

THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE IN THE ERA OF THE REVOLUTIONARY TRANSFORMATION OF THE ANCIENT EUROPEAN SOCIETY

Abstract

The Ottoman Empire held the world stage for a period spanning more than seven centuries. Its greatness influenced and is still reflecting in the world history, particularly in the Southeast Europe. For the period which is object of our interest, it is important to underline the fact that great impact upon the decline was caused by the new revolutionary ideologies from the West and Russian empire from the East. The pulses coming from Russia with its hidden intensity of differences on religious ground, basically caused disturbances in the Empire which ended with a many treaties in the name of the promised “peace”, which of course, did not last long enough. During the 19th century within the enflamed passions of the Western European countries, the Ottoman Empire with its power and dimension did not manage to lead the political scene. The fluctuating alliances resulted in the empires “longest” century. Under the influences of the Great Powers the process of disintegration became unstoppable. The national revolutions within the Empire became more visible and effective by decade and new national states spawned in the Balkan Peninsula. Facing the new waves from the West influencing the national movements based on liberal – democratic ideals, the Empire felt the need of certain reform’s in an attempt to stabilize the political order, desperately trying to adapt its ancient heritage to a new, modern era.

The numerous internal turbulences which gradually weakened the power of the Byzantine Empire, along with the strikes dealt to Byzantium by the Crusaders, were the main reason for the arrival of the Seljuk Turks on European soil. For a brief moment, both on the inside and outside, the events were layering one after another, silently taking the breath away and leaving behind a lasting crack through which, step by step, the Seljuk tribe entered in this territory from Asia Minor.¹

The history of the incoming Islamic state-legal system in Southeastern Europe starts at the moment when one part of the Anatolian beyliks unified into smaller principalities and, under the guidance of the powerful leader *Ertuğrul*, constituted their first capital in *Söğüt*. In that exact place, after his death in 1281, his son *Osman* will form the new dynasty and, proclaiming himself as Sultan, will call the country - Osman dynasty. Thus Osman will become the first ruler of the *Osman* Empire in 1299.²

The invasion of Southeastern Europe was performed by *Murad I*, the son of *Orhan*, who led his army all the way to the river Danube. After the great victory of the House of Osman in the battle at the river Maritsa in 1371, the Turkish penetration on the Balkan Peninsula was inevitable and uninterrupted. Even with the joined resistance of the Medieval Christian kingdoms, the battle on Kosovo Field in 1389 secured the Ottoman supremacy in

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¹“The Turks, along with the Mongols, Mancures, Bulgarians etc., initially composed the group of Altaic people in External Mongolia in Central Asia (in approximately the second millennium BC). The records of the first Turkish kingdom, settled along the river Orkon in Siberia, date since the early VII century.”-Herper, MetinandCriss,Nur Bilge, *Historical dictionary of Turkey*, Third Edition, The Scarecrow Press, Toronto, 2009. p. 20.

²Uyar, MesutandErickson, Edward J., *A Military History of the Ottomans: From Osman to Ataturk*, Praeger Security International, Santa Barbara, California, 2009. p. 2.

Southeastern Europe, which was followed by consolidation and reinforcement of the Ottoman power.

Under the leadership of sultan *Mehmed I*, the Empire strengthened with the expansion of its borders, reorganizing its internal bases and thus directing the plans for a final conquering campaign towards Constantinople. The siege of Constantinople started on 6th of April 1453. After nearly fifty three days, on 29th of May 1453, Constantinople will be forever conquered by sultan *Mehmed II*. Under his command, the Ottoman rule will extend to the west, i.e. towards the island of Rhodes and some parts of southern Italy. The breakthrough in the west was disrupted as a result of the impermanence of life, i.e. the sudden death of the sultan. Or, as it was noted: "The death of the Conqueror saved Europe".³

The culmination of the military campaigns of the Ottoman Empire was achieved by sultan *Suleyman I the Magnificent*. During his rule, he granted himself the title *Caliph of the entire world (Halife-i ru-i zemin)*. *Suleyman I* led the victories and conquests at Mohacs and Rhodes, as well as the siege of Vienna and Szigeth. The conquering of Hungary after the battle at Mohacs and its transformation into an Ottoman province for more than one hundred and forty years, presented a real threat for Western Europe. This conquest implied that the defenses of the West had fallen, and the Ottoman army led by *Suleyman I* headed towards the gate of Catholic Europe, i.e. towards Vienna. Although serious chances for success existed, the siege of Vienna failed, and the death of *Suleyman I* on 6th of September 1566 marked the zenith of the Ottoman progress in the conquering of Europe.

