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THE POLICIES OF THE BULGARIAN STATE TOWARDS THE MINORITIES (1878 – 1914)

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Abstract

After the Istanbul Conference in 1876 provided the groundwork, the Bulgarian state emerged as an independent state in 1878 under the Treaty of Berlin. The policy of exterminating the Turks to create a Slavic state, as put into practice by the Russians during the War of 1877-78, was picked up by the Bulgarians after the Russian departure from the scene, followed by acts of massacres and exiles. The Ottoman government not only negotiated with the Bulgarian Principality but also held talks with the Great Powers of Europe to stop the violence in the region against the former Ottoman populations but none yielded the expected results. While the European powers pointed out that they were against the violence and oppression towards the Turks in Bulgaria, they were not more than a spectator to these violent activities of the Bulgarians.

Keywords: Bulgarian State, Ottoman Empire, Minorities

After the conquest of Bulgaria in 1393, the Ottomans put an end to the administrative functions of the Bulgarian patriarchate and put it under the jurisdiction of that of the Greek Orthodox Church. The Bulgarian allegiance to the Ottoman state continued up until the early nineteenth century when Russians attempted at increasing the Bulgarian national awareness, which, coupled with the unjust administrative reconfigurations by the local Ottoman administrators, caused the Bulgarians to rebel at many points throughout the nineteenth century. The foundation of the Bulgarian Exarchy in 1870 and the emergence of an independent Bulgarian

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church gave a further impetus to these separatist rebellions. When the Bulgarian rebellion began in 1876 together with the rebellions in Herzegovina, Serbia and Monte Negro, "Bulgarian Issue" gained a different dimension during the Istanbul Conference which would feature the signatories of the Treaty of Paris.

When the Ottoman State rejected the results of the Istanbul Conference as well as the "London Protocol" spearheaded by Russia, Russians declared war on the Ottoman State on the 24th of April, 1877. When the war turned against the Ottoman State, the Treaty of San Stefano was signed that nominally established the "Great Bulgaria," stretching from the Danube down to the Aegean Sea. As a result of the British and Austrian objections to this arrangement, the Treaty of Berlin was signed and the Great Bulgaria was divided into three administrative units as the Principality of Bulgaria, Eastern Rumelia, and Macedonia. Accordingly, Macedonia was left to the Ottomans on the conditions that reforms were made, while the Eastern Rumelia became part of the Principality of Bulgaria in 1885.

1.120.000 Turks and 1.130.000 Bulgarians had been living in the Ottoman Tuna vilayet when the Principality of Bulgaria emerged in 1878 under the Treaty of Berlin.¹ The Treaty also guaranteed the lives of Turkish, Greek, Romanian, and other communities living within the Principality. Yet, the members of the "Bulgarian Organisation of Civilian Administration," which was founded by Prince Cherkaski before the Ottoman-Russian War of 1877-78, decided early on to "relocate" or "put to sword" all the Turks in Tuna and Edirne vilayets, in accordance with their nationalist ideology.² It was after this decision that a policy of "expulsion" and "extermination" began in Tuna and Edirne vilayets during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78.³ As a result of this policy, half a million Turks were either slaughtered or died out of hunger and disease in these vilayets and one million people were forced to resettle.⁴

II- Bulgarian Pressures on the Turks

A) The Pressures by the Komitadjis and Brigands

Within the framework of the Treaty of Berlin, the Bulgarian National Assembly (*Sobranryo*) approved the Bulgarian constitution on the 23rd of April, 1879 and German Prince Alexander Battenberg was elected as the Bulgarian Prince on the 29th of April, 1879. With the foundation of the Administration of the Principality of Bulgaria, Russian forces left the

country.⁵ The policy of "exile" and "extermination" against the Turks that had been carried out jointly by the Russians and Bulgarians during the Ottoman-Russian Wars of 1877-78 was taken up by the Bulgarians themselves after the Russian departure. While the Russians and European powers turned a blind eye towards the massacres, these Bulgarian operations to cleanse the region off the Turks continued in its full intensity up until the outbreak of the Balkan Wars in 1912. In this time span, while the Bulgarian administrators were preoccupied with "*expulsing*" and "*slaughtering*" the population in the region, they were also quite active looking for ways to declare their independence, which eventually took place on October 5, 1908.

The violence committed towards the Turkish population in these years has many layers. The Bulgarian gangs and komitadjis had been attacking the villages, kidnapping the Turks, torturing, and killing them. While the Turks living in the region knew very well who were behind these acts of violence, there was no higher authority to which they could submit their complaints. The principality, encouraged by the indifference of European powers, increased the intensity of their systematic oppression day by day. Under the pretext of the close examination of the brigand activity, the Bulgarian authorities sent troops and officials to villages, especially the ones where the Muslims held the majority, and the activities of looting, usurpation, torture, and slaughter got underway through the leadership of these officials and soldiers and under the auspices of the principality. The complaints received from the Turks resulted in no action on the part of the Bulgarian administration.⁶ Let alone helping them out, the Bulgarian Naçalniks (the head of the administrative unit of *kaza*) took the lead in acts of oppression by visiting the villages under the cover of official duties with a group of 300-500 bandits and looting the villages. These bandits would prison the Muslim men, rape the women, and rob their houses.⁷ In addition to the policies of "*exiling*" the Turks and "*killing them like the flies,*" they also forced the Turks to convert.⁸

