

## NEW DOCUMENTS ON THE LATE OTTOMAN DIPLOMACY

Center for Ottoman Diplomatic History, *Ottoman Diplomatic Documents on the Origins of World War One*, The Isis Press, Istanbul, 2008 [I. *The road to Bulgarian independence (September 1908 – May 1909)*, Edited by Sinan Kuneralp and Gül Tokay, 2008, 305 p.; II. *The Bosnian annexation crisis (September 1908–May 1909)*, Edited by Sinan Kuneralp, 2009, 280 p.; III. *The Final Stage of the Cretan Question (1899–1913)*, Edited by Sinan Kuneralp, 2009, 609 p; IV. *The Macedonian Issue (1879–1912)*, Edited by Sinan Kuneralp and Gül Tokay, 2011, *Part 1 (1879–1904)*, 615 p., *Part 2 (1905–1912)*, 488 p.]

For the historians used to know how rarely collections of diplomatic documents are published these days, a thumb-nail sketch of the developments that have been going on around the Center for Ottoman Diplomatic History in Istanbul will be useful. The Center's main field of activity is to publish collections of documents from the Ottoman Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*Hariciye Neyareti*) which, after an interruption of more than 15 years, have been made available to researchers as a result of their incorporation into the Central Ottoman Archives (*Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivleri*). This Center is an instance of collaboration between Ömer M. Koç, a potent businessman, and the distinguished editor and historian Sinan Kuneralp. Its aim is to bring a fresh insight to the Ottoman diplomatic history since the late eighteenth century until the early twentieth century. Two main series are planned: *Ottoman Diplomatic Documents on the Origins of World War One* and *Ottoman Diplomatic Documents on the Eastern Question in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*. Other diplomatic documents covering more topical subjects like "The Franco-Prussian War" or "Italian Unification" have come out in an additional series, *L'Empire Ottoman et l'Europe*. The working language of the Ottoman diplomatic service was French as a rule. Selected documents are therefore in that language, but the introduction, notes, and indexes are in English.

Such an activity is unavoidably reminding of the great series of diplomatic documents published during the interwar period: *British Documents on the Origins of the War, 1898–1914*, edited by G.P. Gooch and Harold Temperley, 11 volumes, London, 1926–1938; *Die Große Politik der Europäischen Kabinette, 1871–1914*, edited by Johannes Lepsius, Albrecht Mendelssohn Bartholdy and Friedrich Thimme, 40 volumes, Berlin, 1922–1927; *Documents Diplomatiques Français, 1871–1914*, 41 volumes, Paris, 1929–1939; *Österreich-Ungarns Aussenpolitik: von der bosnischen Krise 1908 bis zum Kriegsausbruch 1914; diplomatische Aktenstücke des österreichisch-ungarischen Ministeriums des Äusseren*, 9 volumes, Wien, 1930; Dr. M. Boghitschewitsch, *Die auswärtige Politik Serbiens, 1903–1914*, 3 volumes,

Berlin, 1928–1931. We are therefore entitled to look upon the new series of collections of Ottoman diplomatic documents as matching a tradition of publishing diplomatic correspondence. Sinan Kuneralp deserves the credit for having also published *Recueil des Traités, Conventions, Protocoles, arrangements et déclarations signés entre l'Empire ottoman et les Puissances étrangères. 1903–1922*, 2 volumes, Editions Isis, Istanbul, 2000 as a sequel to that fundamental work, Gabriel Effendi Noradounghian's *Recueil d'actes internationaux de l'Empire ottoman*, 4 volumes, Paris, 1897–1904. These new collections of historical documents are of great interest to the students of South-Eastern Europe for whom they provide a working instrument. Among parallel efforts to illustrate the diplomatic history of the same region, Serbia seems to take a prominent place, with 30 volumes having already come out as part of the collection *Dokumenti o spoljnoj politici Kraljevine Srbije: 1903–1914* (Beograd, 1980–). In Bulgaria, only three volumes have been released in a series dealing with the same topic (*Външната политика на България. Документи. София, 1978–*) concerning the years 1879–1894. In Romania, the research devoted to the subject led to two volumes of *Documente Diplomatice Românești* since 2006. And, as things stand, there is little hope that another volume may follow soon. As for Greece, nobody until now seems to consider a similar enterprise.

