

Sex in the city : gender relations between the civilian population and the Allied Armies of the Orient in the city of Salonika, 1915-1918

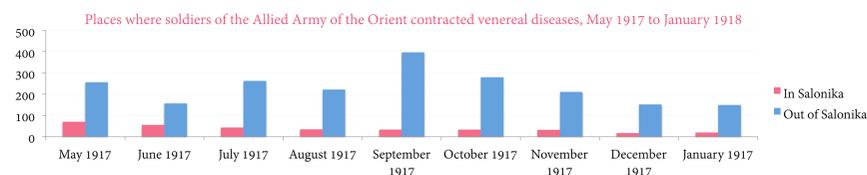
Hortense Chauvin, BA History

Supervisor : Professor Anastassios Anastassiadis

- Out of the 60 000 women living in Salonika during the Great War, approximately 510 were earning their living through sex work.
- Their national origins were diverse : they were Greek, Russian, Serbian, Turkish, Spanish, Romanian, Hungarian, Danish, Italian, English, or French.
- The disruption of families resulting from the mobilization of adult men had a tremendous impact on gender roles. A lot of women turned to prostitution to support their families.
- The economical difficulties experienced by Greece during the war also had repercussions on prostitution : after the great fire of Salonika in August 1917, many found themselves impoverished, and prostitution increased.

Venereal diseases : a war epidemic

- According to the army's medical services, a quarter of Salonika's sex workers were infected with a venereal disease.
- Salonika's brothels, located in the Bara and Vardar neighbourhoods, were major sites of infection.
- However, most soldiers contracted venereal diseases on their way to Salonika, in urban centers such as Grenoble, Toulon, Nimes, Marseille, Monastir and Athens.
- In order to deal with the epidemic, the Serbian, French, Greek and Italian armies' medical services decided to cooperate.
- Military leaders were also responsible for conducting awareness campaigns on venereal diseases. Education and propaganda were seen as important aspects of preventing their propagation.



A challenge for the army

Venereal diseases were present in both the civilian and military spheres during the war. According to the army, their propagation was jeopardizing the soldiers' health as well as their ability to "perpetuate the race". However, while the army strived to fight the stigma against venereal diseases among soldiers in order to facilitate the doctors' work, sex workers, who were seen as responsible for the epidemic, were often criminalized. Contrarily to soldiers, who were never punished or coerced into prophylactic treatments, they were subject to repressive measures by the army.

Discipline...

- Sex workers had to undergo two health inspections a week, one if they were independent.
- The French police kept a close watch on accredited brothels.
- Infected women were closely looked after by the police and the army's medical services, before and after they were discharged from the hospital.
- Houses of prostitution had to provide their clients with antiseptics and prophylactic treatments. The owners had to ensure that their employees used them as well.
- In each brothel, the army installed numerous prevention posters written in the main mother tongues of the soldiers present in Salonika: French, English, Italian, Serbian and Greek.

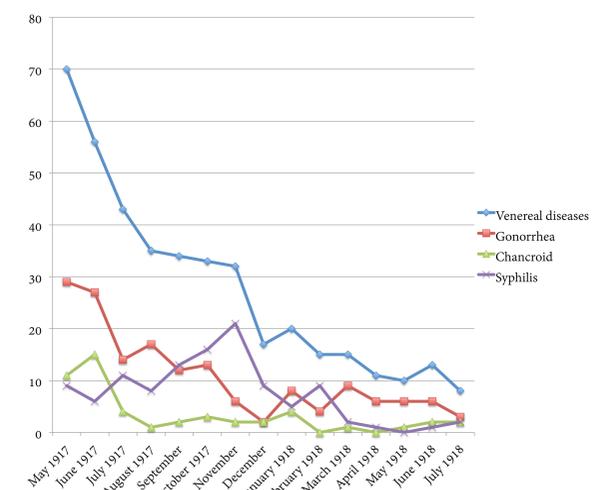
And punish !

- Brothels which did not abide by the army's hygienic rules could be temporarily closed.
- Clandestine prostitution was severely repressed by French and Greek police.
- Men who were suspected to have sexual relations with other men in Salonika's Turkish baths were systematically expelled from the city.



Development of medical infrastructures

- Until August 1917, there was only one venereal hospital. It was extended in order to accommodate up to 100 sick women.
- A second hospital was built in the Turkish neighbourhood. It was dedicated to those referred to as "free women", in order to facilitate their surveillance.
- The French army's medical services were also planning to create a venereal office, open day and night, that would allow soldiers to be given a preventative treatment right after having sexual intercourse. This system was inspired from what the American Army had implemented in France.



The medical measures implemented by the Allies successfully decreased the amount of venereal diseases contracted by the soldiers in Salonika, as shown above.

October 1915 : the first allied troops land in Salonika

In autumn 1915, the French and British governments decided to evacuate their troops from Gallipoli, where they had suffered heavy losses. Under the command of Maurice Sarrail, French and British troops landed in Salonika in early October, in order to support the Serbian army against Bulgaria. The Bulgarian campaign would soon prove inefficient.

December 1915 : the retreat to Salonika

In early December, the French and British troops were forced to retreat in Salonika. At the onset of the allied retreat, there was only one prophylactic organization in Salonika, managed by the Greek administration. Improved health policies were soon needed to address the swift rise of venereal diseases, resulting from the sudden overcrowding of the city.

January 1916-November 1918 : living in the "birdcage"

From January 1916 on, Salonika became the allied base in the Balkans. Over 200 000 French, British, Italian, Serbian, Russian, Greek and Albanian soldiers lived in the city. In order to fight against the propagation of venereal diseases, the Allied joined forces: besides from creating venereal clinics, they also implemented a series of health and social measures, both in the military and civilian spheres of society.