The Bulgarian soldiers would torture Muslims at outposts and oblige them to sign the official reports that would make the victim to appear to be criminals. Though the Turks appealed to the higher authorities in such cases, the access to the courts was not easy, and they were instead found guilty and tortured.⁹ These cases obviously show how the rights for the Turks under the guarantorship of the Treaty of Berlin were violated by the Bulgarian party. With the support of, and in coordination with, the Bulgarian authorities, the Bulgarian brigands attacked the villages, raped women publicly, burned the bodies of human

beings, cut their organs, or committed other acts of violence on bodies. They also attacked the livelihood of the Turks, usurping their money, precious goods, crops and animals in their farms.¹⁰

The Turks in Bulgaria could not make sense of this oppression coming from the Bulgarians since neither had they behaved rudely against the Bulgarians before, nor could they associate this oppression with the values preached by Islam and Christianity. The oppression was as such that in the early years of the Bulgarian administration, all the Muslims from Şumnu even thought of resettling elsewhere.¹¹ Acting in accordance with the goal of expelling the Turks, the Bulgarian brigands invaded the villages and kidnapped the Turks in groups of 200-300 people, killing the woman and children and burning down their houses. These were total destruction of whole villages, sparing no trace of life behind.¹² During such acts of violence, the Bulgarians would speak Turkish and dress up like the Turks, both creating a sense of suspicion and unrest among the Turks and marketing the massacres to the outside world as if they were some domestic quarrels among the Turks.¹³

When spring rolled around each time, the Bulgarians increased their pressures further. Travelling from a settlement to another was not possible since the Bulgarian bandits stopped the travellers and killed people of different religion and race. No matter whether travelling alone or in a group, the bandits often stopped the travellers, wounding and then releasing them as warning to others. When the bandits did not spare their lives, these tortured individuals were left on the road or thrown in places of public visibility in an attempt to create a culture of fear, thus facilitating the settler movements and sealing off any plans of return.¹⁴ Religious services for the dead were averted and burials were in the form of dumping the bodies in mass graves. Such agitation of religious feelings took other forms as well. During the attacks to the villages, pork meat was hung and the cross signs were drawn on the walls of mosques, which clearly insulted the Muslim people. Moreover, people who were in the course of religious services were forced out of the mosques and religious officials were affronted beyond imagination.¹⁵ When the Turks left their settlement for somewhere else in the region to attend other ceremonies, the Bulgarian brigands looted their neighbourhoods, villages and houses, slaughtering women, children, and the old who were left behind. On the other hand, massive expulsions of Muslim villagers took place into the Bulgarian interior and the goods they left behind were the targets of usurpation.¹⁶ These acts of robbery, bigotry, usurpation, assassination, torture, and murders were now ordinary, occurring at any time in any given day. Those

behind such acts of violence were not deemed as criminals but cherished as patriots.¹⁷

While the Treaty of Berlin defined the legal status and guaranteed the rights and liberties of the minorities, the Turks were not allowed to benefit from these legal arrangements. They could not even cultivate their lands and the events with 30-40 years of history were re-litigated retrospectively by the Bulgarians against the Turks.¹⁸ The only thing that those exposed to violence could do was to submit official complaints when they could, be patient, at times resist, and in the end resettle.¹⁹ In addition to the acts of violence committed by the Bulgarian bandits, oppression by the Bulgarian officers locked the Turks in loneliness and despair, giving them a mere choice between "*being killed*" and "*being expelled*."

B) Oppression by the Bulgarian Authorities

a) Seizure of Weapons

Russian demands to disarm the Turks in the region found acceptance among the European powers in the Istanbul Conference. The order of disarming the Turks and then delivering the weapons to the Bulgarians was communicated to the Division of Don Kazak Cavalry that was about to cross the Danube for the first time on June 26, 1877. The Russians started disarming the Turks all over Bulgaria in a short time and when they were asked whether the Bulgarians took part in the process of disarming the Turks, they would reply by saying that the "Bulgarians" were soldiers and "what we look for are the weapons of the Muslims."²⁰

By the time the Principality of Bulgaria was founded, Muslims were completely disarmed which was a clear advantage for the Bulgarian bandits who could now easily enter the villages and neighbourhoods without experiencing any resistance. Muslim people did not have even "*a pocketknife*" to resist the bandits, and protect their lives and honour. First it was the Russians during the invasion and then the Bulgarians afterwards who seized everything that could be used to fight against. The Muslims who submitted complaints to the Bulgarian authorities accordingly were advised "*to fight with sticks against the bandits*."²¹ Obviously, these bandits worked in partnership against the Muslim elements in Bulgaria.

During the Russian invasion of the region from Zıştovi (Sviřtov) to Edirne (Adrinople), all the armament seized from the Muslims was redistributed to the Bulgarians, while General Gurko provided 60.000 additional rifles to the Bulgarians living in the southern Balkans.²² The disarmament of the Turks during the Ottoman-Russian War of 1877-78 and

the over-armament of the Bulgarians created an extremely dangerous situation in Tuna and Edirne vilayets. Since they represented a different race and faith, those who were left defenceless were exposed to the Bulgarian oppressions, which meant inevitably to be "*displaced*" and "*killed*." Such events continued up until the Balkan Wars of 1912-13.

b) Seizure of the Real Estates

The issue around the lands and real estates of the Turks in Bulgaria had always been a source of controversy both during the Russian invasion and later under the principality administration. For the Russians, those people who left their villages or resettled elsewhere lost their right of property –a consideration contrary to the legal arrangements as specified in the 11th article of the Treaty of San Stefano and the 12th article of the Treaty of Berlin. The 12th Article of Treaty of Berlin mandated that those who left their villages and resettled elsewhere had the right of the guardianship of their properties and of keeping them running via a third party. Accordingly, Bulgarian administration had no right to seize the properties even when their owners left for elsewhere. Also, a joint Turkish-Bulgarian commission would be established to address the problems of abandoned properties within the boundaries of the Principality of Bulgaria and the commission would solve these issues in two years time.²³