The first three volumes of the series *Ottoman Diplomatic Documents on the Origins of World War One* are providing a more complete overview of the Empire's foreign policy after the restoration of the Constitution in July 1908. Further volumes will bring the story to November 1914 when the Ottoman Empire entered the war. (At the time of this article being delivered, two more volumes in the series were published: V. *The Turco Italian War 1911–1912*, Edited by Sinan Kuneralp, 2 volumes, 2011; VI. *The Aegean Islands Issue 1912–1914*, Edited by Sinan Kuneralp, 2011). The said volumes contain political correspondence exchanged between the Ottoman missions abroad and the Ministry. There are gaps and lacunae in the documents. Owing to the lack of proper cataloguing in the Ottoman Ministry of Foreign Affairs archives, some documents may have been misfiled and misplaced, while others appear to have been accidentally destroyed or lost. On the other hand, as indicated in the Editor's Note, the correspondence of the Ministry with the foreign missions in Constantinople does not seem to have survived. Therefore, the negotiations driven between the Ottoman Foreign Minister and the Austrian-Hungarian Ambassador at Constantinople during the Bosnian Annexation Crisis can be followed only through Austrian-Hungarian documents. Moreover, we do not have any account from the Ottoman side of the negotiations conducted by successive Greek envoys in Constantinople with Ottoman ministers during the final stage of the Cretan Question. This is also because the Ottoman diplomats abroad were apparently kept in the dark regarding the developments of this kind of negotiations. This is not a singular occurrence, and such poor communication between the Central and its foreign missions can also be noticed with other diplomatic services. One of the first measures Rifaat Pasha took when becoming

Foreign Minister in March 1909 was to initiate the 'Service d'Information' whereby dispatches to and from Ottoman envoys in foreign posts were duplicated and circulated to missions abroad to keep them informed of the main issues in which the Ministry was involved.

The Young Turkish Revolution threw Europe into turmoil. It forced Abdülhamid II to recall the Parliament and, for all practical purposes, to give up most of his powers. The Great Powers hastily convened meetings of their diplomatic representatives with one another in an attempt to reshuffle the balance of power in the Balkans, should the Ottoman state completely disintegrate amid conflicting nationalisms. Some of the Great Powers or Balkan states took advantage of the temporary vacuum of power in Constantinople while there seemed little chance of an immediate Ottoman response to their strokes. The restoration of the Constitution had led to a reshuffle in the diplomatic personnel abroad and the heads of missions in all major capitals, except London, had been changed in the weeks following July 24. A further disadvantage was the occult presence of the Committee of Union of Progress which had its own concurrent aims in foreign policy.

In October 1908 Austria-Hungary proclaimed the annexation of the provinces of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Bulgaria declared her independence. The next day Greece took advantage of the powers' evacuation of Crete to annex the island. These actions involved no change in either the territorial or the political arrangements of the Balkan Peninsula, as Austria-Hungary had taken the two nominally Ottoman provinces "for occupation and administration" on thirty years, while the sultan had never exercised the slightest control over the autonomous principality of Bulgaria set up in 1878. But the steps taken by these governments were actually breaches of the existing treaties, because the other signatories to such treaties had not been consulted. Ottoman diplomacy, at the closing stage of the Empire, was more interested in form than in substance. For instance, in the case of the autonomous tributary principality of Bulgaria, the fact that the tribute was never paid did not matter much as long as the subordinate position of the Principality vis-à-vis the Empire was stressed, as for example in the *Almanach de Gotha*, or that it could not be represented abroad by fully-fledged diplomatic envoys but only by agents of an indefinite nature. In fact, the status of the Bulgarian agent in Constantinople, Ivan Geshov, would be an excuse to spark off the string of events in the autumn of 1908. The Geshov incident (a failure to invite the Bulgarian diplomatic agent to a dinner party given by Tevfik Pasha, the Minister of Foreign Affairs for all foreign diplomatic representatives in the Capital to celebrate Sultan Abdülhamid's birthday on September 14) reflects the sensitivities of both parties about the diplomatic etiquette as an indicator of Principality's international standing. Although the Grand Vizier made a public statement and sent two notes to the Bulgarian Prime Minister, playing down the importance of the event, such efforts failed to satisfy Sofia as long as the status of its representative in Constantinople had not been clearly defined. The Bulgarian Government, which had since the beginning shown

