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A new approach on the Serbian-Bulgarian war and the peace treaty of Bucharest (1886)

Margareta PATRICHE*

Our thanks to L.E.F.

Bulgarian, Serbian and Romanian historians have studied and considered this remarkably brief war with a peace treaty that simply restated the status-quo-ante. Nothing changed after two weeks of fighting. The war and its truce present two historical problems that I wish to consider in this paper:

First, how could this war take place so shortly after the entire Balkan Peninsula was devastated by the Russian-Ottoman war of 1877-1878? The Serbian-Bulgarian War only contested a very small border territory in the Timoc Valley and nothing more.

Second, why was the Bulgarian-Serbian war's truce drafted in Bucharest rather than a major West European capital?

I wish to consider these two questions because they are important in helping us understand the entire European political context of the last quarter of the XIX century:

- a) In 1873 the Three Emperors' Alliance was signed after the Franco-Prussian War; this treaty united Germany, Austro-Hungary and Russia. Chancellor Otto Von Bismarck intended to unite his allies against France;
- b) In 1878 the Russian-Ottoman war ended with Russia's victory. During April of that year the San-Stefano treaty was signed but it was not acceptable to major European powers. Consequently Russia was forced to accept the terms of the Treaty of Berlin in June 1878. The Berlin Treaty maintained the sovereignty of Serbia and Romania. However, San Stefano Bulgaria, or Greater Bulgaria, was radically reduced by division into two parts: autonomous Bulgaria, diminished to the territory between the Danube and the Balkans and Eastern Rumelia, an Ottoman Province;
- c) One result of the Treaty of Berlin was a change in Serbian foreign policy. Traditionally a Russian ally Serbia signed a commercial treaty with Austro-Hungary in 1881;

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- d) Also in 1881 the government of Bucharest proclaimed Romania an independent monarchy, this greatly dissatisfied the major European Powers;
- e) Furthermore, in 1881, the Three Emperor's Alliance was renewed and supplemented with the division of Balkan spheres of influence;
- f) In 1882 Serbia proclaimed itself an independent monarchy as did the Romanians the previous year;
- g) A new Triple Alliance was forged in 1882 uniting Germany, Austro-Hungary and Italy. Russia was excluded from the alliance which was intended to contain French power;
- h) Romania secretly joined the revised Triple Alliance in 1883. This marked a shift in Romanian policy towards the Western European powers and away from the Russian Empire;
- i) In 1885 Bulgarian national aspirations erupted with the Plovdiv revolt which succeeded with the removal of the Ottoman Governor and the reunification of Eastern Rumelia and Bulgaria proper.

Threatened by the Bulgaria victory Serbian King Milan attacked Bulgaria to assert territorial claims. This Serbian aggression came to be known as the Serbian-Bulgarian war of 1885. The war lasted only 16 days. A post war treaty was signed, after long debates, on 19 February 1886 in Bucharest.

The previous Treaty of Berlin (June 1878) incited great dissatisfaction in Bulgaria, especially among the population of Eastern Rumelia. This dissatisfaction led to popular revolts that were suppressed by General Dondukov, chief of the Russian military forces that occupied Bulgaria for 9 months according to extreme measures of the Berlin Treaty.¹

General Dondukov undertook a massive political and administrative restructuring of Bulgaria. He reestablished the administrative center in Sofia, moving it from Veliko Târnovo. He also established the first modern Bulgarian military detachments (mobilizing almost 21.000 soldiers) using Russian arms and under the command of Russian officers. Furthermore, general Dondukov attempted to establish a Constitution but he was met by Bulgarian Resistance: the Constitutional Assembly refused to move from Veliko Târnovo to Sofia and the Constitution that they did produce was eviscerated by extensive amendments.²

General Dondukov's political and administrative actions in Bulgaria ignited the first Bulgarian conflicts, between pro-Russian and ante-Russian elements. Bulgaria's prince Alexander Battenberg manipulated this political tension to establish his own political authority. On 8 September 1885, Prince Battenberg proclaimed at Plovdiv the union of Eastern Rumelia and Bulgaria.

This act aroused very strong and contradictory reactions. Turkey protested but it didn't send any military troupes: united or not, Bulgaria still was an Ottoman province and finally the Plovdiv Act was only a restoration of the San Stefano Treaty.

Russia's reaction was very harsh: Tsar Alexander III commanded the Russian officers to return home. He intended to prove to all Europe that Russia had nothing to do with this Greater Bulgaria.³

Serbia's reaction was probably the most unexpected: a Greater Bulgaria was not only a violation of the Berlin Treaty, but also a "great danger" for the Serbian interests. King Milan tried very hard to implicate against Bulgaria two other countries: Romania and Greece. But none of them wanted to take part in Serbian aggression.