In view of such legal guarantees as the 12th article of Treaty of Berlin as well as the promises made by the principality along the same lines, those Muslims who left their homes for elsewhere started heading back to their villages. Both the Muslim settlers and those who opted for staying in their villages despite the mounting oppression had retained the titles, vouchers, and related credentials. When they applied to the commissions for the necessary legal procedures to be made for the return of their properties, their documentations were not accepted by the Bulgarians with regard to various legal loopholes. For instance, a petition submitted to the Ottoman Prime Ministry on November 14, 1880, mentions how some of the Muslims of Köstendil did not leave their houses with the hopes that they could keep a hold of their goods and properties, and how some resettlers returned to their homes along similar expectations, only to find themselves in a barrage of legal threats and/or retrospective lawsuits with 30-40 years of history. The Bulgarian replies to the Turkish petitions and complaints clearly defied the legal arrangements specified by the international treaties.²⁴

Nihat Pasha who was appointed as the Ottoman commissar to Sofia in the April of 1880 carried out a number of negotiations with the Bulgarian

authorities on the issues of the lands and real estates of the Muslim population. The Bulgarian authorities informed the Pasha that the government was in the opinion of setting prices for the farms and properties and accordingly buying them from their Muslim owners, only to sell them back to the Bulgarian villagers after resizing the plots of lands. In this effort, a draft bill was proposed to the Bulgarian parliament. Nihat Pasha in turn asked the Bulgarian authorities to return temporarily the lands and properties in question to the Muslim owners until the draft bill was passed into law but the Bulgarian authorities did not take note of the proposal.²⁵

After having prepared the necessary regulations, the Bulgarian principality started establishing the commissions in this regard in violation of the 12th Article of the Treaty of Berlin and despite the growing diplomatic pressures by the Ottoman government. These commissions started selling the properties in question in exchange for little monetary return to the Bulgarians who had seized the properties through use of force or who documented the properties as their own through false witnesses or who occupied the properties by way of land tenure (*icar*). These properties in question that were bestowed upon the Bulgarians by the commissions were in fact the lands of the Muslims that were inherited from their ancestors or the plots of land that Muslims later bought. After the Russian invasion, these lands were rented to the Bulgarian villagers for cultivation with fixed terms (*icar*) as it had been done so traditionally. Those Muslims who applied to the commissions for the return of their lands were left unanswered. For instance, the lands of Hurşid, Osman, Ömer, Seyid Mehmed Rıza, Ali Rıza, Osman Muhammed, and Hasan from Vidin applied to the commissions sent from Sofia on October 20, 1884.

In January of 1851, the Ottoman government transferred the lands owned by the *gospodars* to the *miri* lands and the *gospodars* in turn were given the share prices from the Ottoman treasury. Later the Ottoman administration distributed these lands to the locals in the region with land titles –a process under the supervision of Arifi Efendi, an official from Defter-i Hakani, sent to Vidin at the time.²⁶ These lands that belonged to the Muslims of Vidin were the properties that had been distributed to them after these regulations in the January of 1851. What the Bulgarians did then was to prepare the new regulations in 1881 and 1884 and establish new commissions to recreate the *gospodar* farms on these lands, having annulled the earlier Ottoman regulations passed in favour of those engaged in agriculture in the region. With these new legal realities in place, the Bulgarian commissions seized the lands and real estates from the Muslims

across Bulgaria and particularly in Vidin, regardless of whether these lands were the products of the Ottoman arrangements in 1851 or not.²⁷

The commission that seized these plots of lands from their original owners redistributed them among the Bulgarian villagers in exchange for little monetary return. By finding false witnesses to prove that they had been cultivating these lands for ten to fifteen years, the Bulgarian villagers did their best to usurp the lands and properties of their Muslim neighbours. They were in a fierce competition to obtain more and more land from the commissions by manipulating the number of people in their households. The Bulgarian Muslims often filed complaints about the situation to the Ottoman commissar in Sofia as well as the Prince of Bulgaria. However, they never received replies from the Bulgarian party.²⁸

On the one hand, the administration of the Principality of Bulgaria was busy in legalizing this process of the usurpation of the lands and properties belonging to the Muslims. On the other hand, Bulgarian officials persecuted the Muslim population in the region through acts of robbery, rape etcetera in order to force them to seek shelter elsewhere. It was these very Bulgarian officials who committed those acts of robbery, usurpation, torture and murder, which explains why those complaints were ignored constantly on their part.²⁹

c) Recruitment

According to the 71st Article of the Bulgarian Constitution, any male between the ages of 19 and 32 and living within the boundaries of Bulgaria, regardless of religious affiliation, are obliged to do military service. In reference to this article, the Bulgarian government attempted at recruiting the Turkish youth for military service in 1879 and 1880. The Turks asked for exemption from the military service until the terrible conditions around the resettlement patterns of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78 got settled. To that end, they asked Prince Alexander of Bulgaria to be exempted from the military service for ten years but their request was rejected.³⁰

In order to find a solution to the dilemma the Bulgarian Muslims came face to face, the Ottoman government also submitted several requests to the Bulgarian government but these attempts proved futile as well. After the relevant ordinance was signed by Prince Alexander in the October of 1880, the Turks began to be recruited to the military, including those born in 1859.³¹ Recruiting the age group between 15 and 20 was obviously in violation of the law.

