editions), was lavishly illustrated, published regionally (in Marseille) and clearly marketed at libraries and veterans as a souvenir edition. Deygas' *l'Armée d'Orient dans la guerre mondiale 1915-19* was printed by leading Parisian publisher, Payot, and is addressed to a 'forgotten' constituency of veterans, the 'Poilus d'Orient'. Charles-Roux's is one of the few post-war first hand accounts to focus exclusively on the Dardanelles and is cited as authoritative by contemporaries as the insider view of a French HQ staff officer.¹¹

It is between the Second World War and the decades of the 'second memory boom' that historiography of the Dardanelles undergoes a hiatus. The history of the present and the greater 'débâcle' of 1940 overshadow the more distant disaster of 1915-16. In Vichy France, the Dardanelles were cast in an Anglophobic light: Jean Guiffan notes that the sinking of the

⁹ François Charles-Roux, *L'expédition des Dardanelles au jour le jour* (Paris: A. Colin, 1920), 292-3.

¹⁰ F-J. Deygas and Louis Félix Marie François Franchet d'Esperey, *L'Armée d'Orient dans la Guerre Mondiale* (Paris: Payot, 1932), 37.

¹¹ The scion of a dynasty of Marseille industrialists, François Charles-Roux was a career diplomat attached to the French staff at Gallipoli as a translator. Claudine Roubaud, 'François Charles-Roux, un Marseillais dans l'Armée d'Orient', *Marseille et la Grande Guerre*, *Marseille* 246 (2014): 58-60.

French battleship *Bouvet* in the aborted attempt to force the Straits symbolised the French Navy's resentment of the British Admiralty prior to Mers-el-Kébir.¹² The gap decades in French publications catalogued by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (1946-64 and 1971-98) give a rough measure of the eclipse.¹³ With communicative memory beginning to fade, Jean Vizern's *Dardanelles 1915* (1964) is the imaginative reconstruction – in Socratic dialogue – of a departed comrade-in-arms' frontline experience¹⁴, while Jean Giraudoux's rough field notes published posthumously in 1969 revisit the playwright's earlier wartime memoir (1917).¹⁵ In 1965, Radio France marked the 50th anniversary of the Gallipoli campaign with a two hour broadcast featuring Vizern.¹⁶ By the early 1980s, the Dardanelles occupies just a single paragraph in the 30 pages dedicated to the First World War in the standard history textbook for state high schools.¹⁷ Even in later specialist histories of 'France's Great War', the campaign is briefly summarised as part of diversionary strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean.¹⁸

The resurgence of interest in the Dardanelles in France in the late 1990s followed the 'awakening' of Anzac memorialism, but possessed its own commemorative dynamic.¹⁹ To mark the 80th anniversary of the the Armistice, *Le Monde* featured a profile of the last of the 'Tirailleurs sénégalais' (Senegalese skirmishers), Abdoulaye Ndiaye, evoking the 'sensitive memory' of the so-called 'Black Force' from former French West Africa whose invalidity and veterans' pensions had been frozen on independence.²⁰ The issue was dramatised in the television film *The Debt* (2000). If Ndiaye was awarded the Légion d'Honneur alongside other surviving Great War veterans in 1998, it was only after Jacques Chirac's state visit to

¹² Jean Guiffan, *Histoire de l'Anglophobie en France: de Jeanne d'Arc à la Vache Folle* (Rennes: Terre de Brume éditions, 2004), 161.

¹³ Although Alan Moorehead's *Gallipoli* was translated into French in the late 1950s: Alan Moorhead, *Dardanelles* (traduction de R. Jouan) (Paris: Presses de la Cité, 1958).

¹⁴ Jean Vizern, *Dardanelles, 1915* (Monte Carlo: éditions Regain, 1964).

¹⁵ Jean Giraudoux, 'Souvenirs des Dardanelles', *L'Opinion*, 17 February, 1917; Jean Giraudoux, *Carnet des Dardanelles (Introduction et notes de Jacques Body)* (Paris: le Bélier, 1969).