a lack of sympathy with the new Turkish regime, feared that the latter intended to establish a precedent fixing Bulgaria's position as a vassal State against the rights the Principality had acquired over the years on the international scene. The Geshov incident would spur the Bulgarian government into quick, pre-emptive action against the Sublime Porte (see the diplomatic correspondence published by the Bulgarian Archives State Agency in series *Известия на Държавните Архиви*, 95–96/2008, *100 години от обявяването на Независимостта на България*, София, 592 p.).

Coming immediately in the wake of the Geshov incident, the Bulgarian Government, using as a pretext a strike that had broken out among the employees of the Oriental Railway Company operating a line between Constantinople and Sofia, occupied the track of the line that was still Turkish property on grounds of national security and refused to return it at the end of the strike. The intractable attitude adopted by the Bulgarian authorities in both the incidents coupled with the quasi-royal welcome enjoyed by Prince Ferdinand at Budapest on the occasion of his state visit. Throughout the summer, Ottoman diplomats in European capitals, having passed on their Minister unconfirmed reports to the effect that Baron Alois von Aehrenthal, the Austrian-Hungarian Foreign Minister, contemplated some action in Bosnia, took care however to stress that nobody was expecting a radical change in the near future. Therefore the Porte was surprised just as much as the other Cabinets when Vienna announced the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In that case as well as for Bulgaria's declaration of independence, the Porte did not entertain any hope that these may revert through the support of any sympathetic foreign Powers. The Ottoman diplomats were painfully aware that the international law did not apply when their Empire was concerned. Ottoman protests to the signatories of the Berlin Treaty, supposedly bound to guarantee its provisions, were met with no response. The Porte eventually was compelled to solve the crisis on its own.

The Ottoman diplomacy was a low-key diplomacy that aimed at limiting the losses and, in it, it was successful. Thus, in exchange for the recognition of the new status of Bosnia and Herzegovina, it succeeded in forcing Austria-Hungary to pay a substantial financial compensation and imposed as a symbolic gesture the closing down of its offices in the Empire, their presence being viewed as an infringement on the sovereign rights of the Porte. The Austrians also renounced all the rights they enjoyed in the Sandjak of Novi Bazar, rights of emigration and religious liberty were secured to Muslims and Vienna agreed to negotiate a new commercial treaty with Turkey within two years and to an increase of custom by 4%. Having reached an agreement with Austria-Hungary, the Porte was now ready to settle the Bulgarian issue which was by now limited to a mere difference in the amount to be paid by Bulgaria as compensation for the Eastern Rumelian tribute, including fully payment of the 1908 instalment since it had already been earmarked for the amortization of the Ottoman Public Debt. By the intercession of Russia that, through its ambassador in Constantinople, had announced it as a gesture of goodwill towards the new regime in Turkey, she would be willing to relinquish the

balance of the war indemnity due to her by the Ottoman Empire. With the St. Petersburg Protocol that was ratified on April 1909, the Ottoman Empire pledged to recognize Bulgarian independence and to refrain from any further financial demands on Bulgaria, while Russia renounced forty annuities of the war indemnity which would have covered the amount claimed by the Porte in compensation from Bulgaria. Ottoman diplomacy obtained the recognition of Bulgarian independence be made conditional to the solution of various issues pending between Turkey and Russia. Through skilful dilatory tactics, in October 1908 it succeeded in neutralizing the military threat of Bulgarian mobilization.

