

Russian Stroke to Ottoman - Russian War of 1877-78

(Russian scenario about the war and after the war)

Prof. Nina Dyulgerova, PhD

Numerous are the unknowns in the process of formation and development of the Russian diplomatic-military doctrine in the eve and during the last Ottoman - Russian War 1877-1878. Because of difficult access to the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Empire (MFARE), and to the yet unused archive of Count N.P. Ignatiev and other documents of the State Archive of the Russian Federation (SARF) it is not possible to reveal the separate and in most cases unknown issues of this process.

In the heart of this report are some unpublished by now documents from the secret fund of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Empire (f. 138, op. 467) of MFARE, as well as from SARF, which allow us to follow the accents and tasks in the core of the suggestions and projects of the ambassadors Shuvalov, Novikov, Orlov, Ignatiev, the councillor Gorchakov, the military officers – general Obruchev and general Fadeev. All of them suggest and stand behind their ideas, dependent on both personal and diplomatic (or military) experience and on the situation in the respective state or battle field.

Each document, especially the one from the secret archive of MFARE, has its own destiny. It is connected either with a certain resolution by the Russian Emperor Alexander II, or with a recommendation for giving the document high confidentiality statute.

The last Russian-Turkish War for the 19 century tested both the role of the Russian Empire in the complex configuration of the “European concert” and its ability to defend its strategic aims in the Eastern Question. Petersburg started a war in which emotions and ambitions supported with the promises by Austro-Hungary from Reichstadt (July 1876) and Buda-Pest (January 1877) led to the only possible results in this situation. Wins and mistakes on the diplomatic field are as important as the military successes and failures.

The Russian Empire started the war with the Ottoman Empire with the officially declared task to save the Christian nations under Turkish rule. This, however, is not just an empty standard phrase. On the contrary, Russian society and some governmental circles were convinced that “the liberation of the eastern Christians is a historical vocation of the Russian nation. What was Petersburg actually trying to achieve in this war and what was the outcome?

In the existing diplomatic documentation in the Archive of the foreign affairs of the Russian Empire two topics, subject of projects and plans stand out – The Straits and the Balkans. The strategic, but mainly hypothetical aim of possessing the Bosphoros and the Dardanelles is present in one or another variation in the plans of the high-ranked military people, in the secret instructions by the Russian emperor and in the peace projects between the two empires – the Russian and the Ottoman.

Considered and offered are different ways and opportunities for the realization of this so wanted dream, which in the beginning and during the whole Russian-Turkish War did not cease to interest the military elite. There were no contradictions about the way the Eastern Question could be solved. Military people were unanimous that this meant conquering the straits, and control on them depended on the ground forces¹. According to general Fadeev “the Bosphoros could be taken easily and without any making a lot of noise about it, with enough power and fro a few days, but only when we (Russians – note N.D.) go towards the Straits not from the river Danube, but from the southern border of liberated Bulgaria”². According to him this would allow the landing of a 50000 people Russian army, which will be impossible to overtake. The general was convinced that with this army the whole southern Russia and Caucasus would be covered, instead of the many-thousands army needed for this task now. According to his plan the direct outcome of conquering the Bosphoros is the concentration of the whole Russian army on the western border, which would put the rest of the Great Powers in disadvantageous position³. General

Obruchev also gave his opinion on the Straits and their usage. He took long to consider the principle of parity, suggested for the European squadrons for the use of the Straits⁴. The general is adamant that such a decision would be quite unfavorable for Russia. After a long analysis of the parity and its questionable advantages for the Russian interests in the Straits and the possibilities for its use in the Mediterranean Sea, he reached the conclusion that it is better for the empire to waive “the right of limited access to the Black Sea through the Straits for ships by all nations without exception.”⁵. For Obruchev this was the safer option. His arguments were quite reasonable. The lack of active sea trade, as well as own port in the Mediterranean, which can host the Russian fleet in case of war or neutrality by the coastal countries, question the benefits of the required right for access to the Mediterranean Sea⁶. His theory for the abilities of the Russian fleet and the rest of the Great Powers was convincing. With Austro-Hungary bilateral relations were limited by geography to ground forces, a sea battle with Italy was very unlikely, and there was no comparison with the fleets of England and France. General Obruchev was convinced that the warranties for the Russian interest in the Straits should be limited in the framework of Russian-Turkish negotiations. The most successful option for the empire he thought was related to the following combinations:

1. Reaching stable military and sea position for Russia through compromises by the Turks, where it (Russia) would build its fortifications. On the opposite side there should be Turkish fortifications. Thus the empire would become invulnerable. According to the General Buyuk-dere should be demanded, despite of the negative reaction by England and the rest of Europe.
2. In the Bosphoros there should be mixed garrison by agreement between Russia and Turkey, including a system of fortifications from the side of Buyuk dere, which will used by the mixed garrisons of the two countries.

3. All expenses on the improvement, arming and repair of the fortification should be allotted in the same way.
4. The discussion of all fortification issues is assigned to a mixed committee⁷.

The document, containing the three variants for possible peace conditions between Petersburg and Constantinople could be added to the projects of the two generals⁸. The principle on which the anonymous author builds his suggestions is the attitude of Europe to the military actions and the successes of the Russian weapons. No matter if they are extremely radical or moderate, these ideas express the desire for either free sailing or no access at all to the Straits for the Russian and English ships. In two of the suggestions is creeping the memory of the Russian diplomatic success, achieved in Unkyar-Iskeleski in 1833 – the closing of the Straits for ships of all countries but the coastal ones, i.e. with the only exception of Russia. Constantinople's faith is also connected with this of the Straits. The options are either a free city under the protectorate of Europe or Turkish city with clearly defined borders. They should be guaranteed by closing the Straits with Russian fleet from the Bosphoros and by English fleet from the Dardanelles⁹. Besides it was underlined that a special convention with Turkey should be signed for not allowing the creation of sea institutions of foreign countries in the Black Sea¹⁰. These projects are in unison with the moods of the Russian emperor Alexander II, who was firm in his instruction from November 1877 Gorchakov about the conditions in which Turkey should accept defeat in the war¹¹.

He was sure that the sultan should find a way to reach an agreement with Petersburg about the defense of the rights and interests of Russia in the Bosphoros and the Dardanelles¹². The range of suggestions and hypotheses, which concern the Russian generals, is quiet limited. The memories of the unsuccessful Crimean War or of the triumph in 1833 do not change the fact that

Russia then and now has before it a weak Ottoman Empire and a strong Europe which does not tolerate the supremacy of others.

Regarding the frank position, based on pragmatism, the resolution of Alexander II to save most of the received documents in the most secret archive and to deny access to them sounds logical.

The constant presence of the Straits in the projects and the official statements of Petersburg do not change the fact that the main accent in the Russian plans, which are more feasible, is on the future of the Balkan territories. Their distribution and development are vital for the role and place of the Russian Empire in the Balkan configuration. The possible decisions are not a lot, but are all based on the diplomatic achievements at the time and mainly the agreements from the conference in Constantinople in December 1876. Enough is written already about the activity of Count Ignatiev and his continuous defense of the Bulgarian interests as a long-time ambassador in Constantinople and during the Russian-Turkish war. His skillful diplomatic game, which successfully proved the necessity of some specific decisions on the Bulgarian question by the European forces, is not a secret to anybody.

While this is a widely known truth, less popular are the opinions and visions of the famous and not so famous Russian diplomats, working in the embassies throughout Europe or on the Pevchevski Bridge on the future restructuring of the European South-East. One of them is the letter with inscription "Top Secret" by Count Orlov from 16 February 1877, which is in the secret safes of the secret archives of the Minister of MID¹³. Of some importance here is the fact that agreeing that Turkey can be allowed to realize the promised reforms, the Russian diplomat suggested Russia to regain "without asking for anyone's consent, Bessarabia, which was taken from it under the Paris contract from 1856¹⁴. The seeking of retaliation Orlov explained with "the blood shed by the soldiers of Rumyantsev and Suvorov"¹⁵. With the regaining of the area the

Russian emperor would keep the peace, would defend the interests of Christians and the Russian national dignity.