The strict determination on the part of the Bulgarian authorities in handling the recruitment in such ways clearly resulted in an increase of settler movements. In accordance with the directives from the Ottoman government, Nihat Pasha, the Ottoman commissar in Sofia, negotiated with Prince Alexander and Monsieur Zankoff, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, with regards to the former Ottoman populations. The negotiations did not culminate in the expected results. However, Monsieur Zankoff gave some guarantees about the issue of military service, which were the repetition of the previous guarantees by the Bulgarian authorities. They were as follows:³²

- 1- Those whose relatives were to resettle elsewhere would be released from the military and returned to their relatives.
- 2- Due attention would be paid to the Islamic practices during military service.
- 3- No one from the Muslim settlers who returned would be recruited.

Despite these guarantees, the Bulgarians continued to recruit the Turkish youth.³³ The complaints filed by the Muslims were ignored once again. One complaint submitted to Prince Alexander on June 1, 1880, mentioned that the Muslims who were in the military were forced to wear crosses.³⁴ Bulgarians believed that such policies would result in the mass settler movements of the Muslims. Yet, since the Muslims did not give in but fought for their rights through legal and diplomatic channels, which was not an expected reaction, the Bulgarians started easing the pressure of military service on the shoulders of the Muslims. After the year of 1881, the number of the Turks in the military began to be decreased. It was declared that those with children, married or not, would be exempted from military service and those who wanted to resettle could be released from the service as well. More precisely, 1600 out of 2600 Turkish soldiers in the military were disbanded and sent back to their homes.³⁵

While these complicated processes in relation to the military service were underway, the Muslims were trying every possible way to avoid being recruited to the Bulgarian military. Even during the Second Constitutionalist period, the Muslims opted for resettlement into Anatolia to pull their children and relatives off the service in military, leaving all belongings and properties to the Bulgarian authorities as taxes, an act in clear violation of the Kanûn-ı Esâsî.³⁶

d) Spreading Terror on the Muslims

Terror was a method for the Bulgarian authorities and bandits to force the Muslims to leave their homelands. The methods of spreading the terror varied from unexpected raids into villages and residential quarters to blocking the roads and killing or wounding the travellers, and from night raids to showing up in public events and bullying the participants, all in all for the purpose of creating a culture of fear.³⁷

Since the Russian invasion, Muslim people kept themselves distant from their goods and properties, often motivated by fear of life and honor. Due to terrible conditions they were experiencing, they either had to resettle or kept their spirits up and resisted the pressure with the hopes that things would get better soon.³⁸ The Bulgarian bandits often gathered armed groups around the villages and settlements, keeping the threat of further massacres always on the horizon.³⁹ The Bulgarian gendarmerie that came to the villages to investigate incidents was equal to the bandits in terms of their attitudes towards women and girls. To avoid further damage to their lives and honour, the Muslims did little to confront these excesses. In the April of 1907, for instance, 12 Bulgarian soldiers in the military outpost of Üstüne village of Filibe spread terror among the villagers by their acts of violence and oppression. Although there were about 250-300 strong young males, each of whom was capable of "*coping with ten Bulgarians*" at a time, they could do nothing in turn, fearing that their mothers and sisters would be assaulted further.⁴⁰

For the Muslims who lived in this culture of fear that was constantly fuelled by acts of Bulgarian oppression, getting settled in nearby towns or resettling into Anatolia was a clear necessity.⁴¹ If they opted for staying wherever they were, they had to stay alert for further oppressions and possible massacres. It was this culture of fear that the Bulgarians maintained in order to ensure that the Muslims had to leave at one point or another.⁴²

C) Bulgarian Educational Efforts among the Turkish Population

After the start of the Ottoman-Russian War of 1877-78, Ottoman educational institutions came to a sudden halt. In general, education had the aim of teaching religion to the Muslim children as well as increasing literacy among the Muslims. To this end, there were Mekteb-i İbtidaiye (*primary school*) and Mekteb-i Rüştiye (*middle school*) in the towns and bigger Muslim villages. After the establishment of the Bulgarian

Principality, these schools that fulfilled the educational needs of Turks were began to be shut down one by one due to the rising economic costs and lack of trained personnel. On the contrary, there was a rapid growth in the number of schools where the medium of instruction was in Bulgarian. The Bulgarian administration demanded the students of the Mekteb-i Rüştiye to be present next to the Christian students in the religious ceremonies and prayers led by Despot Efendi, accompanying the Bulgarian national holidays such as the termination of the Treaty of San Stefano and the conquest of Varna.⁴³ These pressures caused sadness and resentment among the Muslims.

With the periodic increase in the number of Muslim settlers into the Ottoman interior, the schools started shutting down one by one due to dwindling demand and it became more difficult day by day to find teachers in certain regions. By 1911, for instance, there were only 7 or 8 teachers to provide education all over Bulgaria for the remaining Muslims. In the same year, there was not even a single teacher to teach religion to the people of Deliorman and its environs. Benefiting from this situation, the Bulgarian administration started sending Bulgarian teachers to the "*Muslim quarters*." The Muslim families tried to avoid sending their children to schools where the instruction was given by the Bulgarians, fearing the "*Bulgarization*" of their children. In the end, they chose to resettle in the Ottoman interior.⁴⁴

The Ottoman statesmen were in the opinion that Muslim children ought to be educated in order to stop the oppression on Muslims in Bulgaria, which could only be possible through increasing the common awareness and revising the education system so that when the time comes they could fight for their own rights. To this end, the Ottoman authorities criticised the notion of "*education in Bulgarian*" on legal basis and argued it was in violation of the law and treaties.⁴⁵ A report sent by the Ottoman Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Embassy in Sofia on January 26, 1911, asked what could be done to better the situation since the Bulgarian insistence continued to be firm on the issue.⁴⁶ A report prepared by the Filibe Consulate General, dated January 28, 1911, says:

There are not any schools in most villages due to the shortage of economic contribution from the Ottoman government and lack of appreciation on the part of the locals about the worth of education. For example, there is not even a primary school in a village of Çukurköy inhabited by Pomaks ⁴⁷ with 300 households. Bulgarians take advantage of this situation by opening schools in Muslim villages and bulgarizing the children. In the villages nearby the Ottoman border, children mostly attend

the Bulgarian schools, only to be bulgarized day by day. Inadequacy of education is the most serious danger for people in this region. As long as their ignorance is maintained, the ruin of the Muslims seems to be inevitable even if there is no prosecution to their lives or properties. Muslims are deprived of science and truth not only in border areas but also all over Bulgaria. The progress of the Muslim people in the region depends on the progressive measures that ought to be taken in educational efforts. It is necessary to appoint teachers immediately to these Islamic towns where no school exists due to lack of economic sources and ignorance. The direct attempts on the part of the Ottoman government will cause problems. The number of villages where the medium of education is in Bulgarian is fifteen at most. It is always possible to employ a teacher with a wage of 60 francs in these villages. Since the accommodation and other needs of the teacher will be met by the villagers, contribution of 500 liras by the Ottoman government will be adequate. The Consulate General will closely follow up this beneficent order. Also there is the Association of Islam in Filibe. The Office of Mufti can carry out the educational activities in these villages and restore things back to usual.⁴⁸

Accordingly, from the year of 1912 onwards, the annual funds of 500 liras, set aside by the Ministry of Education, would transfer to the Filibe Consulate General via the Embassy in Sofia. These funds would be used to pay the teachers.⁴⁹

Through establishing such secret funds that bypassed the Bulgarian Principality, the Ottoman government hoped to increase the awareness of the people in the region so that they could claim their rights through legal channels, which would in the end slow down the resettlement into the Ottoman interior. However, the start of the Balkan wars at this time made the efforts of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs fruitless.

III- Activities of the Turks and Ottoman State against the Bulgarian Oppression

A) Turks Seeking their Rights through Bulgarian and Ottoman Channels

The massacres against the Turks and the corresponding settler movements that started right after the Russian invasion initiated a flow of petitions from the Muslim people to the Ottoman government asking for help, such as the petition of a group of *ulema* from Varna, dated December 11, 1879, explaining the scope of violence in Bulgaria and arguing that only

a European action could stop the ruthless violence and torture against the Muslims and thus the Ottoman state ought to inform the European powers and initiate action.⁵⁰ Writing a petition to the Sublime Porte on March 27, 1880, a group of inhabitants from Şumnu told the Ottoman authorities that the oppression became unbearable and only God was on their side, thus some help from Istanbul was urgent.⁵¹

In a telegram sent to the Sultan on April 11, 1880, the inhabitants of Köstendil argued that the whole world knew the scope of the violence they were face to face. They were stripped off their properties by fabricated lawsuits, everything was under the Bulgarian control, the violence they were exposed was unbearable and against human nature, and they did not know what to do but ask help from the Ottoman state.⁵² For these people, the Ottoman Empire was the way to communicate with the outside world and they thought that the Principality of Bulgaria was an Ottoman creation and the Ottoman Empire was what provided the legitimacy for its administrative framework. Thus, the Ottoman state became the receptacle off all these complaints flowing in because it was the initiator of all these arrangements in the first place.⁵³

Those people who could not file their complaints directly to the Ottoman state sought the help of the Ottoman representatives in Bulgaria in communicating their requests to the central government. For instance, on March 20, 1881, a group of people from Vidin applied to the Ottoman consulate, asking that necessary precautions should be taken to prevent Bulgarians from blocking the roads so that they could start making use of their goods and properties without fears of Bulgarian attacks.⁵⁴ In a similar manner, another group of people from Vidin filed a complaint on October 20, 1884, to the Ottoman Ministry of Trade that the commission that arrived from Sofia usurped their lands.⁵⁵ On November 10, 1884, Seyit Mehmet Hayri complained that İkonof, the chief of the commission for the farms in Köstendil, usurped his private-registered lands through arranging false witnesses.⁵⁶ The Muslims not only filed complaints to the Ottoman authorities about the scope of oppression they came face to face but also to the Bulgarian administration, thus using all legal channels available. The school teachers who were acquainted with the conditions the people of the region were encountering also expressed their opinions to the Ottoman authorities.⁵⁷

What characterized all these complaints and attempts on the part of the Muslim people in the region was a call for help to stop the violence committed against them. In this effort, the Muslims from Vidin sent a

petition to Prince Alexander of Principality Administration of Bulgaria on June 1, 1881 and below were their requests from the Prince:⁵⁸

- 1- Taxes without any legal basis are collected.
- 2- The sale of lands and properties at low prices are hindered.
- 3- Some Bulgarians, encouraged by the administration, persecute the Muslims.
- 4- Cursing Islam and its prophet has been done publicly.
- 5- Muslim people are beaten down and left wounded.
- 6- The Bulgarian administrators do not take the necessary measures in issues we complain about.
- 7- Brothels are opened in Islamic quarters. Young girls are secluded to force them change their religious affiliations. Though there is the order of the Prince on this issue, the children have not been returned to their families.
- 8- Those Muslims recruited in the military are forced to wear crosses, though they are clearly Muslims.
- 9- People are punished on the basis of no illegal action.
- 10- Prisoners are beaten down at nights; the rights of the lost or murdered people are not sought after.
- 11- Ruthless persecutions that endanger human life are committed.
- 12- Lands are usurped with the permission from the government. People cannot even pay for the basics of subsistence.
- 13- Orphan fund is not operational.
- 14- While all other *millets* practice their religious duties freely, the Muslims are not even allowed to build mosques from their own pocket.
- 15- Since the high school got under the control of the principality, children cannot go to schools.

