

The April 1876 Uprising Against the Ottoman Yoke

In order to be able to understand the historical significance of the Bulgarian National April Uprising in 1876, we shall have to envisage it against the background of the political state of affairs in Europe at that time. West European states were in the throes of liberal movements and demands from many ethnic groups for national self-determination. Projected against this background the corrupted oriental despotism of the Turkish Sultan in Eastern Europe was an anachronism. The “sick man” of Europe was already a moribund member of the European society of nations. There were only two alternatives left to the Great Powers in Europe – either to try to cure him or dispose of him on time, lest his death cause a political vacuum in the Balkans.

Envisaged against this international political background the timing of the Uprising was aptly chosen. The ultimate goal was not to militarily defeat the Turkish Empire (the organizers of the Uprising were more intelligent than that) but to induce the intervention of the Great Powers in general and Russia in particular. Only in this sense can one understand the fateful utterance of Georgi Benkovsky, the Apostle of the most active revolutionary district (*okrug*) of the Uprising, which he made while gazing at the burning towns and villages in the valleys of the Rhodope mountains at the end of the Uprising: “I inflicted a mortal wound into the heart of the Turkish Empire from which she will never recover! As to Russia – she is welcome!”¹ He was correct in his prophecy; the wound the Uprising inflicted on European Turkey was mortal, indeed. It was only a matter of time for the end to arrive.

As a direct result of the April Uprising and its aftermath – the cruelties and atrocities by which it was stamped out by the Turkish regular army and the *bashibouzouks* – public opinion in Europe in general and in Russia in particular was aroused.

The barbaric atrocities committed by the Turks in crushing the Uprising horrified and shocked the entire civilized world. The intellectual strata of Europe expressed its indignation through the pen and speeches of such outstanding men-of-letters as Victor Hugo, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Turgeniev and others. The anarchist Kropotkin and the politician Aksakov in Russia, the scientist Charles Darwin and the statesman Gladstone in Britain and the American journalist MacGahan, to mention but a few, also expressed their warm sympathy for the tragic fate of the oppressed Bulgarian people. Gladstone, the leader of the Liberal party in Great Britain at that time wrote several pamphlets on the subject, one of which was entitled: “Lessons of the Butchering”. He boldly accused Disraeli, the Prime Minister at that time, of complicity in this mass murder of innocent children, helpless women and defenseless old people. MacGahan gave a truthful eye-witness delineation of the horrors which he observed in the Bulgarian village of Batak. This is what he reported to his *Daily News* paper: “People say that Bulgarians ought not to have rebelled... (that now) they must bear the consequences. But the truth is that no nation in the world except those Bulgarians could have stood even for a day that arbitrary action, robbery and oppression to which they have been subjected for centuries. If anyone had only attempted to introduce in England the system of taxation in force in this country, the people would have risen against the government as one man. Then why should we blame the poor Bulgarians for having done what we all would have done in similar circumstances? In committing atrocities there is a limit beyond which one should not go – the Turks have passed this limit.”

Under the pressure of European public opinion an International Commission was dispatched to investigate the authenticity of the published facts on the spot concerning the Turkish atrocities. The Commission duly confirmed the accusations made against the Sublime Porte, despite denials by the Turkish authorities.

The Great Powers now decided to try the first alternative mentioned above, namely, to try to cure the “sick man” in order to save the moribund European limb of the Ottoman Empire and thereby preserve peace in the Balkans and Europe. The political recipe they prescribed to the Sublime Porte warranted the introduction of social and political reforms in the “Christian provinces” of the Sultan. The remedy was effective, but the “sick man” refused to swallow it. Hence Alexadre II, the Tzar of Russia, addressed a letter to the government of Great Britain in which he made it quite clear that “the present state in Turkey is intolerable, and unless Europe is prepared to act with firmness and energy, I should be obliged to act alone”².

It is evident from the above that the April Uprising in general and the Turkish atrocities in particular rendered the Turko-British alliance absolutely impossible, and by doing so united the hands of Russia to act on her own. Nevertheless one last desperate attempt to prevent the war was made by the Great Powers, and mainly on the insistence of Russia herself. A conference of the Great Powers’ representatives was summoned in Istanbul. The members of the conference, after prolonged and lengthy discussions, finally arrived at the decision to grant political independence to Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina. However in the midst of the proceedings of the conference, on December 23, 1876, salvos of cannon were heard by the startled of the conference, proclaiming the inauguration of the “most democratic Constitution” in the Ottoman Empire, in the words of Safvet Pasha, Turkish foreign minister at that time. The conference, therefore, became meaningless and speedily came to an end on January 20, 1877. In the words of Lord Derby the war now became “inevitable”.

The cardinal error of Great Britain all along was that she, instead of becoming the champion of the young and rising Christian nationalities on the Balkans, diplomatically at least sided with Turkey, trying blindly and in vain to save this politically moribund empire. She failed to realize that had she sided with the rising nationalities on the Balkans, they would have been able to checkmate on their own whatever imperialistic designs Tzarist Russia might have had, and this enlightened and farsighted policy would have arrayed on the side of Great Britain as a counterbalance to Russia, the rising and invigorating national forces on the Balkans.

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1. Stoyanov, Zachary, *Zapiski po Bulgarskite Vystania* (Notes about the Bulgarian Insurrections), 1965, p. 24

2. Ross J. Holland, *The Development of the European Nations*, London 1904, p. 175