Now the Porte was able to entirely devote its attention to the Balkans. Its own position in Macedonia and Albania would have been endangered by an armed confrontation between Serbia and Austria-Hungary. Here again, the Ottoman diplomacy manoeuvred very skilfully. It did not let itself be drawn into an anti-Austrian coalition with Serbia and Montenegro. At the same time, the Porte needed to be prepared in case Serbia, exasperated by a peaceful solution of the Austro-Turkish conflict, might strike a pre-emptive blow by attacking the Sandjak, and therefore the Ottoman diplomacy could have adopted the view of an alliance with Vienna. Yet, being informed by its envoys in Berlin, London and St. Petersburg of the day by day fluctuation of the international conjuncture, the Porte was able to steer a middle way. The Turkish ambassador in Berlin, Osman Nizami Pacha, came up with the notion of an alliance between the Ottoman Empire, Austria-Hungary and Romania. It might have taken the shape of a secret military arrangement aimed at securing peace in the Balkan Peninsula, also making allowance for the event of a conflict with Serbia, Bulgaria and Montenegro. The project of a military agreement between Romania and Turkey was not new, and it even caused concern to the Bulgarian authorities (see the memoirs of the Bulgarian diplomatic agent at Bucharest, Hristofor Hespaciev – *Служба на България в чужбина. Военнодипломатически спомени. 1899–1914*, София, 1993). Eventually, the Porte applauded Alexander Izvolsky, the Russian Foreign Minister, when the latter finally acquiesced under German pressure to the annexation, leaving Serbia with no other option than similarly caving in. Izvolsky was credited of having saved European peace.

The position of the Porte to Greece's decision to use the new turn of events for announcing its annexation of Crete in October 1908 was different. It rejected the suggestion of leasing the island or turning it over to Greece in exchange for financial compensation, as it had been the case for Bosnia's annexation by Austria-Hungary or the recognition of Bulgarian independence. Instead, Ottoman diplomacy concentrated on its primary objective, ensuring the continuation of the status quo, which became the Porte's rallying cry. It duly protested at each new violation of the Sultan's sovereign rights and every time received the reassurance from all Powers concerned that the status quo was to be maintained. As mentioned in the editor's note, the third volume of the series is a summary of frustration and helplessness of Ottoman diplomacy, which nevertheless succeeded in keeping alive

for more than a decade the fiction of Ottoman sovereignty over Crete. This volume of documents covers the period extending from the entry into function of Prince George of Greece as High Commissioner empowered to govern the island in the aftermath of a brief Greco-Turkish war to its final incorporation into the Hellenic Kingdom as a result of the Balkan Wars. From the Ottoman side, most of the correspondence on the Cretan question originates from the Athens legation. The island was – according to the 1898 arrangement – put under the joint control of the European Powers with the Sultan retaining nominally his sovereign rights over Crete. Therefore, Greece – on paper – had no part in the question, and Greek statesmen would use this argument, when it suited them, to disclaim any responsibility over events that took place in the island in response to Ottoman protests. The Porte did not hold any illusion in her innermost that full sovereignty could ever be restored in Crete. Ottoman statesmen were aware that the process was irreversible. The most they could obtain was the prolongation and maintenance as long as possible of the status quo. This would, in the view of some of them, have a disastrous domino effect on the other Ottoman islands of the Aegean, inhabited mainly by Greeks, and on the aspirations of the Balkan states. That the *de jure* sovereignty of the Porte lasted till 1913 is to the credit of the tenacious Ottoman diplomacy. At the same time it is indicative of the lack of resolution of the Powers to put an end to that ambiguous situation, unsatisfactory as it was for all sides involved.

The same reasoning may be applied in the case of the Macedonian question which, in the eye of the Europeans, by the turn of the century, was the microcosm of the Balkan problem. It is hard to find another region where the national idea has wrought such havoc as Macedonia. Here we can see simultaneously, and in concentrated form, all the different elements which, on a larger scale and in successive phases, have contributed together to make up the Eastern Question. The disorders in Macedonia stemmed from a combination of Turkish misrule and rivalries of the Christian inhabitants of the area, who found allies and arms in the neighbouring Balkan states in their struggle to secure the promised land for themselves, slaughtering rival elements, Christian or Muslim. Most of the newly created Balkan States pursued an irredentist ambition to redeem their co-nationals living in European Turkey. Indeed, Article XXIII of the Berlin Treaty of July 1898 granted reforms under European guidance to these territories. On the other hand, the Ottoman Empire failed to develop any clearly defined policies how to respond. It tried to establish law and order whilst implementing defensive measures to avoid any confrontation with regional and European powers. Having been faced with the independence-pursuing nationalistic movements inside and outside its boundaries, and also with European imperial ambitions, the Porte benefited from the Great Powers' prevalent desire to ensure the survival of the Ottoman Empire as a political entity. It should be remembered that the Turkish policy was the traditional one of procrastination, promises, and perfect politeness. However, the policies implemented after the Young Turk Revolution, as well as the shift in the priorities