Despite constant communication of such complaints to the Bulgarian authorities, the Muslims were always ignored by the higher-ups.

B) The Ottoman Attempts to Solve the Problems with the Principality of Bulgaria and European States

With the outbreak of the Ottoman-Russian War of 1877-78, the Turkish population in Bulgaria faced massacres and exile, which led to a series of negotiations between the Ottoman government and Russians, and later between the Ottomans and the administration of the Principality. In August 1877, the Ottoman government officials held a meeting with Prince Dondukof about the difficulties that the settlers had faced on the way back

to their original settlements, when Dondukof said that all settlers except those who had charges against them could return to their former settlement without any difficulty. Since this decision could make it possible to lay blames on all Turks, the Ottoman government protested it by a diplomatic note sent to the Russian embassy on August 20, 1878.⁵⁹ Despite all the attempts by the Ottoman government to negotiate a solution with the Principality of Bulgaria and the Province of Eastern Rumelia, the massacre and violence against the Muslims in Bulgaria continued to grow hold and the resettlement patterns continued unchanged. When the war came to an end, the negotiations with the Principality administration under the framework of the Treaty of Berlin, Muslim settlers began to be sent back to where they came from. However, the Bulgarians occasionally prevented the return of these settlers by sealing off their borders. For example, in March 1880, they closed the borders by stating that they would not let the settlers in until a new framework with the Sublime Porte was to be established. Accordingly, the Ottoman cabinet decided to ask Nihat Pasha, the Ottoman commissar in Sofia, to start the necessary negotiations with the Principality of Bulgaria and European states.⁶⁰

All these negotiations with the Principality proved fruitless. The reports sent from the Vilayet of Edirne to the Sublime Porte stated that unless the necessary measures were taken to stop the settler movements, all in Bulgaria could move towards Anatolia.⁶¹ In December 1880, the Ottoman cabinet pointed out that all the complaints filed against the Bulgarians had proved useless so far and the settler movements clearly continued unchanged, and thus some serious measures were to be taken to help the incoming settlers. Accordingly, the Ottoman cabinet came to the conclusion that the settlers would suffer much since winter loomed ahead and thus it was necessary to make the settlers to sell their properties in spring time and collect money accordingly. The Ottoman state then would make the necessary arrangements as to specify the whereabouts of the settler zones and how many settlers could each settler zone accommodate.⁶²

Since the violence against, and ruthless treatment of, the Muslim people continued uninterrupted, the constant attempts of the Ottoman Empire forced the Principality of Bulgaria to carry out an investigation in 1881 in the areas where the most complaints originated from.⁶³ People in these areas demanded freedom and equality as provided to other *millets*.⁶⁴ There were discrepancies between the information in the official reports provided to the Ottoman state by the Principality and the treatment of people in the hands of the Principality. As a matter of fact, Nihat Pasha, the Ottoman commissar in Sofia, informed the Sublime Porte in June 1884 that

the Principality of Bulgaria manipulated the Ottoman and European states and delayed the resolution of the matter.⁶⁵ Despite such statements from Nihat Pasha, the Ottoman Ministry of Foreign Affairs instructed him to have talks once again with the Principality of Bulgaria and European powers to stop the oppressions and settler movements.⁶⁶

In response to the complaints made by the Ottoman government about the violence, torture, usurpation, and massacre against the Muslim people in Bulgaria, the Bulgarian authorities stated that these were commonplace criminal activities. Yet, with the increase in the criminal activities and settler movements by early 1900s, the Ottoman government forced the Danif cabinet of the Principality to establish a commission in 1902 to investigate the incidents in Deliorman and its environs. When the members of this commission presented a report that verified the persecution and violence against the Muslims, they were released from their duties.⁶⁷

While the Ottoman attempts to negotiate a solution with the Bulgarian authorities kept failing, further attempts were made to stop the violence in November of 1902,⁶⁸ January and February of 1905,⁶⁹ and May of 1905.⁷⁰ Ironically, these attempts by the Ottomans resulted in an increase of the Bulgarian oppression on the Muslim people.⁷¹ The reports, dated 18 August 1910, from Filibe Secretaryship (*kitabets*) to the Embassy in Sofia, pointed out that the oppression and violence caused an increase in the settler movements, providing lands and houses to these settlers within the Ottoman domain encouraged the people to settle in the Ottoman domain, and preventing the resettlement of the Muslims nearby the border areas would be in favour of the Ottoman state in terms of political and military benefits. Accordingly, settler movements along the borders occurred either as a result of the desertion on the part of the Muslims or leniency on the part of the Bulgarians. Those settlers coming from the Bulgarian interior sold everything they owned, only to pay the proceeds to the Principality as taxes, with the sole purpose of not letting their children being recruited into to the military. Stripped off everything they had, the settlers hit the road without food and water. One reliable way of preventing the settler movements was to ask the incomers to show Bulgarian passports. The testimonials obtained from the muftis, on the other hand, were not deemed dependable since they were often signed under the Bulgarian oppression.⁷²

The information received from the district governorate of Cisri Mustafa Pasha also argued that the mass movements of the settlers into the Ottoman interior was not because of the provision of lands and properties by the Ottoman government but rather because of the oppression they

faced from the Bulgarian authorities.⁷³ The information by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs also instructed that not even a single settler family coming from the border zone be accepted; otherwise, it would be impossible to stop the settler movements. Accordingly necessary measures had to be negotiated with the Bulgarian Principality.⁷⁴ Likewise, Consulate General of Filibe stated that certain measures had to be taken because the settlers who demanded their prospective properties filled the consulate and embassy buildings.⁷⁵ In response to the reports from the consulate and embassy, a memo from the Ministry of Domestic Affairs to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, dated May 20, 1910, described the military and political disadvantages of the settlers emptying the border zone and pointed out the necessity to prevent such settler movements.