¹⁶ 'Les Dardanelles', Ina.fr. Accessed 4 November 2014. Available from : <http://www.ina.fr/audio/PHD94049072/les-dardanelles-audio.html>. A television documentary was broadcast by the public channel F3 in 1976 in its 'Great Battles of the Past' series: 'Les Dardanelles 1915', Ina.fr. Accessed November 4 2014. Available from: <http://www.ina.fr/video/CPC76068049/les-dardanelles-1915-video.html>.

¹⁷ J. Bouillon, A.M. Sohn and F. Brunel, *Histoire : Le Monde Contemporain 1914-1945* (Paris: Bordas, 1980), 16.

¹⁸ Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *La Grande Guerre des Français 1914-18* (Paris: Perrin, 3rd ed. 2002), 104-5.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Rechniewski, 'Quand l'Australie invente et réinvente une tradition : L'exemple du débarquement de Gallipoli (avril 1915)', *Vingtième Siècle*, no. 101 (2009/1): 123.

²⁰ 'Abdoulaye N'Diaye, dernier tirailleur sénégalais', *Le Monde*, 12 November 1998. For a discussion of the pension issue see Falila Gbadamassi, 'Anciens Combattants de France et d'Afrique: Même Pension'. Accessed November 4 2014. Available from : <http://www.afrik.com/article20328.html>.

Senegal in 2005 that FWA pensions were thawed and revalued. As late as 2003, Marc Michel could write that ‘the role of these [black] troops in the Dardanelles operation has been largely obliterated’.²¹

For the 90th anniversary of the Dardanelles landings, Michèle Alliot-Marie, the defence minister, prefaced a collection of first-hand accounts assembled by the Dardanelles and Eastern Front National Memorial Association, the veterans’ society founded in 1920 which merged with its counterparts for Macedonia-Serbia and the Levant in the early 1980s.²² It was the latest in a series of manuscripts unearthed by researchers to be published at the turn of the new millennium. The move to rehabilitate theatres of operations ‘too long overlooked’²³ has been part of a trend towards the ‘internationalisation of memory’ since the second Chirac presidency, involving bilateral agreements on shared memory with former allies and adversaries, with a meridional dimension that emphasises the geo-strategic importance of the Mediterranean to France.²⁴ The upsurge in interest in the Dardanelles coincided with Chirac’s declarations in favour of Turkish membership of the European Union, a position that was reversed in August 2005 over Turkey’s refusal to recognise the Greek Cypriot government. Nonetheless, the Dardanelles remains a poor relation to the Second World War *lieux de mémoire*, especially the anniversary of Operation Anvil-Dragoon 15 August 1944, a tradition initiated by Charles de Gaulle in 1964, followed by Prime Minister Chirac in 1974. The landing in Provence is celebrated in France as ‘the other D-Day’, not just for its sweeping success in liberating the South of France but because, unlike the Normandy landings, Free French forces (drawn largely from North Africa) played a leading role: the 1st French Army under General de Lattre de Tassigny made up two thirds of the 11 Allied divisions deployed. More recently, its commemoration has been assiduously observed by Presidents Sarkozy and Hollande, surfing on the popular interest stimulated by the film *Indigènes* (2006),²⁵ as an opportunity for memorial diplomacy with leaders from France’s former North and West

²¹ Marc Michel, *Les Africains et la Grande Guerre: l’appel à l’Afrique (1914-18)* (Paris: Karthala, 2003), 85. My translation.

²² The association participates in the relighting of the eternal flame at the Arc de Triomphe every 25 April. ‘Association Nationale pour le Souvenir des Dardanelles et Fronts d’Orient’. Accessed 4 November 2014. Available from : <http://www.fronts-dardanelles-orient-levant.tk/>.

²³ Association Nationale pour le Souvenir des Dardanelles et Fronts d’Orient, préf. de Michèle Alliot-Marie, *Dardanelles, Orient, Levant* (Paris: l’Harmattan, 2005), 5.