At the very beginning of the fifth decade of the XVI century, the Ottomans ruled the conquered territories which extended over Asia, Africa and Southeastern Europe. The Byzantine territories on the Balkans were entirely conquered by the Empire, and in 1650 Ottoman authority stretched starting from the rivers Sava and Danube to the south, all the way to the central regions of Hungary to the north. The Ottomans turned the principalities Transylvania, Wallachia, Moldavia and the Khanate of Crimea, located on the territory between Hungary and the Black Sea, into vassal states. Stretching out on three continents, this powerful empire was a symbiosis of several Islamic Middle Eastern cultures which, following the Ottoman permeation on Christian territories created a new long-term cultural identity in Southeastern Europe. In that sense, when referring to the subjects of the Ottoman Empire, it is very correct to conclude that the subjected population had a very heterogenic structure, not only in terms of their spoken language, but also regarding their social and religious affiliation.

In terms of religion, *in the early VII century, the Turks-Seljuks had their first contact with Islam. In the period between the Arabian conquest of Iran and their exercised influence all through Central Asia, until the X century AD, the majority of Turks converted into Islam. In the following ten centuries, Islam significantly shaped the Turkish state, society and culture.*⁴ Therefore, the Ottoman state was built upon the concept of holy war and its goal was to spread and defend Islam. Since it was built on the concept of dichotomy, i.e. Dar al-Islam (دار الإسلام) and Dar al-Harb (دارالحرب), or the *house of peace* and the *house of war*, every sultan had an obligation to expand the rule of Islam onto as bigger territory as possible. Therefore, when new territories were conquered, the local population was offered the opportunity to keep their own religion if they surrender without resistance. From the aspect of military Islamic rules, the subjects were selected on the base of their social position. The army was comprised of land and naval forces. The main military force was the land army, consisting of the sultan's guard and the *eyalet army* of the provinces. The most numerous eyelet armies were the *Sipahi*, i.e. the cavalry, while the striking powers of the sultan's guard

³Lane-Poole, Stanley, *The Story of Turkey*, Press of G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1893. p. 136.

⁴Herper, MetinandCriss,Nur Bilge, *Historical dictionary of Turkey...* (q.w.), p. 20.

were the *Janissaries*. These squads held a special significance to the Empire and were recruited under the so-called “blood tax” created by sultan *Orhan*, who introduced this unprecedented practice in 1330. This tax was initially collected by sultan *Murat I* in 1365. The “tax in blood” (*devshirme*) was intended for boys belonging to non-Muslim communities, especially the Christians, and implied forcible recruitment of young boys every five to seven years and their training into elite warriors and administrators. The Christian boys aged between 8 and 18 years were taken from their families, converted into Islam and trained for the personal sultan’s army. *When these boys arrived before the Sultan, they were taught the Turkish language, the Islamic religion, the Arabian and other features of the Ottoman way of life. Later, they were sent to a military training and were organized either as part of the infantry, called “New Force” (Yeni Qeri), and became yanissaries, or as part of the cavalry, called Sipahis.*⁵ The navy, on the other hand, gained power under the rule of sultan *Bayezid I*. The head position of the navy was held by the *Kapudan Pasha*, while the lead commander of all the military powers of the Ottomans in times of war was the *Grand Vizier*.

According to the state structure, the Ottoman Empire was unitary and centralistic. As a despot monarchy, it had a strong theocratic marking. This characteristic of the Empire became especially significant after the conquering of Egypt and Arabia in 1516 and 1517. After the annexation of these eastern territories, sultan *Selim I* added the Caliph designation to his title, which indirectly meant that he announced himself to be “protector of Islam”, signifying that, in addition to the highest secular jurisdiction, the highest religious authority in the Empire was in the hands of the Ottoman sultan. “Therefore, the entire legislative power rested in the hands of the Sultan, and he was the exclusive lawmaker who exercised total control over the execution of laws through his administrative bodies; he held the highest administrative and judicial authority; he decided for war and peace; he represented the country in the international relations and was the supreme military commander. As a Caliph, he was also the supreme religious chief of the Islamic world.”⁶ This meant that the *Quran* and the *Hadith* represented the basic legal sources for the principles under which legal acts were created. In essence, although not always in practice, all proclaimed laws were restricted from opposing the *Sharia law*. In this sense, the control over religious principles was held by the supreme religious leader *Sheikh ul-Islam*, who was obliged to give interpretations and to assess legal norms from the stand point of Islamic law.