All these official reports and memos that highlighted the necessity to bring a halt to the settler movement also argued how the Ottoman attempts to negotiate a method with the Bulgarian Principality to stop the settler movements proved futile again and again. Despite the guarantees received from the Principality that they would start the necessary investigations about the troubling events within their boundaries, the Bulgarian authorities did not take action. With the outbreak of the Balkan Wars of 1912-13, the settler movements gained speed and thus began the Ottoman preparations for the housing of the future settlers looming in the horizon.

Since the Ottoman attempts to negotiate a solution to the problems with the Bulgarian administration did not yield any concrete results, the Ottoman state decided to inform the European powers about the ongoing problems in the region. The directives given to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as reflective of the decisions in the Ottoman Cabinet, asked to bring the issue to the European powers.⁷⁶ Despite such diplomatic attempts of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, particularly in England, France, Germany, Austria, and Italy, the Bulgarian policies did not change. In other words, the Western powers were mere spectators to the Bulgarian oppressions. Although they often stated that they would "*do anything they could within their capacity to stop the violence,*" there was clearly no action on their part.⁷⁷

Despite the Ottoman attempts among the European powers to draw attention to what had been taking place in Bulgaria, the Ottomans chose to circulate little information for domestic consumption. Censorship was in place for the domestic press about the Bulgarian oppressions. Such an attitude reflected the Ottoman desire to make its population to feel further depressed.⁷⁸ On the other hand, the Ottoman attempts to circulate the news

in international press did not yield enough coverage. In a way, the Turks in Bulgaria were left all alone against the Bulgarian acts of violence.

IV- The Beginnings of the Settler Movements as a Result of the Bulgarian Oppression and Attempts to Prevent the Settler Movements

With the outbreak of the Ottoman-Russian War of 1877-78 that highlighted the goal of expelling the Turks off the Balkans and establishing a Slavic state in its stead, settler movements from Bulgaria started becoming a commonplace sight. Yet, the major settler movements that reflected the larger goal of the extermination of the Turks began with the establishment of the Principality of Bulgaria and the corresponding Russian exodus from the region. According to a report by Muttet, the French consul in Varna, 18.033 Turks took off from the port of Varna for Turkey, their motherland, between June 1879 and September 1880.⁷⁹ The Turks in Vidin took the boat trips on Danube down to Istanbul thrice a week. Such examples reflect a general pattern in settler movements across Bulgaria and the settlers were put on English, French, Russian, and Turkish boats, leaving the ports under the control of the Bulgarian Principality for Istanbul.⁸⁰

The increase in the Bulgarian oppression against the Muslims translated into soaring numbers of settlers leaving the region. These settlers were miserable throughout their flight.⁸¹ The Ottoman officials tried to re-settle the incoming settlers from the border zone to Edirne but the sheer number of settlers could have made any such operation substandard.⁸² Some of the settlers who could not be settled in Edirne were being sent to Istanbul by train and the costs of such accommodation were covered by the Ottoman state.⁸³ On the other hand, the Bulgarian authorities employed various tactics to usurp the properties and goods left in the hands of the Muslims. The example of the people from Tirnova who sold their properties for half of its worth so that they could hit the road is quite telling. In September of 1880, the Bulgarian officials suddenly discovered that these settlers still owned debts to the Homeland Funds (*Menafi Sandığı*). Those who wanted to resettle elsewhere, thus in need of permission from the Bulgarian administration, and those minorities who wanted to have a say on their own property had to present a set of necessary documents to the Bulgarian authorities. Those who were to settle elsewhere were asked to get their documents from the Homeland Funds, while other Muslims were asked to obtain different documentation, depending on whether they lived in cities or in villages. Thus, the Muslims

had to pay any debt recently discovered by the Bulgarian authorities in any event –either to resettle or to live in Bulgaria. These bureaucratic obstacles were the major source of complaints by the settlers.⁸⁴

The settlers also faced various forms of violence even during their getaway. On January 12, 1881, a group of settlers boarding a ship in Varna were robbed and prevented from their journey without even a single reason.⁸⁵ Some Muslims relegated their ownership of property to someone else for management purposes. Yet, the Bulgarian authorities under Russian influence did not always accept these relegations, which caused a series of problems. When given a rejection, the person was asked to obtain “certified copies” from the relevant Ottoman offices, which generally took a long time to receive.⁸⁶

Bulgarians from Thrace, Eastern Rumelia, Macedonia, Serbia and Romania, were resettled in places emptied by the Muslim settlers due to the Bulgarian oppression.⁸⁷ On December 12, 1884, Bulgarians from Edirne, for instance, were resettled in Kuzluca Village of Varna where 25 households out of 75 resettled elsewhere. With the coming of the Bulgarians, Muslims became restless and faced the threat of being expelled from their village.⁸⁸