²⁴ Olivier Wieviorka, *La Mémoire Désunie: le Souvenir Politique des Années Sombres, de la Libération à Nos Jours* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2010), 266.

²⁵ Rachid Bouchared’s Franco-Maroccan, Belgian and Algerian coproduction about the destiny of four North African soldiers who landed with the 1st French Army was entitled ‘Days of Glory’ in its English language version.

African colonies. In terms of popular culture, the Dardanelles has inspired nothing comparable to *Capitaine Conan* (1996), Bertrand Tavernier's feature film about a unit of skirmishers on the Eastern Front. The only artwork featured in the centenary mission's statement, an oil painting by Henry Valensi 'Expression des Dardanelles' (1917), has none of the instant familiarity of Sidney Nolan's canvases.

Formal commemoration of the Dardanelles lacks a focus comparable to Toulon's Mont Faron memorial. The French cemetery in Sedd-el-Bahr was inaugurated by the former CEO commander General Gouraud in 1930, but while an Agence France Presse report of the commemoration of the 99th anniversary of 'The Battle of the the Dardanelles at Gallipoli' shows a wreath-laying ceremony at the cemetery, its coverage presents the event from the Turkish perspective with no explicit mention of France's involvement.²⁶ There are no major monuments to the Dardanelles in France. The sole memorial to the broader campaign in the Eastern Mediterranean is the 'Monument to the Heroes of the Army of the East and Foreign Fields' in Marseille inaugurated by President Doumergue in 1927.²⁷ That site of memory was instrumentalised diplomatically in the early 1930s in efforts to build the Little Entente around France's former Balkan allies: Alexander I of Yugoslavia was assassinated on the Canebière on 9 October 1934 within minutes of paying homage there to the 'Poilus d'Orient'.

In France's official Great War centenary programme, 'la Mission du Centenaire', the Gallipoli-Dardanelles campaign is briefly cited in relation to French participation in events planned to mark the Anzac centenary in Australia and New Zealand and then only in the same breath as the Western Front.²⁸ President François Hollande made no mention of Gallipoli or the Dardanelles in his speech on 7 November 2013 to launch the centenary commemorations, unlike his British counterpart David Cameron who announced that the Anzac centenary would be co-opted into the British programme in 2015.²⁹ The French Embassy in Turkey announces

²⁶ 'Commémoration de La Bataille des Dardanelles à Gallipoli'. Accessed November 4 2014. Available from : http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x1r29tj_commemoration-de-la-bataille-des-dardanelles-a-gallipoli_news.

²⁷ For the symbolism of the Monument aux Morts des Armées d'Orient, see Emmanuel Laugier, 'Les Monuments du Souvenir', *Les Cahiers de Marseille* 54 (2014): 8-9.

²⁸ Antoine Prost, *2014 – Centenaire de la Première Guerre Mondiale* (Paris: Mission du Centenaire de la Première Guerre Mondiale, 2014), 57.

²⁹ François Hollande, 'Allocution pour le Lancement des Commémorations du Centenaire de la Première Guerre Mondiale'. Accessed November 8 2014. Available from : <http://www.elysee.fr/declarations/article/allocution-pour-le-lancement-des-commemorations-du-centenaire-de-la-premiere-guerre-mondiale-4/>.

David Cameron, 'Speech at Imperial War Museum on First World War Centenary Plans, 11 October 2012. Speeches - GOV.UK. Accessed November 8 2014. Available

that the ceremonies to mark the centenary of Gallipoli in 2015 will be ‘bigger than ever’, though France’s contribution remains imprecise.³⁰ If it would be misleading today to speak of any aspect of the Dardanelles as forgotten or neglected history, France has yet to make the commemoration its own.

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³⁰ AmbaFrance, ‘99ème Anniversaire de La Bataille Des Dardanelles. Presqu’île de Gallipoli, 24 et 25 Avril 2014’. Accessed November 8 2014. Available from : <http://www.ambafrance-tr.org/99eme-anniversaire-de-la-bataille>.

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