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Muslim Soldiers in the French Army in the Great War (1914–1918) and the Politics of Multiculturalism

Description for the general public

Research project objective

The aim of the project is to reveal contradictory nature of the model of multiculturalism adopted by the French authorities in response to the presence of the Muslim soldiers from Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia in the French Army in 1914–1918. During the First World War, the French Army deployed more than 211 thousand of Muslims from the North Africa. Cultural otherness of these people was the first challenge the French military authorities had to face. The Muslim soldiers had to eat, drink, to be healed and buried according to their tradition; they practiced religion and were determined to observe rituals and religious feasts, including the pilgrimage to Mecca. The hypothesis of the project says that the procedures and laws adopted in the French Army during the Great War in response to the presence of the Muslim soldiers in the caserns and battlefields constituted a comprehensive model of multiculturalism aimed at providing social peace and political integrity. However, this model represented a special form of the politics of multiculturalism and contained a contradiction of serious consequences. Indeed, on the one hand, it recognized the cultural identity of non-Europeans and promoted the idea of cultural pluralism in contrast to the politics of cultural assimilation. But, on the other hand, it stressed a de facto domination of the indigenous, or French culture, constraining transculturation, or the process of merging and converging the two cultures. This contradiction provoked distrust and dissatisfaction, as well as the acts of desertion and insubordination.

Research project methodology

The substance of the research methodology is in extracting three particular fields of study that can be considered as critical in dealing with cultural diversity, namely: (1) cultural identity; (2) social equality; and (3) political participation. The analysis is focused on procedures and legal acts approved by the French ministries and the Parliament regarding the Muslim soldiers, and to define the model of multiculturalism the documents of the French Ministry of War, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs the *Commission interministerielle des Affaires musulmans* have been used. The first issue is analyzed by exposing the regulations of the French Army that aimed at solving the problem of the cultural distinctiveness. The issue of the social equality covers the soldiers' pay and the pensionary benefits for the soldiers and their families. The issue of political participation is critical for the politics of multiculturalism, and in 1914–1918 in France it was defined and discussed in terms of the naturalization.

Present reasons for choosing the research topic

The presence of the Muslim soldiers in the French Army during the First World War has attracted attention of prominent scholars and resulted in outstanding studies. Nevertheless, new research is still undertaken.

Multiculturalism as cultural diversity and as a politics became the very basic problem of today's Europe. The measures which have been adopted several decades ago in the European countries and which have encompassed the idea of a cultural pluralism in contrast to cultural assimilation have been recently criticized for not providing social peace and political cohesion. Besides, the European public fears over multiculturalism as the politics of the maintenance of cultural diversity because of Islamic terrorism and there is a growing shift away from public endorsement of this politics along with the phenomenon of the ghettoization of some cultures and the growing sense of marginalization and deprivation among the Europeans of non-European background. But, the possibility of the adoption of a completely new politics to solve the recent social and political imbalances in the Western European societies is highly problematic the politics based on the evident fact of the multicultural nature of the European societies remains the most appropriate. The revision of the existed models of multiculturalism has become urgent and the study of the case of the management of cultural diversity which goes back to the First World War is a relevant contribution to the current discussion on the European future as it asks whether the acknowledgement of cultural plurality is enough to provide social peace and political integrity of a multicultural society, or not, and as it supposes that social equity and political participation are critical factors in achieving this goal.