The Islamic law in the Ottoman Empire was founded upon divine revelation *Wahy* and human reason *Aql*. This duality of the origins of Islam was expressed through the two Arabic titles *Sharia* and *Fiqh*. While *Sharia* was firmly connected with divine revelation, *Fiqh* was a product of the human reason. The *Fiqh* mainly engaged in the practical legal declarations which referred to the individual’s behavior in society. It epitomized the reflection of positive law and, although in a greater sense it was equated with the *Sharia*, the *Fiqh* did not contain general provisions about morality or religion, which were not legally binding concepts.

Regarding the territorial-administrative organization, in order to successfully maintain its administrative and army duties, the Empire was divided into two bigger provinces, so-called *beylerbeyliks*, which were: *Rumelia* (the European part) and *Anatolia* (the Asian part). These provinces were governed by *Rumelian* and *Anatolian* *beglarbegi*. The Ottoman administration was structured in several local units which at different times were called *vilayets*, *eyalets* or, *pashaliks*. They were divided onto territories called *sanjaks* or *liwas*, which were subdivided *tokazas* and, later on, *nahiye*. These territorial units had separate local

⁵Shaw, Stanford, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, Vol. I, *Empire of Gazis: The Rise and Decline of the Ottoman Empire, 1280 – 1808*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1976, p. 26.

⁶Поповска, Билјана, *Државно-правна историја на Македонија од VII – XX век*, Скопје, 2010, p. 114.

administrative apparatus, which implied not only cooperation with the *sipahis*, but also cooperation with the local administration system organized as juridical districts or *Qadi*, as well as and cooperation with representatives of the state treasury, or *defters*. Thusly organized, the local administrative authorities had mechanisms of coercion under their jurisdiction, and it was expected that army forces will get involved in the execution of police tasks.

The duty of *qadi'asker*, i.e. supreme judge of the soldiers was introduced in the 1460. The *nişancı*, whose duty included maintaining of the administration and placing of the *tughra* (the sultan's seal) on the documents released by the central authority, also held a high position in the social hierarchy. Along with the sultan, the state's council called the *Divan*, which consisted of the highest officials of the state, also handled the state's affairs. Until the rule of sultan *Mehmed II the Conqueror* (1451–1481), the sessions of the *Divan* were governed by the sultan himself. Afterwards, this obligation was given to the Grand vizier, while the sultan participated in the *Divan* only for exceptional reasons. With the publication of the two systematic collections of laws, i.e. the so-called *Kanun-i Osmani*, *Mehmed II* introduced the first codification of Ottoman law.

The gradual fall of the Empire, largely as a result of the loss of territories in Europe, could be traced to the beginning of the XVIII century. Following the Treaty of Karlowitz in 1699 and in all future historical stages, the Empire will be forced to take a defensive position on the international scene which, after several decades, will result in its dissolution.

At the beginning of the XIX century, with the breakthrough of western ideas concerning the nations in Ottoman society, the contents of the *Millet system* gradually started to change. The several reform legal acts passed in the Empire in the XIX century represented a large, but in essence only a formal attempt to improve the picture of the increasing decadence. Therefore, the announcement of the *Edict of Gulhane* (*Khatt-i Sharif dan Gulhane*) and the proclamation of full equality of all citizens of the Empire before the law marked the end of the connection between the peasant and the land. This way, through the process of creation of the *chifliks* and the re-adaptation from villagers tied to the land into chiflik-workers, the existing established law, which allowed feudal owners to keep villagers on the land which they managed, was abolished. This enabled an easier migration from village to town, and thus accelerated the process of creation of the new layer of citizens.

This process of reforms within the Empire continued in the second half of the XIX century with the passing of the *Hatt-ı Hümayûnu* – or the Imperial Rescript (*Khatt-i Humâyûn*) on 18th of February 1856. This reform act confirmed the rights established with the Hatt-I Serif from *Gulhane*, while additionally representing a guarantee for the following rights: it guaranteed equal rights of the population in the Empire regardless of social or religious affiliation; it guaranteed the right of life, honor and property of the Ottoman subjects; it recognized the right for regulation of the religious and educational life for the non-Muslim municipalities; state's services were declared equally available to all subjects; it envisioned the formation of trade and criminal courts which would enable participation of a non-Muslim jury (*aazi*); it gave jurisdiction to the Kadi, i.e. the judges, to judge the non-Muslim population in public proceedings; in projected mixed courts as general citizens' courts for the Christians within the villayets and sanjaks; it guaranteed the legitimacy of taxing and recognized the rights of the non-Muslim municipalities to collect taxes in order to settle their own necessities, etc.

Consequently to the changes conditioned by the *Tanzimat reforms*, reforms were also made in the structure of the *Millet system*. Within it, some new secular elements started to emerge. The formation of a middle class of citizens also contributed to the changes, creating a demand for a larger influence of the secular element over the millet, and expressing dissatisfaction regarding the religious leaders 'complete control over the life in the

community. A direct consequence of the Tanzimat was the weakening of the religious institutions in the Muslim millet, which resulted in abolition of the monopoly of the Ulema over the judiciary and educational system, along with replacement of the earnings from the vakıfs with state's salaries.