of the European Powers, provided grounds for the Balkan states to overcome their differences and unify their forces to achieve their aims in Macedonia by 1912. The Ottoman diplomatic documents on the Macedonian Question from the Berlin Treaty up to the First Balkan War collected in these two volumes show that, despite the efforts of Ottoman diplomats to improve Turkey's 'image' and to gain international support, by 1912 the war became unavoidable.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, although Macedonia was already seen as the 'powder keg' of Europe, as a result of the escalation of armed activities by various groups, the European Powers preferred not to interfere and the reforms promised at Berlin remained a dead letter. It was only after Austria-Hungary and Russia signed an entente regarding the Balkans in May 1897 that both states began cooperating, with the consent of other powers, on a reform programme. They initiated a series of proposals, culminating in October 1903. This was designed to compel the sultan to reform the administration of Macedonia so as to make life tolerable for his Christian subjects there. Reforms were to be introduced under the 'dual control' of Austrian-Hungarian and Russian civil agents, assisting an Ottoman inspector-general, and assisted in turn, in the second rank, by personnel from the other Great Powers. Most of them were either disinterested or believing that the reforms would not bring any significant improvement: for their own long-term ambitions in the Peninsula the Powers insisted on maintaining the status quo in the Balkans. The pressing danger to European peace lay in the fact that the Ottoman Empire could hardly survive a blow as severe as the loss of Macedonia, a juncture which would precipitate war between the Balkan states, and possibly a European war. With the restoration of the 1876 Constitution after the Young Turk revolution of July 1908 the Mürzsteg proposals initiated by the Great Powers were put aside. The new regime had started to implement stricter policies on Macedonian lands, which made the Christian communities, as well as Muslim Albanians, lose many of the privileges which they previously enjoyed. Soon after, the Balkan states started to search for ways of cooperation. By the summer of 1910 news had started to reach the Ottoman Foreign Ministry that an entente between Greece and Bulgaria was soon to be formalized. Furthermore, by February 1911, the Turkish minister at Belgrade wrote about an official entente among the Balkan states brought about by the aggressive policies of the Young Turks in Macedonia. In the meantime, pessimistic news about developments in the Balkans continued to reach Constantinople. On the regional level, while the understanding between the Balkan states started to take shape in the spring of 1912, alternatives for reforms, with the aim of improving the situation and pressurizing the Ottoman politicians, were being discussed in European circles. But the experience of Macedonian reforms showed that this might only involve the Powers in endless disputes with Turkey. Moreover, new issues arose in the autumn of 1912 when the leaderships of South-Eastern European state proved capable of acting single-handedly.

Most of the reports sent by the Ottoman diplomats focus on the activities of various bands and organisations like *Etniki Etairia* or *The Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization* which played an important role in the region. The Romanian historians will be interested in the proceedings initiated by the Vlachs, with the support of Bucharest, to be recognized as a separate community with the right to be educated in their native language and to enjoy freedom of religious practices. The documents emphasize Apostol Margarit's activity which was strongly opposed by Greeks, who identified it as a schism within the Orthodox Church (see the documents published by the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, after the severance of the diplomatic relations between Bucharest and Athens – *Documente Diplomatice. Afacerile Macedoniei. Conflictul greco-român*, Bucureşti, 1905). While the Greeks attempted to murder him, the Romanians themselves did not spare serious accusations against Margarit. About this leader of the Vlach national movement, Ottoman diplomats' reports agree with the Romanian statesmen who placed their faith in him, such as King Charles I and the Liberal prime-minister D.A. Sturdza.

This absorbing set of documents proves that one of the key elements in understanding the relations among the European states in the modern period is the study of Ottoman history and diplomacy. We can only look forward to the next volumes which will offer information on the Balkan Wars and the signing of the Peace Treaty of Bucharest.

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