When Eastern Rumelia was annexed to Bulgaria in 1885, the oppression and violence against the Muslim people increased significantly. The Muslim people in the region asked the Sublime Porte to grant permission for resettlement, claiming that more than 740.000 Muslims would be “*exterminated*” unless they were allowed to resettle in the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman government had no other choice but make it easy for these people to resettle in order to prevent further damages to the Muslims. Accordingly, in addition the Commission of Settlers, another commission was established where the Sultan would lead the meetings. About 160.000 settlers were placed in the vacant plots of the border vilayets of Edirne and Salonika, aiming for the strengthening of these border regions financially and morally. The rest of the settlers would be placed in the vilayets of Aydın, Karasi, and Hüdavendigâr.⁸⁹ To relieve the pains of these settlers, the Ottoman government was in continuous effort to take necessary precautions and provide for the needs of the settlers.⁹⁰

As for the Muslims who stood tight in the face of the increasing oppressions, hoping that things would get better soon, they became the targets of the Bulgarian gendarme units who rounded them up in their villages and neighbourhoods and forced them to leave.⁹¹ As a matter of fact, 11.715 people between March 1886 and February 1887, 17.646 people between March 1891 and March 18, 1892, and 2972 people between 1897

and 1898 left Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia for Istanbul. 68.88% of the total settlers coming from the Balkans were the Muslims that came from Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia. According to the Bulgarian statistical sources, 70.603 people left Bulgaria to settle in Turkey in the decade of peace between 1893 and 1902.⁹²

The settler movements as a reaction to the ongoing assassinations, usurpations, and violence against the Muslims continued unchanged after 1903. Even in those periods when the Turkish-Bulgarian relations were in stagnation, about 7000 settlers came to Turkey every year. In 1883 when the number of settlers arriving at the Ottoman domain reached up to 70.000 per month, the number was 7.000 per month twenty years later. In 25 years time period from the establishment of the Principality of Bulgaria to the Balkan Wars of 1912-13, the settler movements from Bulgaria to the Ottoman Empire did not come to a halt.⁹³ During the Balkan wars, approximately one million Turks in Rumelia were uprooted from the Balkans. About 200.000 of these people were killed during the war and the rest were resettled in Anatolia. Moreover, in the year of 1912, 115.883 people out of 180.883 people who resettled in Turkey were the Muslim settlers from Bulgaria. Between 1885 and 1923, about 500.000 Turks in total were forced out of Bulgaria to resettle in Turkey.⁹⁴

CONCLUSION

After the Istanbul Conference in 1876 provided the groundwork, the Bulgarian state emerged as an independent state in 1878 under the Treaty of Berlin. The policy of exterminating the Turks to create a Slavic state, as put into practice by the Russians during the War of 1877-78, was picked up by the Bulgarians after the Russian departure from the scene, followed by acts of massacres and exiles. The Ottoman government not only negotiated with the Bulgarian Principality but also held talks with the Great Powers of Europe to stop the violence in the region against the former Ottoman populations but none yielded the expected results. While the European powers pointed out that they were against the violence and oppression towards the Turks in Bulgaria, they were not more than a spectator to these violent activities of the Bulgarians.

The wave of settler movements into the Ottoman interior first started in 1877 as result of the Bulgarian oppressions. After the Treaty of Berlin, some settlers opted for return to their homeland but the ill-treatment of these people by the Bulgarians once again reversed the direction of settler movements into the Ottoman Empire. On the eve of

Balkan wars, settler movements picked up speed because of the growing instances of violence against the Turks and the Balkan Wars turned these movements into a massive scale. The continuing hostile attitudes of the Bulgarian administrators towards the Turks in the aftermath of the Balkan Wars also caused further settler movements from Bulgaria into Anatolia from time to time.⁹⁵

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- ⁸¹ BOA. HR. SYS. 304/78: Başvekâletten Rumeli-i Şarki Vilayeti'ne tahrirat (8 Mayıs 1880).
- ⁸² BOA. HR. SYS. 305/81: Edirne vilayetinden sadarete telgraf (5 Haziran 1880).
- ⁸³ BOA. HR. SYS. Edirne vilayetinden Başvekâlet'e telgraf (6 Haziran 1880).
- ⁸⁴ BOA. HR. SYS. 305/137: Turnova ahalisinden Başvekâlet'e arzuhal (13 Eylül 1880); 305/139: Bulgaristan Kapıkethüdalığı'ndan Hariciye Nezareti'ne tahrirat (8Mart 1881).
- ⁸⁵ BOA. HR. SYS.305/122:İdare-i Muhacirin Komisyonu'ndan Hariciye Nezareti'ne tahrirat (12 Ocak 1881).
- ⁸⁶ BOA. HR. SYS. 305/62: Manastır vilayetinden Başvekâlet'e tahrirat (5 Nisan 1882).
- ⁸⁷ Nedim İpek, op. cit. p..152.

⁸⁸ BOA. HR. SYS. 306/276: Varna muallim mektebi reisinden Bulgaristan'daki Osmanlı komiserine tahrirat (12 Aralık 1884).

⁸⁹ Nedim İpek, op. cit. p..151.

⁹⁰ BOA. HR. SYS. 306/210: Sadaret'ten Hariciye Nezareti'ne tahrirat (3 Man 1888).

⁹¹ BOA. HR. SYS. 306/206: (29 Mart 1889); HR. SYS. 306/162: Bulgaristan Komiserliği'nden sadarete tahrirat (5 Kasım 1902).

⁹² Nedim İpek, op. cit. p. 153.

⁹³ Bilal Şimşir, op. cit. p. 52.

⁹⁴ Ahmet Halaçoğlu, Balkan Harbi Sırasında Rumeli'den Türk Göçleri (1912- 1913), Ank.1993. p.63.

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