In the secular millet, the influence of the profane element was increased with the reforms made in 1856. Confirming the rights projected with the *Edict of Gulhane*, regarding his non-Muslim subjects, in 1856 the sultan proposed the following reforms: "Every Christian or other non-Muslim community is obliged, in a previously determined period of time and in accordance with the commission composed of its members, along with my consent and under the observation of my Sublime Porte, to examine their own unbreakable rights and to observe and submit to my Sublime Porte proposals for reforms which are required for the progress of Ottoman civilization."⁷

These reforms brought change in the administration and the financial organization of the millets, without addressing the rights of the religious chiefs. The authorizations granted to the Christian patriarchs and bishops by sultan *Mahmud II* were supposed to be adjusted to the new social position which the Sublime Porte obliged to provide for the non-Muslim communities. Among other things, the following measures were implemented: the principle of lifelong appointment of the patriarch; mandatory oath for all patriarchs, metropolitan bishops, archbishops, bishops and rabbis at the moment when they enter into office; the abolition of religious taxes and their replacement with assigned revenues for the religious leaders of the communities, with the allocation of allowances and salaries equitably proportioned to the importance, the rank, and the dignity of the different members of the religious institutions. The increase of the influence of the non-Muslim factor in the Empire through the Tanzimat reforms could be additionally observed with the increase of the jurisdiction of the non-Muslims in the managing process of the millet communities, such as the fact that the property and personal possessions of the Christian priests were exempt from taxation. Moreover, the temporary management of the Christian and the other non-Muslim communities was put under the jurisdiction of an assembly elected among the members of the clergy and the laymen of that community. Furthermore, it lifted the ban and granted full freedom to the "non-mixed communities" in the towns, small boroughs and villages to repair buildings set apart for religious worship, for schools, for hospitals, and for cemeteries. Also, it determined that every religious group, in the regions where there is no other religion, is to be freed of all limitations regarding performing its rites in public. In the towns, districts and villages where there was a mixed composition of religious groups, it was determined that every community will have equal right to repair its churches, hospitals, schools and cemeteries.

"My Sublime Porte will take energetic measures to grant every religious community, regardless of the number of its members, complete freedom in the conduction of their religious services. Every attempt or designation, whose goal is to make any class of believers in my Empire less valuable than any other, as the result of their faith, language or race, will be forever erased from the laws and the decrees of the Empire... All forms of faith are and will be freely worshiped, and no subject in my Empire will be hindered in the exercise of the religion, nor will be in any way annoyed or forced to change religion... All subjects within my Empire, without distinction, shall be received into the Civil and Military Schools, if they fulfill the age requirements and the conditions determined in accordance to the regulations of those schools. Furthermore, every community is authorized to establish Public Schools of Science, Art, and Industry, with the condition that the methods of instruction and the choice

⁷Поповска, Билјана, *Државно-правна историја...* (q.w.), p. 140.

of scholars shall fall under the control of a Mixed Council for Public Education, whose members will be appointed with my royal ordinance.“⁸

In their essence, these regulations referred to the non-Muslim millets, and they represented an attempt by the Empire to prevent their intentions to gain larger autonomy or independency.

The Hatt-ı Hümayûnu, adopted under the influence of the western European powers, mainly England and France, aimed at securing equal rights for the Muslims and non-Muslims in the Ottoman Empire. This basic principle, however, encountered difficulties in practice because of its incompatibility with the existing general social relations in the Empire. On the other side, the influence of the great powers, which were behind the process of reforms within the Empire, increased significantly after the *Paris Peace Conference* on 30th of March 1856, held as a result of the defeat of the Empire in the *Crimean War* (1853–1856).⁹

It is evident that, since the beginning of the XIX century, the future of the great Ottoman Empire became uncertain, mainly due to situation in terms of the social-economic relations, as well as the political circumstances which did not allow its transformation into a modern state. The excessive economic dependency on western European capital, as well as the increasing crisis in internal and, at the same time, inter-religious matters, were evidence of the total crisis in the social order within the Empire. The erosion in all segments of social life was mainly the result of the obsolete practices within the economy and administration management of the overall state order, which became entirely outdated on technological and political plan.

The system of manufacturing relations within the Ottoman Empire was built on feudal and semi-feudal foundations, while the largest part of the rural population in Southeastern Europe, and especially the part which was inside the borders of the Ottoman Empire, functioned in conditions of servitude.