Moreover, King Milan's intention didn't have any support. The Serbian Parliament (Scupština) in Niš received a warning from Constantinople about the fact that Turkey would consider the aggression against Bulgaria as a war statement. The German Chancellor expressed his disaccord very clearly: no new military on the Balkans would be tolerated. Austro-Hungary notified the Serbian King Milan that he wouldn't receive any Austrian support and advised him to consider his position more carefully.⁴

Despite these warnings, on 2th November 1885 king Milan suddenly attacked Bulgaria.

If the fear that a Greater Bulgaria would have been a real danger for the peace on the Balkans was only an excuse, why should King Milan persist to start this unpopular war?

And also, why didn't the European Powers do enough to stop this non-sensical war? The possible answer could be that: Serbian aggression was a good opportunity for the European Powers to really revise the Berlin Treaty, without a military involvement of their countries.⁵

Therefore, Austro-Hungary wanted not only to administrate but also to annex Bosnia and Herzegovina. Russia wanted to restore her influence in Bulgaria if this country was defeated by the Serbians. Even Turkey secretly hoped that a Bulgarian defeat would exempt the sultan from his recognition of the union of Eastern Rumelia and Bulgaria.

But the rapid progress of the military operations was a great surprise for everyone. The Bulgarian Army, commanded only by a few officers without a proper railway to transport them, was transferred on foot from the south border to the western one in 6 days.⁶

In mid November this brave army stopped the Serbs in a two-day battle at Slivnitsa. After that, the Bulgarians started a counter-offensive. They won a new battle at Dragoman and went on to Piro and Belgrade.⁷

Because of that sudden turn of the events the European Powers finally decided to stop the war. Austro-Hungary was delegated by the Great Powers to persuade the two parties to cease fire and to start negotiating.

Despite Turkey's insistence that the debates should be held in Constantinople, the German Chancellor, Otto Von Bismarck imposed Bucharest.⁸

Why did he do that?

Because during the war the Romanian position was conciliatory and extremely correct. Romanian Red Cross sent medical assistance to both fighting countries.⁹ In fact, the reason why Bismarck didn't point out an European capital was that he intended to undervalue the importance of the conflict and of the treaty. On the other hand, Bismarck wanted to gain the faith of the small Balkan countries and to give them the illusion that they were able to decide for themselves.

The diplomatically debates started in a peaceful atmosphere. Before the Conference the Ottoman government recognized Prince Alexander Battenberg as the governor of Greater Bulgaria.¹⁰ Also, the Bulgarian ambassador, Geshov, permanently accompanied the Ottoman Empire ambassador, Madjid Pascha.

Besides, Mihail Pherekyde, Romanian Foreign Minister, was a remarkable host: on Thursday, 4th February 1886, he received the official delegates in the Ministry of Finance's Building in Bucharest. The Serbian ambassador, Mijatovic said about the official hall that it was elegant, sumptuous and stylish. On the walls they could see the portraits of the Romanian Royal Family, of the Sultan, of King Milan Obrenovic and Prince Alexander Battenberg.

Mihail Pherekyde invited the Ottoman ambassador and the Bulgarian one to take seats on his left and the Serbian delegate on his right. After that, the Romanian host delivered a very short speech, talking about his confidence in a peaceful future for all Balkan countries.¹¹

The atmosphere later became tense only because the Serbian ambassador Mijatovic was often changing his attitude. In fact, Mijatovic had rigid instructions from Belgrade to use any excuses to delay the conclusion of the peace-treaty.

Despite those restrictions, Mijatovic honestly wanted to sign the peace and finally agreed for an "honorable and durable" peace between the Serbian Kingdom and the Bulgarian Principate.¹² The peace treaty had also registered the status-quo-ante in accordance with the Berlin Treaty.

Unfortunately, the peace treaty of Bucharest was not the ending of the "eastern crisis". Bulgaria was the most affected country. Russia took her revenge and had the leading part in Prince Alexander's forced abdication in September 1886.

Russian interferences in Bulgarian internal affairs would be the main cause for the delay of Bulgarian Independence. It was not until 1908 that Bulgarian independence became a reality but this time with Austro-Hungarian help.

Notes:

1. Constantin Velichi, *Istoria moderna a Bulgariei*, Bucuresti, 1973, p. 253;
2. *Ibidem*, p. 254-255;
3. *Ibidem*, p. 265;
4. Miodrag Milin, *Relatii politice româno-sârbe in epoca moderna*, Bucuresti, 1992, p. 148;
5. Nicolae Ciachir, *Marile puteri si România (1866-1947)*, Bucuresti, 1996, p. 127;
6. Stefan Trifanov, *Istoria na Bŭlgaria*, Sofia, 1991, p. 48;
7. R.J. Crampton, *A Concise History of Bulgaria*, Cambridge, 1997, p. 102;
8. Nicolae Ciachir, *op. cit.*, p. 128;
9. *Ibidem*, p. 127;
10. *Ibidem*, p. 128;
11. Miodrag Milin, *op. cit.*, p. 152;
12. *Ibidem*, p. 155-156.