These thoughts were shared by the Emperor himself, who admits: “I like the thought of Orlov as well”¹⁶. The diplomat’s logic reflects not only the Russian interests but also the search of a balance between the Russian and Austro-Hungarian ambitions. The Russian minister of foreign affairs Duke Gorchakov did not have any illusions about the Austro-Hungarian position on the Christian population in the Ottoman Empire. The desire of Vienna to annex Bosnia and Herzegovina was not a secret to Petersburg¹⁷. The chancellor Gorchakov was also aware of the fears of his Austro-Hungarian counterpart Count Andrashi from isolated Russian actions on the Balkans, which motivated Vienna to look for common decisions on the issues in the Ottoman Empire. In his instruction to the Russian ambassador in Vienna Count Novikov from 11 September 1876 the chancellor gave his prediction Europe and the East are predestined for constant convulsions¹⁸, while the Pevcheski Bridge and diplomats in Vienna and Paris related the Russian claims with the Austro-Hungarian ambitions, the Russian generals was trying to find the logic of the Balkan geo-policy through the prism of the military strategy. The geographical closeness of Bulgaria to the Bosphoros defines the central place of the Bulgarian territories in the Russian projects and plans. The interest in Bulgaria, shown by high clerks and diplomats, is naturally pragmatic. This showed specifically in the variants offered for the solutions of the Bulgarian and the rest of the Balkan’s questions in the end of the Russian-Turkish war, which is directly connected with the military actions and Europe’s reaction. Offers vary from independence for Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria, through keeping their feudal autonomy to political autonomy for Serbia, Monte Negro and Romania and administrative autonomy for Bulgaria¹⁹. The returning of Bessarabia to Russia²⁰ in return of Dobrudzha to Romania was flatly outlined as well²¹. It was gladly

noted that after this war the Ottoman Empire would lose the southern and central parts of the Balkan peninsula²².

The content of the existing documents leads to the conclusion that during the Russian-Turkish war high diplomacy does not forget even for a moment that on the issue of the Straits and the Balkans would be solved on the battle field. Indeed, the last Russian-Turkish war did not change the established in the 19. scheme – war–conference–diplomatic instead of military solution. The San Stefano preliminary agreement demonstrated the strong desire of official Petersburg to realize its dream for a big, Slavic, orthodox Christian state on the Balkans, ignoring the Austro-Russian agreements from Reichstadt and Buda-Pest. The situation, however, as in the whole period of this eastern crisis, was not in favor of the Russian plans. There is a lot of literature on the causes of the San Stefano experiment. Opinions vary from inadequate acceptance of the situation by the high diplomatic and military elite and the imposition of the subjective factor in the face of Count Ignatiev for the implementation of this decision to conscious desire of Petersburg to check the boundaries, in which the Great Power would allow Russia to carry out its ambitious plans independently. The results of the Berlin congress in June 1878 defined clearly the limits of the Russian presence in the Eastern Question. The combined efforts of the states from the “European concert” against the Empire led the next eastern crisis to its predictable end. The Russian doctrine, based on the emperor’s idea of territorial expansion and defense, for establishing political authority in the European South-East, fails in the end of the 70’s. There is a good reason why after returning from Germany the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Russia Count Gorchakov said: “I consider the Berlin pact the darkest page in my life.”²³. In a letter form 20 June 1878 from Berlin to the Russian Emperor Alexander II he wrote bitterly that “after this bungled peace is signed, we will have to go back to the well known phrase from 1856: Russia needs to focus now”²⁴. The

focusing did not help a lot, maybe the lack of a figure like Gorchakov is to blame for that, but Gorchakov from 1856, not the one from 1878.