In essence, the feudal socio-economic relations were representative of the military-feudal Ottoman Empire, and were directly determined by the issue of land and, subsequently, by the agricultural production. The entire land was divided into three categories: state land (*Miri*), private possession (*Mulk*) and the land in ownership of the religious communities (*Vakıfs*). The intentions to introduce changes in the manner of ruling and administration of the land, in the XIX century imposed the necessity of changes within the plan of the functioning of the state. The entire feudal society was subjected to a complete socio-economic transformation which mainly sought radical changes of the attitudes of the ruling feudal class. Aiming to protect its status, the ruling feudal class intensified its efforts to keep the existing order, diminishing the chances of any kind of progress.

The third important element of the socio-economic structure of the Balkans in the XIX century was the fact that the Empire, since the end of the XVIII century, became incapable of maintaining the internal order and started to fail in issues imposed by new global tendencies. More precisely, this condition is best observed through the incapability of the Ottoman ruling class to include all social factors in the social and political system of the state. Resulting from the inability to reach any consensus within the established military-feudal system and the failure to establish one general economy policy, the Ottoman Empire brought

⁸Hammer, von Joseph - *Historijaturskog /osmanskog/ carstva*. 3 tom, Zagreb, 1979, p. 403.

⁹“The Crimean War started in 1853 between the Russian Empire and the Ottoman Empire. The following year the Ottomans were joined by Great Britain, France and Sardinia. The Treaty of Paris opened the doors to all the Great powers into the internal affairs of the Ottoman Empire. Signed between France, Austria, Great Britain, the Russian Empire and the Ottoman Empire, this Treaty guaranteed the independency and the integrity of the Ottoman Empire. However, with articles 9, 14 this Treaty ensured the right of the great European powers to interfere in the internal affairs of the Ottoman Empire regarding the conduction of reforms.” - Royle, Trevor, *Crimea, The Great Crimean War 1854 – 1856*, Little, Brown and Company, London, 1999. p. 476 – 502.

itself in a position where all periphery territories established more developed economic relations with the European capitals than with its own capital.

The moment when the dissolution of the authority of the central government in the Empire commenced, was the same moment when the wave of national romanticism started to grow among the enslaved people. This moment is the starting point of the whole composition which, by the end of the XIX century, brought defragmentation of the relations and connections between the Muslim and non-Muslim population within the state. Overall, the crisis which covered the whole legal system of the Empire, without the opportunity of contra-balance against the dominant Muslim prefix, pointed out to the serious consequences which jeopardized the existence of the Empire as a whole.

It is important to note that the legal system of the Ottoman Empire was built upon the principles and postulates of the Sharia law. Even though it was formally reformed during the XIX century following the example of the French law, in essence the legal system of the Ottoman Empire stayed unchanged and completely ineffective. First of all, in terms of religious principle, the dominant Muslim prefix remained, which in a great sense distorted the picture of justice and righteousness regarding not only the Christian population, but also the rest of the population which were not devotees to the crescent moon. Even though the natural economy was dominant in the timar-sipahi system, it also coexisted with the commodity-monetary economy, as well as commodity-monetary relations on the territories where this system was dominant. In fact, the urban economy did not extend outside the frames of the feudal-craftsmanship commodity-monetary economy; in addition, it did not have the power to influence villages, which represented autochthonous components where each household almost entirely satisfied its own needs with its own production.¹⁰ With the abolition of this system in 1834, the Ottoman Empire made a step forward in the attempt to stabilize the big military-feudal state. By repealing a large part of the natural economy, it intended to deal with the weakening of its own central power. However, this occurred only in the final moments, when it became completely obvious that there was no way to stop the enormous breakthrough of the commodity-monetary relations. As a result, the timar-sipahi system became unusable and the Empire was faced with imminent necessity to make reforms in the entire economic structure. The inflow of commodity-monetary relations, the import of luxury products, the standstill in the conquest of new territories, the high degree of corruption throughout the entire state apparatus and, in addition, the decrease in earnings from trade, started to shake the foundations of the great empire, i.e. started the dissolution of the two main pillars of the military power of the Ottoman Empire, the sipahis and the janissaries. This led to a gradually increased state of anarchy, especially in the Balkan parts of the Empire, where the timar-sipahi system was predominant. Parallel to this process, i.e. during the process of deterioration of the timar-sipahi system, state reforms started with gradual introduction of the chiflik-agrarian system. However, the entire composition of the newly established relations serve as evidence to the fact that, until its final collapse, the Ottoman Empire was unsuccessful in building healthy and firm legal mechanisms through which the economic relations of the new chiflik agrarian system on Balkans would be regulated. The destruction of the traditional natural economy and the weakening of the central government led to radical changes which reflected not only on the legal system of the Empire, but also over the complete socio-economic structure.

In the era of nationalism on the Balkans, three major factors intercepted and determined the further dynamics of events which followed in the XX century. Those were: the increasing

¹⁰ Поп-Георгиев, Димитар – *Сопственоста врз чифлиците и чифлигарските аграрно-правни односи во Македонија до Балканската војна 1912*, ИНИ, Скопје, 1956, p. 16.

plummet of the great Ottoman Empire, the process of revival of the Balkan nations and the interference of the great European powers in Balkan politics.

As stated in the previous chapter, the European political scene, between the Vienna Congress of 1815 and the beginning of World War I, was steered by the Concert of Europe. The main characteristic of the great European powers during the entire XIX century – the preservation of the principles established with the Vienna Congress and the fast development of industrialization– conditioned the necessity of conquering new territories and led to an accelerated imperial expansion on the African and Asian continent, which meant that the geostrategic connection of the Balkans with Africa and Asia will unavoidably attract the interests of Western Europe. Furthermore, during the XIX century, this fact influenced the relations with the Ottoman Empire and reflected over the development of the national movements on the Balkan Peninsula. The favorable geostrategic and international position of geographic Macedonia, as an Ottoman province located in the central part of the Empire, attracted the attention of the Great Powers. The access to the Port of Salonika through the Moravian-Vardar Valley was among the central tendencies not only of the European but also of the Balkan countries, especially during the second half of the XIX century.

Resulting from the process of dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of the national aspirations of the Balkan nations during their revolutionary struggle for creation of their own nation states, the European courts foresaw geostrategic gain in creating their own spheres of interest on the Balkan Peninsula.

The main interest of the great powers was aimed at gaining control over the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles. The Habsburg Monarchy conquered Bukovina in 1775 and Dalmatia and Istra in 1797, and the annexations of these territories were confirmed with the agreement signed in Vienna in 1815. By obtaining Bessarabia with the treaty of Bucharest signed in 1812, Russia was also successful in its efforts to gain territories north from the Black Sea. On the other hand, in 1815 Great Britain acquired control over the Ionic islands, which remained under its rule until 1863.¹¹

Resulting from the exceptional strategic location of its territory in global sense, the Balkan Peninsula became a point where the interests of the great powers overlapped. It was the Russian Empire and Great Britain who had the leading position in the contest for conquering the territories that expanded through China, the north bordering regions of India, Afghanistan, Persia and the Ottoman Empire. For Russia, the Balkan Peninsula represented a strategic region which entered its own sphere of interests in the frames of the relation between the Black sea and the Marmara Sea. Russia was intensely interested in securing its domination over this region due to its geographic location, which the Russian Empire related both with the historical past and the future development of the relations between the great European powers. Therefore, the existence of the Ottoman Empire represented a strategic interest for the great European powers. Great Britain and France feared that a shift in the control of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles would threaten the concept of balance of powers on the European continent. The fears of the two great European powers were not far from the truth and therefore they were strongly interested in preserving the status quo in the region.

The further Russian expansion on the Middle East was contrary to the imperial interests of Great Britain. They especially feared the possibility of Russian control over the Straits, which would jeopardize the British trade on the Levant, as well as its navy in the Mediterranean and its position in India. Therefore, during the entire XIX century, British diplomacy tirelessly worked on the preservation of the wholeness of the Ottoman Empire.

France was also interested in the events on the Balkans and the Middle East. Although it was the first Christian power since 1536 to sign a union and trade agreement with the

¹¹Јелавич, Барбара, *Историјана Балканот (дваесетти век)*, II, НИК ЛИСТ, Скопје, 1999. p. 3.

Empire, aimed at securing a powerful ally against Austria, over time it weakened its influence in Constantinople, ending it with Napoleon's ascension. After the fall of Napoleon, France was forced to transfer control over the Ionic islands and Malta to Great Britain, thus completely marginalizing its position by 1815. In diplomatic sense, France approached the interests of Great Britain, not so much because of the ideal matches of the interests of the two countries, but because of their common goal to stop the Russian Empire to advance further towards the east. As a result, during the Crimean war in 1853, Great Britain and France fought alongside the Ottoman Empire against Russia.

The Paris treaty from 1856 established an arrangement that the Great powers will respect the independency and the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire. A special clause banned navy ships of any country from entering the Black Sea, which in great sense decreased the Russia's threat to the integrity of the Ottoman Empire.