The extremes of the military men were balanced by the cautious, and considering numerous traps diplomatic moves. The emperor's ideas, which were no different in aggressiveness and mercantilism from those of the other participants in the events in European South-East, escalated naturally after the Russian army victory on the battle field.

The results of the following political and diplomatic actions of Petersburg regarding the Eastern Questions were not brilliant. The unsolved issue of the Straits, the economic and political pushing from the region, the accumulation of negatives in the bilateral relations with the Balkan states were the specific results Russia achieved from the war with Ottoman Turkey. Moreover, it lost the advantage before the other Great Powers, which it had until 1877 due to the policy to support the national liberation battles of the orthodox Christian population in the Ottoman Empire. In the next decades the halo of Russia as Balkan liberator was darkened due to its imperial policy, not very different from those of the other Great Powers.

¹ Государственный архив Русской Федерации (GARF), [State Archive of the Russian Federation (SARF)], fund 677, list 1, archive 368, may 1877, pp.7-7a. Записка ген.майора М. Фадеева о задачах России в войне с Турцией, [A Note of General Major M. Fadeev of Russia's Problems in the War with Turkey]

² SARF pp. 7-7a.

³ SARF p. 7a

⁴ Архив внешней политики Российской империи (AVPRI), [Archive of the Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of Russian Empire (MFARE)] fund 138, Секретный фонд Министра МИД [A Secret Fund of the Minister of the Foreign Affairs], archive 467, case 36/37/39. Записка генерала Обручева. К вопросу об открытии Проливов. [A Note of General Obruchev. Towards the Question for Opening the Dardanelles], 27 November 1877, pp. 34-44.

⁵ MFARE, p. 37

⁶ MFARE, pp. 38-38a

⁷ MFARE, pp. 39/a-40

⁸ MFARE, f. 138. A Secret Fund of Ministry of the Foreign Affairs, archive 467, case 36/37/39. Записка по вопросу о Проливах 1877 [A Note towards Question for the Dardanelles], p. 92a

⁹ MFARE, f. 138, p. 92a

¹⁰ MFARE, f. 138, p. 93

¹¹ MFARE, f. 138. A Secret Fund of the Minister of the Foreign Affairs, archive 467, case 35/36, 22 November 1877, pp.10-11a

¹² MFARE, f. 138, pp.10-11a

¹³ MFARE, f. 138. A Secret Fund of the Minister of the Foreign Affairs, archive 467, case 35/37/39. 16/22 February 1877. From Graf Orlov to Graf Gorchakov, p. 10

¹⁴ MFARE, f. 138, p. 10

¹⁵ MFARE, f. 138, p. 11a

¹⁶ MFARE, f. 138, p. 10

¹⁷ MFARE, f. 138, p. 10

¹⁸ MFARE, f. 138, p. 17a

¹⁹ MFARE, f. 138. A Secret Fund of the Minister of the Foreign Affairs, archive 467, case 36/37/39, 5 June 1877, Возможные условия мира смотря по событиям, [The Possible Conditions for Peace According to the Events]. p.105

²⁰ The German Chancellor Otto Bismarck was agreed with this act in February 1877. MFARE, f. 138, p. 10

²¹ MFARE, f. 138. A Secret Fund of the Minister of the Foreign Affairs, archive 467, case 36/37/39, 5 June 1877, p. 105

²² MFARE, f. 138. A Secret Fund of the Minister of the Foreign Affairs, archive 467, case 36/37/39, 5 June 1877

²³ Quoted a Collection published in memory of 25 Years Administration of the State Chancellor Prince Gorchakov of the Ministry of the Foreign Affairs 1856-1881. S. Petersburg, 1881

²⁴ MFARE, f. 138. A Secret Fund of the Ministry of the Foreign Affairs, archive 467, case 36/37/39, 20 June 1878, p. 4