Austria also had its own interests on the Balkans. Even though the Ottoman Empire represented a direct threat for Austria and jeopardized its existence, the possibility of a Russian breakthrough forced Austria to lean towards the block which was led by Great Britain and was aimed at maintaining the status quo on the Balkans and the Middle East. The decisions of the Vienna congress brought significant Austrian expansion on the Balkans, mainly in Dalmatia and the remaining regions of Mljet, thusly granting Austria prevalent influence over the Adriatic Sea, as well as over the western part of the Balkan Peninsula. For those reasons, it was especially important for Austria to prevent the Russian advance on Ottoman possession, mainly since the great number of Slavic subjects within the enormous Habsburg Monarchy could become supporters of the Russian interest towards Austria.

The strengthening of the German imperialism was another characteristic of the international relations, especially in the second half of the XIX century and culminating at the beginning of the XX century. This influence was not directly aimed towards the Balkan events, but undoubtedly had an indirect impact over them. From the moment when the Turkish-German alliance was made, i.e. when the Ottoman Empire granted concessions to the German industry for building of the Baghdad railway, German capital penetrated the Empire with great intensity. The German ruling circles aimed at creating a large trade region which would extend from the Aegean Sea to the Persian Gulf. With this, Germany was certain in its ability to restrain Great Britain in its imperialistic expansion. At the same time, this move opened the possibility for accessing the Persian Gulf, which was especially unfavorable for the interests of Great Britain.

Following the end of the Crimean War (1854 – 1856), the integrity of the Ottoman Empire was preserved with the Paris treaty of 1856. In reality, the existing situation could not persist over a prolonged period due to the crack which emerged between the members of the European block who aimed to preserve its wholeness. The war between France and Austria for supremacy of Italy in 1859, the Austrian-Prussian attack over Denmark in 1864, the war between Prussia and Austria in 1866 and the Prussian-French war in 1870 simply destroyed the Crimean block. The essential issue which burdened the European scene for centuries – the struggle for supremacy of the continent between France and Austria– suddenly changed with the ascension of the German Empire under Bismarck as the biggest power in Europe. In order to neutralize France, Bismarck renewed the League of the Three Emperors consisted by Russia, Prussia and Austria. Within the alliance, Russia and Austro-Hungary both obliged not to interfere in the local events on the Balkan Peninsula and that to advocate the maintenance of the status quo. In reality this was not possible, this became obvious with the outbreak of the Great Eastern Crisis in 1875. It became clear that, with the expansion of the Bosnian-Herzegovian crisis to the regions of Serbia, Montenegro and in Bulgaria in 1875, as well as

with the “Bulgarian horrors” of 1876, the threat of escalation of the crisis to into a military clash which would entail interference from the great powers, was probable. The diplomatic efforts continued with the negotiations between the Russian Empire and Austro-Hungary in the Reichstag on 8th of July 1876 and with the Russian ultimatum to the Ottoman Empire.¹² After the Ottoman Empire accepted the truce on 31st of October 1876, the Constantinople peace conference was held on 12th of December 1876.

The decisions on the Constantinople conference contained clauses for the division of the Bulgarian territory on western and eastern province and for unification of Bosnia and Herzegovina into one province, envisioning a certain degree of autonomy for each of these provinces. Additionally, it was decided that Serbia would not suffer any territorial losses, whereas Montenegro would be allowed to keep the territories won in Herzegovina and in North Albania. Such decisions were categorically rejected by the Empire and the conference was interrupted on 23rd of December 1876, when cannon shots announced the adoption of a new constitution by the Sultan. With this act the Conference became redundant, which had a severe effect over the politics of the Russian Empire. Russia was gravely concerned by the development of events, especially since, with the Paris conference in 1856; it lost its status as protector of the Orthodox population in the Empire. Therefore, the Russian Empire was constantly working on instigating internal conflicts aimed at weakening the Ottoman Empire. At that moment, the Russian strategy felt the favorable wind which reopened space for maneuver, and it became clear that a new military conflict with the Ottoman Empire was in sight. For these reasons, on Russian initiative, the secret Budapest convention between Russia and Austro-Hungary was signed on 15th of January 1877. With the convention, Russian strategists secured neutrality by the Habsburg Monarchy in case of a future military clash with the Ottoman Empire. The following step was the London convention between the great European powers on 31st of March 1877. With this convention the Ottoman Empire was requested to fulfill the promises regarding its internal state arrangement. After it rejected to conduct the reforms and to allow this process to be monitored by the great powers, on 24th of April 1877 the Russian Empire declared war on the Ottoman Empire.

The Russian-Turkish war resulted in the signing of the preliminary peace treaty on 3rd of March 1878 in San Stefano, located just twenty kilometers away from Constantinople. With this treaty Russia, contrary to the previous arrangements made with Austro-Hungary, created Great Bulgaria. With this treaty Bulgaria was proclaimed as an autonomous principality governed by an elected prince. With the exception to Constantinople, Odrin and Thessaloniki, the thusly drawn Bulgarian state represented an enormous Russian satellite on the Balkans, which caused turbulent reactions by the remaining European powers.

After several months of diplomatic activity, Russia, exhausted by the wars, agreed to review the San Stefano decisions.¹³ During the revision congress in Berlin which commenced on 13th of June the same year, under Bismarck’s leadership and with the formal presence of Ottoman delegates and representatives from the Balkan nations, corrections to the previous agreement were constructed. With the Treaty of Berlin, the territories of Eastern and Western Thrace, Macedonia, Epirus, Albania and the part known as Old Serbia were returned within the borders of the Empire. Bosnia and Herzegovina was also recognized as part of the Empire; however, de facto, Austro-Hungary was granted the right to perform an annexation of this territory in the following thirty years. With the Treaty, the great San Stefano’s Bulgaria was divided into autonomous Bulgaria, in the region north of the mountain Balkan

¹² There are two versions of the same. What is identical in both versions is the agreement not to create a big Slavic country on the Balkans.

¹³See also: *Treaty between Russia and Great Britain for changing of the San Stefano Treaty*. - Христов, Александар, Донеv, Јован - *Македонијавомеѓународнитедоговори 1875-1919*, АрхивнаМакедонија, МатицаМакедонска, Скопје, 1994, p. 66-70.

and the half-autonomous province Eastern Rumelia in the south, while the territory of the entire ethnic Macedonia was returned under the Ottoman rule. Fearing that the thusly set solutions might instigate reactions by the Balkan revolutionary leaders and might open the possibility for waves of dissatisfaction among the Christian population which was returned under Ottoman administration, the Great powers found solutions in the practice of articles 23 and 62 of the Treaty of Berlin.¹⁴ With these articles, it was envisioned that the Ottoman Empire will allow the participation of the Christian element in the administration and will guarantee equality of the civil and political rights between the Christians and the Muslims. In essence, this formulation meant providing certain autonomy for the Balkan nations under the Ottoman administration, since the decisions of the treaty envisioned transfer of the jurisdictions and the rights of the central government to the local administrative bodies. These instruments, however, remained ineffective and did not lead to essential changes in the European part of the Empire since the Porte, using to its advantage the weak mechanisms of control and prevention, skillfully avoided its duties. Hence, for the Balkan nations, this act remained as nothing but ink on paper. Therefore, fulfilling Article 23 of the Berlin peace treaty meant reformation of the European Villayets, a task which was given to the Empire. In 1880, the Empire designed the "Law of the Villayets", which encountered strong reactions among the local population and was severely criticized by the English commissioner from the Rumelian region. As a result, this law was placed under the observation of the European commission and underwent essential changes. The re-worked law was renamed to *New law of the European villayets in Turkey*, and was, de facto, never applied by the Ottoman Empire.

The Berlin congress of 1878 played a major role in the process of creation of the nation states on the Balkans and its revisionist decisions made significant changes on the geopolitical map of Southeastern Europe. These decisions envisioned the creation of the tributary principality of Bulgaria and the autonomous province Eastern Rumelia, while Montenegro, Serbia and Romania gained their independence. Bosnia and Herzegovina was given to Austro-Hungary, which was supposed to perform an annexation of this territory in the following thirty years. In addition, the Habsburg Monarchy was granted the right to place a military garrison in the sanjak of Novi Pazar. With these revisions, only the territories of Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia, which were connected with the capital city through a narrow strip in Thrace, remained within the borders of the Ottoman Empire. In 1887, the question of Southeastern Europe returned to the European political scene mainly as a result of the collapse of the League of the Three Emperors caused by the Bulgarian question, and the diplomatic tensions between the Russian Empire and the Habsburg Monarchy significantly increased in intensity. In the following period however, the great powers were less interested in the Peninsula, which changed with the assassination of the Austro-Hungarian heir to the throne Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914, at the dawn of the Great War. In this period, Great Britain – the protector of the Ottoman Empire – focused its attention on Egypt and the Suez Canal, after gaining control of this region in 1882. War, as an instrument for resolving disagreements, remained on the Balkans during this period, which is exemplified through the Serbian-Bulgarian war in 1885 and the Greek-Turkish war in 1897.

In conclusion, it is evident that the arrangements of the Berlin congress regarding the Balkan Peninsula conditioned the Habsburg-Serbian dispute apropos the question of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as the Balkan system of alliances between Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece and Montenegro, aimed at dividing the remaining Ottoman possessions on the Balkans, which escalated in the First and the Second Balkan War in 1912/13.

¹⁴Ibid. p. 71-90.

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